LES ATELIERS DE L'ÉTHIQUE

LA REVUE DU CREUM

CREUM

CENTRE DE RECHERCHE EN ÉTHIQUE
DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE MONTRÉAL

UNE REVUE MULTI—
DISCIPLINAIRE SUR LES
ENJEUX NORMATIFS DES
POLITIQUES PUBLIQUES ET
DES PRATIQUES SOCIALES.

2

VOLUME 4 NUMÉRO 1
PRINTEMPS/SPRING 2009

A MULTIDISCIPLINARY
JOURNAL ON THE
NORMATIVE CHALLENGES
OF PUBLIC POLICIES
AND SOCIAL PRACTICES.

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97

VOLUME 4 NUMÉRO 1
PRINTEMPS/SPRING 2009
ARTICLES :

ASKING PRACTICAL ETHICAL
QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUTH
PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on case study research conducted in an economically depressed, immigrant gateway neighborhood of Escondido, California. This study has been in progress since 2005 and involves working with children at the local middle school on rights-based community environmental action research projects in coordination with student facilitators in an upper-division university class titled "Children and the Environment." This case study has suggested inquiry into the practical ethical dimensions of working with children, administrators, and university students on action research. Examples of the ethical questions which arose during this study include: how can continuity for the middle school children be achieved as different groups of university students move in and out of the project as they take and finish the "Children and the Environment" class, and is it ethical for the middle school children's work to be facilitated by university students only freshly trained in the action research technique? This paper explores these and other ethical questions involving power, coercion, tension over expectations, and obligation and provides direction for on-going ethical questions scholars should pursue in involving children in rights-based community environmental action research.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se base sur une étude de cas menée dans un quartier immigrant défavorisé d'Escondido, Californie. Commencée en 2005, l'étude comporte le travail avec des enfants dans l'école secondaire locale autour des projets de recherche-action environnementale communautaire dans une approche de respect et de promotion des droits, avec la collaboration d'animateurs d'une université, inscrits dans le cours « Les enfants et l'environnement ». Cette étude de cas a soulevé des questions sur les dimensions éthiques du travail avec des enfants, le personnel scolaire et des étudiants universitaires dans la recherche-action. Comment peut-on atteindre une continuité pour l'enfant quand différents groupes d'étudiants universitaires rentrent et sortent du projet en prenant et en finissant le cours « Les enfants et l'environnement » ? Est-il éthique de charger l'animation des jeunes du secondaire aux étudiants universitaires qui n'ont été formés que très récemment à la recherche-action ? L'article explore ces questions et d'autres encore, concernant le pouvoir, la coercition, la tension au sujet des expectatives et l'obligation. Il offre un cadre pour les questions que les universitaires devraient se poser en travaillant avec des enfants dans la recherche-action environnementale communautaire dans une approche de respect et de promotion des droits.

Ethical issues abound in the study of children's participation in action research. The focus of this paper is a case study which has suggested practical ethical questions in working with children, administrators, and university students on participatory action research. This research was conducted in an economically depressed, immigrant gateway neighborhood of Escondido, California. The study involves working with children at the local middle school on rights-based community environmental action research projects in coordination with student facilitators in an upper-division interdisciplinary social science university class I teach titled "Children and the Environment".

Childhood, adulthood, and power are key issues debated in the literature on children's participatory research. It is not unusual for children's participatory activities to be initiated by adult priorities and this is one of the factors that can lead to "tension" in children and young people's participation. Another point of tension can occur when adult, parental, and organizational roles or agendas conflict with the child's right to participate or the adults' own child-centered goals. These points of tensions are areas which need examination in order to improve participation practices.[1]

Given the evolving nature of the settings and goals of child participation activities, it is unlikely that there will be consensus on a normative approach to ethical issues. Rather, researchers will always need to be careful as issues emerge as any given project is being planned and then throughout the project.[2] The aim of this paper is not to problem solve for any particular ethical questions; rather the aim here is to reflect on situations which arose from my own case study. Put another way, what are the ethical questions I have grappled with which might inform the work of myself and others in future research?

CASE STUDY

My goals for this case study were threefold, 1) to teach my university students ways to work on action research which honored children's right to participate, 2), to provide a setting for children to participate in decision making for their local environment, and 3) to fur-

ther understanding of participatory action research with children. Each semester at my university is 16 weeks long. This case study played out on a semester by semester basis: Semester 1: January- May 2005, Semester 2: August-December 2005, Semester 3: January- June 2006, Semester 4: August-December 2006, and Semester 5: January- May 2007. During the first few weeks of each semester I taught my students the basics of action research with children.[3] Then I took my students to the middle school and had them work with small groups of children, usually divided by grade (6th, 7th, and 8th), on physical environmental issues of interest to the children.[4] We met with the children once a week.

The particular techniques I taught my students were designed to take children's already existing knowledge to the next level, i.e. by having them photograph, draw, and talk about the condition of their local environment. As a participant, I actively set up the project and trained my students how to apply action research methodologies with children. As my students applied these techniques, I became more of an observer, both of my students, as they tested the techniques, and of the children, as they engaged in action research.[5] Matthews notes that, "….as adult researchers of children and young people, we need to be clear about the baggage that we carry with us and how our preconceptions or misconceptions may colour our interpretation of events and experiences. This poses perhaps the greatest ethical dilemma of all—-how to reach into an out-group that is temporally out of reach."[6] Researchers have to be tuned into their own sense of moral integrity, which sometimes means that the actual research interests of the researcher need to take a back seat to being an attentive and helpful person to the children you are working with.[7]

From the very beginning stages I took as ethical of an approach as I could, including applying early on for permission to conduct the research under my university's human subjects review protocol and completing "Student Field Placement" agreements through our Office of Community Service Learning. Additionally, one of the requirements for entry into the K-8 teaching credential program which includes my class is that all students go through state-level back-

ground checks before they are allowed to enter a classroom with children. During the course of the research, I was careful to act in an ethical manner. For example, I always did exactly what I said I would do for my students, the children, and the school staff. I strove to be adaptable to ongoing events and as inclusive as possible and, indeed, never told anyone that they could not participate in this project. As the case study developed there arose ethical issues outside of the purview of my own moral compass and commitment and my university's protocol, including those surrounding power, tension over misaligned expectations, obligation, and coercion.

POWER

Like most children's participation projects, my project was initiated by an adult worldview, my own desire to give voice to children's knowledge about their communities. However, I was constantly aware of and trying to adjust for the power dynamics created by the fact that this was adult-initiated. My attitude toward the children was that they already knew what they liked and did not like about their school sites. It was not my place to create or point out problems. Rather, it was my place to facilitate giving their already-existing interests and concerns a voice and to assure the children that whatever concerns they had were worthy of being voiced, and that once voiced, my students and I could help them collect the research and tools to address their concerns.

While I was very comfortable with the decision making power residing in the children's hands, it was often difficult for my students to understand what we were doing in the same way that I did. Is it ethical for the middle school children's work to be facilitated by university students only freshly trained in the action research technique and who might not be used to putting decision-making in the hands of children?

As Matthews points out, "Enabling participation in community decision making also involves some adults relinquishing power and opening up structures in ways that are challenging to extant practice."[8] Indeed, there were several teachers and administrators at the school who witnessed our work up close and who were generally supportive, but who also evidenced difficulty in giving over to children the power to decide what to do next.

TENSION OVER EXPECTATIONS

The "tension" between adults' and children's perspectives was evident throughout the case study, as was tension between older and younger adults' points of view.[9] During Semester 1, I came to realize that I was observing a situation in which participants had misaligned expectations of each other. My students, while in school to become teachers themselves, had yet to actually experience what it is like to work full-time in a school setting and attempt to meet all of the expectations of one's students, faculty, and administrators. Some of my students were surprised that the school's principal was unable to respond in a timely way to their concerns. One student emailed me, "I have spent two weeks trying to get an interview with the school principal….Although…he insists he is interested in anything that involves campus improvement, he seems to make himself unavailable to talk to." I explained to my student that the principal was likely overworked and unable to respond as quickly as he would like and that I would also try to talk to the principal about how to work around this sort of problem long-term, as the project continued into subsequent semesters. This was not helpful to my student since he would only be with the project that semester.

In fact, later in the semester, the student sent an email to the principal with an inappropriate tone, given my goal of the school hosting the project for the long-term. The student wrote, "I feel some disappointment in not being able to have my group interview you,…Perhaps you can investigate these issues and get back to me before then to see if anything can be done." I considered this an inappropriate approach because my student was giving the principal a task rather than waiting for collaboration with him, and making his frustration clear by letting the principal know that he was disappointed. As it turned out, the principal did respond via email to my student in an itemized description of what was being done about each issue.

His response revealed a very top down approach. He identified the adults who were going to take care of each issue which concerned the students, for example, the adult who was going to remove the graffiti which the children had identified as a concern of theirs. So, while I considered my student's tone with the principal inappropriate, he did help to reveal an issue that would continue to thwart this project. During the project, it was hard for me at the start of each new semester's work, and as administrators changed at the school, to reiterate the child-centered goals of the project. Administrators and faculty never seemed to fully understand that we wanted the children to determine the issues and facilitate the means of improvement, not have adults adopt the children's issues and "fix" the problems for them.

In the very last semester of the project, a key administrator, who appeared to be very supportive of the children's work, seemed in a rush to make sure the children had something to show for their concerns, and arranged for the children to present their concerns about the layout of the school library in an inappropriate venue, the annual book fair for another grade level. At this point, this project strayed more toward social mobilization, as my students and I lost control over the project and the administrator employed an adult-oriented approach to the children's concerns. My students and I heard from the children that this project was taken away from them and reshaped into something which fit the adult's idea of how others should find out about the children's concerns.

After this event, I interviewed this administrator and found out that she had a sophisticated understanding of how to conduct action research with children, an observation from which I intuited that given the circumstances of the children coming to her near the end of the school year, and wanting to make their concerns known, she fell back on a less child-centered process and, as an administrator, made something happen given the school year's rapidly approaching end. The practical ethical question which arises from this is: what does the researcher do when others at the research setting employ non-child-centered approaches in response to children's request for help with

their project? Given that I relied on the administrators' good graces to have the project at the school, it would appear ungrateful for me to counsel an administrator that their techniques are not appropriate. On the other hand, the projects are no longer child-centered rights-based action research.

There were also ways in which students' expectations of what could be done were misaligned with the children they worked with. Even though the directions I give my students for how to conduct these projects include the statement, "*Do not become focused on creating a product at the end of your project.* If there is a product, great! But remember, the goals of this project are for you to learn how to conduct action research with children and to teach children about citizenship and participation. The process is the goal here," students would often lament that there was not enough time to "finish" their projects.[10] During the course of the case study, I periodically interviewed the children and found that they were always enjoying the process of the projects: taking photos of their school and analyzing them, drawing maps of what they liked and did not like, meeting with university students and school administrators and having them listen to their ideas, and learning from my students of the kinds of questions they could ask school administrators. The children would lament not being able to finish a specific task, but, overwhelmingly, from the children's point of view, having an adult facilitate their group's work, no matter the state of progress, was a positive and enjoyable experience for them.

OBLIGATION

What is our obligation to children once we initiate participatory action research with them? I struggled with how continuity for the middle school children could be achieved as different groups of university students moved in and out of the project as they took and finished the "Children and the Environment" class. Was it fair to have children's expectations tied to our university schedule? It was also hard to explain to the children that the students and I would not be back to work with them after a certain point. And there were also

questions of obligation which arose out of the logistics of trying to have weekly meetings with the children.

Hopkins and Bell stress the importance of reflecting on the ethics of the research site.[11] In my case, I chose the research site because of the great economic distress of the community, in hopes that providing any sense of democratic place making would eventually work toward bettering the community. Without a doubt, the very signs of distress in the neighborhood that attracted me to working there also made the logistics of the project an issue. In an environment where people see many around them failing economically, it is not a stretch to imagine a child making an individual decision to skip a meeting for a week. An absent child one week may cause the group to lose the train of thought which set the stage for the next week's activities.

Attrition among the children in the first few weeks of the project each semester was high and disruptive to the project's trajectory. The afterschool program supervisor warned us of this in advance when he said, "(Your students) will find a lot of these (children) will flake on them." In the worst case scenario, one of my students never worked with the same group of children week to week.

From my very first meeting between my students and the middle school children I was concerned about not having enough time during the semester to help the children develop their ideas and then follow through with these ideas. From Semester 2 on, I was able to start my students earlier in the semester in their work with the children at the middle school. Yet, in the end, I felt that the structure of the university's schedule and the middle school's schedule were unworkable impediments. The semester for my students ended in early May, while the middle school students continued school through June, a difference of a whole month in which the children might have liked to work on their projects, but my students were no longer available. This suggests that scheduling issues need to be looked at with a great deal of scrutiny. My desire to put the two groups together and hope for the best in spite of the fixed schedules which did not quite fit each other more often than not left the students, children, and school staff wanting more, though as stated earlier, the project still brought the children satisfaction.

My initial community partner and, indeed, my entry into the school setting, was the leader of an afterschool program. However, this partnership lasted only a few months because the afterschool program was closed for funding reasons; I shortly thereafter began collaboration with one of the administrators at the school site. This administrator, who had been at the school for a long time, enabled a more consistent meeting pattern and took responsibility for reminding students throughout the week of the upcoming meeting. Students met more regularly with the same group of children from week to week. From this point forward, students' written reports of their projects evidence getting to know the children they worked with better and establishing rapport, though the overall frustration with not being able to "complete" a project remained throughout the duration of the case study. In some cases, knowing the children better increased my students' frustration with not being able to work toward a more satisfying concluding point for their projects.

It is interesting to note that while sometimes access to the children by my students was difficult, the children always had access to each other in classes, at lunch, and at after school activities, and even in social settings among those who were friends (and many were). Still little progress on the projects was achieved outside of the meetings we held. Towards the very end of the case study, as we were working with a group of 8th graders, a few of whom had worked on the Semester 1 projects as 6th graders, we did notice more initiative taking in that some of the 8th graders met with a school administrator on their own.

That eventually my students would no longer meet weekly with the children at the end of each semester loomed over the project. Indeed, it turned out that what the children anticipated missing the most was not the project, but the loss of interaction with my students. They often wanted to continue meeting into the summer or the next semester with the same students, as they had come to value this adult role in their lives. Sometimes, my students would try to stay in touch with their children and even promised to continue meeting with them, and since the thought of them continuing to work outside of

the expectations of my class was gratifying, I hoped this would happen. But, in fact, these promises were never worked out logistically and in the later semesters of the project, I made children aware that it would not continue, so as to lessen expectations.

COERCION

Though I was aware of the undesirability of coercion in a child-centered project, there were points at which coercion occurred. During the second semester of the case study, some teachers started to offer the children extra credit for working with my students. This was arranged by my key contact administrator, unbeknownst to me. I realized that the administrator thought he was doing us a favor by enticing the children's participation in this way and thus propelling the projects forward. I was pleased that my students all discussed this coercive aspect of the project in their final papers and that they had realized how undesirable it was. Their recognition of this also led to them not personally using it to entice the students; they never tried to coerce the children to come to the meetings using the extra credit. However, I was unable to control how much of this was practiced by administrators and teachers. I was relieved that the extra credit enticement faded away of its own accord during the last year of the project.

I have also considered that another element of coercion throughout the project was the provision of snacks and drinks. I know that most of the children came to the meetings anticipating snack because they arrived excited to see what I had brought and they never refused the chips and juice that I offered. As my students established more rapport with the students, they would bring in even more food that they knew the kids wanted, such as cake, veggies and dip, and sodas. I never placed any restrictions on my students in terms of what they could bring to the school to serve the children. One time I did not bring snacks to test the children's reaction, and I walked away from that meeting very apologetic and humbled because it was very obvious how disappointed and hungry they were. I know that some children came with the snacks as the foremost enticement. In my own

personal worldview it would have been unethical for me to not provide growing, hungry children with snacks after school. Though snacks may have an element of coercion about them, the fact is that providing sustenance for children is a key element of the human condition.

CONCLUSION

This case study was prefaced by high ethical standards. At the beginning of the project I set my own moral compass vigilant and was true to my word, inclusive of all, and adaptive to the circumstances. I was cognizant of the adult oriented initiation of the project and the power adjustments which this would require to achieve the goals of a child-centered, rights-based project. I received permission to proceed from my university's human subjects review board. I trained my students in the most highly regarded, child-centered, age-appropriate participation techniques. Yet, as more people became participants in the case study and brought their own world views and logistical issues, in spite of my vigilance, serious practical ethical issues arose during this case study.

The children enjoyed their time working with adult facilitators, but I found the university's relatively short fifteen week semester made it difficult for my students and me to bring the projects to a satisfactory concluding point, which raised questions about our obligations to the children. I also found that there were seemingly unavoidable tensions in expectations between mine, the children's, the students', and those of the middle school staff. The middle school staff sometimes pushed the children's work in the direction of social mobilization. This can be explainable with regard to their training as teachers to set expectations and requirements before their students. However, this contradicted the child-centered techniques my students and I were trying to facilitate. Furthermore, the middle school staff's actions sometimes led to coercive behavior, for example, by offering extra credit for coming to the action research meetings.

That all of the interviews and surveys I conducted with the children note their sense of satisfaction in being able to engage with

102

adults over environmental issues which interest them using child-centered techniques confirms that this kind of participatory research is valued, desired, and that it has its place in the world of childhood. This discussion of ethical issues which arose over tensions in expectations, power, obligation, and coercion sheds some light on what we must work to resolve to propel child participatory processes to an even better fit with children's abilities and needs.[12]

NOTES

1   Clark, Alison and Barry Percy-Smith, "Beyond Consultation: Participatory Practices in Everyday Spaces," Children, Youth and Environments, vol. 16, no. 2, 2006, pp. 1-9.

2   Sime, Daniela, "Ethical and Methodological Issues in Engaging Young People Living in Poverty with Participatory Research Methods," Children's Geographies, vol. 6, no.1, 2008, p. 76.

3   Students applied material from the following texts: Chawla, Louise, Growing Up in an Urbanizing World, London: Earthscan Publications Ltd. 2002; Driskell, David, Creating Better Cities with Children and Youth, London:Earthscan, 2002; Hart, Roger A., Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care, London: UNICEF, 1997.

4   In order to minimize confusion, student facilitators in my university class are referred to as "students" and students at the middle school are referred to as "children" throughout this paper.

5   For more details of how this class is taught, see Knowles-Yánez, Kim, "Service-Learning and Implementation of Children's Right to Participate in Community Decision-Making," Research, Advocacy, and Political Engagement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives through Service Learning, Sally Tannenbaum (ed.), Stylus Publishing, LLC, 2008.

6   Matthews, Hugh, "Power Games and Moral Territories: Ethical Dilemmas When Working with Children and Young People," Ethics, Place and Environment, vol. 4, no.2, 2001, pp. 117-118.

7   Aitken, Stuart C., "Fielding Diversity and Moral Integrity," Ethics, Place and Environment, vol. 4, no. 2, 2001, pp. 125-129.

8   Matthews, Hugh, "Participatory Structures and the Youth of Today: Engaging Those who are Hardest to Reach," Ethics, Place and Environment, vol. 4, no. 2, 2001, p. 157.

9   Clark, Alison and Barry Percy-Smith, "Beyond Consultation: Participatory Practices in Everyday Spaces," Children, Youth and Environments, vol. 16, no. 2, 2006,pp. 1-9.

10 Website for LBST 307 "Children and the Environment": http://courses.csusm.edu/lbst307kk/

11 Hopkins, Peter E., and Nancy Bell, "Interdisciplinary Perspectives: Ethical Issues and Child Research," Children's Geographies, vol. 6, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1-6.

12 The author wishes to gratefully thank all of the students from LBST 307 and all of the students, staff, and teachers at the middle school who played a role in this case study. Thank you for your time and dedication to the participation of children.