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## **Problematics in Young People as Researchers: Visions and Voices**

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## Abstract

While during the past twenty years working with young people has witnessed the rise of a movement involving young people in the planning and conduct of formal and genuine research activities, the methodology is still under-theorised and under-utilised. In a previous publication (Bland & Atweh, 2003), we discussed some theoretical foundations for the involvement of students in meaningful educational research based on critical theory and its later developments in the writings of Habermas. In this paper, we will discuss in detail the question of “voice” arising from collaborative projects with young people. We will reflect on our experiences from one specific collaborative project with high school students that has been going on at the Queensland University of Technology for the past 12 years. The first section of the paper will provide the vision behind collaborative research projects with young people, concentrating on those conducted in educational settings. This will be followed by a short description of the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project involving staff of the Faculty of Education and numerous high school students and their teachers in metropolitan Brisbane. The third section will problematise the question of “voice” as we struggled with this concept in the planning and conduct of this project.

The past twenty years working with young people has witnessed the rise of a movement in many countries around the world of involving young people in the planning and conduct of formal and genuine research activities. In a previous publication, Atweh (2003) made the claim that while many young people may have experienced projects in schools that require the collection of information and writing of reports, these activities may not be regarded as “genuine” research activities since “[r]arely is this knowledge considered ‘new’ knowledge [nor] does it form a basis for decision-making or for solving real life problems” (p. 23). Social and educational research includes many reports about genuine research activities conducted in conjunction with young people (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Burke, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2002; Fielding, 2001; Kirshner & O’Donoghue, 2001; Thomas, 2000). The role of young people in these projects varies from mere research assistants gathering the data on other young people (e.g. Daws, Brannock, Brooker, Patton, Smeal, & Warren, 1995) to full researchers involved in the planning and conduct of the research as well as the analysis of the data and writing reports. Kirshner and O’Donoghue (2001) noted, “while great advances have been made in theorizing researcher-practitioner partnerships, research collaborations with youth remain under-theorized and under-utilized” (p. 4).

In a previous publication (Bland & Atweh, 2003), we discussed some theoretical foundations for the involvement of students in meaningful educational research based on critical theory and its later developments in the writings of Habermas. In that context we discussed some examples of projects involving students as researchers and some of the benefits to the young people themselves arising from such involvement. We also identified some arising issues that need further attention and critique for such projects to be consistent with their claims. In this paper, we will discuss in detail the question of “voice” arising from collaborative projects with young people. We will reflect on our experiences from one specific

collaborative project with high school students that has been operating at the Queensland University of Technology for the past 12 years.

The first section of the paper will provide the vision behind collaborative research projects with young people, concentrating on those conducted in educational settings. This will be followed by a short description of the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project involving staff of the Faculty of Education and numerous high school students and their teachers in metropolitan Brisbane. The third section will problematise the question of “voice” as we struggled with this concept in the planning and conduct of this project.

### ***Visions in Young People as Researchers***

Here, we will summarise the arguments for the involvement of young people in research activities based on three grounds: practical, epistemological and political.

#### *The practical vision*

During the past century there have been several attempts around the world to reform education. Not many of these attempts have led to significant changes in the classroom. Increasingly, educators have been questioning some of the practices and assumptions behind some such programs that have led to limited success if not complete failure. One factor often identified by educators is the role of the teachers in such endeavours. Sprinthall, Reiman and Thies-Sprinthall (1996) have argued that research on the gap between policy and practice has shown that often many innovations are seen by many teachers as external demands that “force” teachers to change, and hence are resisted by teachers. The experience of teachers under the National Curriculum reform in the UK illustrates the effect that sudden changes imposed from outside the classroom can have on demoralising and dis-empowering teachers (Hargreaves & Evans, 1997).

In a book with the provocative title of *The Predictable Failure of Educational Reform*, Sarason (1990) identifies the piecemeal approach that many of these reforms take as responsible for their failure to change actual school practices. There are often separate reform agendas for the curriculum, for teacher professional development, for school structures and organizations, and so on. Hargreaves (1994, p. 242) argues that “significant change in curriculum, assessment or any other domain is unlikely to be successful unless serious attention is also paid to teacher development and the principles of professional judgement and discretion contained within it”. Sprinthall et al. (1996, p. 666) argue that the “massive failures of the [many] national curriculum projects of the 1960s” raised interest in (re)investigating and (re)theorising the teachers’ role in educational change.

Of course, the concern here is about the involvement of students themselves. Cook-Sather (2002) calls students “the missing voice in educational research” (p. 5). Johnson and O’Brien (2002) call for the need to listen to student voices and needs for effective education change. Levin (2000) goes further to claim that education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more

direct involvement of students in all its aspects. He argues that not only do students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation, but also students' views can help mobilise staff and parent opinion in favor of meaningful reform. Students are not seen as the products and the recipients of educational reforms but are active producers of school outcomes. Their expectations and actions are essential for the achievement of schools visions and aspirations.

Educational cultures that “deny students a voice on issues that matter to them” fail “to support students to engage successfully in a ‘fair share’ of the full benefits of education and training” (Johnson & O’Brien, 2002, p. 9). The authors go on to argue that students’ disengagement has both immediate and long-term social and economic effects, leading to some students “voting with their feet” (p. 6) if not being mere spectators of their own learning. It is important to note that students’ disengagement is also a function of their social and economical background. Levin (2000) cites a considerable body of evidence showing that “disadvantaged students tend to receive the least interesting, most passive forms of instruction, and are given the least opportunity to participate actively in their own education” (p. 164). Here we argue for an approach to the inclusion of students often excluded from benefits of education that is based on “strengths” and avoids “deficit” approaches (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982) which can be misguided, ineffectual and lead to reinforcing stereotypes and blaming the victims.

### *The Epistemological Vision*

Here, we identify three epistemological bases for the involvement of young people in genuine research activities. The first is founded on constructivist theories of learning (Davis, Maher & Noddings, 1990) which assert that learners develop their knowledge based upon previous knowledge and experience — and that this process is assisted by reflection and negotiation with others and not simply transmitted from expert to novice. Crawford and Adler (1996), using a neo-Vygotskian perspective argue that knowledge or meaning is constituted rather than transposed through activity in a sociocultural context. They go on to assert that:

Students taught and assessed in traditional ways, learn to demonstrate that they have encoded the culturally approved knowledge and can reproduce it. Those who learn about teaching through reading about education research develop knowledge of a similar kind. In neither case is the knowledge necessarily a basis for further action or a changing personal view of reality. (p. 1189)

Levin (2000) and Cook-Sather (2002) have employed constructivist theories to argue that students’ involvement in research activities provides with first hand experience in knowledge generation that is both meaningful and useful for them.

Secondly, Cook-Sather (2002) argues that excluding students’ perspectives from dialogue about schooling and change results in an incomplete picture of life in schools and limits opportunities for improvement. Here, we argue that 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 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). Collaborative research with young people allows for a range of knowledge to be brought to the project by each of the participants. For example, in collaborative projects between academics, teachers and young people, process knowledge about research and project development and theoretical extrapolations from the data (Greenwood & Levin, 2000) can be provided by the university researchers; systems knowledge is provided by the coordinating teachers; and local knowledge about students' interests and context can be provided by the student participants.

Thirdly, we base students' involvement in meaningful research activities on the epistemological understanding that knowledge is never value free. Critical theorists have employed Habermas's theory of knowledge-constitutive interests (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1987). Carr and Kemmis (1986) point out that the designation of this theory reflects its basic epistemological assertion that knowledge "is always constituted on the basis of interests that have developed out of the natural needs of the human species and that have been shaped by historical and social conditions" (p. 134). Habermas discusses three types of knowledge-constitutive interests: *technical*, *practical* and *emancipatory* (e.g. see Atweh, 2004). Following these principles, Grundy (1987, p. 13) states that "the *emancipatory* interest gives rise to autonomous, responsible action based upon prudent decisions informed by a certain kind of knowledge" (italics added) (p. 18). While control and understanding are the motivating factors of the technical and practical knowledge-constituted interests, empowerment, that is, "the ability of individuals and groups to take control of their own lives in autonomous and responsible ways" (p. 19), is the motivation for emancipatory knowledge. Further, since autonomy of one individual cannot be isolated from that of others in a social group, and since any practice is a social process that involves many others, there is more emphasis in this type of knowledge on the role of the social dimension of the practice. The development of such knowledge is enhanced by collaborating with other people from the "inside" and the "outside" of the practice. Here, we argue that students may gain technical knowledge from listening to teachers and reading books; they may gain practical knowledge from participating in the day to day life of the school; however, through involvement in research activities, they have the opportunity to develop as independent knowledge generators and hence develop a sense of autonomy and empowerment.

### *The Political Vision*

In his later work on communicative action, Habermas (1984) provides a critique of the philosophy of the subject where he argues that "truth resides not in the mind of individual cognitive subjects ... but in the eternal conversation of people who interrupt what they are doing to ask 'Is it comprehensible?' 'Is it true (in the sense

of accurate)?' 'Is it morally right (appropriate)?' 'Is it truthfully (i.e., sincerely) stated?'" (Kemmis, 2000, p. 4). Habermas (1984, p. 44) defines communicative action as the "form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are coordinated through an exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language orientated toward reaching an understanding". Arguably, in a certain sense, the whole process of education can be seen as developing this communicative competence.

Of particular interest to us here is the two-level theory in which communicative action takes place: the *lifeworld* and the *system world* (Habermas, 1987). While the lifeworld is the taken for granted pre-interpreted everyday life existence, communicative action in this world is saturated by tradition and routine. Through the lifeworld, individuals construct their own identities and create social solidarity and participate in, and create culture. On the other hand, the social world consists of social organisations dominated by technical goals and outcomes. The function of the systems level of society is to coordinate and control natural and social forces, as well as the resources and organisations to administer them through bureaucratic structures. Seidman explains that whereas, in the lifeworld, "action is oriented to mutual understanding, at the systems level, the emphasis is on instrumental control and efficiency" (Siedman, 1998, p. 197).

Habermas goes on to argue that these two life spheres are highly differentiated into subsystems and that their interactions are complex. In analysing late modernity, Habermas makes two key observations about this interaction. The first he terms the *uncoupling of the system from the lifeworld*. This refers to the fact that systems have become increasingly autonomous from the concerns of the lifeworld. Systems seem to have developed a rationality of their own and act according to their own imperatives even at times when they contradict the processes of the lifeworld that sustain them. The second observation that Habermas makes about modernity relates to the *colonisation of the lifeworld by the system imperatives*. This is seen, for example, in the dominance of the systems language of efficiency, productivity, goals and roles on the lifeworld on people. For instance, our roles in social systems functioning are used as part of our notions of our own personal identity, for example as clients and consumers.

How can we conceptualise students' involvement in research in these constructs developed by Habermas? Undoubtedly, today's youth inhabit a world where roles, traditions and understandings are shifting at an unprecedented rate. In these postmodern times, the only certainty left is that of uncertainty and risk. Here we argue that student involvement in research is an opportunity for participating in meaningful and empowering communicative action where they work collaboratively with other students, teachers and academic researchers to posit their own questions and problems, and to find creative ways to deal with and improve aspects of their lives. In doing so, students are not only developing some technical knowledge about survival in the lifeworld and the system world, but also developing practical knowledge about the world, and, arguably, developing a sense of an empowered agency as active participants or actors in the world.

Students' involvement in meaningful research activities serves two purposes with reference to the two observations that Habermas makes on the interactions of the

lifeworld and system world. On one hand, it allows the students who are constructed as recipients of the benefits from the education system world's knowledge and policy, to be active agencies of that world. To counteract the colonisation of the lifeworld by the systems level, Habermas turned to the developing grass-roots, democratic, social movements as redemptive agents and the carriers of a rational society (Seidman, 1998). Similarly, young people engaging in deep participation as researchers may find empowerment through having a direct impact on systems' processes. On the other hand, the students' participation in research assists in making that world more responsive to their own lifeworld. Research conducted in an increasingly commercialisation and commodification culture at universities may not be relevant to the daily lives and concerns of young people. This involvement challenges the traditional educational system construction of students as clients of research and educational services rather than as active agents in their own education.

### ***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 (Postle, Clarke, Skuja, Bulk, Batorowicz, & Cann, 1995). In particular, the under-represented groups include Aboriginal students, Torres Strait Islander 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, DEET, 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, & Passeron, 1990). 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 Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) 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-female 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 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 program, a university scheme 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.

### ***Problematics of Voice in Young People as Researchers***

*Whose voices are reflected in establishing the project?*

One issue we faced in running the SARUA project relates to the role of the students in the choice of the issues and methodologies involved in the research project. The project commenced through a need identified by some university staff committed to issues of equity and access to higher education by students from

certain social groups traditionally excluded from pursuing higher education. The originating team was committed to the principles of participatory research which has shaped the operation of the project to a large extent. We designed the initial training days to provide students with awareness of the social issues behind access and participation as well as with what we judged to be appropriate initial training in research methodologies to investigate the phenomena and to plan and evaluate appropriate activities in their schools. At various times we have questioned if our commitments and experience in research have colonised students voices. Would students have identified the particular problem investigated without our prompting? Would they have chosen different ways of investigating the problem and provided other types of activities if they did not receive the initial training we provided?

Perhaps not. However, we can make three comments on the success of SARUA project. Firstly, the majority of the students have demonstrated a strong commitment to the project. Such a commitment was demonstrated by their continual involvement in the project even when it was additional to their schoolwork and when weekly meetings have occurred outside their normal class time. There is no doubt that the students have “adopted” the agenda initially proposed by the university staff as their own. Perhaps, this is not unlike any collaboration between co-researchers where the idea of the project may have arisen from one of the participants to be adopted by others who found some benefit from their participation. Secondly, the design of the project was conceptualised as an action research project at two levels (Atweh, Christensen, & Dornan, 1998). On one level, the university staff were involved in an action research project studying the facilitation of action research with young people. On the other level, the students were involved in action research on their own school communities. While the overall structure of the project has been determined by the university staff, the students had much more input in the design of their own school projects and activities. Naturally, students’ feedback and critique on the whole process was sought at different stages and in some instances the structure of the program was modified accordingly. Here we claim that even though the contribution by the various collaborators was not necessarily the same, it was based on the mutual respect and openness of the collaborators to listen to each other with respect and good will. Thirdly, in previous publications we have demonstrated the benefits gained by the students from their participation in such a project (Atweh, 2003; Bland & Atweh, 2003). Our claim is that the question of who benefits from a collaborative project is more important than the question of who selected the issues and methodologies adopted.

#### *Can adult and young people voices be in conflict?*

In reflecting on the project we encountered another issue relating to the question of the roles and duties of the university staff in the project that may be seen as interfering with student voices. Our planning of the project was based on our belief that students need to participate in the culture of the university during their involvement in it in order to bridge the gap between the two cultures. We also were committed to the notion that the work they produce must demonstrate its value as

useful research for them and their school communities to make specific recommendations and plan some action. Further, we were aware that in our work with the students, the university staff and the teachers had legal duty of care responsibility towards the students. We were further committed to avoiding students experiencing failure in the project that might reinforce bad academic experiences in their schooling that might, in turn, lead to contrary results to those we envisioned. These considerations have undoubtedly led to some conflicts with allowing the voice of the students be fully heard.

At various times such conflict was commented upon by the students themselves. At the early stages of the project, Atweh, Christensen and Dornan (1998) reported on one such conflict. In planning a Buddy System between year 8 and university students, the students in one school hoped that each of the year 8 students would be matched with a university student for the duration of the year. The structure of the university courses and the considerable distance of the school from the university made this proposal impractical. Trying to negotiate limiting the proposal to a handful of at risk students led to temporary loss of trust between the students and their teachers and university staff involved in the project. However, what was heartening to us about this short interruption to the harmony of the project was that the students in arguing their case were using issues of equity and privilege and were ready to stand up and argue for them rather than accept our suggestions as final impositions.

Similarly, at a more recent focus group of students from one school, a few of the students have been rather critical of the role of the university staff in editing the work submitted by students. One student put this way: “And I also think that we should have less input from other people, because, well, we just kept on getting stuffed around, saying, like our surveys weren’t right and ways, like not really to improve them, just to change them...”. This student goes on to suggest that a common lesson on writing surveys might have been helpful and that students critiquing each other’s work might have been more effective. Later she added, “[i]f we ask for help then give it!” Undoubtedly, these are some very valuable lessons for us. Another student agreed, “we did that report thing, like, you [the university staff] kept changing our work, and we’d change it again and then you’d change it back again – it should have been more of our own work that went into it”.

Similar concerns have been expressed by other collaborators with young people. Cook-Sather (2002) observes that it is essential to consider the intersection of identity, language, context and power that inform all pedagogical relations. Language is an expression of culture and power, according to Whitmore and McKee (2001) who note that professional researchers need to be aware of how easy it is “to slip into taking over, especially when others are insecure, inexperienced and impatient with the process” (p. 401). Considering the major issues of ownership and quality, Whitmore and McKee (2001) question the extent to which “experts” should revise and edit students’ research questions and reports. They assert that the keys to avoiding unwarranted intervention are “sufficient time, adequate resources, a lack of rigid rules around measuring ‘results’, the consistent presence of trusted staff, and a solid commitment to ‘pass the stick’ to the youth” (p. 401).

### *Which young people's voices are silenced?*

A third consideration relating to the problematic of voices is the realisation that students' voices are not singular. It is easy to speak of students' voice v. adult voices. However, in dealing with this project we realised that there are multiple student voices and that some of them may be silenced at the expense of others. In certain groups that we have worked with, there were some students that were marginalised by the rest of the group. For a variety of reasons some students were consistently not listened to by the group, often leading to tension and at times to students dropping out of the project completely. At times, such divisions were on gender grounds, other times on racial and ethnic grounds. In one focus group with the students, there was obvious tension between the participating female and male students. The female students were complaining that the boys were not "pulling their weight" when it came to doing work on the project, while the male students were complaining that the girls were not "listening" to their suggestions and were making the decisions all by themselves. Similarly Atweh, Cobb, and Dornan (1997) discuss experiences in working with culturally homogenous or heterogenous groups of students. The authors conclude that collaborative projects with students should be very flexible in their organisational structures. Single cultural groups and single gender groups may be appropriate under certain circumstances. These may allow for the discussion of specific cultural and social issues relevant to students and may allow the development of empowerment and leadership within the particular cultural groups.

Our experience in working with students has demonstrated that working in groups requires careful planning and continual maintenance. While the group is working towards achieving set aims, part of its energy should be directed at reflection and negotiation on its own methods of working and dealing with arising problems. Successful group work should incorporate feedback mechanisms on its own operation. Students' reports in SARUA often contain sections on lessons learnt by the students about working in groups. One point often made by the students is that one of the main benefits that they have developed is in working across cultural and friendship groupings. One female student put it in the following way:

When I came here I just hanged around the, you know, my people, the Vietnamese people, and I did not really socialise with other people and I thought those people must be bad and all this. But now that I have done the survey, [I realised that] there's heaps of people that [are] real nice.

### *How critical/theoretical can student voices be?*

The last point about student voices discussed here relates to the question of the level of critical thinking and theoretical maturity of students' voices represented in the project. The SARUA project was planned from a critical theoretical perspective (Atweh, Christensen & Dornan, 1998). Citing MacLaren, Cook-Sather (2002) states that critical pedagogies focus on "critiques of social injustices and inequities" (p. 6) and calls for the empowerment of students to critically appraise the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way we live.

Atweh, Christensen and Dornan (1998) discuss how students' reports have demonstrated an ability of the students to reflect critically on problems that they have encountered during their research process. For example, the students reflected on the advantages of the different methods of data collection. They identified some of the practical limitations that they have encountered. And most interestingly, they ventured to provide their extrapolations from the data and provide their own hypothesis about its meaning and causes. For example, in noting that 71% of the boys and 29% of the girls in their school have university aspirations, in spite of the fact that girls indicated that they enjoy school more than boys, they were able to provide the following possible explanation: "Possibly this may be due to a lack of female role models who have completed university other than teachers, as was early motherhood, which is common in [this suburb]" (p.126-127).

Likewise, students felt free to critique the structure of the project and its presentation by the university staff. In a recent focus group the students felt that their university training consisted of too much time in the classroom. While it may have provided them with adequate "theory" to do the research, they did not feel that they were able to have enough experience of the life of the university. "How can we recommend it to young people [in our school] to go to university if we don't really know what it's like". They preferred to be able to go around the university observing and perhaps interviewing university students about their experiences and views and they called for regular visits during the year to the university. They were aware however, of the practical problems that this may have implied in terms of missing school classes, demands on teach time and transport costs.

Further, there was some evidence that students' views about the failure of students from their school to pursue higher education do alter during their involvement in the project. Initially when we raise the question for discussion "why do students from your own school not go to university", students initial reasons are often along the lines "because they are lazy", "they want to start work and earn money fast", or "they are interested in having a good time". Later in their reports their analysis is more focused on structural and social problems such as "lack of knowledge about university", "financial limitations", and "lack of teacher expectations".

Having said that, the question can be raised as to how do students develop these critical and theoretical understandings in the project. We have not built into the SARUA project a review of the literature or readings about the problem. Although we felt that this is an essential component of "genuine" research, we felt that it was an unreasonable demand on the students' time since this project constituted additional demands on students' schoolwork and school-time. We ourselves often referred to some theoretical constructs such as "cultural capital" and some research findings by other researchers. In other words, our theoretical and research knowledge provided insights traditionally played by the review of the literature. Similarly, in organising the writing process of the final reports we have made specific efforts to ask students to reflect on the problems that they have identified. In other words, the development of a critical stance by the students was contingent on us having that stance ourselves. This contribution of the various

participants to different aspects of the project is consistent with any research partnership (Grundy, 1998) that forms a basis and rationale of any collaboration.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

In this paper we have developed a vision behind the involvement of young people in genuine research activities that lead to change in policy and practice in their real world. On practical grounds, we have argued that students' involvement in research and the representation of their voices assure greater chances for the success of the various reforms affecting their life. In particular, the participation of at risk students in such activities may counteract their disenchantment with and exclusion from education and social life. On epistemological grounds we have argued that through young peoples' involvement in research activities, their knowledge about their world would increase and hence their ability to be active participants in its change. Using Habermas's construct of emancipatory interests, we claimed that students as researchers have a chance of developing a sense of agency and empowerment that will increase their participation in their current and future world. Lastly, young peoples' involvement in genuine research activities was based on a political vision where young people can participate with adults in the system world not as benefactors but as active participants.

However, in order to avoid the colonisation of the lifeworld of young people, working with them in research activities must be done from a critical point of view. In working with young people it is often easy to make claims of collaboration, voice and empowerment. Uncritical assertion of these claims may lead to further manipulation and dominance of young people; hence, these claims need to be contested and demonstrated rather than merely asserted. In this paper we have problematised the claim that students' involvement in research assures giving them a voice in decisions affecting their life.

Our experiences working with young people over 12 years have led us to be aware of many situations where claims about young peoples' voice may need clarification if not problematising. Working with students in collaborative research, adults should be conscious of the differential experiences and expertise that each participant brings to the process of collaboration. While young people can bring in the knowledge from the inside of the phenomenon being investigated, adults usually bring in knowledge of the research and potentially useful theoretical constructs for understanding the phenomenon. Further, in some cases, adults have a duty of care over the participating young people. This unequal contribution might lead to differential valuing of certain voices over others. In planning collaborative projects with young people, adults usually have access to sources of funds, hence they are the ones who identify the problem and determine the overall structure of the project. They also might be interested in the question of rigour and the form of results presentation to meet adult standards. These concerns might lead to limiting the students' voices in their participation.

Perhaps it is simplistic to talk about adults' v. young peoples' voices. In any collaborative activity there is a multiplicity of voices. It is essential to be conscious of the differential backgrounds and interests of the participants. However, it is also

essential that these voices enter into a dialogue and engage with each other rather than remain distinct and parallel. Honesty, respect and good will are essential conditions for the success of such dialogue. So is a continual process of self-reflection and critique, otherwise collaboration may easily lead to colonisation.

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