



Practitioner research

Working with specific groups of people

JANET SOLER:

Mary, I know one of your interests particular is children's voice in the ethical issues and methodological issues that surround that, do you think there's anything, from your extensive experience of working in that area, that practitioners should be aware of and maybe could take account of, especially as students when they're starting to construct their own research?

MARY KELLET:

I think if you're doing any kind of research where you're interested in children and young people's voice, then you've got to be prepared to step back and let the young people take the lead, and that's sometimes very difficult for us as adults to do. To be able to facilitate genuine young person voice we've got to take away all the adult filters. And that's not easy to do. We often mediate what young people say. We're very quick to interpret what young people have said and interpret it in an adult way, rather than letting their voice come through. The best way I found of being able to empower young people with, with a voice is to give them a research voice.

Because that has an evidence base to it. It also has the authenticity of insider perspective. So if young people are going to research issues among their youth community, then you are going to get authentic young person voice.

I think it's the same as well in, in other forms of research where you're really trying to elicit insider perspective. So for instance, if you're doing ethnic minority research and what you're looking for is the perspective of that ethnic minority, you've got to let that voice come through. Similarly with disability research, some people have argued that able bodied people find it very difficult to understand disability issues and therefore it should be disabled people who are researching it. But in order to do that, you've got to give people the skills to do research. They can't just go out and do it.

So if you want to facilitate authentic insider voice, whether it's a young person voice or marginalised group voice, you've got to give them the skills through teaching research process to enable them to do that. And then be brave enough to accept what they're saying. And that's not always easy for us, particularly if they're saying something that's either uncomfortable for us to hear or something that is different from what our expectations might have been.

JANET SOLER:

Do you have any example from your own research or, in terms of how they might take account of pupil voice but also can be involved and constructing their own research projects?

MARY KELLET:

I think you've got to be a really good listener. I think you've got to listen to what young people are saying and not prejudge what you might want to happen. So for instance, if you're interested in researching a question, then you've got to give the young people an opportunity, to interrogate that question or even change that question if they think it's not appropriate. So it's about taking a back seat and sitting back and listening very carefully to what the young people want to say and being prepared to accept it. It's about involving them from the very outset. So not deciding on a piece of research and then part way through thinking: Oh, I think I'll go and involve some young people now.

Because you've already missed an important part of the process that they can inform with their insider perspective, with those eyes that they've got, they see things we don't. If you miss out that stage, then your research is not going to be as rich as it might be. So if there's any advice, it's to involve young people from the very outset and all the way through the process.