

“This is awesome Miss. It is safe. We don’t do this with any other teacher.” Classroom activities to listen to pupils’ voices

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Abstract

This methodological paper is concerned with the use of ‘child-centred’ methods to gather data from young people about their leisure lives. Specifically, a set of activities were devised that enabled young people’s voices to be heard, and their lived experiences to be understood. Inspired by research undertaken in primary schools, classroom-based activities which included creative representation, mind-mapping, pupil interaction and role play were used in a series of ethnographic case studies as part of a national secondary school physical activity research project in Wales during 2007-2009. This paper is an exposition of these activities for researchers and professional practitioners to gather information. Through an evaluation of their efficacy with the young people themselves, the methods were found to be effective for data capture and as a focal point for subsequent interviewing and focus group discussions. They also engaged the young people and enabled rapport to be developed between the researcher and the researched. The success of these methods in specific educational settings has implications for teacher-researchers and professional practice with children and young people in other contexts.

Keywords: Research methods, child-centred, classroom activities, leisure lifestyles.

Introduction

Over the last ten years attempts to inform policy and practice across a range of sectors have placed emphasis increasingly on listening to the voices of young people (Welsh Assembly Government [WAG], 2008a). In educational research

and physical education [PE] in particular, there have been strong commitments to research designs that have afforded pupils the opportunity to make their views known (MacPhail *et al.*, 2003; O'Sullivan and MacPhail, 2010). In many studies pupils' voices have been heard (literally) in interviews and focus group discussions and these established data collection methods have been successful for capturing thoughts, opinions, attitudes and dispositions of confident, fluent and articulate participants (Christensen and James, 2000). Yet researchers have also found gathering information from less confident pupils/children to be more challenging and as a result may have under-represented or neglected them (Christensen and James, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to present a set of methods that were used effectively during 2008 and 2009 for data capture and as a focal point for subsequent data collection methods – especially interviewing and focus group discussions. By drawing on a series of ethnographic case studies, the methods provide a resource for teacher-researchers seeking to listen to the pupils' voices and create more pupil-centred research environments. Through the use of visual display forms (drawings, spider-diagrams, mind-maps and posters), the various activities engaged the young people and enabled rapport to be developed between the researcher and the researched. The particular context for this exploration of methods was a series of ethnographic case studies as part of a national secondary school physical activity research project in Wales. Classroom-based activities were utilised by the first author and included techniques of visual representation, peer-interaction and role play.

The remainder of the paper is in four further sections. In the first of these there is a conceptual under-pinning (linked to a 'child-centred' approach) and an empirical illumination of previously used methods. Following that, the methods are explained and presented before being discussed and evaluated in the penultimate section. Finally, there is a conclusion which makes a case for more widespread use of these methods within educational research as well as in other subject fields where research is conducted with young people.

Before progressing, however, a note on nomenclature used in the paper may help with operational clarity. The vocabulary used by researchers who conduct research *with* (and sometimes *on*) children and young people is frequently context sensitive and specific to a subject field and/or professional organisations. Terms such as 'minors', 'pupils' and 'youngsters' are also used – often interchangeably and sometimes without precision. For our purposes, as the empirical work upon which this paper is based was conducted in secondary schools in Wales, we adopt the term 'pupils' to refer to the 11-12 year olds and 14 -15 year olds who participated. Elsewhere, particularly in the contextualising section that follows, we offer critique of other research remaining consistent with the vocabulary used in the original sources. Where ambiguity may remain, we have sought to elucidate by making explicit precisely to whom the discussion refers.

Background and context

The epistemological basis for the methods presented in this paper is predicated on the importance of differentiation within research design – mirroring educational principles linked to pedagogic practice (Lucas *et al.*, 2002; Mosston and Ashworth, 2002). In essence, the methods accommodate pupils' varied needs, their learning styles, different types and levels of cognitive ability (Klein, 2003), and their level of readiness and interest (Lowe and Turner, 2009). In other words, they are methods that place young people at the heart of the analysis, rather than through adult-centric conceptual (re)constructions that privilege specific kinds of potentially inappropriate knowledge.

Pupil voice and proper consultation with pupils to inform policy and practice have become key imperatives within educational discourse (WAG 2008a, 2008b; Wood 2007). The Welsh Government's 'Pupil Participation Project' promotes the participation of children and young people in making decisions, planning and reviewing any action that will affect them, specifically, to have a voice and choice (WAG, 2008a). In this sense, consulting with pupils is central to policy development, especially since this process can convey the significance of such initiatives (Templeton and Hodd, 2002).

Traditional approaches for researching with young people and children such as surveys and questionnaires have sometimes failed to address the complexity of young lives (Christensen and James, 2000), and there have been concerns about simplistic research design, objectification of pupils, limited response rates (Enright and O'Sullivan, 2010), and a failure to engage young people satisfactorily (Biddle *et al.*, 2004). To address these shortcomings some researchers have attempted to listen to children and young people by using explicitly child-centred methods (MacDougall *et al.*, 2004; MacPhail *et al.*, 2003; MacPhail and Kinchin, 2004) enabling children to work alongside the researchers (see Lomax, 2012). A key feature of many child-centred approaches has been the use of creative methods and imaged-based research with which young children (especially) are familiar and experience in their daily lives (Crivello *et al.*, 2009). For instance, creativity finds expression in inventive and imaginative tasks such as storytelling and drama (Veale, 2005), and visual image-based techniques including mappings, photography, paintings, graffiti walls, textiles, wood work, collages, scrapbooks and drawings. Visual narratives of children's experiences of their neighbourhood have been created through photographs that illustrate the multiple meanings of their creators (Lomax, 2012) – even diagrams have been used to elicit technical information, drawings to capture interpretations and judgements, and fictional characters to illuminate personal identification (O'Brien *et al.*, 2012). Individually or in combination, these visual research techniques provide complementary insights that enrich understanding of participants' lives (Darbyshire *et al.*, 2005; Gibson *et al.*, 2005.).

Multiple child-centred methods have also been used in research with children (e.g., Darbyshire *et al.*, 2005), and MacDougall *et al.*, (2004) have explored the meanings children attached to physical activity through the use of mapping and photography. Findings indicated that the children were enthusiastic participants in these studies and were delighted for their voices to be heard.

One technique that is both creative and image-based is drawing. It has been used extensively in clinical settings (Butler *et al.*, 1995; Jolley and Vulic-Prtoric, 2001), as well as in explorations of sex and gender role differences (DiCarlo *et al.*, 2000; Di Leo, 1983; Flannery and Watson, 1995), the sensitive topic of family communication about genetic conditions (Coad *et al.*, 2009), and in children's perceptions of health and exercise (Hemming, 2008). The use of drawings has clear advantages: flexibility of the design and implementation; versatility of application especially linked to questions of local geography and spatiality; and empowering the (relatively) disempowered (Shohel, 2012). For example, Young and Barrett (2001) found that the use of drawings with Kampala street children (who lacked formal education) was a useful method to gather information about their social spaces and daily lives. This study in particular highlighted the need to spend time with young people to develop trust and rapport and engage them in a number of activities to ensure a successful outcome. Furthermore, drawings have also been found to be enjoyable, to enable the expression of collective perspectives as well as individual conclusions, and to provide an 'anchor' for subsequent interviewing or observational work (Hemming, 2008).

Yet fifteen years after Anning (1997) noted that drawings (and by implication other visual methods) were under-used in educational research, they still do not seem to have been embraced as fully as they might have been. There are, of course, some notable exceptions (see for example, Haney *et al.*, 2004; Hodgkin *et al.*, 2013; MacPhail and Kinchin, 2004; Prosser and Loxley, 2007; Lodge, 2007) but there remains a scarcity of studies using child-centred methods – especially amongst older children and young people. Perhaps this is, in part, because their design and implementation has not hitherto been made as transparent as it might have been.

There are, of course, shortcomings associated with this approach – not least the limitations of what can actually be represented visually, the difficulty of interpretation and analysis, and the coding of complex and detailed research drawings (MacPhail and Kinchin, 2004). On balance, though, drawings provide a good platform to explore child and young people-centred research methods.

In the section that follows the methods are presented from part of a large-scale Sport Wales funded national research project about young people's perceptions of extracurricular sport and physical activity (Leyshon 2011; Leyshon *et al.*, 2012). Pupils from Year 7 (11-12 year olds) and Year 10 (14-15 year olds) in two secondary schools participated in the study during two phases of ethnographic fieldwork between 2008 and 2010.

As with some of the 'classic' ethnographies in the sociology of education (e.g., Ball, 1981; Lacey, 1970), the process included gaining access to the schools and overcoming some awkwardness in the role of researcher in a new environment, before full co-operation from pupils was achieved (Morse and Richards, 2002).

The teacher-researcher role was adopted in order to spend time with the young people and consequently to glean a better understanding of their 'world' (Christensen and James, 2000), but also raised the possibility of role conflict between the data-capturing role of researcher and professional practitioner role of teacher (Peeke, 1984). Nevertheless, the perceived benefits outweighed the potential costs with rich and illuminating information gathered without compromising the professionalism of the teacher role.

Data were gathered by the first author, a bilingual (Welsh and English) fully qualified, former PE teacher. The names of the schools (Rhyd Y Fro – a Welsh language school situated in rural West Wales, and Valley High School – an English language school located in a socially deprived area of the South Wales valleys), as well as the names of the pupils and other interviewees are pseudonyms, and all identifying descriptors have been removed to protect anonymity.

The methods

The process

Initial access to the schools was facilitated through gatekeepers from the funding agency, Sport Wales. Compliant with best practice endorsed by the British Educational Research Association (2004 – since updated, 2011), and following approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee, the initial steps involved an 'enhanced' Criminal Records Bureau check for the first author and securing the permission of the Headteachers to conduct research in their respective schools. Informed consent was sought from, and granted by parent(s) or guardian(s) for pupils to participate in the study, and assent was given by the pupils themselves. Commitments to anonymity were also made but only on the understanding that any 'guilty knowledge' (Fetterman, 1989) that came to light as a result of the research would be acted upon in the usual ways and in line with the schools' and Local Authorities' policies and procedures (Emond, 2005).

Part of the rationale for the selection of different methods was that together, the activities would help to gain a nuanced insight into the leisure lifestyles of young people. Hence it was important to spend time with the pupils by capitalising on opportunities to engage with them in classroom-based activities during lessons when 'supply cover' would otherwise have been deployed. These were lessons that the first author 'covered' the absence of the regular teacher. This direct researcher involvement with the delivery of the data collection activities had clear operational benefits. It meant that a consistent format was adopted, that

there was an opportunity to clarify any uncertainties about the tasks, and that the instructions were followed.

Hour-long sessions were considered optimal for data capture and all pupils, were invited to take part and without exception were enthusiastic about participating. After data collection had been concluded the process was evaluated by the pupils themselves, the Head of Physical Education [HoPE] in each school and the local authority sport development officer [SDO] representatives responsible for the delivery of the extracurricular intervention.

The activities

Four different types of classroom-based activities were selected and implemented successfully. Together, their purpose was to develop a more sophisticated understanding of a particular research theme (in this instance, young people's participation in sport and physical activity within their leisure lives); to create a more positive interactive relationship between pupils and researcher in which previously unheard voices find greater opportunity for expression; and to provide a stimulus for further exploratory research – focus group discussions.

Each activity selected focused on a particular method linked to its purpose: creative representation work for leisure lifestyles; mind mapping for reflecting on the transition from primary to secondary school; pupil interaction for classroom bingo; and role play for leisure centre management. The data derived from the classroom-based activities was varied and creative and included drawings, spider diagrams, posters and lists (see the illustrative examples in Figures 1 to 4) and short descriptions.

The most significant activity was the 'Leisure Lifestyle Activity' as this provided rich insights into each individual young person. This activity was selected to promote creativity (Veale, 2005) and to provide autonomy of representational style. For this activity, pupils were provided with coloured pencils, pens and a sheet of plain A4 paper and asked to represent their personal interests, hobbies and activities on the paper. They were also asked to be specific about, for example, sports clubs, computer games and social network sites – and then to rank numerically the activities in order of decreasing importance (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). In Figure 3 the pupil indicated his rank order by placing the most important activity in the top left hand corner (and then worked across and down the page)



Figure 1. A personal interest illustration by Jane (aged 12, Valley High)

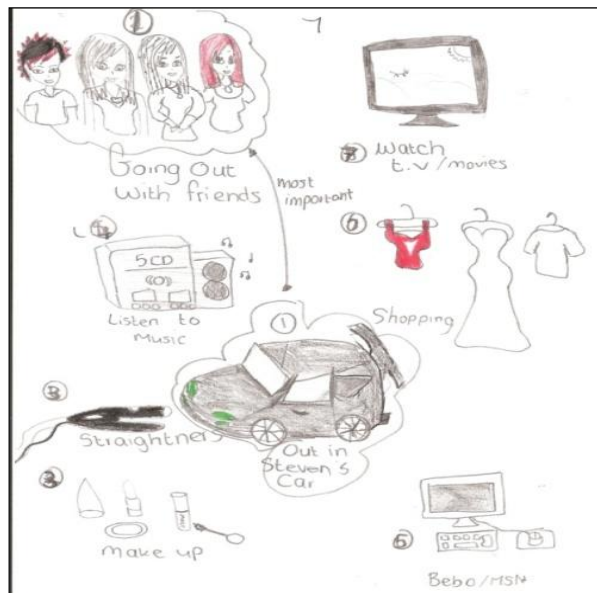


Figure 2. A personal interest illustration by Amy (aged 14, Valley High)

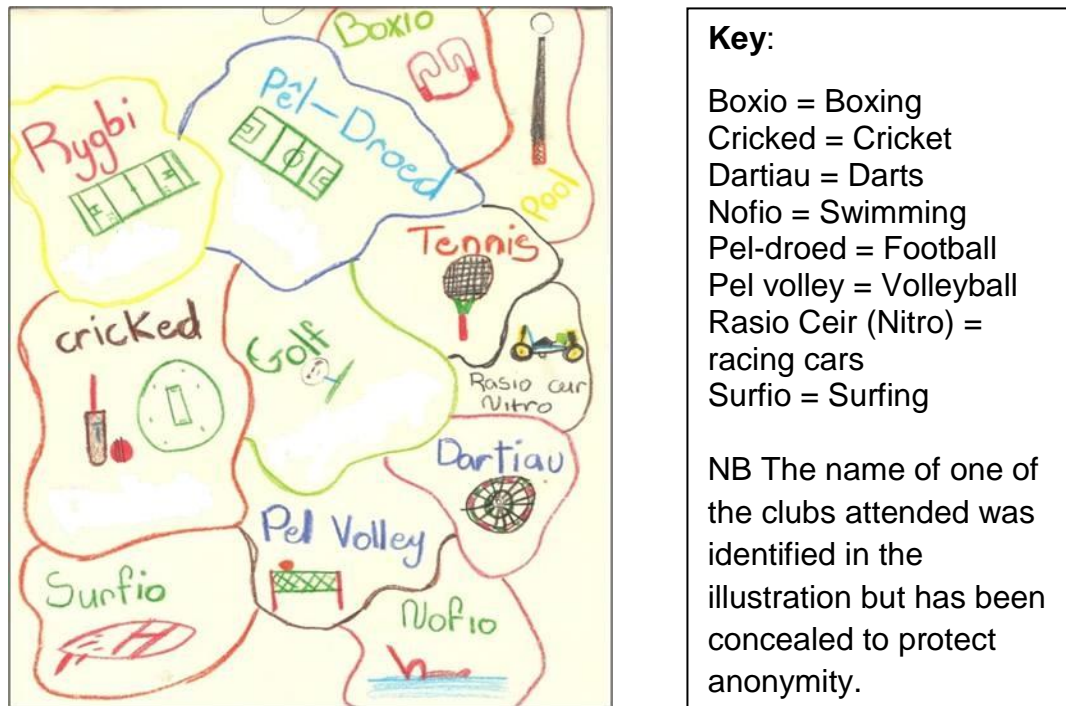


Figure 3. A personal leisure illustration by Rhys (aged 11, Rhyd Y Fro)

For the second activity, pupils were encouraged to do a 'mind map' of their previous sport and physical activity experience during Year 6 at primary school (e.g., PE, physical activity transition days with secondary school, after school clubs and matches). Pupils were asked to note what activities they participated in and how they perceived their experience. This activity was predominantly used as a prompt to probe for more in depth information in follow up focus groups.

The other two activities were designed explicitly to cater for kinaesthetic and spatial learners (Gardner 1983). They were interactive activities, 'pupil bingo' and 'Leisure Centre programme' role play. These activities were primarily selected to provide an opportunity for the young people to interact with each other (see also Young and Barrett, 2001), to develop rapport with other pupils and with the first author as researcher, and to stimulate dialogue and to explore leisure activity participation. For 'pupil bingo' a number of bingo cards were prepared. Each card had 20 boxes each with a different statement about the possible interests of classmates (see Table 1). Each pupil was then asked to move around the class asking their peers if they matched a description in one of the squares. The aim was to be the first person to match all the statements by only the names of other classmates once only and then calling out "bingo".

.... watches a lot of TV	... is a member of a youth club	... does activity with their family	...spends a lot of time in the park
...have lead younger pupils	... likes skiing	... have been part of a school show	... spend a lot of time with friends
...sing in a choir	... likes eating healthy	... does sport outside school	... walks to school
... plays an instrument	... is good at drawing pictures	... plays a lot of computer games	... helps with the house work
...enjoys all sport / physical activity	... likes to help others learn	... prefers apple to chocolate	...likes surfing

Table 1. A classroom bingo card

The fourth activity, 'Leisure Centre programme' role play, was the most challenging conceptually and was used to generate data, to develop social interaction, enhance communication skills and provide opportunity for pupil group work. Pupils assumed the role of a Leisure Centre Manager and were asked to design a physical activity programme to maximise participation by young people using a budget of £50,000. They were encouraged to think of 'cool' and 'funky' activities and to create brochures (for homework) to attract young people to their leisure centre (for example, Figure 4). During a subsequent lesson pupils then tried to persuade their classmates to visit their leisure centre through a short group performance. For this task an hour-long lesson was divided evenly between time for preparation and for performance.



Key:

- Canolfan Hamdden = Leisure Centre
- Dawnsio Disgo = Disco dancing
- Tennis i fiwsic = Tennis to music
- Sgio i fiwsic = Skiing to music
- Nofio = Swimming

Figure 4. A Leisure Centre programme (Rhyd Y Fro)

A principal strength of the use of the classroom activities was the opportunity provided to secure extensive scope of participant recruitment and engagement. Across both schools, a total of 436 pupils from a possible 488 participated in the classroom activities and involved 17 classes from a possible 20 classes. Boys (n=223) and girls (n=213) were represented in approximately equal numbers overall.

The data were then subjected to a content thematic analysis using a combined inductive and deductive approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In accordance with Guba and Lincoln (1981), the four criteria for increasing trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were considered. For example, in an attempt to increase the credibility of the project a copy of the 'Personal Interest Activity' was provided to the pupils who participated in the follow up focus groups. The purpose of this activity was to confirm the accuracy of the analysis by asking pupils to explain their visual representations (Guba and Lincoln, 1981).

Discussion

The pupils participated in the classroom-based activities enthusiastically, perceived them to be 'fun', and like young people in other studies, were pleased to have the opportunity to express their opinions and views (Hemming, 2008; MacDougal *et al.*, 2004; Young and Barrett, 2001). Many of the pupils agreed with Ben, a year 7 pupil. "I really enjoyed the activities they were exciting and I learnt interesting facts about my classmates." Jonny, a 'difficult' Year 10 pupil in this study commented eagerly: "This is awesome Miss. It is safe. We don't do this with any other teacher." Jenny, a year 7 pupil, added texture to a similar analysis:

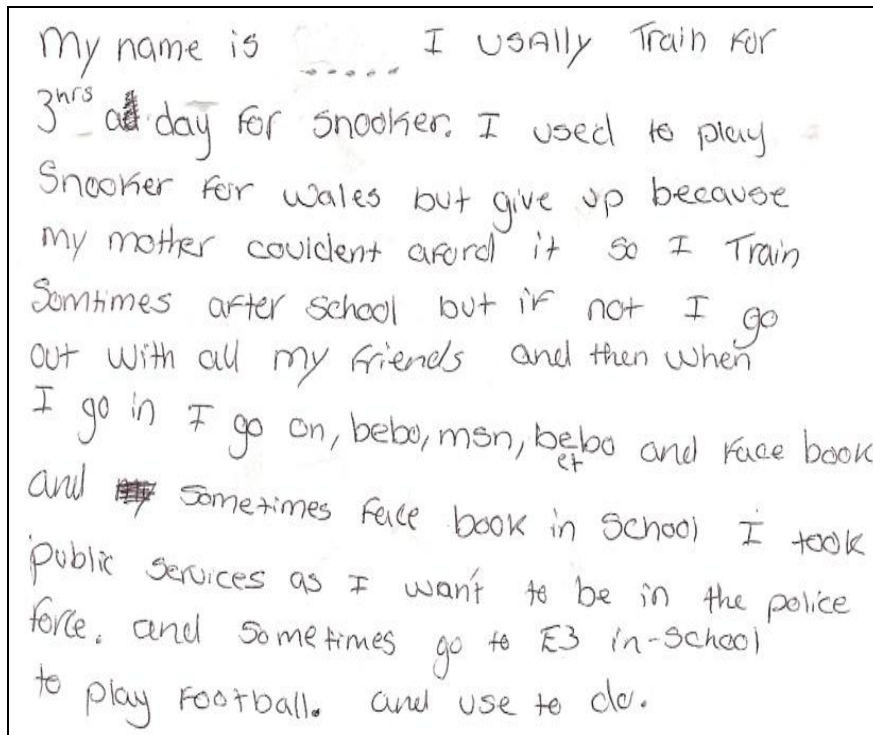
It was fun, I think we could do that in different lessons ... In normal lessons you just got to sit quiet we are not allowed to do anything, but in that session you got to do loads of activities. It was fun, I liked pretending that I was a manager of a Leisure Centre.

One reason for the success of the activities was that a meaningful experience and positive environment were established by providing pupils with ownership, choice and independence of activities that were associated with their leisure time and lifestyles. The HoPE at Valley High confirmed the success of the classroom-based methods for engaging the young people:

I think the engagement and interaction of what I saw with the classroom methods from the students was fantastic and should be flagged up as excellent practice. I think you need to share what could be achieved in terms of engagement in the classroom environment with the Sports Council team. The activities were a great way of engaging all types of young people and learners, not just the sporty ones' but also those who don't take part...

Moreover, the type of data derived from engaging all young people in the 'Leisure Lifestyle Activity' shed light on their lives, which might otherwise have remained hidden and hence unknown to others. Commenting on classroom activities like Figure 5 (below) the HoPE at Valley High explained:

We've also got some students with issues / circumstances and just having some information like that might give us an insight into why or what's important and to make them comfortable.



My name is I usually Train for
3^{hrs} a day for snooker. I used to play
Snooker for wales but give up because
my mother couldnt afford it so I Train
Sometimes after school but if not I go
out with all my friends and then when
I go in I go on, bebo, msn, bebo and face book
and ~~if~~ sometimes face book in school I took
public services as I want to be in the police
force. and sometimes go to E3 (in-school)
to play football. and use to do.

Figure 5. A leisure lifestyle description by Ben (aged 15, Valley High)

An implication from this is that pupils need adequate opportunities to express their personal interests in written and visual format. This is particularly the case in order to empower the disempowered and those less frequently heard (Lee *et al.*, 1995). Moreover, as MacPhail and Kinchin (2004) also found, there were other educational benefits to support and extend pupils' learning that also accrued. The HoPE and the SDO (who was working in partnership with the school and the local authority), envisaged the classroom activities being incorporated into the health and well-being aspect of the Personal, Social and Health Education curriculum.

The observation about the potential of these kinds of activities and data to transfer into other contexts involving children and young people is an important feature of the work. The evidence from this research indicated that these methods could also be used to understand better young people in other aspects of their lives. To elaborate, the 'Leisure Lifestyle Activity' was successful in deriving information-rich data and provided a research tool to better understand the young people's leisure lifestyle participation. For example, in one focus group Amy referred to her 'Leisure Lifestyle Activity' (see Figure 2) and suggested that the Dance fitted well with her lifestyle priorities such as fashion, make-up, MSN, Facebook and boys:

The Dance course is cool and fits well with me and my activities I do here (referring to her representation of her personal interests), it is really

good. You get to listen to your own music and fetch your ipod in, and make your own dance that suits you best.

It seems reasonable then, that these activities both provide an 'anchor' for subsequent interviewing or observational work (Hemming, 2008), and they might also help address concerns of traditional research methods when engaging young people, for example, the failure of surveys and questionnaires to address the complexity of young lives (Christensen and James, 2000) and a failure to engage some young people satisfactorily (Biddle *et al.*, 2004).

The richness of the data captured particularly in the 'personal interests/activities' in the drawings and spider diagrams suggests that these activities would be a useful aid in the transition process from primary to secondary school (Hodgkin *et al.*, 2013). James, the SDO at Valley High was one of those responsible for the delivery of the physical activity intervention. He explained:

I think it would also be of benefit if we did some classroom-based methods with the primary school pupils. I think it will be a bit more personal and provide us with a bit of background on each individual that will help the transition from Year 6 to 7 (the move from primary to secondary school).

A positive response from the pupils to these activities was not solely a result of the rapport built between the researcher and pupils; they were also successful when undertaken by others. Under supervision, James was able to gather information about his potential 'client groups'. The HoPE at Valley High explained:

For James, it was a fantastic opportunity for him to interact with the pupils and for them to see he's got time to talk. For the pupils they saw James in a different light/role, and in a far more comfortable environment.

He was also able to spend time with young people to develop trust and rapport (Young & Barrett, 2001) and to engage them in a number of activities to ensure a successful outcome. James concurred with this finding:

The classroom activities give me...an insight into each person. Normally we only see it from a school point of view but if you can get to know them outside of school then this provides us (the SDOs) with an opportunity to get to know the whole person rather than just the school person. It is a good insight to allow you to know what they are thinking and have common ground straight away an ice breaker if you like. I just think the relationship between officers and the young people will benefit physical activity programmes.

Both the HoPE and SDO alluded to the possibility that establishing the relationship in the classroom environment could be transferred to other contexts and could therefore have important implications to future studies.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an account of a series of classroom-based research related activities including, creative representation, mind-mapping, pupil interaction and role play resulting in drawings, spider diagrams, posters that served three main functions: (i) to generate and gather data about a particular research theme, in this instance, young people's participation in sport and physical activity; (ii) to create a more positive interactive relationship between pupils and researcher in which previously unheard voices find greater opportunity for expression; and (iii) to provide a stimulus for further exploratory research. The main advantage of this process was a more specific and personal approach which led to informal conversations about pupils' leisure lifestyle activities as well as more in depth focus group discussions.

Crucially, the classroom activities offer a novel approach to securing significant 'economies of scale' that other methods such as interviews and focus groups could not. The research techniques involved have been used successfully in other subject fields and with other age groups, for example, particularly at primary school level. However, the application presented in this paper extends the existing scope of their use by targeting secondary schools. The activities are particularly pertinent for practitioners such as teacher-researchers conducting action research for each progressive cycle of, planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Cohen *et al.*, 2008).

There are, however, three important caveats about the use of these techniques. First, the classroom-based methods require the researcher to have some classroom management skills – and qualified teacher status would seem to be an asset in this regard. The role of teacher-researcher has been a focus for sustained consideration in education studies for many years (e.g., Peeke, 1984). The approach to conducting research with secondary school pupils described in this paper marks a clear distinction (at least in the minds of the pupils at Rhyd Y Fro and Valley High School) about the nature of 'school work' and 'research' about their leisure interests. In doing so, it may also ease the experience of role conflict that teacher-researchers continue to encounter (Fleming, 1997).

Second, the creative tasks are also constrained by the abilities and technical (artistic) skills of the pupils themselves. One reason for undertaking follow up checks and discussing the 'artefacts' with the pupils themselves was to confirm the intended meanings embedded within them and to inform the researcher's interpretations of them (Lodge, 2007).

Third, the element of pupil voice was addressed by providing the pupils with ownership of written/drawing presentation of their activities, for example, some

pupils did the activities by writing lists, drawing mind maps or spider diagrams. It is acknowledged, however, that a holistic approach to young person-centred research would also include the pupils in the analysis and selection of the activities.

Yet in spite of these three shortcomings, it is clear from the research presented in this paper that the classroom activities did add to the 'researcher's toolbox' when working with children and young people in educational settings. Evidence suggests classroom activities are particularly suitable for practitioner focused teacher-researchers conducting action research as well as studies with younger secondary pupils, including for example, the transition from primary to secondary school.

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