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Researching 'With', Not 'On': Engaging Foundation GNVQ Students in the Research Process

Abstract

This paper discusses practical and methodological issues arising from ongoing case study research exploring the hopes, aspirations and learning identity of 4 cohorts of GNVQ Foundation (level 1) students in 3 English General Further Education (FE) colleges. This paper focuses on work with the student participants in the study and poses a number of questions. How can young people be engaged with a research process? How can that process be meaningful to them in the context of their lives and experiences? How can the significant ethical issues involved with working with these students be addressed? Part of the thesis for this work has been the lack of value placed on students enrolled on Foundation level programmes. Therefore, it was important to demonstrate value for them throughout this process, and one way in which this was achieved was by engaging the young people with the research process as actively as possible. Working within a feminist theoretical framework, and specifically considering the notion of knowledge/power relationships the paper outlines the participative approach which was taken in the development of interview questions, informed by the 'arenas of action and centres of choice' described by Ball et. al (2000:148). Further, it explores the practical issues and ethical tensions which arose associated with respecting the young people and facilitating their involvement in the research process whilst working within the constraints placed by their level of experience and understanding, and discusses some of the unanticipated challenges that arose from this process. The paper concludes with a discussion of the way the research has evolved in response to these issues and of the 'added value' to the research which has arisen from the participants' engagement with the process.

References

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