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EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Listening to unheard voices

The responsibility of inclusive researchers



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I recently had the pleasure of participating in the co-creation of *A Manifesto for Education for Environmental Sustainability* that has just been launched (BERA Research Commission, 2021). It was a particular privilege to collaborate with experts, and young people whose future depends on adults supporting them to make sensitive decisions about their planet's future. The biggest factor in persuading me to take part, however, was the project leads' willingness to let me adapt their methodology so that the views of young people with learning difficulties could be sought and incorporated into the manifesto's design.

Far too often it is assumed that these young people – because they may have difficulties in communicating, need longer to understand and respond to stimuli, or do not use standard communication devices – have nothing to say. Having researched the responses of young people with significant learning support needs to being taught science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), and supervised a doctoral student who considered their response to learning a modern foreign language, I have been convinced that they have much to communicate, if only researchers will listen to them.

The production of the education for environmental sustainability manifesto required the team to consider various aspects of the project. These can be considered under three headings: being visibly inclusive; being responsive and risk-taking researchers; and reconceptualising data.

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BEING VISIBLY INCLUSIVE

While we have all grown used to symbols for accessibility for wheelchair users, visually impaired and deaf or hard of hearing people, we have no equivalent marker for accessibility for very diverse learners. This meant that, to meet the timescale of the project, the request for contributions had to be directed to specialist educational settings and third sector organisations working with people with significant learning support needs. Fortunately, Camphill Village Trust, a third sector organisation that offers day care and work opportunities for just such adults, put us in touch with a staff member who had recently facilitated the creation of a group poem on the environment. I asked whether we could have a transcript of the poem to share prior to group discussions to provoke debate; the poetry group went one better and offered to be filmed speaking their poem (*Routes*, 2021). They all rehearsed very hard so that even the shyest member of the group could speak the line they had created, and we were delighted to use their video in our portfolio of stimulus material. Having a contribution from visibly neurodiverse people sent out a strong message that other diverse people belonged in the project and were welcome to participate. This undoubtedly assisted in my quest for further contributions from other school groups. In recognition of the contributions made, the final report had on its cover Makaton (a sign and symbol system commonly used with and by people with learning difficulties to support, or in place of, oral communication) symbols for 'look after' and 'Earth'.

BEING RESPONSIVE & RISK-TAKING RESEARCHERS

The poetry group raised an important question about ethicality in data gathering from so-called 'vulnerable subjects'. Although all had attained the age of adulthood, they could not be assumed to understand the full

significance of posting a video onto a website where it could be seen by thousands of people. This meant that informed consent could only be obtained by providing very clear descriptions of the consequences of sharing their video, and by giving them time to fully understand what they were consenting to. Although this presented potential logistical problems for a project that was on a tight timescale, it could not have been done any other way.

A second adjustment was that the questions for the main discussion rooms were reduced in number and the language simplified. This could be considered a 'reasonable adjustment' allowing contributors to take time to reflect on the question, and to focus on key questions without going beyond their attention span, which is commonly limited.

RECONCEPTUALISING DATA

Potentially the highest research risk was allowing contributors to communicate their ideas about the future of the environment in whatever way they preferred – by choosing pictures or speech, signing or using eye-gaze technology to pick out symbols. This open-ended data gathering is high inference, relying on both the translation of staff who were recording their answers and the researchers who then had to make sense of the data returned by the staff. Despite the risk of wrongly inferring meaning from the data, without this level of flexibility we could not claim to be giving a voice to very diverse learners. We were hugely reassured when their answers identified themes and issues that were common to other participants, even though some were at the extreme end of the range given by the other focus groups.

At the end of the project, I think the team can be justifiably proud, not only of the report and its topicality, but also – for the sustainability of the planet and educational research – that we sought out and genuinely listened to diverse voices. The report represents a powerful manifesto for education for environmental sustainability, and its research methodology has made important steps towards meeting United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 10: the reduction of inequalities.

REFERENCES

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