

‘What is it really like?’ Developing the use of participant voice in research

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Elliot Eisner has suggests that the question "what is it like to be here?"¹ is nontrivial and that such a question can only be answered by researchers taking a careful and rigorous approach to qualitative research. Such an approach to qualitative studies takes the issue of ‘voice’ as primary. As well as a commitment to listening to those engaged in education, either as teachers or students, researchers interested in democratising the process take a particular view on the epistemology underpinning such research. Schratz and Walker ask the question,

If we are to find ways to make research democratic then we have to find ways to break the mould that confines research to a highly selected group of specialists. ²

For Schratz and Walker the social specificity of research make any claims to truth problematic. Indeed such claims to truth may be oppressive in themselves and reflexivity may become the main focus of concern for the researcher engaged in democratic research. The purpose of such work is not to tell truths about the world but to open up spaces that allow us all to think about how our worlds may be changed.

‘Voice’ has been defined as privileging experience over theory as a basis for understanding³ with the main concerns of those researching with ‘voice’ at the heart of their research being work with marginalized or ‘silenced’ groups; inclusive and democratic research; challenge and critique of processes which silence; and participation and empowerment within and through the research process.

This project presentation will examine ways in which researchers can work with pupils and teachers to develop an authentic 'voice' that speaks to researchers, academics, administrators, and those who have responsibility in policy formation. Tony will bring examples of video and audio recordings from work with pupils and teachers in schools in crisis, and describe the ways in which he works to develop vignettes which aim to both reflect ‘what it is like’ in these schools from pupil and teachers perspectives and to offer rich insights into broader educational issues. He will also bring data from a workshop carried out

¹ Eisner, E. W. (1991) *The Enlightened Eye - Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice*. New York : Macmillan Publishing Company.

² Schratz, M. and Walker, R. (1995) *Research as Social Change*. London : Routledge. (p14)

³ Hadfield, M. and Haw, K. (2000) *The ‘Voice’ of young people: Hearing, Listening, Responding*. University of Nottingham: Nottingham, UK.

in South Africa to explore the appropriateness and transferability of research carried out in two different social and political contexts.

The workshop will be practical and participants can expect to model the processes being described. We will aim to produce vignettes describing 'what it is like' in our mathematics classrooms from our personal perspectives.