

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Communicating with gatekeepers in UK educational settings

Background context:

In the Spring of 2022 I joined a team of researchers exploring issues surrounding school toilet use in English schools. The project was funded by the Gender and Education Society and the Institute for Social Justice at York St John University. A group of young people in the sixth form of an English school (aged 17-18 years) were invited to be co-researchers alongside an adult researcher, with a participatory methodology underpinning the research.

I had previously worked in UK schools and had experience as a researcher navigating gatekeeper consent in community settings. However, this was my first engagement with adult gatekeepers within a school setting. I familiarised myself with literature concerning how to put an ethical approach into practice, and what it might take to do this within schools (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Tisdall, Davis & Gallagher, 2012). My attention was drawn to some of the tensions surrounding adult-child authority, peer group dynamics, space and privacy, and authentic consent, power and voice (Lundy, 2007; Gallagher, 2008; Kirby, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2021). Informed by these insights, and the ERIC principles and guidance, I felt reasonably confident in proceeding with the research. I could see that a key element of an ethical approach was building the kind of trusting relationships so central to participatory research. Overall, the participatory process appeared to proceed well, with young people conveying that they felt included, valued and respected. Yet, during the course of the project I found that attending to issues of power and consent needed a confidence and boldness that was not always easy.

The ethical challenge:

The Head of the sixth form was the delegated adult gatekeeper within the setting. They expressed a strong desire to engage with the University in this project because of concerns raised by students, via a school survey, that the toilet conditions were 'inadequate'. The Head was interested in finding out why the students felt this way, and this aligned well with the broad research questions of the project. With the Head's permission, a group of young people from the sixth



form were invited to engage with the research as co-researchers, to choose a line of inquiry surrounding school toilet issues and to gather data from their peers. I met with them twice each week for 5 weeks. These meetings provided an important opportunity for relationship building, which was critical to being able to collaborate respectfully throughout the research. Initial conversations highlighted that the young people witnessed the toilets within the sixth form being used as a social space and they wanted to explore students' experiences of this. This became our research focus. We also covered topics that included research aims, methods and ethics. The Head joined us for the first session but given other commitments and events in the school was unable to attend the subsequent sessions. This meant the Head missed some of the important discussions around putting participatory principles into practice.

For one of these sessions, our usual room was not available. The sixth form had no other space to offer us except some seating outside the Head's office. The Head, who was working in their office at the time, overheard our research conversation and approached us enquiring about data we had been discussing. As a research team, we had been navigating boundaries around privacy, confidentiality and anonymity on a weekly basis. These issues were somewhat heightened in this project, given the focus on toilets. The Head's request felt like it was putting the young people in a vulnerable position by encouraging them to break the ground rules we had established for our group. The young people were caught between two loyalties: the Head, in a position of authority in their school, and the ethical principles they had committed to with me, another adult, which were intended to protect the privacy and confidentiality of their peers. Was I, as the adult co-researcher, willing to challenge the Head's request and uphold the ethical principles we had established for our group?

Choices made:

This struck me as the kind of 'ethically important moment' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) that can make or break participatory research with young people. I quickly realised that the initial conversations held with the Head had not covered enough detail about the research process and the ethical way we were attempting to work. We also had not had the opportunity yet to discuss which findings the young people might want to share with their school and how these might be used. Therefore, it was in this 'in-situ' moment that I needed to reinforce the ethical principles that had been guiding our research and the work of the co-researchers. As sensitively and quickly as possible, I drew the Head's attention to the ground rules we had agreed to as a group, and the foundation upon which our co-research was established.



In reflecting on this interaction, I realised that ethical safety in research is both place and relationally determined (Lundy, 2007). Our usual private, safe meeting space, had been unavailable, but in drawing attention to our ethical ground rules, I maintained a safe psychological 'space' for our research. What I also realised was that my relationship with the co-researchers, and with the sixth form students more broadly, was at stake in this ethical moment. Breaching their trust in this way would likely have entirely compromised the research. It was an uncomfortable moment, but I believed in the ethical principles the young people and I had agreed upon. I also hope it demonstrated to the co-researchers that they can say no to situations they don't feel comfortable with (Kirby, 2020). The interaction became an important point for my own reflexive journaling, where I began reflecting more deeply and documenting what needs to happen well before fieldwork begins – key considerations that Sassen (2013) has termed, 'before the method.'

Reflexive questions / considerations:

I now find myself looking in every nook and cranny for examples and experiences of researchers working in participatory ways with children and young people. Researchers are increasingly vocalising and engaging with evolving developments around ethics and the complexities of participatory research methods with children and young people (Stride, Brazier and Fitzgerald, 2022). Understanding and exploring these tensions helps to encourage and bring to life the idea of a 'safe space' for research. Fitzgerald (2021, p.6) recommends, '*Prior to entering the field, researchers can start to build a relationship with key adult stakeholders (teachers) to develop trust and rapport. This would allow more time to tease out any concerns about the research process and also to confirm exactly what you intend to do.*'

A personal aim will be to work towards further inclusion of authority figures and gatekeepers within settings such as the one described, in order to promote shared values around participatory research and support the importance of building trusting relationships with young people. It feels important to pay attention to these interactions so that the discussion around research participation in UK schools can further develop (Kirby, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2021), and conversations can emerge between educators and researchers about the wider ethos and scope of ethical research with children and young people.

- How can researchers effectively work with schools and educational institutions to create a safe space for students' voices to be heard?
- How can we effectively communicate the principles of participatory research when in settings that are not accustomed to this way of working?



- In participatory research with young people in schools, how do you, as a researcher, balance the two separate but interconnected relationships (with gatekeepers and students), and foster an environment of confidentiality and respect amongst all?

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