

Title - Doing participatory action research (PAR) in a primary school: the key role played by (unexpected) social-actors for the successful completion of a school-based research.

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The Health Foundation's inquiry (2019) into young people's future health identified that UK's children are amongst the most tested students in the world with negative impact on students' mental health and wellbeing, let alone the high costs of mental ill-health for the government. Children in the UK are formally tested three times by the age of 11 vs one time in most European countries. Therefore, my research intended to explore the nature of pre-adolescent mental health within the ambivalent features of the school-environment in the 'exam-focused' school. Further attention was placed on the factors enhancing researcher-user interaction, 'take-up' and impact through varying degrees of service-user engagement (Service-Users here refer to any participants from the school, and also users such as school-governors who did not participate but 'used' the research findings as guidance). The research, part of my Masters degree, was carried out in June/July 2019 over six weeks in a primary school in central London (UK). It involved eight year-6 students (10/11 year-old) who had just completed the Statutory-Assessment-Tests (SATs), their final exam of primary education.

The school selection was part of a wider design to inform my follow-up PhD research which would focus on the influence of the exam-focused school on pre-adult adolescent mental health – 16/18 year-old. Therefore, I selected a local primary school as part of a preparatory, as it were, pilot-study to gather data on the same theme from a different age group, undergoing the same 'final year' examination. A number of lessons were learned about doing participatory action research (PAR) alongside an ethnographic methodology.

First, it is essential to have a research plan to share with the school's social actors to identify commonalities of intent and expected outcomes. It initiates a working relationship rather than a formal handover of a research terrain often difficult to access. For example, once I got the head teacher on board, I was assigned a gatekeeper who was in charge of students' wellbeing and inclusion. The gatekeeper coordinated my day-to-day work in the school and also assigned a teaching assistant to the research, facilitating further rapport-building with other school staff. This enabled smooth operations throughout the fieldwork. In short, the school wanted to have a broader, more inclusive view than the one I had planned and my flexibility paid off.

Second, while the ongoing sharing of views/expertise with the (unexpected) social-actors implied a slight reworking of original plan (i.e. to involve students only), it also contextualized and grounded my plan in the 'field'. Not only was showing such flexibility useful for a richer thematic analysis, but it also helped reach other key social-actors (teachers, teaching assistants and parents), offering additional analytical and methodological scope I had not contemplated before.

Building on the previous points, a third important learning curve, emerged while witnessing a discrepancy between methodological theory and practice. Even though most PAR theories do not advocate fixed procedural criteria, they still invite to adhere to standard iterative procedures to ensure reliability and rigour. For example, on reflection, while I was the research-facilitator who involved different social-actors according to their different roles, I noticed that 'varying degrees' of PAR were unfolding rather than a standard PAR cycle. Amongst the many changes of plan or adaptations, a few are worth consideration.

Firstly, I was unexpectedly asked to wait two weeks before starting to engage with the year-6, causing research-worries about completion. However, the assigned gatekeeper took prompt action and, with the support of the teaching assistant, arranged that I worked with a group of year-5's for a short while. It turned out to be invaluable preparatory time, to get a 'feel' of the research field, experiencing the school ethos first-hand, getting to know new staff and the school-environment, testing the year-5's curiosity and anxiety about turning year-6 soon.

Again, such a move had further implications as I was asked to drop 'mental-health' from my research focus and replace it with 'wellbeing', in line with the internal school policy to focus on wellbeing only; a separation that opened up to nuanced speculation on educational policies in my follow-up Ph.D.

Thirdly, **Secondly, my initial research question had to change and adapt following some of the suggestions from the head teacher.** for a variety of reasons the number of parents' participants (to be interviewed) went from the initially recruited ten to two parents. In this occasion, the deputy head (a new social-actor appearing on the scene) reassured me that we could have reached a greater number of parents, often those hard to reach, through a survey/questionnaire. She facilitated the submission of an online questionnaire for all year-5/6 parents, adding alternative valuable data and increased the voices to be heard to contextualize further students' perceived well-being in relation to exams/tests. Once again, this shows that **'degrees of PAR'** involvement varies across social-actors involved.

In conclusion, following a rich analytical triangulation of data collection (parents, staff, students), three major findings, focusing on wellbeing promotion were presented to the school-governors. Surprisingly, the findings were included in the school 'improvement plan' document for the following year. Such a participatory approach blended well with a growing interest in research 'use/influence' which, as Wright (2008) argues, goes further than communicating research to a limited privileged few, instead, moving towards embedding strategies of service-user engagement and seeing research as a driver of wider social change.

By keeping a flexible research-mindset, a PAR approach brings with it twists-and-turns, let alone new social-actors, which cannot be 'designed' but can surely add value to the research outcome.

References:

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Cite myself in methodology chapter? Or recommendations?

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