

## **Examining and Exploring Issues of Power and Ethics in researching marginalised youth - the dilemmas of the practitioner researcher**

**Chapter 6 from Bhopal, K. and R. Deuchar (2015) 'The complexities and dilemmas of researching marginalised groups', London, Routledge**

This chapter explores and examines the ethical dimensions and dilemmas of engaging in practitioner research on a marginalised group – young people experiencing Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) - within the context of a Secondary school in the West of Scotland, situated in an area of multiple deprivation. It examines a wide range of issues pertaining to power and authority, role conflict, identity, subjectivity, boundaries, communication, confidentiality, anonymity, child welfare and the integrity of the research process. It sets this within the context of an evaluative case study of an intervention, developed and implemented by the author with a team of volunteers (principally Pastoral Care and Behaviour Support Teachers), to support children with SEBD. The key messages are for the need to adopt a reflexive and sensitive approach, taking account of culture and context and, at all times, to be guided by the highest ethical principles of respect, openness, honesty and integrity.

The principal aims of this chapter are to examine and explore the ethical dilemmas which can be encountered when conducting action research within an educational setting on young people who could be considered to be marginalised; to describe how the author sought to negotiate such dilemmas; and, to draw from the above, insights which can inform practice as it relates to researching marginalised young people.

Pertinent to this discussion are issues pertaining to power and authority, consent, role conflict, identity, subjectivity/objectivity, boundaries, communication, transparency, anonymity, confidentiality, child welfare and the integrity of the research process. The discussion is illustrated through reference to an evaluative case study (Bassey 1999) conducted by the author within the setting of a Secondary school in the West of Scotland, situated within an area of multiple deprivation (Scottish Government 2012).

The study focussed upon an evaluation of an intervention to support children

experiencing Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD<sup>1</sup>), developed and implemented by the author. The chapter is initially contextualised by a brief discussion as to how young people, particularly those from impoverished communities, may experience marginalisation in their lives.

### **A focus upon marginalisation**

It is difficult to examine and explore the concept of marginalisation without reference to the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Booth and Ainscow (1998, 2) (cited in Messiou 2012) argue that inclusion and exclusion in education are ‘as much about participation and marginalisation in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, poverty and unemployment as they are about traditional special educational concerns with students categorised as low in attainment, disabled or deviant behaviour.’ (1312-3). Thus, by inference, marginalisation can be perceived to pertain to a wide range of circumstances from the individual- to the macro- levels (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Messiou (2012) draws from the accounts of children to identify four ways in which marginalisation can be experienced (or not) by them (cc. Figure 1):

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<sup>1</sup> Also referred to as SEBN (Scottish context, where N refers to Needs); EBD, BESD amongst other acronyms (UK context). ‘D’ within the American context refers to ‘disorders.’

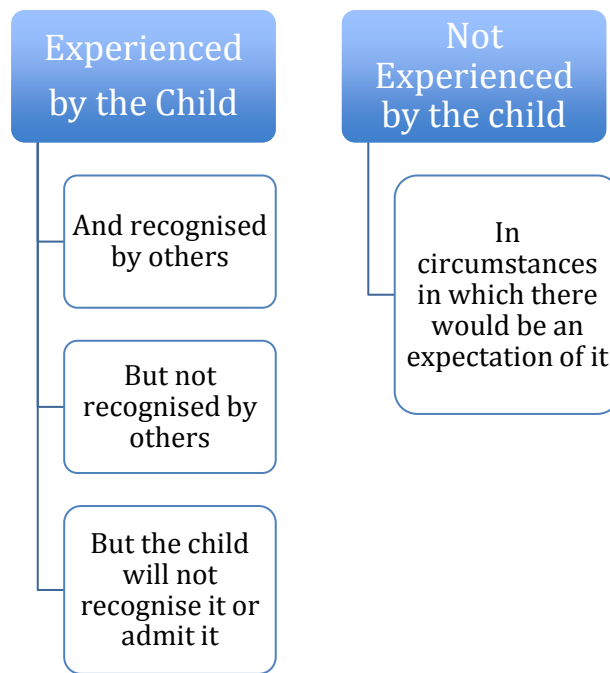


Figure 1: Illustration [Mowat] of Messiou’s four modes by which marginalisation can be experienced, or not, by the child

It is evident from the above that how marginalisation is experienced (or not) is complex and that there is an element of interpretation both on the part of the individual child and by others looking in upon the child.

Ridge (2011), examining the effects of poverty on children’s lives within the UK over a ten year period (1998-2008), identifies a wide range of ways in which children in impoverished circumstances experience their lives as difficult and marginalised. With regard to schooling in particular, the constraints of poverty prevented children from being able to play a full part in school life, being excluded from participation in school trips and other social activities. School was an arena where they could experience stigmatisation and bullying; where teachers discriminated against children from poorer backgrounds and had lower expectations of what they could achieve; and, in which relationships between teachers and pupils could be strained. If one were to add into the equation other variables such as children

taking on the role of young carers (Becker and Becker, 2008) and children of gypsy travellers (Lloyd and Stead, 2001)<sup>2</sup> (amongst other marginalised groups), the problem becomes exacerbated (Messiou 2012). Scottish Government statistics indicate that young people living in the 20% most deprived areas (as described in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) were excluded from school (by a factor of 6.7) than those in the least 20% deprived areas. (Scottish Government 2013b)

Deuchar (2009) explores how youths, involved in gangs, become not only marginalised within their communities but also become bounded by them, limiting their life opportunities; and Riley and Rustique-Forrester (2002) describe the experiences of youths who have disengaged from school life and have become marginalised from their school communities. The practices of isolating pupils who had misbehaved, of placing them in a behaviour unit – ‘You sit there and do nothing’ - and of excluding them from school meant that their learning experiences were often fragmented and interrupted and their social relationships disrupted: the pupils saw themselves as ‘bottom of the pile.’ (27) Pupils felt that they didn’t belong to the school community. They were ‘labelled as failures’ – teachers had given up on them and had very low expectations of what they could achieve. Pupils were engaged in routine, repetitive tasks that, to the pupils, lacked any relevance to their daily lives. As the authors describe, ‘... for many of the young people ..., school was a profoundly sad and depressing experience’ (32). Whilst some might argue that the young people had disenfranchised themselves through their conduct (Hamill, Boyd, and Grieve 2002), this fails to take account of the ecological factors (Bronfenbrenner 1979) that interact with each other to create the context in which these behaviours are acted out and which then act upon the environment. What was of the essence, however,

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<sup>2</sup> Both references cited in Messiou 2012

according to the authors, was the quality of relationships between teacher and pupil and the opportunity that this presented for the pupil to be listened to.

What the above will have highlighted is that marginalisation as it pertains to young people experiencing SEBD is acute. It manifests itself in a wide variety of ways and impacts negatively upon their experiences of schooling. Further, the policies and practices of schools (and the underlying values and ethos) may serve to disenfranchise young people even further. There is a stigma attached to SEBD and often a pathologising of it and an apportioning of blame as being ‘within child’ (Hjörne and Säljö 2013) or ‘within family’ (Araújo 2005) which may not be so prevalent in other forms of Special Educational Needs (SEN)/Additional Support Needs (ASN) which has implications for researching this specific group of pupils. It

should also be recognised that SEBD presents in many different forms and there is great danger in perceiving this specific group of young people as homogenous.

### **The Nature of the Intervention**

The premise upon which the Support Group approach is built is that good behaviour comes from within. It emerges from a sense of morality – from knowing oneself, from having a strong set of values which guide actions and from having a sense of being part of a community in which people care for and about others – a sense of empathy. Likewise, true motivation comes from within – it cannot be imposed externally. The role of the educator is to create the conditions under which intrinsic motivation can flourish and develop. Thus the intervention focuses upon helping children to develop intrapersonal (understanding of self) and interpersonal (understanding of others) intelligences (Gardner, 1999), helping them to come to an understanding of their

values, beliefs, emotions, attitudes, motivations and actions. The role of the teacher leading the group (the Support Group Leader (SG Leader)) is to establish a positive ethos for the group and to teach for understanding and transfer. The activities in which pupils engage are principally discussion based and have been designed to promote reflection, metacognition and thinking at a deeper level.

The approach draws primarily from Multiple Intelligence theory (Gardner 1999) – in particular, the two personal intelligences - and Social Constructivist Theory, utilising the ‘Teaching for Understanding Framework’ developed by David Perkins and his colleagues at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Wiske 1998). It integrates this latter framework with Carol McGuinness’ work on ‘Activating Children’s Thinking Skills’ (McGuinness 2006) and draws also from theories of achievement motivation (Dweck 2000).

Pupils were nominated for participation within the study by their Pastoral Care teachers on the basis of two criteria:

- The pupil was having difficulty in coping with the norms of school life or was showing early signs of such
- It is felt that the approach could be of potential benefit to the pupil.

After formal permission has been sought of parents and pupils, the Support Group met for 1hr per week for around twenty sessions. Pupils were extracted from class in order to attend the group after negotiation had taken place with class teachers.

## Research Aims

The study sought to evaluate the efficacy of the approach and to ascertain pupil outcomes (for example, the extent to which, if any, the approach had impacted upon the development of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences); to identify facilitators and barriers to pupil progress; and to examine the extent to which the intervention had promoted, or not, inclusive practice within the school.

## The Study Methodology

This evaluative case study (Bassey 1999) was conducted over a five-year period, examining the experiences of the first four cohorts of Support Group pupils. It was principally (but not solely) qualitative in approach, informed by an interpretivist paradigm. It drew upon the principles of both case study research and action research (Mills 2007, Somekh 2006) in that it sought to impact positively upon its setting. Whilst it could not be regarded strictly as a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008), it drew upon some of the principles in that the study was emergent and theory informed and modified the design and conduct of the study.

Sixty-nine Secondary 2 (aged 13-14) Support Group pupils and their related stakeholders (parents/guardians; Support Group Leaders; Pastoral Care Teachers; Class Teachers and representatives of the Senior Management Team) participated within the study. Each pupil was matched with a comparator pupil (a pupil who was considered by their Pastoral Care Teacher to be achieving well at school).

The study was guided by ethical principles as described by Bassey (1999) – respect for democracy; respect for truth and respect for persons – and the concept of trustworthiness in case study research which aligns with respect for truth (73-79).

These principles are encapsulated within SERA guidelines for research in schools (Scottish Educational Research Association 2007).

### *Methods*

Semi-structured interviews were held with each of the Support Group pupils (utilising an interview schedule) immediately after intervention had ceased and a sample of these pupils was followed up two years later with a further interview (N = 22 - around 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the SG population). A stratified, random sampling method was utilised, taking account of gender and the group to which the pupil had been assigned. Questionnaires were issued to class teachers of all Support Group pupils, to their Support Group Leaders and to their parents. Quantitative data were gathered on all pupils who participated within the study relating to attendance, discipline and attainment and all pupils also completed an attitudinal questionnaire, devised by the author, both pre- and post-intervention, based upon a semantic differential scale.

In-depth data were obtained from the conduct of six Case studies, drawing from the accounts of SG pupils, SG Leaders, class teachers and parents. A multi-phase, stratified sampling method was utilised taking account of gender, the group to which the pupil was affiliated and the degree of initial concern expressed about the pupil, as ascertained by the nomination forms. A focus group discussion was held with all Support Group Leaders (N = 8) and interviews were conducted with the Headteacher and a Depute Headteacher. All six case study interviews and the focus group discussion were conducted by an experienced, independent researcher.

Qualitative data were analysed by means of thematic analysis, adopting a 'bottom-up' approach, generating descriptive codes, sorting and classifying these into analytical codes and, finally, generating over-arching themes (King and Horrocks 2010). This was a re-iterative process and the coding was refined until it was felt that



a point of saturation had been reached. Quantitative data were analysed via non-parametric tests as the distributions were too skewed to enable parametric testing.

## **An Examination and Exploration of Ethical Dilemmas as they pertain to the study**

Mockler (2007) argues that ethical practitioner research is dependent upon the alignment of three ethical frames – those relating to consent, confidentiality and transparency - and it is when these frames are out of alignment that the researcher, and, indeed the research itself, may be compromised (88). However, the discussion to follow would indicate that, important as these three frames are, they do not represent the full range of ethical issues and dilemmas which can impinge upon the practitioner researcher. This discussion will centre around the ethical issues which emerged at the various developmental stages of the study from its design through to its dissemination, as set out in the introduction. It is important to recognise the inter-relationships between these concepts, which has implications for the structuring of the discussion.

### **Respect for the Individual**

#### ***The Principle of 'Do no Harm'***

One of the foremost principles of educational research is, “Do no harm.” (Scottish Educational Research Association 2005). By its very nature, action research seeks transformational change (Somekh 2006). However, it cannot be assumed that, because an intervention is well-intentioned, the outcome for individual pupils will be positive – it could also be neutral (have no impact) or negative - and nor is it easy to predict how an individual pupil may respond to a specific intervention. On one hand, the potential dangers of stereotyping, stigmatisation and labelling when a child is

identified as being in need of additional support needed to be considered (Hjörne and Säljö 2013, Skovlund 2013). Commentators, such as Dyson and Kozleski (2008), draw attention to the disproportionate number of children facing disadvantaged circumstances who are classified under the banner of Special Educational Needs and Slee (2013) makes a similar observation with regard to children from ethnic minorities. Would intervention serve to disenfranchise these children further and make it more likely that they would be regarded as ‘other’? Would they internalise these negative views of themselves, leading to a self-perpetuating negative spiral? (Greenbank 2013, Hjörne and Säljö 2013, Skovlund 2013) On the other hand, it was evident to the author that the systems and structures which were in place to support these children within the school were largely ineffective; that the school was largely re-active rather than pro-active in its approach to discipline; and there was an over-reliance upon punitive approaches which were perceived as ineffective by parents, staff and pupils. These impressions were corroborated by research carried out by the Scottish Executive in exploring the views of marginalised children in Scotland (Scottish Executive Education Department 2004). Failure to intervene could mean that pupils’ difficulties continued to be unaddressed and further entrenched. Kauffman (2005) argues for the need for early intervention and the need to forefront prevention ahead of concerns about potential stigmatisation and labelling. Thus, in comparing and contrasting these opposing perspectives, it can be seen that the matter is complex and that there is a need to balance the potential for harm with the potential for good. In simple terms, there could be potential for harm if one does intervene but the potential for harm might be greater if one does not intervene.

Having given consideration to the above, a further ethical issue related to the design of the study itself. It is generally considered that the ‘gold standard’ in robust

educational research is that of the controlled experimental trial. Apart from considerations relating to the methodology itself, such as the assumption that variables can be identified and controlled for within the environment – an environment described by Humes (2001) as ‘messy’ and ‘indeterminate’, characterised by ‘uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflict’ (25) – there were other, to the author, more important issues of an ethical nature to be considered. The role of Depute Head encompasses duties for both pupil welfare and discipline therefore my responsibilities lay with **all** children within my year group [Secondary 2] and, if the intervention were to be of potential benefit to pupils, I did not consider it ethical to potentially exclude some young people from it. This perspective is also forwarded by Sikes (2006) and by Locke, Alcorn and O’Neill (2013) who observe that, ‘a right-end does not justify a non-right means.’ (115). The solution adopted was to select a comparator group of pupils (cc. methodology) rather than a control group, a solution also adopted by Greenbank (2013) in his study of undergraduate students. This enabled comparisons to be made between the progress of the two populations on a range of measures (as previously described).

### *Confidentiality, trust and child protection*

A key element of Support Group work is the trust that was established between the SG Leader and pupils within the group and between the pupils themselves. Without trust developing, and the respectful relationships which underlie it, it is unlikely that there would be any meaningful discussion as pupils would be concerned that any information they disclosed would be passed on to their parents, teachers and peers.

SG pupil

I used to worry that you would pass on what I was saying to my Mum and others but you didn't.

The Author

Did my joint role of discipline/welfare help or not?

SG pupil

Yes, it helped a lot. You listened to my version of things when I was in trouble and that made me listen to what you had to say.

The establishment of a Support Group pledge to which all signed up (including the SG Leader) in which confidentiality was an important element was essential to this process. However, by the very nature of the pupils who had been included within the intervention, it was important to explain to pupils and parents from the outset that any matters disclosed by pupils within the group setting which could be perceived as a Child Protection issue would need to be brought to the attention of the Senior Management Team within the school.

### **The difficulties of placing boundaries around research activity within the school setting and issues of competing cultures and rights**

Locke, Alcorn and O'Neill (2013) draw attention to the difficulty in drawing boundaries around 'school related activity' and 'research' within the school context. They ask with respect to teachers, 'How can the boundaries between involvement and non-involvement in the research, as opposed to routine work be demarcated?' given that such work forms part of their normal duties as a professional (216). Likewise, if the child decides not to participate within an action research project, the teacher has a duty of care towards that child and cannot simply remove the child from the activities and tasks associated with it. This was an issue with regard to this specific study as, in the view of the author, when dealing with young people who may have had difficult

relationships with adults in the past and for whom trust may take a long time to establish, it would not be wise to encourage them to withdraw from the intervention at the first hurdle and, indeed, it could be potentially detrimental to their wellbeing. There were many examples of young people within the study who initially did not respond positively to the intervention but who ultimately experienced positive outcomes. This tension highlights a difference between the cultures of schools (in which pupils are rarely permitted to exercise agency with respect to withdrawing from activities) and research where the right to withdraw from a study is a fundamental principle. This created a dilemma and the compromise reached was that pupils could withdraw from the study but, if they wished to withdraw also from the Support Group, this needed to be discussed with their parents and with myself in my role as Depute Head. [cc. Issues of role-conflict, power and authority]

### **Role conflict, values, identity, transparency, power and authority**

Whilst it is recognised that within practitioner research there will be difficult issues pertaining to role conflict between the role of the individual within the organisation and their role as a researcher, this was compounded, in this particular instance, by the multiple roles that I played within the school:

1. As Depute Head, I played a key role in the leadership and management of the school, through participation within the senior management team
2. As Depute Head, I was responsible for all matters pertaining to pupil progress, discipline and welfare for S2 pupils and for liaising with staff, pupils and parents on such matters

3. As Project Manager of the intervention within the school and as SG Leader, I was acting in a welfare capacity for pupils within Support Groups in general and for my own group in particular
4. My capacity as independent researcher.

### *Role conflict and values*

Role conflict isn't just solely about pragmatic issues. Underlying it are the values associated with a role. Elliot (1991), drawing from Simons (1985), contrasts the values of the researcher as being concerned with openness, critical responsibility and rational autonomy with those of the values of schools which are concerned with issues of privacy, territory and hierarchy. Whilst it could be argued that schools have moved significantly forward since Elliot first penned this text, it is still the case that schools are very protective of their reputations and that, despite more flattened structures in Scottish schools and the emphasis upon distributed leadership (Harris 2008), hierarchies still exert an important influence. When these two sets of value systems come into conflict with each other it can result in misunderstandings and interpersonal conflicts (Elliot 1991). As a practitioner researcher, this was experienced as an inner-conflict in which my loyalties were divided between responsibility to the school, as a senior representative of that school, and to my role as a researcher, seeking to cast light on the case. I was aware that aspects of the findings of the study could be potentially sensitive and could be detrimental to the reputation of the school (for example, the finding that not all staff were supportive of the efforts of pupils to improve upon their behaviour). Smyth and Holian (1999) draw attention to the dangers of the 'insider researcher' becoming a 'Joan of Arc' or 'sacrificial lamb' as uncomfortable truths are unearthed and become public. Avoiding such dangers may

lead to compromise and distortion of the study and its findings, compromising the integrity of the research.

Saunders (2007) compares and contrasts statements of principle which can be discerned from documentation pertaining to the professional roles of the practitioner and the researcher, respectively. These are set out in the table below:

Teaching as ‘activism’	Research as ‘scepticism’
Social-relational	Epistemological-scientific
Vested interest	Neutrality
“What use is this work?”	“How valid is the work?”
Looking for confirmation	Looking for refutation
Concerned to identify extent of applicability	Concerned to identify type/extent of error
Insights for action	Insights for understanding
“How will the knowledge enable further action(s)/decisions?”	“How does this research enable new theory and/or knowledge to emerge?”
Management issues concerned with implementation	Management issues concerned with quality assurance

Table 1: Table 5.1 (modified) as reproduced from Saunders (2007). Principles underlying practice

She argues that teacher practitioners are often positioned as users of others’ research and that when they do undertake research a patronising stance is often adopted towards it – it is seen as somehow ‘lesser’ – small-scale and localised or, alternatively, over-ambitious in its aims. (63) Saunders is not undertaking the above comparison to re-inforce these prejudices but to make the case that it may be of value to consider more explicitly the values which underpin both teaching and research and to provide support to teachers in their role as researchers such that they develop an understanding of ‘which forms and modes of professional learning are integral to the creation of professional knowledge.’ (72)

Mockler (2007) argues that the ethics of practitioner research straddle the boundaries between the ethics of research and the ethics of practice and therefore

incorporate aspects of both. The consequence of this is that ethical concerns which are traditionally seen to reside within one tradition may be seen to be applicable to the other.

Thus, within these accounts there are three perspectives on the relationship between ethical values/principles as they apply to practitioners and researchers: the first (Elliot) placing them in opposition to and being in conflict with each other; the second (Saunders) recognising the different underlying ethical principles but calling for the need to make the values which underpin these ethical principles explicit; and the third (Mockler) looking to integrate the ethical principles of both practitioners and researchers.

### **Power, Authority, Confidentiality, Transparency and Consent**

As a senior manager in the school, I had to be very aware of the power which is inherent within the role and to ensure that I did not take advantage of this to further the study. As a normal part of my role, I would request information from staff pertaining to pupil welfare, discipline and progress; would attend inter-professional meetings (including those convened by Social Work and Children's Hearings) in which highly confidential information about pupils and families would be discussed; and would have available to me highly sensitive information about pupils, some of whom were within the study. Brindley and Bowker (2013) and Smyth and Holian (1999) attest to one of the potential dangers of practitioner research as having access to information which would not normally be available to the 'outsider' researcher, which parents and pupils might not wish disclosed, and which could be potentially sensitive, bringing to the surface unwelcome observations.

Likewise, Elliot (1991) also draws attention to norms which prevail within schools regarding the right to privacy. It is not possible to 'unlearn' that which has



been learned but what it is possible to do is to act ethically and to ensure that permission was sought of the individuals concerned before drawing upon any such information within the study and to ensure that staff were absolutely clear about the purpose of any requests which were made to them for information pertaining to pupil progress and the voluntary nature of requests pertaining to the study. However, this does not get round the issue of power and authority – even though every effort was made to ensure that staff, parents and pupils were not coerced into participation within the study or in disclosing information pertaining to it, could the role of the author as Depute Head have exerted a pressure to conform to such requests? Brindley and Bowker (2013) draw attention to the ‘myth of voluntariness’ where power differentials make it very difficult for individuals to exercise choice and Locke, Alcorn and O’Neill (2013), drawing from the literature, also raise this concern.

The former authors also observe that the assumption is often made in schools that it is sufficient to seek formal permission for a research study from parents without formal permission being sought from children. This is also a reflection upon the different cultures within schools and within the research community where, within the former, the role of teachers acting in ‘*loco parentis*’ and the authority of teachers is considered to be paramount. However, within the context of a growing emphasis upon children’s rights, as enshrined within law (Scottish Government 2013a), there is now an imperative to consult with children and young people about matters which pertain to their education. Within this specific study it was imperative to consult fully with both pupils and parents prior to seeking formal informed consent (from both) not only on ethical grounds but also on pragmatic grounds as this would be likely to impact significantly upon the pupils’ willingness to participate actively within group

discussions and activities and therefore upon potential outcomes for children, and information events and meetings were held to facilitate this.

### **Researcher Identity and Role**

Thomson and Gunter (2011), outwith the context of Practitioner research, question the orthodoxies associated with the notion of the ‘outsider’/’insider’ researcher and discuss the fluidity of the researcher ‘identity’ as not being a constant. They describe a situation in which they fulfilled multiple roles for different stakeholders (eg. ‘providers of expert advice’ to the Head and ‘a conduit to the Head’ for pupils) and one in which their role changed as the project in which they were engaged developed. They were neither solely ‘insider’ nor ‘outsider’ and their identities with regard to each were in a constant state of flux. Whilst the study described above is of a different nature to that of practitioner research, there were strong parallels to this specific study in the sense of multiple and shifting roles which, at times, conflicted with each other as is exemplified both above and below.

Sikes (2006), discusses the difficulties faced by the ‘insider researcher’ engaged in practitioner research which she describes as ‘inherently sensitive, and, therefore, potentially dodgy’ in ethical terms: ‘People considering embarking on insider research have to think very carefully about what taking on the role and identity of the researcher can mean and involve in a setting where they are normally seen as someone else.’ (110) This became an issue for me when piloting an observation schedule. It soon became evident that this approach was not tenable as the pupils (and, very likely, teacher) perceived me in my role as Depute Head and this immediately impacted upon the situation under observation. Indeed, when an aggressive incident broke out within the class, I had no option but to abandon my role as independent

observer and don the cap of 'Depute Head' in helping to restore order within the class!

Sikes also raises concerns that people within that working environment may not wish to disclose information to a colleague; the researcher may uncover information of a highly sensitive nature; and there may be difficulties about disseminating the findings within the public domain, issues raised in the above discussion.

### **Issues of bias, subjectivity and objectivity**

A further issue which is peculiar to Practitioner Research is the inside knowledge of the school and the 'taken for granted ways' in which it operates which raised issues about bias and subjectivity/objectivity. Once one has internalised the 'ways of being' within an institution, it is not always easy to take an objective stance and to question assumptions however, that is fundamentally the role of the researcher. As described by Brookfield (1995) in his advocacy of 'hunting assumptions', it is necessary to explore the power relations which underlie policy and practice and Floyd and Arthur (2012) discuss the dangers of bringing false assumptions to the frame. The 'ideal' picture of the researcher as being entirely objective and bias free can only be a myth as we all bring our own frame of reference to what we do which influences all of the choices and decisions which pertain to all stages of the research process including the initial focus of the research. Smyth and Holian (1999) state: 'We must surrender the idea that researching the meanings and interpretations we make of people in social situations can be objective.' (1) Kemmis (1980) describes the search for objectivity within enquiry as an illusion: 'Research is not a process of thought going out to

embrace its object as if its object lay there inert' (119) and observes that the very presence of the researcher will have an effect upon the case under study. Indeed, it is often advocated that researchers should bring to the frame, and make clear their values, beliefs and prejudices. Norris (2007) outlines a wide range of potential sources of bias in research and observes that 'a consideration of self as a researcher and self in relation to the topic of research is a precondition for coping with bias.' (174) This, however, implies a high degree of intrapersonal intelligence (Gardner 1999) which may not always be present in the researcher. Gillham (2000) cautions about the dangers of ideologically driven research in which the researcher may give greater credence to findings which accord with his/her value system whilst giving little weight to discrepant data.

Being aware of these potential dangers, I used a process of triangulation (both in terms of drawing upon multiple methods and multiple perspectives) as a means of trying to ensure greater trustworthiness (Bassegy 1999) and also actively sought out alternative explanations and interpretations. I also verified during the interview process itself that my understanding of what had been said accorded with what had been expressed by the interviewee by regularly paraphrasing back the response to him/her: "So what you are saying is ....", enabling them to expand upon points and/or clarify issues which proved to be highly effective. Case studies were returned to source for verification and were scrutinised by independent researchers at the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE).

### **Issues of Anonymity and Transparency**

Whilst within any empirical enquiry, the issue of anonymity is important, within the context of practitioner research it assumes an even greater importance and this is particularly the case when the study involves vulnerable groups. Floyd and Arthur

(2012) highlight the difficulties of concealing the organisation or institution when a simple Google search under the author's name would quickly reveal it but what is even more difficult is the need to ensure that participants within the study cannot be recognised within the institution. How does one conceal the identity of the Headteacher within the institution or the sole Behaviour Support teacher whose views were sought? The answer is you can't. The only honest course of action is to be open about this. Likewise, in undertaking a case study, the circumstances pertaining to a child may be so unique that it becomes almost impossible to conceal the identity of the child to those within the school and the locale. This raises issues about boundaries - how much information to disclose – and also about the means of dissemination. How and when will the findings be disseminated and to whom? This highlights the inadequacies of formal ethical approval procedures in which once all of the boxes are ticked it is assumed that ethical requirements have been met, an issue raised by Brindley and Bowker (2013). The authors also draw to attention the lack of guidance within schools for conducting research in an ethical manner. The above highlights the need to attend to these ethical issues at all stages of the research and to perhaps go back to the individuals concerned and negotiate with them the issues raised above. It is important to recognise also that there may be implications of such disclosure for the individuals concerned and for the school well beyond the completion of the study (Floyd and Arthur 2012).

### **Key Messages**

The principal aims of this chapter were (in brief) to examine and explore ethical dilemmas (and the implications of such) as they pertain to practitioner research within the context of marginalised youth as a means of informing future research in this area.

What follows is a summary of the main issues which, for me, as a practitioner researcher, arose from the reflections upon this study when working within a context of multiple deprivation and poverty in which many young people are highly vulnerable. These are for the need to be self-reflective; to develop intrapersonal intelligence (to know oneself); to understand that one cannot place oneself as the independent, objective observer: that one's very presence as a practitioner researcher has an impact upon that environment; of the need to recognise the internalised values and assumptions which become the cultural norms of the environment and to seek to explore beneath and examine these values and assumptions; and to bring to the fore one's own value and belief system and open it out to question. Further, to be aware of and take account of issues pertaining to unequal power in the design and conduct of the research at all stages; to be open, honest, transparent and non-manipulative in one's dealings with people; to ensure that communication is clear, appropriate and unambiguous; and to ensure that one does not abuse the trust which goes with being a member of that community in order to further the ends of the research. One needs to respect the ethical principle of 'Do no harm'; to ensure that informed consent is sought of all concerned and that the normal ethical considerations apply but to recognise also that these may not be sufficient to protect vulnerable populations and that further measures may need to be taken to protect identities. In working with children and young people consideration needs to be given to Child Protection and the safeguarding of children's interests and to recognise these as paramount. One needs to have the interpersonal skills to be able to negotiate difficult terrains and territories but also to have the courage to fight for what is right in order to maintain the integrity of the research. However, one needs also to recognise the varied perspectives which

people bring to the situation and the difficulties which the research may present to others and be sensitive to this.

It could be argued that the above could be applicable to any form of practitioner research but the issue here is that, in researching vulnerable groups, they assume a much greater importance and significance and, if not implemented, could jeopardise the well-being of those whom one is researching not only in the short-term but the long-term and bring educational research itself into disrepute. Fundamentally, ethical practitioner research is dependent upon the need to adopt a reflexive and sensitive approach, taking cognisance of culture and context, characterised by the highest ethical principles of respect, transparency, honesty and integrity.

#### Note

The findings of this study have been reported in Mowat (2008, 2009, 2010b, c, a, 2011). The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation supported a research and development project to extend the approach across two Scottish Local Authorities and across both Primary and Secondary sectors. One of the Local Authorities is currently extending the approach across its networks of schools.

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