



Data Collection and Evidence Building to Support Education in Emergencies

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NSI is produced by NORRAG and is supported by the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The content and perspectives presented in the articles are those of the individual authors and do not represent views of any of these organizations.

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NORRAG Special Issue 02, April 2019

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NSI 02 benefited from the advice and the support of the
INEE Language Communities

INEE

NORRAG is supported by:



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC



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ISSN: 2571-8010



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Improving the Quality of Inclusive Education in Emergencies: What Are Our Methodological Choices for Engaging Children in Knowledge Generation?

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Summary

This paper analyses the role and involvement of research participants, especially children with special educational needs, in the generation of knowledge of which they are expected to be beneficiaries. It also examines research participants' role in participatory research and how power is exercised over research participants.

Keywords

Participatory Research
Inclusive Education

Introduction

Research in the Special Education Needs (SEN) field assumes a proclivity towards participants' involvement in research. This approach is concerned with generating knowledge that aims to help children with SEN; it also often aims for emancipation and empowerment among research participants. The term SEN is referred to here as the broad social construct that encompasses a range of disabilities and children with SEN; it also identifies a sub-group of the larger population being researched in the education in emergencies (EiE) field. Asked simply, what role or power do children with SEN have over the generation of knowledge about them?

The Role and Involvement of Research Participants in Research

Emancipatory research advocates for the idea that individuals with SEN have privileged access to knowledge and understanding of their own experiences, and thus only they can develop meaningful knowledge related to members of their group (Oliver, 1992). In other words, if individuals with SEN are not able to be active participants in the research process themselves, there is less possibility of developing an empirical and theoretical understanding of their experiences (ibid). The distinction between emancipatory and empowerment research lies in the degree to which participants are actively engaged in and driving the research process, and the role, if any, of outside researchers in the process (Hickey & Mohan, 2005). Implicitly, both emancipatory and empowerment methodologies challenge the marginalisation and silencing of the researched perpetuated by conventional, interpretivist researchers.

However, some conventional researchers who might facilitate the participation of those being studied in their research emphasise that when the purpose of the research is to develop research-based empirical and theoretical knowledge,

the researched persons' experiences can sometimes be a hindrance (see Fay, 1996 below). Outsider researchers who study the experiences of the researched at a distance argue, in some cases, that they are in a better position than the participants themselves to understand certain experiences (ibid).

Fay (1996, p. 21) suggests that "being immersed in a certain way of living or acting may prevent one from knowing what one is." Secondly, knowledge "consists not in the experience itself but in the grasping the sense of this experience" (ibid, p. 27). Thirdly, while those being studied have access to many of their individual actions and activities through shared reflection, outside researchers gain this perspective through their observations of the researched participants' actions and activities. This means that conventional researchers are also in a position to propose interpretations and perspectives on actions and activities, including tentative interpretations of what the actions, activities, and events might mean to the researched participants.

This approach to research participant knowledge and experience is considered flawed by emancipatory and empowerment researchers. There is, for example, evidence that researchers who adopt an interpretive approach are more likely to exclude the voices of powerless participants in the process of their investigations (see Kugelmass, 2001). Danieli and Woodhams (2005) argue that emancipatory and empowerment researchers also exercise power over research participants when they reveal their theoretical starting point, which is likely to influence the choice of paradigm assumptions of less confident participants when they are collecting and analysing data. This suggests that power relationships exist between the researched and the researchers in emancipatory, empowerment, and interpretive research approaches. This further suggests that a stance that researchers should follow when involving participants in the research process is to embrace the principles of inclusion, which can both identify and minimise power imbalances that already exist.

Research Participants' Role in Participatory Research

The ideals of inclusion require that everyone be involved and ensure that all voices be heard. I argue that research in the field of inclusion should be grounded in methodologies that speak to these ideals. Inclusion can take different forms, varying from the passive, active, and representative to more dynamic forms of participation. Pretty (1995) identifies research methodologies that reflect these different degrees of inclusion. His broadened seven-fold model of participation distinguishes between representative and passive participation, consultation, participation involving sharing resources, and functional participation. Higher

levels of participation involve interactive participation and self-mobilisation, which are valued most by researchers predisposed to participatory research. This approach favours the involvement of the researched at every stage of the research.

In practice, participatory researchers usually do not allow participants to take initiatives independently or afford them equal status as researchers in the research design process or in the implementation of research. I also adopt the view that to be a participatory researcher and ensure the inclusion of all participants does not necessarily require this level of engagement from participants. Treating those being studied as active participants, not as subjects, but also not as researchers, may be appropriate for EiE studies that aim to allow all participant voices to be an important part in the development of better policies and programmes that benefit those being studied.

This interpretation of participation does not conform to the high levels of participation proposed by Pretty (1995). One problem with those high levels is that their essentialist position appears to devalue other types of participation. This is the reason that I specify the type of participation I follow, as those types will threaten rather than support the ideals of including everyone and ensuring every voice is heard. What is important in participatory EiE research is to shift away from the interactive and self-mobilisation bottom of the continuum towards a passive, representative, and active participation. I argue that the term participation can be resolved into these three types. My basic understanding of passive, representative, and active participation is described below.

Active participation requires participants to engage with other participants in face-to-face discussion and analysis throughout the research process. Representative participation mainly involves investigators constructing meaning about and reporting what they uncovered from their face-to-face interview with participants. Passive participation subtly engages participants in providing or choosing a closed set of responses from structured or fixed-response questions. Determining the most appropriate methodology and what level of participation may be preferable would depend on the research question and context. There are times when more passive approaches might be needed while we still advocate for more participatory approaches.

That said, I am also aware that it is uncertain whether an investigation will be considered participatory only because it is engaged with a range of perspectives, particularly where participation is passive. Passive participation may be insufficient for developing more comprehensive perspectives and experiences by the research participants. This requires active participation, which places value on dialogue.

Engaging research participants in dialogue, it should be noted, does not necessarily mean that the approach is more participatory or that the findings will accurately reflect participants' opinions, perspectives, or ideas. However, everyone has his or her own point of view that needs to be taken as a contribution to understanding the problem under study, and as shown from previous research (Kurawa, 2010), some participants may express themselves meaningfully through passive forms of participation.

What is stressed here is that the emphasis when doing research should be on all participants and their voices and not just on those who are traditionally included (adults) or excluded (children) in research. This is related to the wider notion of inclusion, as discussed in Kurawa (2019), and the aim of research with children to look at the opportunities provided for everyone to be involved and how everyone is encouraged to be involved. The challenge is how researchers can also engage themselves and research participants in critical self-reflection, which can help ensure more genuine deliberation, together and alone. Researchers should come to their research with no fixed beliefs that they would not subject to rational scrutiny by the data. Their examining of the research transcripts, revising and revisiting them, and asking what the evidence is telling them would be an element of that test.

That said, researchers should be aware that the evidence given, and its interpretations, would not be value-free. As such, they should consider sensitive, value-laden issues related to the relationships between the researched and other adults working with them, and how those relationships affect children's behaviour and educational experiences. These are issues that are identified in much literature and in interviews, as shown in Kurawa and Azare (2014), that have been simmering in challenging contexts and that have also stirred public debates. Researchers should seek out the voices of children and adults working for or with them as contributions to burgeoning issues. Individual texts of the contributions should be sent back to most participants to privately reflect, rework, and approve them so that rationally defensible empirical evidence would emerge.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown that there are different approaches to conducting research on SEN and that each approach has its advantages and disadvantages (interpretivist or participatory). The approach taken should be informed by the research question, the aims of the research, and the context. Participatory approaches are not the only approach. If and when researchers choose to engage in participatory approaches, there are certain things of which they need to be mindful.

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