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## On PAR with Young People: Learnings from the SAURA Project<sup>1</sup>

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*The Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) is a participatory action research project between groups of senior high school students, their schoolteachers and university staff. During the eight years of its activities in at least 17 high schools in the greater metropolitan area of Brisbane significant learnings have developed about working with students on projects that affect their own lives. This paper problematises aspects of partnerships and collaboration between two diverse cultures of the university and the school and discusses the benefits of such collaboration, some of the challenges faced and the responsibilities of the university partners in facilitating action research with young people.*

Young people's involvement in research activities is a relatively new development in educational research. Students' engagement in classroom projects requiring planning, gathering information, analyzing and report writing is not uncommon in many classrooms. For teachers, the primary aims of these projects are to develop skills and attitudes toward research and/or to develop the students' own knowledge. Rarely is this knowledge considered "new" knowledge or does it form a basis for decision-making or for solving real life problems. As such, these activities are not generally recognized as "genuine" research projects.

A review of literature yielded a handful of funded research projects that employed young people as researchers. For example, Schwartz (1988) reported on a study to investigate the effect of the use of the electronic network on the writing abilities of students. Alder and Sandor (1990) used young unemployed people to conduct a study on homeless youth as victims of crime. Other projects have employed young people as researchers to evaluate an education service provider (Slee, 1988), and investigate areas such as the effect of school on students from non-English speaking backgrounds (Henry & Edwards, 1986), vandalism (Knight, 1982), sexual violence and young people (Daws, Brannock, Brooker, Patton, Smeal, & Warren, 1995), and youth homelessness (Crane, Brannock, Ray, Campbell, Smeal, & Atweh, 1996). In the majority of these cases, young people were employed in these projects for the purpose of data collections and were not involved in data analysis, writing on their findings and/or conduct of action based on the findings.

Of special interest in this area is the publication of a book with the title *Students as Researchers: Creating Classrooms that Matter* (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998). This is one of the few books that

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attempt to theorize students' involvement in research activities. Fifteen educators from the US and Canada were involved in the writing of sixteen chapters for the book. The chapters are presented in three main sections: four dealing with theoretical issues, 11 dealing with stories of different pedagogies based on students' research, and one concluding chapter by the editors. This collection lays the theoretical foundations for students' involvement in research and demonstrates through a range of examples that some student involvement in research is not only possible, but is also of a great benefit to them. Not all the projects reported in the book relate to students involved in solving real world problems. In this paper, I am concerned with students' involvement in action research projects on real world issues that affect their lives.

Here I argue for students' involvement in action research projects based on three principles. Firstly, Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) argue that action research is participatory in that the different players involved in and affected by a problem should take responsibility in researching it and working towards its solution. Action research is participatory in the sense that people can only do action research 'on' themselves — individually or collectively. It is not research done 'on' others. This involvement of the groups or individuals who are facing a problem in the process of finding a solution embeds the solution in the context, making the solution more appropriate and more likely to be implementable than more abstract solutions derived by "experts". Secondly, young people involved in researching a social practice or a problem are in a better position to know the "inside story". This is consistent with the principles of ethnographic research, particularly those adopted by some feminist researchers (see for example Herbart, 1989) who argue that the view from inside a group should be obtained from the inside by using participant observation. Serious questions can be raised about the meaning and possibility of participant observations when an adult researcher, with different academic experience, and often from a different social background, attempts to "participate" in the world of young people. As Denzin (1986) notes, "The researcher who has not yet penetrated the world of the individuals studied is in no firm position to begin developing predictions, explanations and theories about that world" (p. 39). Thirdly, students' involvement contributes towards the role of research in empowering the researched community involved (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1986, Carr & Kemmis, 1986). This stance has been used to argue for collaborative research (Stenhouse, 1975), participatory research (Horton & Zacharakis-Jutz, 1987), and educative research (Gitlin, 1990) and of course, action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Students' participation in action research projects allows them to gain research skills that are useful for their future life as well as develops their confidence and sense of responsibility for taking an

increased control over aspects of their lives. It is worthwhile to note that the same arguments can be presented for the involvement of teachers in action research projects on their own practice. Naturally, the involvement of students in action research projects raises its own issues and problems, some of which will be discussed in this paper. These issues will be discussed based on the learnings from one action research project with students that I have been coordinating for the past 8 years.

The Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA)<sup>2</sup> (Atweh & Dornan, 1997) is an action research project that aims to increase the participation of youth from target disadvantaged groups in higher education. The project has two aims. First, it aims to identify the barriers to participation in tertiary studies for students from certain under-represented groups; and second to commence some appropriate action towards increasing the participation of these students<sup>3</sup>.

This paper is a reflection on aspects of the project over the eight years rather than a formal evaluation of the project. It outlines the principles, structure and history of the project; problematizes aspects of partnerships and collaboration between the two diverse cultures of the university and the school; and discusses the benefits of such collaboration, some of the challenges faced and the responsibilities of the university partners in facilitating action research with young people. It should be acknowledged that the following analysis represents the story of a single person in the research team. Previous publications (Atweh, Christensen & Dornan, 1998; Campbell, Cook & Dornan; 1995) have discussed the learnings from the first two years of the project. Atweh, Cobb and Dornan (1997) discuss the learning developed from the benefits and challenges of implementing this project with specific cultural groups of students. Students' voices are heard in their own reports (Baer, De Jong, De Vries, Keis-Jorgensen, Korver, Nguyen, & Strong 1997; Bevan, Fawke, Gladman, Tuigamala & Fidow, 1996; Bloomfield, Kitzelman, O'Grady, Parsons, Proctor, Leschke 1996; Borowicz, Davis, James, Le, Nguyen, Owens, Pham, Strachan & Wilkins, 1992; Bajar, Brennan, Deen, James, Nguyen, Nguyen, Owens, Peace, Rice, Rilatt, Strachan, & Tran, 1993; Fawcett, Herlaar, Kropp, Meehan, Nugent & Young, 1996), a video (Bajar, Brennan, Do, Nguyen, & Tran, 1994) and a conference presentation (Blashak, Proctor, & Pym, 1997).

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<sup>2</sup> Several people have contributed to the design and implementation of this project during the last five years. Special thanks to: Derek Bland, Jennifer Campbell, Kayleen Campbell, Alan Cook, Tom Cooper, Roger Slee, Sandra Taylor Glenice Watson, Loiusé Dornan, Alison Cobb and the many teachers and students who have helped shaping project in so many ways.

<sup>3</sup> It is worthwhile stating that no single university is targeted in this project and the project emphasised higher education as an option inclusive of Technical and Further Education institutions.

## The SARUA Project

Social research in Australia since the 1960's has shown that several sections of society do not have the same access to tertiary studies as the rest of society (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Henry, Knight, Lingard & Taylor, 1988; Western, 1983; Postle, Clarke, Skuja, Bulk, Batorowicz, & Cann, 1995). In particular, the under-represented groups include Aboriginal students, Torres Strait Islanders students, women in non-traditional and postgraduate courses, students from certain non-English speaking, low socio-economic, rural and remote areas backgrounds (Department of Employment, Education & Training, 1990). Research and policy documents during the past 10 years have recognised the great social and economic cost of such a lack of participation, not only to individuals and their communities, but also to the whole of society. In spite of the introduction of 'free' higher education in Australia in the 1970s, recent research has shown that, while the overall situation has improved for some of these groups in the past 20-30 years, the student population engaged in higher education does not yet reflect the distribution of the overall population (Postle et al, 1995).

A major hindrance preventing students from underrepresented groups from pursuing tertiary education is that higher education is not part of their *habitus* (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 1991). Habitus according to Bourdieu's theory is a disposition toward acting and thinking in a certain way. Likewise, Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett (1982) have argued that many working class students do not value formal education and lack knowledge about its feasibility for them, and hence they are not predisposed toward it. This project is based on the belief that action that seeks to bridge the gap between the culture of the underrepresented students and the culture of higher education is needed and that this can best be achieved through controlled participation of these students in the life of the university.

The interrelationships between the culture of higher education and the culture of the students from the so-called disadvantaged backgrounds need to be addressed in the conceptualisation of projects designed to increase the participation of the under-represented groups. In describing the heterogeneous spaces in which we live, Foucault (1986) asserts that we live inside a set of relations that delineate sites which are irreducible to one another and not superimposable on one another. In particular, such projects should be conceived in the borderline terrain where "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower,

middle and upper classes touch” (Anzaldua, 1987). Hence, action dealing under-representation should be careful not to regard the culture of the university as superior to that of the students’. Deficit models for dealing with the backgrounds of students from underrepresented groups are misguided and not effective and amount to no more than blaming the victim. Such action should be sensitive to and accommodate the development of understanding and respect of the multiple spaces in which students live and function.

### **History and Structure of the Project**

The project began in one school in 1992 and expanded to another in 1993. At that early stage of the project, a small number of schools were supported by a relatively large number of university staff. The student groups selected from these two schools represented a balance of student backgrounds in terms of gender and ethnicity. In 1995 3 new schools with a special concern about the low participation of male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the transition between Years 10 and 11 joined the project. In 1996 we had three all-females groups working on issues related to the tertiary aspirations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females, while one all-male group targeted tertiary aspirations of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males. As in the previous year, all participating schoolteachers were non-indigenous although the male group also had an Aboriginal teacher aide supporting the supervision of students’ work. During that year, four other schools with students from low socio-economic backgrounds also joined, with one school providing a group of female and male Pacific Islander students. In 1998 the project became part of the normal business of the university in being incorporated with the activities of the Q-STEP, a university program to cater for the participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. As a result of national and international conference presentations about the project, at least three other universities around Australia are planning to conduct similar projects. An informal coalition of interested staff from these universities called SARUA National was formed in 1999 with the intention of sharing experiences and resources.

The overall structure of the project was the same each year and consisted of three main stages.

- I. Students from under-represented backgrounds, selected by their teachers according to school-developed criteria attended an initial 2-5 day training and planning workshop at the university. During these workshops students a) gained direct knowledge about the university, its culture and the variety of options available to gain university entry, b) identified some social factors

affecting youth from their respective backgrounds, c) received some training in research methods, and d) came up with plans for research and/or activities that they would conduct in their school communities.

- II. Students returned to their schools to carry out their projects in their local school environments. The school based projects consisted of either conducting research projects or, based on recommendations from previous research, designing and implementing activities to increase the awareness of the school community about tertiary access.
- III. At the conclusion of the project, students and their teachers returned to the university to reflect on and document their projects. Recommendations for the next year's action and research were then outlined.

### **SARUA as a Participatory Action Research Project**

Perhaps the most widely known characteristic of action research is that it consists of cycles of action and reflection. However, Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998) argue that action research has some other important characteristics that set it aside from other research paradigms. The authors identify six characteristics of participatory action research (PAR).

First, PAR is *social* in that it recognizes that studying the particular practice should construct it as part of a wider set of constraints, relationships and agendas. Further, PAR problematizes the process of research itself and critiques it in terms of power relationships between the participants, the representation of their voices and relative benefits each obtains from the research. PAR is also *participatory* in that 'it engages people in examining their knowledge (understandings, skills and values) and interpretative categories (the ways they interpret themselves and their action in the social and material world)' (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 23). It is also participatory in the sense that people can only do action research 'on' themselves — individually or collectively. It is *not* research done 'on' others. Similarly, PAR is *collaborative* in that people involved in the practice work "with" others from within and from without the practice. PAR is also *emancipatory* in that it helps participants analyze the social constraints on their practice and find ways to counteract these constraints and/or learn to work around them thus giving them a sense of ownership of the knowledge and action generated. Likewise, PAR is *critical* in raising questions about the conditions of practice and the assumptions and values of the various participants. It raises questions such as "Why" and "What else is possible". Finally PAR is *recursive* — *reflexive, dialectical* — in that it aims to help people to investigate reality in order to change it, and to change reality in order to

investigate it (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 24). This element is seen in terms of the spiral of cycles of critical and self-critical action and reflection as discussed above. This characterization of PAR will be employed in the reflection on the SARUA project in the concluding section of this paper.

### **Learnings from SARUA**

This section discusses some of the learning developed from working with students on their action research projects. Naturally, there have been significant gains obtained from this project for the students, their school communities and university researchers. In this paper, however, I will concentrate on the benefits the students gained. Likewise, there have been a few difficult challenges that the participants have faced. Some were dealt with, while others have proven more difficult. Moreover, reflection on the role of the coordinator of this project has given rise to valuable lessons about responsibility in facilitating action research. Hence, this section discusses some learnings evolving from the project under three headings: Benefits, Challenges and Responsibilities. These reflections were obtained from an analysis of university staff observations during the conduct of the project, their critical reflection at planning meetings, interviews with students at different times in the project and an analysis of the reports produced by the students themselves. These learnings relate to working with high school students in particular. Whether or not these learnings will translate to other informal settings involving young people in general will be left to the critical reflection by the reader.

#### **Benefits**

The gains obtained from this project by the participating students cannot easily be quantified in terms of specific outcomes. The exact numbers of the students from the participating schools who have gone on to the university cannot be ascertained with any degree of certainty. We know that some students from these schools have graduated successfully from university. Some have decided university life was not for them and dropped out. Others have returned to further studies a few years after finishing their work in the project. Testimonies from the teachers indicate that university entry from their schools has increased and university has become a real option that students think about and discuss with their career advisers more than before. This is supported by research done during

the first two years of the project (Campbell, Cook & Dornan, 1995). However, there have been significant qualitative gains from the project and these will be discussed here.

### *Teamwork*

One of the main features of the organisation of this project was its use of teamwork. Working on the research project gave students the opportunity to reflect on the benefits of working collaboratively with each other. Because they worked in teams they were able to divide the tasks among students themselves thus making the best use of the skills of the group. A typical comment about this mode of working was "[doing the project] was simple - easier than I thought. I thought it needs more working and all that but really it's teamwork and we finished things earlier than we thought because we work in a team. [If] we do it alone, it would take time, real long time".

Although the students saw the benefits of teamwork, they also reflected on the problems that arose. At times real conflict arose between individual students or between groups of students. This related to differences in opinions by various students on how to do things, their different working speeds, preference in working alone or in groups and the varying efforts exerted on their projects. One student expressed this in the following way: "I knew quite a few of the people who actually took part in the project with me. I thought I knew them pretty well but when we got into the research thing I found out how differently each of us actually were. We weren't as close or related as I thought we were". Of particular interest here is that on several occasions the students themselves took the lead and reprimanded other students who were disrupting the conduct of the meetings. Later planning workshops included special training for working in groups, negotiation and handling of difference in opinions.

Another benefit from teamwork in the project arose from the fact that the students came from different ethnic backgrounds. One young female student commented: "When I came here I just hang around the, you know, my people, the Vietnamese people, and I didn't really socialise with other people and I thought those people must be bad and all this. But now that I done the survey [I realised that] there's heaps of people that [are] real nice."

These experiences demonstrate that the students were able to successfully work together in non-school like activity to accomplish a common task, and more importantly, they were able to reflect critically on their experiences.

### *Developing a critical research sense*

The students involved in this project demonstrated considerable “research sense” and a critical appreciation of the research process itself. This was clearly illustrated in the research reports that they produced. For example, they were able to identify the strengths of use of questionnaires for data collection in order to “question a large anonymous audience, within a minimal amount of time” (Borowicz et al, 1992; p 2). At the same time, they were able to identify some of the pitfalls in designing and conducting surveys: “The design of the survey relied heavily upon the brain” (p.2). They also identified that the attitude of the data collector towards the respondents was a major factor in obtaining valid information. They concluded “one must commit oneself to the task, taking a professional outlook and reflecting this image toward the respondents” (p.3). Similarly, they were not afraid to go beyond the data and raise hypotheses about its meaning and causes. For example, in noting that 71% of the young men and 29% of the young women surveyed have university aspirations in spite of the fact that girls indicated that they enjoy school more than boys, they were able to offer the explanation that: “Possibly this may be due to a lack of female role models who have completed university other than teachers, as well as early motherhood which is common in [this suburb, rather than women concentrating on careers]” (p.21).

Students were also able to be critical of the whole structure and conduct of the collaborative project. In deciding how much advice and assistance to give to students the university team was guided by two considerations. Firstly, we were careful not to expose the students to decisions which we did not think that they were prepared to make. Many of these students have faced failure many times before, and our responsibility was to avoid their involvement in tasks which might lead to further failure. Secondly, we aimed to ensure that the report produced by the students had some credibility as a research report. Perhaps we regarded this component of the project more as an apprenticeship for the students to develop research skills rather than a partnership between equals. This emphasis led to a sense of loss of ownership over the project among a few students. One student felt that “we were doing it all for them [i.e. the university staff] sort of thing”. Another student felt that the students were used as “guinea pigs” in an experiment to see how the methodology of action research can be utilised with young people. Based on these comments, the initial training sessions were modified to allow for more explicit negotiation and explanation of the roles of the different participants in the project.

### *Bridging the gap with the university*

One of the aims of the project was to increase the students' familiarity with university life. The interviews with the students indicate that being invited to work at a local university and to experience a new environment proved to be very rewarding. Prior to the project, universities were an alien environment for many of the students. Many did not know anybody who had gone to a university. As one student put it: "They don't think uni is for them". Upon the completion of the project, one student commented with some surprise that "I didn't think it would be such a big place ... how sociable people are! ... Like, at first, I thought it might be like school ... They're not trying to go around big noting themselves like school kids are". Another student said that her involvement in the project "made me realize that not all my doors are closed to uni, that I do still have a chance and I'm going to do everything that I can to get there".

Not only did the students become more familiar with the university environment, but also they had a chance to develop skills that were useful for them if they decided to go to university. Students were able to participate in many tasks usually conducted by university staff. They were involved in a genuine action research project dealing with a specific real world problem affecting their lives. They used rigorous research methodologies and instruments, generated useful knowledge, documented their findings and were engaged in the dissemination of their knowledge. From time to time students have presented their findings at professional meetings. One group of students prepared posters on their results at a gathering of researchers from universities in Brisbane that won them the award for the best project from novice researchers. In another, year the students participated in symposium at a national conference for educational research. They read the paper and were able to answer all questions targeted at them from the audience. On both occasions the university and staff were ready to intervene if the students showed any discomfort or embarrassment. Perhaps, this reflected a certain lack of faith in the students' ability as much as a duty of care for their well being.

### **Challenges**

#### *Different agendas of the partners*

In spite of the successful collaboration, it is naive to assume that all the players shared identical agendas. Grundy (1998) discussed the importance of recognising the "distinctive interests of the partners". This project was the result of collaboration between three groups of people each with their own interests and expectations. The researchers from the university were concerned about

learning about the facilitation of action research with students as well as the use of action research to increase access to university from the targeted backgrounds. The teachers in the school saw the project as developing students' academic skills as well as developing a culture in the school that included university as an option to their students. Lastly, the students were offered an opportunity learn more about the university as means for accessing it. However, as the project progressed each year the students were increasingly concerned about access to university for the rest of the student population in their school.

At times there were some tensions between the interests of the three groups of participants. For example, students tended to be less interested in thinking about social issues on a larger scale and to be more task oriented than the University staff and their teachers. Also, during the period leading to the second session with the students at the university, the students expressed concern about the planned program of activities for the three days. They felt that some of the more general skill development sessions such as social action and group work during the first session were not of particular interest or useful for the conduct of their projects. They were very anxious to get on with the task at hand even before they received what the adults perceived as necessary training.

Further tension arose between the practical constraints of what it was possible to accomplish from the point of view of the university researchers and the students' idealism. For example, in planning the Buddy System between the Year 8 and university students, the student group hoped that each of the 80 students in the school would be teamed up with a university student for the duration of the year. The structure of university courses and the distance between the university and the school would have made this proposal impractical. Trying to negotiate this with the students to target only some of the more needy students in grade 8 created a temporary loss of trust and goodwill between the students and their teachers. What was very heartening about this temporary disruption to the project's harmony was that the students had developed their own understanding about the issues related to equity and equal opportunity and were willing to stand up and argue for them. Perhaps there is a reminder here that in PAR projects negotiations may lead at times to inevitable, but not necessarily insurmountable, tensions between the different participants.

### *Catering for cultural differences*

As already indicated, during certain implementations of the project, students worked in homogenous groups based on gender and cultural background. This was done in response to

demands from certain schools themselves. Atweh, Cobb and Dornan (1997) identified several benefits of organizing the groups this way. These included,

- an increase in the participation of students from certain backgrounds who were hesitant to join the project as a minority group working within mixed groups;
- an opportunity to consider aspects of their culture that may not have arisen in culturally mixed groups;
- an opportunity to address issues of race and prejudice in their discussion and research;
- the avoidance of the possible tension that can arise between students from both genders about equal participation; and
- the development of leadership potential within the various groups.

However, the grouping of students in homogeneous cultural backgrounds and gender was not without its dilemmas. One of the indirect aims of the project design was for the participants to become aware of social disadvantage and oppression as a wide spread phenomena that affects different people according to their gender, race, socio-economic or other sources of disadvantage. The university team believed that such awareness is best achieved in groups of students from different backgrounds working collaboratively where they have a chance to develop mutual respect and understanding. On the other hand, the project was also founded on the belief that research into the factors affecting under-representation should be contextualized in terms of the various factors of disadvantage. The experience of disadvantage varies in different communities. Such contextualization could be best achieved in homogeneous gender and cultural groups. This presented the first dilemma for the project.

To satisfy both of these conflicting considerations, the project in 1996 was planned so that students with similar backgrounds worked in homogenous groups yet shared their plans and results with other groups. For example, during the training workshop at the university in 1996, eight school groups were represented: four of which consisted of Aboriginal students and Torres Strait Islander students, one was an all Pacific Islander group and three were mixed gender students from low socio-economic backgrounds (including non-English speaking backgrounds, Aboriginal students and Pacific Islander students). During the training sessions the students participated in joint sessions as well as worked in their school groups. This meant that there were regular opportunities for sharing the issues discussed in the small groups with the whole project. Hence, each participating student had a chance to develop a feel for a range of issues affecting students from various backgrounds. During the year, attempts were made to issue a regular newsletter informing the

groups of the activities at other schools. These arrangements gave all students a sense of belonging to a local group and at the same time functioning within a larger project that included students from diverse backgrounds.

The second dilemma encountered was the match between the schoolteachers' backgrounds and those of the students. The selection of the school liaison people is a crucial component in the success of such projects with students (Atweh, Christensen, & Dorman, 1998). The university team believed that the deeper the understanding the liaison teacher of the culture of the student the more successful the project is in achieving its aims. Arguably, this was important with respect to both gender and cultural background. Not only would a person from the "inside" be more able to understand the issues faced by the students, but they would also be able to provide a better role model to the students. This has not always been possible. In many cases there were no Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander or Pacific Islander teachers in the respective schools. Further, in some cases where there were teachers within the school from the targeted backgrounds they were already overburdened by their heavy involvement in a variety of other school activities and projects.

### **Responsibilities**

In considering the issues of developing communities of professional inquiry or research partnerships, Grundy, 1998 discusses the concept of "parity of esteem" between different partners who have different agendas and have different status, expertise and knowledge. Many decisions in the project were carried out by the university staff. For example, we identified the overall aims and structure of the project. We planned and led the training of the workshops. We drew some overall constraints about what was possible and what was not appropriate. However, we relied heavily on the teachers for supervising the students' work in the schools. Similarly, both the university researchers and the teachers respected the decisions of the students in relation to the design and implementation of the student survey and the later school-based actions. In turn, the students showed a general willingness to accept the assistance of their teacher and the university researchers in the design of their project and in the writing of the reports. Thus, different members of the partnership contributed different forms of knowledge to the project. This section identifies some of the responsibilities that university collaborators must address in order for such collaboration to be successful.

### *Balance between authority and freedom*

All the university participants approached researching with students with a great sense of ethical responsibility. As much as possible, we dealt with the students as equal partners and dealt with them in the same respect that we did each other. We respected and attempted to promote students' freedom in their decision-making. However, the students were also aware of the "duty of care" responsibilities. We were in a more privileged position as we had more experience in the planning and conduct of research as well as our knowledge of theoretical issues. The boundary lines between the authority that we had and the freedom that advocated for the students were sometimes confusing to them as well as to us. At times students and their schoolteachers were hesitant to proceed on a decision without checking if it was what university staff wanted them to do. However, these requests of "permission" became less frequent as the project progressed each year.

The university researchers learnt two means to deal with these confusions about our roles. First was the process of open negotiation with the students and teachers about each partner's roles. This negotiation started when the university staff were explaining the project to the school's administration, the volunteering teachers and the students themselves. The advertising material sent to the schools about the project specifically outlined lists of responsibilities of the various partners. Further, this negotiation was continuous throughout the life of the project. Whenever possible, decisions that we made were explained to the students. Likewise, the students were invited to evaluate the sessions and the processes of the project. As demonstrated above they were not afraid to speak their mind.

Secondly, at various times in the deliberations with students it became clear that the students need some assistance in considering the options of what is possible before they can decide on an appropriate action. For example, in helping them decide what type of data collection tool to use, we discussed with them various data collection methods with their advantages and disadvantages. Naturally, in choosing the list of methods discussed, we selected methods based on our assessment on what was appropriate and what was achievable by the students. From the discussed options, the students had to make their own decisions on which instrument they used.

### *Advocacy vs. empowerment*

In addition to providing the "expert" assistance, the university team realised that at times they needed to act as advocates for the teachers and the students in the school. Schools operate on tight schedules and resources. In many cases the university team had to negotiate with the schools'

authorities about time release for students and staff to be involved in this project. From my experience, one of the main determinants of the success of this project in some schools more than others was the amount of time allocated by the school for students to work within the normal school day. At times students and teachers met during their lunch breaks to work on the project. The university team felt that these arrangements were very unsatisfactory and unfair to the students and their teachers. In many cases, I as the project coordinators, have attempted to negotiate special timeslots in the school timetable where teachers and students can meet. At times this negotiation was more successful than others. Likewise, I made it a point of writing to the school authorities to communicate the university's appreciation for the students' work. Schools tend to recognise students' achievement in sports and other cultural activities. In low socio-economic schools perhaps academic and intellectual achievement is not as highly regarded among the student body as other achievements.

However, advocacy for the students in the school can lead to disempowerment for the participants speaking in their own voices. It is the responsibility of academics working with students' action research to always be conscious of when advocacy can lead to dependency rather than empowerment.

## **Discussion**

Working with students on participatory action research projects has proved to have its rewards and benefits as well as its dilemmas and challenges. As final reflection on the use of action research with students in this project, this section re-visits the characteristics of participatory action research identified earlier in the paper.

First, at the commencement of the project, when students were asked to offer some reasons to explain why few students from their school go to university, their first reaction was "because they are lazy". At the conclusion of the first year's research, the reasons identified by the students for lack of participation in higher education revealed an awareness of the role that the social context and environmental factors play in making university an uncommon pathways for these students. As a result of their engagement in this project, students increased their awareness of the social conditions operating at their schools and at universities. This is in line with the characteristic of action research being *social* in that it constructs practice in social rather than individual terms.

Second, the students themselves being both researchers and researched implied that the project was *participatory*. This participation was of great benefit to the students on many fronts. It allowed them to develop their confidence and research and writing skills useful for university study. It also allowed the development of their knowledge about the university by directly experiencing university life. Moreover, the project gave the message to the rest of the school that young people from that school could accomplish success in intellectual and academic activities.

Third, this project has demonstrated that *collaboration* between university researchers, schoolteachers and students is possible. As argued above, this collaboration had its problems and limitations that need to be addressed. This collaboration did not imply equal participation on all tasks; at times this collaboration became in effect apprenticeship. Yet, it always aimed at being open and self-critical. It demonstrated a parity of esteem, whereby the participants worked to develop a reciprocal sense of trust and respect. One of the main factors that contributed to the success of this collaboration was that all parties involved, students, teachers and university staff shared common commitment towards the content of research.

Fourthly, arguably, the effect of this project on changing school or university structures may have been limited. Student “*emancipation*”, even though may be with its own limitation<sup>4</sup>, was in the form of enabling the students to take advantage of the existing provisions and structures that allowed students from their background to gain entry to the university. As discussed in Atweh, Christensen and Dornan (1998) this emancipation was also demonstrated in the students’ lobbying their teachers and community organisations to support aspects of their activities. Finally, through their involvement in the project the students have developed skills that are useful in the pursuit of university study and in being socially critical citizens.

Fifthly, the students have demonstrated that they developed some *critical* understanding of aspects of the research process. They were able to reflect on the data gathering methods used and to make some hypotheses based on obtained results. The activities that the students planned and conducted showed that they understood the complex dimensions of the problem of access to university, and that they were determined to attempt to address these factors. Their activities involved reaching out to other students in their school, their teachers, parents and community organisations.

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<sup>4</sup> In claiming emancipation or empowerment it is prudent to keep in mind that both constructs are often - and arguably should be - contested from a critical and post-modern perspectives (a more detailed problematization of these constructs is found in Carr, 1995; Kemmis, 1995; Lankshear, 1994; Troyna, 1994; and Zuber-Zkerrit, 1996)

Finally, based on the *reflexive* characteristic of action research, the project followed the cycles of action and reflection. This had two benefits for the students. Firstly, it allowed them to develop their knowledge about the university and about their social context through direct experience and reflection on their local environment. Secondly, it allowed them to see value in collecting data and analysing it. Their endeavours in the research component directly led to action that they performed in their schools. The problems that they worked on were real "real world" problems that mattered to them personally and to their communities and their actions have contributed to somewhat changing their immediate environment.

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