

Article

Seen But Seldom Heard: Creative Participatory Methods in a Study of Youth and Risk

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion of the methodologies used in a small scale ‘popular education’ project involving young people in creative activities. The goal of the project is to explore their experiences and feelings about risk and safety and their ‘connectedness’ to their local community. A number of different methods are discussed as ways of empowering marginalised young people, including the use of visual methods, and new media in the form of blogs and Twitter Scripts, within an overarching participatory methodology. Arts-based and multimedia activities are powerful tools to enable young people to collectively question the nature of their historical and social situation and have the potential to raise sensitive issues, therefore, encouraging wider debate, producing new understandings, and facilitating social change. Building on insights gained in earlier research, which suggested that young people felt that they were not listened to or had enough influence in their neighbourhoods, this paper discusses the use of multimedia and creative means to develop a more accessible and effective arena in which young people can learn new skills to enable them to tell their story. In keeping with Bourdieu’s General Theoretical Framework, consideration is given to the ways in which such participatory and arts-based approaches can demonstrate value for the social and cultural capital of young people.

Keywords: youth, risk, empowerment, co-production, creative media, Bourdieu

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Introduction

This paper presents a discussion of the methodologies used in a small scale 'popular education' project involving young people in creative activities. The goal of the project is to explore their experiences and feelings about risk and safety and their 'connectedness' to their local community. The paper discusses how a range of arts based participatory methods are being used within the 'Seen but Seldom Heard Project' to encourage young people to have a 'voice' in defining their needs and experiences. The paper considers how creative methodologies may support research to engage and value the social and cultural capital of young people. Discussion is framed by consideration of Bourdieu's General Theoretical Framework (1984).

Participatory approaches have long been used by youth and development practitioners, and are also underpinned by recent government policy in the UK which emphasise the inclusion and participation of young people (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005, 2006; Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), 2007; Local Government Group, 2010). There has also been an emphasis on community engagement with young people, especially those alienated from schools and other services, using strategies such as volunteering and youth-led projects (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008). Within the 'Seen but Seldom Heard project' the emphasis is on researching with young people as opposed to researching about them (Thomson, 2008, p. 6).

At the time of writing this paper (August 2011), riots have erupted across many urban regions in England. The origins of such unrest are complex, but it is acknowledged that cuts in youth services and high youth unemployment play a part (Williams, 2011). The Children's Society comments on the riots suggest that young people feel disempowered and that communities need to be strengthened by directly involving children and young people (Children's Society, 2011). It is therefore increasingly important to find ways of engaging young people who are marginalized within society. We hope that this article can add to this debate.

In this article, we explore the background literature to the topic, before considering the underlying methodologies and the project itself. Finally, using a Bourdieusian analysis, we discuss how participatory and creative methodologies may demonstrate value for the social and cultural capital of young people.

Background literature

Concerns about youth behaviour and risk are central to current policy and practice. Negative views of youth have been fuelled by media representation of growing youth disorder, as well as school, other agency and parenting failures (Roche, Tucker, Thomson, & Flynn, 2006). It has been suggested that contemporary youth "have to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents; this is true irrespective of social background or gender" (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997, p. 1). Although it is not within the scope of this paper to offer an in-depth analysis of risk discourse, the notion of a risk society (Beck, 1992) is an important consideration in the

study of 'youth', as it influences the ways in which young peoples' identities are constructed and understood within society. It is therefore important to understand how the social construction of living at risk and taking risks develops for young people, and whether it is representative of young people's understanding. For example this population is seen as "at-risk" at the same time as being "a risk" (Pavlidis & Baker, 2010, p.28). However, to develop a more critical understanding of youth, risk and community, it is important to undertake research which engages with the meanings that marginalized young people attach to 'risk' and 'community.' Youth identities have traditionally been viewed as problematic because they are depicted as 'other' and not adults (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001); as a consequence, they are viewed as deviant and a potentially threatening 'underclass' (MacDonald & Marsh, 2001). As we are concerned not to disadvantage those young people taking part in the study further, we are mindful of te Riele's (2006) proposition of replacing the concept of youth 'at risk' with that of 'marginalized' young people.

Previous UK governmental approaches to youth adopt a social exclusion discourse (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) portraying youth as being both socially excluded and disadvantaged, whilst being problematic to society. More recent youth policy initiatives have included an emphasis on participation, youth action and youth-led services through the development of a citizenship curriculum in schools, youth councils and new youth funds (DfES, 2006). Policies, such as Youth Matters (DfES, 2005), highlight the importance of inclusiveness, and increased participation and influence of young people in building community capacity. However, there is tension between approaches to youth engagement which emphasise a 'top-down' target driven approach and those utilizing more 'ground up' approaches that enable young people to influence youth based initiatives (Milbourne, 2009). As Freire (1970) argues "[e]ducation must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously students and teachers" (p. 72). It is therefore important to create new spaces in which marginalized young people, who are often invisible within youth initiatives (Allen, 2002), are encouraged to participate and have their voices heard (Thomson, 2008). This requires challenging previous approaches and adopting practices that are empowering for young people (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2010).

A previous project commissioned by Bournemouth Youth Service informed the development of the 'Seen but Seldom Heard Project.' The survey, 'The Word on the Street (Cutts, Redmond, & Taylor, 2007), highlighted the fact that young people's concerns about risk and safety were not always borne out by the reality of their experiences. Additionally there was some indication that they did not feel that they were listened to, or had enough influence in their local community. This is not just a UK phenomenon; research in Canada, for example, describes the voices of youth being absent from community building processes, therefore contributing further to their exclusion from the community (Khanlou, 2008).

Building on issues arising from the 'Word on the Street' research, we believe it is essential to work with young people who are marginalised and who are not normally accessible through existing youth clubs or youth group activities. This small scale project is therefore focused on young people who are attending a school for those with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties, or who have been excluded from other schools. We consider ways in which the use of creative means within this 'community' can serve as a "vehicle of expressive and social and political participation of citizens, as an instrument for diagnosing and finding solutions to local problems in the communities" (Beregal, 2002, cited in Beltrán, 2005, p. 30), allowing the young people's voices to be heard.

Methodological basis of the ‘Seen but seldom heard project’

A key objective is to develop an approach which empowers rather than disempowers the participants through the research process; this involves developing an awareness of the potential power imbalance between the young participants and the adult project workers and researchers. Creative techniques are used to collaborate with young people with the ultimate aim of developing a better understanding of both their individual and collective experiences of ‘risk’ and ‘community.’ Such creative methods create a more accessible and effective arena in which young people are able to tell their stories associated with ‘risk’ and ‘community.’ This study draws on the works of Freire (1970; 1988), Fals-Borda (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Fals Borda, 1987), and Boal (1979; 2000). These scholars encourage the organisation of research in ways which involve co-participants at all stages of the research process (from design to presentation of results) and value the application of creative approaches (e.g. art, music, drama, sports, myths, storytelling), which help seldom heard groups articulate their own values and capacities.

A number of concerns are central when undertaking research with young people. A key concern is to use “appropriate research strategies, in methodologies and ethical senses” (Sibley, 1995 p. 270) and an approach which is youth friendly and participatory in approach. Such participatory approaches have been described as “co-creating collaborative spaces to examine and discuss individual, school, and community concerns” (McIntyre, 2000, p.128). In this study such collaborative spaces help us to value the social and cultural capital of young people.

Visual and creative methods have been used as a way of gaining insight into the context of the young person’s lived experience (Wright, Darko, Standen & Patel, 2010). Through these methods young people are able to “construct accounts of their lives in their own terms” (Holloway & Valentine, 2000, p. 8). As a result, creative visual research methods act as a means to study the culture relevant to these young people and the community with which they interact (Banks, 2007). This involves young people choosing images, or creating images themselves through taking photographs that represent their experiences and perceptions of their communities and ‘risk.’ They are not told what to photograph, thereby leaving decisions about both the content and process to the young person. Photo-elicitation interviews are then used to understand the symbolic meaning of the images within a social relationship with young people (Haw & Hadfield, 2011, p. 8).

This project is framed within a critical ethnography approach, which takes an ‘activist’ orientation and has a value-laden approach. This means that the researcher is advocating for a marginalised group, challenging the status quo and “attempting to empower the group by giving it voice” (Ary, Cheser Jacob, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2009 p. 460). The application of ethnography within education projects can help researchers separate their cultural values from those of the students (Spindler & Hammond, 2000), thus giving insight into the social and cultural capital of young people.

However, we encountered a paradox in our attempt to operationalise this approach: although a participatory approach should be ‘ground up’ rather than ‘top down,’ engaging with young people during the school day requires a predetermined program of activity that could fit alongside their existing school curriculum. Although such an approach could risk constraining the emergence of participants’ experiences, the school suggested that students respond better within a structured framework of activities. To balance this structure, it is important to develop ways which encouraged young people to represent their own ideas by participating on their own terms. We were mindful of the possibility that some of the participants might feel excluded due to poor literacy skills if they were asked to use written methods of representation (Allen, 2002). Instead,

we use methods which link visual, creative writing and new media approaches to gather data. Our thesis is that whereas old media ‘delivered’ its message and ‘told’ its audience, new media – including multimedia and performance, in particular – has the ability to ‘ask’ the audience and to collect and value their contributions through participatory approaches. Such approaches can be used to explore themes surrounding youth identity and risk, and produce greater ‘insider’ knowledge which can enrich and challenge students’ understanding and involve them in a process of transformative praxis (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). In this way, ideas and actions taking place in the social sphere of young people’s lives can stimulate change.

As Fals Borda (1987, p.144) suggests, participatory research cannot simply be disseminated via printed publications and reports; it should adopt diverse means which value popular culture and popular knowledge. In this project, the aim is to use a collaborative multimedia ‘performance’ as both a dissemination, event and evaluation tool, using the Forum Theatre model (Boal, 1979). Such a method encourages audience participation in discussion of the issues raised in the performance. As Conrad (2004) suggests, popular education projects which use a variety of participatory methods can enable us to interrupt “the common sense or taken-for-granted” (p. 19) understandings of youth and risk, enabling us to develop perspectives which are grounded in young people’s experiences and ways of making meaning of their lives. As well as breaking down barriers by involving a diverse range of voices within academic writing and representation, it is perhaps equally important to embrace those new methodologies for social research and practice that represent the complexity of contemporary society, and allow a diverse range of voice to find expression. In this way, new ways of knowing or ‘extended epistemologies’ (Bradbury & Reason, 2003) will embrace a wider range of experience which hitherto have remained under-represented in academic debate (Guhathakurta, 2008). As a result we are co-learners in the project (Minkler et al., 2002).

Aims of the project

This is a joint project of the School of Health and Social Care and the Media School at Bournemouth University, and has been developed in collaboration with a secondary school in the South of England, which caters to students with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties, or those who have been excluded from other schools. It is funded by the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice in the Media School (CEMP). The ultimate aim of the ‘Seen but Seldom Heard’ project’ is to work in an empowering way with a marginalised group of young people, and to engage in a dialogue about their experiences and needs in relation to their perceptions of ‘risk’ and ‘community.’ This is important because some groups of young people are excluded from research as they are hard to reach or do not engage well within traditional interview focused research (Curtis, Roberts, Copperman, Downie, & Liabo, 2004).

The young people in this project may be seen to be marginalised further by their attendance outside of a mainstream school setting. The school with which we are working provides education for pupils with a broad range of special needs. As such, the students may be considered to be a risk to themselves and to others. Some of the participants, excluded from previous schools, may have experienced high levels of family stress, and poor relationships with parents, teachers and other pupils. Furthermore, their previous educational experiences may have limited their acquisition of basic skills and limited aspirations (Ofsted, 1996).

Following a request from the school, the project worked with young girls in Year 9 (13-14 years), as school staff believed that this group would work well with the activity, and it would also complement curriculum activities during Year 9. Although this limited the scope of the study and provided a focus on young women’s experience, it nonetheless provides some useful insights into

notions of risk and youth. A risk analysis was undertaken to take into consideration the settings in which the project would take place (i.e. the Media School at the university and the secondary school premises). The former being the most challenging in terms of assessing risk, as this is outside of the structure of the secondary school setting and control of teaching staff.

The aims of the study are addressed in four phases. In the first phase, the study explores the background literature on the access that 'marginalised' young people in both urban and rural areas have to cultural resources (i.e. cultural capital), and their perceptions of 'risk' and 'community.' The second phase considers how creative visual methods can be used to explore the perceptions young people have about 'risk' and their relationship(s) with their 'community(ies)'. The third phase builds on the ideas and materials developed through the visual methodologies used in phase two, key emerging themes and scenarios are considered. In this phase, work from the previous two phases of the project will culminate in a collaborative multimedia 'performance.' Four different mediums have been suggested, those of reality theatre (Saldana, 2005), film, poetry and music; however, other forms of media will be considered and the final decision will be made by the young people themselves. The theme that will be common to all mediums is that it will be the young people who will provide/write the story and will either perform the piece or take on other supportive roles with the guidance of a script writer, multimedia professionals and researchers. A Forum Theatre model (Boal, 1979; 2000) will be used to engage the audience(s) in further discussion of the issues raised, searching for solutions or alternative responses to the problems presented (Conrad, 2004). Phase four will use participatory evaluation – including post 'performance' responses from participants, and audience members, as well as qualitative analysis of materials produced via Twitter fiction and visual methods. As the project bridges disengaged young people, service providers, and community members it will include consideration of the complex interplay between past and present influences through a performance-rich 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) that both facilitates and supports learning.

At the time of writing, Phases 1 and 2 have taken place, and Phases 3 and 4 are being planned. Phase two activity was structured around 9 sessions, each including a range of activities to encourage the participants to develop materials which expressed their understanding of risk and safety, including the production of visual media outputs. Through the development of these materials, the participants were exposed to the work of university students who showcased their own work using digital media, demonstrating the possibilities offered through such media and building the aspirations of the participants to use it creatively to express their own experiences. This culminated in participants developing a short film (1 minute maximum).

Planned data analysis

In phase four, the materials developed by participants will be analysed as part of an emergent process. Interpretive techniques will be used to analyse the materials collected throughout project, which will include the short films and material posted within the online environment (Kozinets, 2002; Puri, 2007). The purpose of the online work is to capture experience and reflections, observe expressions of cultural norms specific to the youth 'community', and to explore how discourse "functions to construct meaning and how textual dialogue can form the bases of cultural understanding" (Markham, 2005, p. 816).

Analysis will be an inductive, collective process with the researchers analysing the same data and comparing and contrasting the results with data collected elsewhere in the project. Analysis will involve a cyclical process. Themes will be categorised and ordered, and the trustworthiness of the data will be qualitatively assessed (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997). All discrepancies will be

discussed amongst the group until a consensus is reached. A methodological journal will also be kept to record these discussions and any changes in coding as common themes and alternate viewpoints emerged. The aim is not to generalise but rather to explore more deeply the nature of this phenomenon (Rowan & Huston, 1997).

The project has been strengthened by the involvement of Bournemouth University (BU) students who, due to their closeness in age, are able to share experiences and empathise more effectively with the points of the view of the young people, thus building successful working relationships and bringing fresh ideas to the project.

Ethical considerations

The research is carried out following the British Educational Research Association ethical guidelines. The negotiation of ethical procedures is a continuous process (Walker, Schratz & Egg, 2008, p. 173). Permission for involvement in the project was sought from both the young people and their parents/guardians. As part of this process it is also important to negotiate who 'owns' the creative outputs of the project, whether theatre performance, creative writings, or images. It was made clear to the young co-participants from the outset that the creative approaches used throughout the project are integral to the research process (Leitch, 2008, p. 53), and that the creative artefacts would be used during the research and afterwards, particularly in dissemination (Leitch, 2008).

The expectation throughout the project is for teachers and teaching assistants to be involved in the design and delivery of creative workshops and to take responsibility for coordinating in-class activities that use and update the project blog. They are also asked to assume overall responsibility for the safety and emotional wellbeing of the young people throughout the project.

The use of the 'blog' is informed by the principles of 'good play,' enabling online conduct that is meaningful and engaging to the participant, who in turn is responsible to others in the virtual community (James et al., 2010). There is evidence of the growth of blogs as educational tools (Lamb & Johnson, 2006; Penrod, 2007), and the use of digital media technology can enhance the learning experience of participants within the wider school setting.

It is also important to recognise the private nature of the blogs as a form of virtual diary keeping. The young people are encouraged, where possible, to keep them private which, therefore, gives them the confidence to post their entries without the fear of them being read by everyone. To achieve this, group discussion forums are included for group conversations as well as password protected areas for more individual reflection.

Discussion of the project using Bourdieu's Theoretical Framework

A key aim of this project is to use creative methodologies which value the social and cultural capital of young people. In his work, *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) described how the concepts of social fields, capital, and habitus all work together to generate social action. Four forms of capital are described by Bourdieu (1984): economic, social, symbolic and cultural capital. The distribution of these among individuals determines "the chances of success for practices" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.242). For the purpose of this paper only cultural and social capital will be discussed, but these are interwoven and intermeshed with economic and symbolic capital across and within social fields.

The habitus, which can be understood as an internalised representation of early socialization

(Bourdieu, 1973), shapes how young people's social identity develops in light of educational experiences, family and peer group experiences. Central to Bourdieu's theorizing of social reproduction is how habitus instils "a sense of one's place" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 466). Access to cultural capital is influenced by both individual and collective habitus, although it has been suggested that "being reflexive, and successfully negotiating future risks, both real and perceived, constitutes privileged cultural capital" (Threadgold & Nilan, 2009, p. 48).

Social capital can be viewed as the social networks and relationships that individuals have, and the resources embedded in these (Lin, 2001). For young people this may include family, peer, school and wider community networks. Putnam (1993, 2000) describes social capital as exerting a positive effect on developing and sustaining community cohesion. It is, therefore, a useful concept when considering how marginalised young people, who do not have political or cultural power in mainstream society, interact with and experience community life. The ways in which young people make sense of themselves and their social identity is influenced by the institutions they have contact with such as schools and local communities. Negative views of young people can be reinforced by social institutions and, as a result, youth identity is problematized within contemporary society (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; MacDonald & Marsh, 2001).

It has been suggested that social capital theorists such as Bourdieu and Putnam have ignored young people's role in generating and using social capital themselves (Hampshire & Matthijsse, 2010). Recent youth projects have been confined to encouraging young people to adapt to normative models of social and political institutions rather than offering transformative projects which create sites of resistance and a radical collective habitus (Milbourne, 2009). This project aims to adopt an approach that values the social and cultural capital of the young people involved. The arts-based and multimedia activities within this project empower young people to collectively question the nature of their historical and social situation. Such an approach has the potential to consider sensitive issues such as insecurity, risk and marginalisation. As a result of their group membership, the participants have access to the collective capital and creativity of all of the members in the group, encouraging wider debate, cultural exchange and the production of new understandings which may facilitate social change (Garoian, 1999). Such approaches may promote understanding of the complex nature of contemporary youth identity, and the intermeshing of individual and collective identities (Savage, 2000).

As Walsh (2007) suggests "youth possess often unappreciated repertoires of practice which allow them to use their imagination and creativity to combine print, visual and digital modes in combinations" (p. 79). This project considers young people's cultural capital through their ability to engage with multi-model creative media, and as a result may inform pedagogical and research practice with marginalized youth. Such approaches may empower young people to express their views about risk and their community in their own language and images. Such co-production is an increasingly important approach within public policy and practice and this approach to research and practice offers "the chance to create new types of knowledge through collaboration with the social and cultural capital of experts by experience" (Fenge, Fannin, & Hicks, 2011).

Conclusions

This paper represents an ongoing project which seeks to work in an empowering and creative way with young people and to develop a more inclusive approach to youth-based research. There is no off-the-shelf formula, step-by-step method or 'correct' way to do participatory research. Rather, participatory methodology is best described as a set of principles and a process of engagement in the inquiry (Haw & Hadfield, 2011, p. 89).

Similar to the work of Howard and co-authors, (2002) “participants engage simultaneously in two processes: a creative process (i.e. developing an idea from concept through to creative outcome, including developing skills in script-writing, film and drama), and an investigative process (researching and developing knowledge in subject matter)” (p.,6). The challenge for participatory research with young people is to use appropriate creative approaches to capture the ways in which they express their understandings of the world in which they live. Developing such creative methodologies supports the notion that young people’s cultural capital should be considered and valued. These methodologies therefore expand the epistemological boundaries of academic knowledge and practice. As Fenge and co-authors (2011) suggest, this encourages “a more diverse contribution to academic knowledge and debate” (p. 13), as well as an inclusive approach which allows researchers to develop an understanding of youth and risk, from the perspectives of marginalised young people themselves.

In light of the recent riots and unrest in England, it is increasingly important for academics, policy makers and practitioners to find new ways of engaging with marginalised young people, to listen to their concerns and to provide them with opportunities which support their connections to the communities in which they live.

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