

Trying to do Socially Just Educational Research: Doing Things Differently

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I want to think about some of the issues involved in trying to do inclusive and socially just education research. I draw on two education research projects that I am involved with. The first project is a small-scale exploratory study with twelve Education academics who are 'staying on' post retirement. The second is a major investigation that explores how England's vocational education and training (VET) system could better support the transitions into further education, training and work of those young people aged 16-20 not taking the university route. Drawing on these two studies, the intention is to ask questions about what is meant by socially just research – that is, research that is both socially just in the way it is carried out (for example, doing research *with* participants instead of *to* them and including marginalized voices) and that seeks to contribute to more socially just educational practices in the future.

There is some danger in claiming that education research should always have some practical utility; there is also a danger in thinking that more socially just research, without any wider political commitment to social change, will 'make education better'. But trying to do 'research differently' and promoting a more deliberate socially just perspective in our research methods and design may be part of a prefigurative politics where we start to contribute towards more equitable social change.

KEYWORDS: *social justice, prefigurative politics, research design*

RESEARCH AND THE 'ARTEFACTS OF MISERY'

This paper takes as its substantive focus two pieces of research that are concerned with education policy (with a small p and a large P) in order to ask some questions about an ethics of research and social justice in critical policy work and doing things differently. Some time ago Stephen Ball (1997, p 258) wrote that 'policy research is always in some degree both reactive and parasitic'. He added that 'Careers and reputations are made as our research flourishes upon the rotting remains of the Keynesian Welfare State'. Arguably, the worse things become, the more (certain types of) policy research and its outputs are circulated, reaching policy-makers and having 'impact'. It may sometimes seem that there are 'fashions' and 'trends' in

education research. It is also quite probable that the research that has the most public 'impact' is that which proffers a policy solution to 'fix' a problem – what Ball calls 'efficient' research such as some (but not all) of the school effectiveness work. But it is not always that easy or that comfortable to resolve policy concerns that become more difficult when issues of justice are concerned, not least because of issues intimately related to power and positionality for research workers themselves. To cite Ball again:

Both those inside the policy discourse and those whose professional identities are established through antagonism towards the discourse benefit from the uncertainties and tragedies of reform. Critical researchers, apparently safely ensconced in the moral high ground, nonetheless make a livelihood *trading in the artefacts of misery* and broken dreams of practitioners. None of us remains untainted by the incentives and disciplines of the new moral economy. (1997, p 258 *my italics*).

I start by considering this 'basic and apparently irredeemable tension at the heart of education policy research' (Ball, 1997, p 271) first because I think it is still sometimes sidelined or forgotten. Second, I also want to start with this 'tension' that acts as a warning to those of us who try to 'do' socially just education research, because we are all, to some degree caught up in this uneasy position. 'None of us remains untainted'. We are all caught up in and by the persuasive and dominant discourses of educational research; some of these can constrain our thinking, shape meanings and displace or conceal alternatives. For example, there is a debate about the need for social justice research to provide 'a coherent way forward for policy makers in education' (Francis et al, 2017, p 424). This is a seductive argument but there is a need to ensure that research is undertaken for more than just practical and pragmatic reasons, important those these may sometimes be. As Whitty (2006) argues, education research is multifaceted and there is a need to differentiate between research for education and of education. He argues that 'education researchers are not necessarily under an obligation to make their research explicitly useful, any more than researchers in many branches of the social and natural sciences' (p 172). However, while it may be the case that 'the pallid and insipid version of educational social justice offered by the main political parties does not constitute social justice at all' (Reay, 2012, p. 596), nevertheless there is some residual form of policy commitment towards equality of opportunity in the UK state.

Concerns have also been expressed about some theoretically driven research that takes the form of 'finger pointing' (Ball, 1997, p 269); work that details and identifies various oppressions or state power for instance but that does not provide the possibility of revealing the potential to disidentify from what Ball calls the 'mantric' use of theory. He cites the case of work that just identifies cases of 'governmentality, patriarchy, state oppression, post-fordism' (p 269). As Ball (1997, p 269) goes on, 'many policy researchers simply seek to re-inhabit the old redemptive assumptions based upon an unproblematic organic role for themselves in a perpetual process of progressive orderly growth... or by the assertive recycling of old dogmas and tired Utopias'. The point of theory, Ball argues, should be 'to sap power' (Foucault, 1972).

To some degree, I am starting by producing a somewhat reductive account of critical educational research in positioning it as being caught between these two dominant discourses – too much emphasis on the practical and/or limited theory work. And maybe not enough social justice either. But, while these tensions do exist in educational research that is attempting to be critical and socially just, there is always some scope for leverage. All discourses simultaneously constitute ‘a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy’ (Foucault, 1982, p 101) as I hope to identify in what follows.

WHAT IS SOCIALLY JUST RESEARCH?

So, how do we do critical policy research that is socially just and avoid some of the pitfalls that I have just described? Indeed, what is meant by socially just research – that is, research that is both socially just in the way it is carried out (for example, doing research *with* participants instead of *to* them and including marginalized voices) and that seeks to contribute to more socially just practices in the future? Francis, Mills and Lupton (2017) argue that what is often missing in social justice work is a perspective on what a socially just education system would actually look like. They argue that this is ‘complicated and contested in multiple ways – not just because social justice can be defined in different ways but because what it means in practice is not straightforward either’ (p 424). But, unless one knows where one is going, it is hard to see how to proceed or indeed know if one has arrived at the destination!

Reay (2012) also agrees that there is a need to envisage what a socially just education would look like and offers a stronger analysis:

But I would argue that it is futile to wrestle with the current neoliberal terms of engagement, to try and make them ‘better’. Tinkering with an unjust educational system is not going to transform it into a just system. What we need are *totally different ways of envisioning education*, ones that enable a move beyond narrow secular self-interests and economic ends. (Reay, 2012, p 589) (my italics).

Reay argues that education is dominated by discourses of economic necessity and competitive individualism that displace a more structural-material approach. This alternative perspective would recognize the ‘glaring issue of disparities... that determines a person’s educational opportunities’ (Unwin and Yandell, 2016, p 14). Reay (2012, p 590) draws on work by Tawney (1964 a, and b) to argue that

a socially just educational system is one in which education is seen as an end in itself, a space that ‘people seek out, not in order that they may become something else, but because they are what they are’ (Tawney, 1964,b. p 178), rather than a means of getting ahead of others, of stealing a competitive edge (Reay, 2012, p 590).

If what we mean by a socially just education system is itself complex and contested, then what of education research? In exploring two recent studies which I am involved with, I want to make a heuristic distinction between work that has a *socially just perspective* and research that takes an *integrally social justice approach*.

A SOCIAL JUSTICE FOCUS

Starting with a small study that Rosalyn George of Goldsmiths College and I have been doing, I would characterise our work as taking a *social justice focus*. Let me explain and lay out the parameters of our work. In recent years in the UK and elsewhere, the number of academics choosing to work beyond the traditional retirement age has increased. In the UK, 'for part-time academic staff, the largest increases have been from staff aged 61–65 (up 41.2%) and 66 and over (up 169.0%)' (Universities UK, 2018, p 28). The Age Discrimination Act (2006) and the Equality Act (2010) have led to a change in mandatory retirement age limits; default retirement (forced retirement at 65) no longer exists. In comparison with previous generations, professional people in later years (65-70 +) frequently enjoy relatively good health and are deciding to stay in paid employment, albeit frequently in part-time posts (Kristjuhan & Taidre, 2013).

But there are some complex social justice conflicts involved in this account of older academics choosing to stay in their posts for longer periods of time. In a context where academic jobs may be decreasing, older workers who stay on in their posts may be limiting employment and promotion opportunities for younger colleagues (Willetts, 2011). At the same time, older workers may be stereotyped and maligned by others in their workplaces; as being 'too old to learn new tricks', or less able to be flexible because of deeply ingrained ageist attitudes.

The British public is routinely exposed to crude and frequently inaccurate stereotypes about what it means to be 'old', and how the ageing process will affect them. These stereotypes pervade society: they inform our political choices, provide the punchline to many a joke, and may even drive the anxieties that help sell anti-wrinkle creams and hair dye (RSPH, 2018, p 7).

The UK has an aging population and this will be expensive for the public purse to care for: more people staying longer in paid employment may help to ameliorate this economic gap. In any case, more people will have to work longer because of labour supply shortages. But there are positive features in this situation - older people arguably bring expertise, experience and reliability to the workforce (Timmons, *et al.* 2011) and, at the same time, staying in 'fulfilling' work can be enriching and sustaining (health and well-being) for this cohort (Marvell and Cox, 2017). In the higher education sector, the rise of casualization, temporary posts and precarity in academic work patterns the employment of many younger (and some older) academics (McAlpine, 2010). So at the very least, there is some potential for intergenerational conflict and discontent in the changing labour market of universities. This is particularly the case if paid employment in a desirable sector is perceived to be limited for younger academics by those elder colleagues who simply will not 'move off the dance floor'.

Gewirtz and Cribb (2002) remind us that social justice is a plural concept including facets such as *distributive* justice; that is, sharing out assets, rights and duties fairly, as well as *recognitional* justice; being respected and non-maligned. According to Fraser (1997) these dimensions can have contradictory intentions, what she calls the 'redistribution-recognition dilemma' (Fraser, 1997, p 16). In the case of those older academics who choose to stay in paid work in their institutions, their employment may limit access to (permanent) jobs for younger people trying

to get a foothold in academia (*distribution claims*). Simultaneously, these older workers may be excluded or disparaged in their institutions by ageist stereotypes and other excluding practices (*recognition claims*) (Willetts, 2011). In effect, this potential conflict raises some complicated questions for what is meant by a socially just set of practices round employment procedures and processes in the university sector in a time of increasing precarity and high levels of casualization. There is a policy 'problem' here that needs to be addressed.

We conducted in-depth semi-structured individual interviews with 12 academics, aged 65 and over who had decided to 'stay on' in paid employment in education departments. Not surprisingly, the dominant reason for staying on given by all the participants was their desire to access more time and space to pursue their research interests; something that had sometimes had to be put to one side in the past. In terms of the *distributional dimensions of social justice*, some of these stayers were relatively privileged as most of them had held senior posts in their universities, and so, to some extent, they were better able to mark out what they wanted to do (although in some cases this might mean that younger less autonomous academics would have to pick up more administrative and marking loads). There were also gendered differences within the 'stayers' that would need more critical attention than I explore here. In terms of *recognition*, things were sometimes less positive.

Understandably, stayers who reduced their hours of paid employment were frequently asked to relinquish their offices. Over the last three years Bradley had been asked to move rooms four times and was now in an office 'down in the dive, and it's a room mainly for the technician.' Fiona had lost her office too: 'I share with one other person, and that's fine. It's a horrible, horrible little room...' a long way from the offices of her department colleagues. Plant space is finite and part-time workers will need to share and, in some institutions, this may involve hot-desking. However, being moved to a 'dive' or a 'horrible, horrible' room sends a message of perhaps being of less value or taking up too much space. Fiona talked about the arrival of her new line manager:

He'd only been in place a few minutes and he said to somebody, "Fiona Collins." "Can't we find a cheaper option?" And I... I sort of brazened it out... but inside I wanted to die... He hasn't bullied me but he's frozen me out.

So far, it might be argued that what I am describing here is a form of theory-pointing: here is the theory (Fraser's 'redistribution-recognition dilemma') and here are some examples of the 'tension between two different kinds of equality' (Gewirtz and Cribb, 2002, p 151). Some of our participants recognised that staying on presents university managers with difficulties.

It's an institutional conundrum, in a sense, which I fully understand. So, on the one hand I would want to defend the right not to have to retire, (but) I do understand the pressures or problems that that can create. I think it's even more complicated than that because all of this is part of a more general shift in the nature of employment and working conditions in higher education (Samuel).

Melody talked about some of the more malign discourses surrounding older academics 'staying on' as provoking discontent:

That's an ideological thing. It's, it's politically expedient to present people who work beyond retirement as somehow wrecking the chances of young people... That's divisive politics to try and set the young against the old you know, it's as simple as that.

So, we would argue that by canvassing the views of elders in one section of the academic labour market, we have tried to bring alternative voices to the debate. Just as importantly, we would argue that we are working to 'dis-identify' from simply rehearsing theoretical positions and working to produce alternative narratives that engage with better ways of addressing the sorts of tensions we have illustrated in our small study. Drawing on Gewirtz and Crib again (2009, p 154) we would argue that we want to 'make explicit the range of competing value sets that are relevant to evaluating policy effects' and to offer a perspective that helps managers and administrators in universities to 'steer the least worst course' through these tensions. There is no easy policy 'fix'. At the very least, care, respect and attention to the emotional outcomes of necessary practices (like room changes) are small details, but it is often the small details that weigh the most.

Rather than focus more fully on dimensions of social justice and the distribution-recognition dilemma that is part of the work that we have been doing, I want to consider the social justice emphasis in our work. At one level, we selected this topic for investigation because we were both in this cohort of older academics who are 'staying on', and we were interested in the experiences of others like ourselves. We were also concerned because employment in the University setting is one that is suffused with socially unjust employment and promotion practices; casualization, precarity, exclusions and micro-aggressions (based on gender and race for example). Thus it would not be too difficult to produce research that was a form of theory finger – pointing. Indeed, we started with an approach that saw social justice as plural and hard to realise in practice, not least because of the recognition-distribution tensions that have potentially given rise to some intergenerational conflicts.

But perhaps we have missed out on other aspects of trying to do socially just research (Kara, 2015). For example, first, in our sample as well as in our approach, we designed a semi-structured set of questions inflected by *our* understandings of related research and drawing on hunches that we wanted to explore. So far, so typical of small-scale qualitative work. But in preparing our interview schedule based on our readings and probably our own hypotheses, we missed a chance – a chance to construct richer questions from talking with stayers about what the salient issues were for them and asking for their help in co-constructing questions. And second, perhaps our sample was somewhat distorted because of those who were not included – those who had to leave/retire and other less senior colleagues. Somewhat inevitably, in focusing on people like ourselves, we excluded the voices of younger academics – so a very partial piece of work! Yet, we would claim that we have included marginalized voices (and it is useful to recognize that individuals are differently empowered in different contexts; being an older part-time professor might be far less powerful and influential than some may imagine). Just as importantly, even though some of the micro-aggressions that we found in our

interviews may not be easy to eradicate, nevertheless if university managers and employment administrators pay more attention to issues of ageism, dignity and respect, even in small ways, the collective culture and ethos may be experienced as being more socially just and so our research may help in a small way ‘to sap power’.

AN INTEGRALLY SOCIAL JUSTICE APPROACH

I now turn to the second much larger project (with Sharon Gewirtz as Principal Investigator and Chris Winch, Alison Wolf, Sait Bayrakdar, myself and colleagues from The Edge Foundation, Olly Newton and Andrea Laczik as co-applicants)¹. This project is exploring how England’s vocational education and training (VET) system could better support the transitions into further education, training and work of those young people (approximately 60%) aged 16-20 not intending to go to university. It is evident from the projects’ intentions that there is a social justice imperative – to better support specific groups of young people, some of whom will have been disadvantaged in various ways. However, I have characterized this work as having an *integrally social justice* approach demonstrated not just in the focus and purpose of the project but also in the way it has been set up. This is a very large funded project and a great deal of time and thought went into its design and preparation (and this argument is not about comparing this research with the ‘stayers’ study). What I *do* want to do is to think more powerfully about trying to do things differently, and to consider more effective ways of trying to do socially just educational research. As I said at the start, one intention in this paper is to ask questions about what is meant by socially just research, and in this section, I want to concentrate on research that is trying to be socially just *in the way it is designed and planned* even before it is enacted.

There is a great deal that I could say about doing research *with* participants instead of *to* them, and including marginalized voices. Fraser (1997) claims that marginalization can take economic forms where individuals are limited by or deprived of material necessities; it can also be shaped by non-recognition or disrespect (cultural forms of social justice). Marginalisation can also come from limits to forms of associational justice, where some groups are excluded from decisions about their lives and contexts (Fraser, 1997). And, as I have argued, marginalization is a process that can occur to those whom we may sometimes perceive as being relatively privileged, depending on the policy and the context. This is because ‘power is everywhere’ and ‘comes from everywhere’ (Foucault, 1998, p 63).

In an explicit attempt to mitigate some forms of marginalization in education research, there is a burgeoning literature that argues for the value of co-production (Durose and Richardson, 2016; Bell and Pahl, 2018). Many of the calls for co-production come from the critique that research has sometimes failed to represent the identities and concerns of those being researched in an acceptable manner. There are well known accounts of ‘anger’ (Beebeejaun, *et al.*, 2013) about research done *on* and *to* minoritised groups and the ways in which less powerful groups have sometimes been represented in research findings (Willis and Saunders, 2007; Chicago Beyond, 2019). There has been an increasing demand for the engagement of various constituencies and communities in becoming more directly

involved in shaping research in order to ensure not only that the work undertaken is managed ethically and respectfully, but also that the outcomes are more responsive to the knowledge, expertise and experiences of those involved as 'participants'.

We need to remind ourselves of the founding goals of the pioneering disabled people's Independent Living Movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Under the banner of 'nothing about us, without us', these people called for greater choice and control *so they could be the authors of their own lives*. This led to the co-production movement; people who use services and carers working together as equals with professionals and practitioners to design, commission and deliver better services (King, 2018, n.p., *my italics*)

Co-produced research 'offers possibilities to academics and communities interested in working together to further the aims of social justice' (Bell and Pahl, 2018, p 105). And Beebeejaun, *et al.*, (2013, p 13) argue that co-produced research 'inherently re-conceptualizes' the role of the researcher in working with communities, as more accepting of different claims to knowledge, operating within new shared spaces for acting, committed to social change, and perhaps, willing to trade-off the 'traditional' forms of academic reward for community benefit (Beebeejaun, *et al.*, 2013, p 13).

This paper is not about co-production *per se*, but it is about attempts to do research differently and with an explicit focus on issues of social justice and this may involve more attempts at participatory approaches. But there are constraints. For example, if a team are looking to put together a collaborative proposal for funded research, it may be hard to build in the time needed to start building trust and relationships between different constituencies. Time is a problem because of the conditions of academic labour. Beebeejaun, *et al.*, (2013) point out that participation may happen after the research has started, for instance. There is also the major issue of funding and costings that have to be fully worked out before a proposal can be submitted for consideration. So, if a team want to make any significant changes in response to input from participants, they may not have the time or the money needed to facilitate this. Without much funding or time, it will be much harder to avoid tokenistic partnerships. And in some ways, a focus on co-production may well disguise some underlying fundamental social justice concerns about power and who is giving co-production capacity to whom (and who is not included or invited) as well as other political questions about where 'voice' may be better and more effectively deployed beyond research projects that may be 'trading in the artefacts of misery' (Ball, 1997, p. 258).

Turning now to our project about youth transitions, I want to outline three considerations that were involved in building the proposal, and in building alliances to try and ensure better representation, inclusion and different knowledge. I also want to detail some aspects of the design that were built into the proposal to try and ensure that the voices of young people and professionals were properly and respectfully co-opted.

First, better representation. As I have explained, we were interested in the transition experiences of young people aged 16-20 not intending to go to university. A great deal of research has focused on increasing the proportion of school leavers who attend some form of tertiary education – and a great deal of this work has a

social justice imperative. There is another related tranche of work that deals with the contentious and contested matter of 'raising aspirations' to try to encourage more young people to aim for university entrance. However, it remains the case that the majority of young people in the UK still do not attend university.

Another focus of research attention has concentrated on those deemed to be NEETS – that is, not in education, employment or training – by various government bodies. I have not got enough time to consider the ideological and discursive work being done by the acronym NEET (but see Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Avis, 2011) but I would want to problematize its use. It can work to categorise and malign young people for circumstances beyond their individual control as well as misrepresenting those young people who slip in and out of different experiences – who move between training courses, apprenticeship schemes, paid work, education and unemployment. As MacDonald (2011 p 429) says, a focus with NEETs 'ignores how disadvantaged working-class young people can churn between insecure low-level jobs and unemployment over the long-term'. Overall though there is much less work that deals with the more ambivalent complexities of different types of youth transitions with diverse constituencies in contrasting social landscapes.

The movement from school to the labour market, albeit now through more circuitous pathways, has been the stock in trade of transitions studies but these cannot be understood in isolation from the wider domains of young people's lives, including how youth cultural identities shape and are shaped by the transitions people make (MacDonald, 2011, p 438)

Another trenchant criticism of transitions work is 'that it has been over-occupied with the problems faced by those 'at the bottom' rather than with the wide range of youth transitions' (MacDonald 2011, p 432). As Ball, *et al.*, (2000) argue, very little work on youth transitions explores the lived realities of 'ordinary kids'.

In order to try to capture some of the grounded complexities of life for those young people not intending to apply for university in more detail and more accurately and more inclusively, we held meetings with a set of different youth professionals. We mustered a list of key organisations that support young people with dis/abilities, LGBTQ young people etc. The list included groups that support young people in 'care' and various specialist youth support agencies. We also involved charities that support students excluded from school. We held a workshop with a range of people working for different youth charities and organisations to listen to suggestions that they would like to see taken on board by our project. We also talked to school leaders about their students' transitions. From these meetings and discussions we wanted to try to ensure that we were as well informed as possible about the priorities for research into youth transitions for organisations supporting young people as well as being better informed about the possibilities and constraints faced by different young people in different parts of the country.

We also spent time in two large London-based comprehensive schools talking with heads of careers, those responsible for post 16 transitions and some young people themselves. We purposively negotiated access to schools with broad intakes where we knew that a proportion of their students would not be going to university. One of the key issues that emerged from these experiences was the

importance of using the right language and terminology so that the young people knew what we were interested in discussing with them. What also came across very powerfully was that these young people themselves were extremely focused on what they wanted to do when school was over. They wanted to work (MacDonald, 2011). In one of the schools, they all had plans and back-up plans. One young woman said that she wanted to carry on with her sports training and thought she could compete for the country (she was a county level sprinter) but that if this did not work out, she would eventually do a hair and beauty training course at the local FE provider. Another young man spoke of how he had previously been involved with local 'bad people' and knew that staying in education could help him stay out of trouble and avoid jail – his motivation to do well in school and follow a practical course seemed extremely high. Older friends in his area had already been in trouble with the police and he had a real appreciation of the costs of not being focused on his next steps.

We also visited transition projects in a large FE college. Here we learned that many young people turned up to enrol at a late stage – they had been rejected by their school sixth forms when their GCSE grades were not strong – and were casting around for a course to take at the start of the new academic year in September. The college staff were concerned that some of these young people were coming with 'damaged learner identities'. They had to enrol on mathematics and literacy programmes and their confidence was at a low ebb.

If nothing else, these experiences underlined for us that key people in institutional settings can make a difference, and that students' social worlds and environments can provoke the sorts of aspirations that the government wants to encourage. What also came across strongly was the lack of fit between what (some) young people wanted to do and the (im)possibility of employment in that area – so the problem was not a 'problem' to be 'fixed' in the NEETS themselves, but a problem produced by policies of austerity and precarity.

Second, partnerships. We have a number of partnerships with different organisations but a very significant relationship has been established with a key charity, the Edge Foundation, who came on board with the project at an early stage. They enjoy a strong track record of working with 14-19 year olds on issues of transition as well as curriculum innovations in this area such as T levels. Andrea Laczik, Policy and Research Manager has considerable comparative experience of vocational education and training. 'Olly Newton, Director of Policy and Research leads on Edge's research and policy reports and more broadly, on communicating the findings of research to policymakers. Before Edge, he spent ten years with the Department for Education, most recently as Head of Apprenticeship Strategy' (<https://www.edge.co.uk/about-us/our-people>). They both joined the team at an early stage when the project was being designed and were an integral part of the planning and proposal writing process. This lent a significant advantage to the preliminary work as their expertise complemented and extended the work of the university academics. Perhaps they can be seen as '*reticulists*, who build capacity and collaborative practices' and who can 'move between research and policy communities' (Chapman and Ainscow, 2019, p. 901)

Third, co-production and participation. Many of us working to do socially just research often argue/write that our work gives 'voice' to those who may often be

less heard. And our project, like many others, argues that one intention is to consider what young people themselves think about transitions, what they consider helpful and less helpful and what they think could be done to make transitions easier for other young people not going to university. However, there are known difficulties with getting (some) young people to participate in activities like our project:

Perhaps the most important difference, though, is the nature of the students that take part. School councils, like similar endeavours in the adult world (think of boards of trustees, town councils, etc.) are populated by the 'usual suspects' – individuals who are already engaged, and already happy to take on the role of decision-makers (Paget, 2016, p 53).

In our project we want to ensure that any outcomes are 'really useful' for the diverse group of young people we are focusing on. We want to ensure that any outputs are meaningful to them, are accessible and speak to their priorities. After much discussion, we decided that we wanted to try to do a number of activities including workshops with young people, supporting some young people to make vlogs, and working with young people to produce useful information sheets for other young people and their parents about transition issues. All of these activities have been planned to take place in partnership with youth charities and other third sector organisations involved in supporting marginalised young people. For example:

In partnership with Journey to Justice, a human rights charity educating people in the practice of social action through the arts, we will run two workshops... These will use reflection on project data and participants' own experiences as a springboard for the development of self- and collective advocacy skills. Working with a professional film maker (e.g. McAlpine Films), the young people will produce vlogs giving advice to others from similar backgrounds. In addition, at 3 points in the research (early, interim and final stages) we will work with focus groups of 15... co-organised with Youth Employment UK... to produce clear information sheets for young people of different ages and their parents.... The young people involved in these activities will be accessed through JtoJ, Youth Employment UK and our contacts in other organisations, and the information sheets and vlogs will be disseminated using the same contacts, reaching tens and potentially hundreds of thousands of young people. (extract from the proposal documentation)

All these activities have been built into the proposal and have all been fully costed for in advance – and that aspect is important because even though activities like this can be done later on and charities can be approached for support with funds – it is not always easy to obtain funding for research after the bidding process.

Taking the time to make contact with, listen to and learn from others with more grounded expertise and skills not present in the research team, lends rigour to the work. Drawing on the arts-based skills of different professionals will provide a vibrant and challenging experience for those young people who get involved in producing artefacts. We hope that by working in partnership with charities we will be better able to produce richer work than would otherwise be the case and be better placed to create impact. Last but not least, starting with an approach that

centres the experiences and views of young people themselves who are not (at point of contact) intending to go to university should lend a degree of authenticity to the work.

Finally, I recognise that I could have taken a far more critical edge to this account. For example, I could have looked more closely at some of the challenges and tensions involved in trying to do genuinely participatory research in the context of a funded bid. There are also myriad questions that need to be raised around the somewhat naïve proposition that of itself, research can always have positive and socially just outcomes in policy and practice. As Chapman and Ainscow (2019, p. 914) demonstrate, ‘successful change requires the coming together of different perspectives and experiences in a process of social learning and knowledge creation within particular settings’. However, in this paper I have deliberately played up a positive account as an heuristic for exploring doing research differently and for starting with an explicit and integrated social justice approach.

DOING RESEARCH DIFFERENTLY – A PREFIGURATIVE PROCESS

In this paper I have been trying to think about some of the things that are involved in trying to do socially just research – that is, research that is both socially just in the way it is carried out and that seeks to contribute to more socially just practices in the future – and it is with this point about the future where I will finish. As I said at the start, there is a danger in thinking that more socially just research, without any wider political commitment to social change, of itself will ‘make education better’ (Whitty, 2006, p.172). But trying to do ‘research differently’ and taking a more socially just perspective in our research methods and design can also be seen as part of a prefigurative politics where we start to make more real ‘the world we want to see’ right now (Cornish, et al, 2016, p 114).

Here I am talking about prefigurative politics as a process of trying to be and behave and not as an outcome of itself. As Carl Boggs (1977, p 100) wrote, a prefigurative politics involves working with ‘those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are [its] ultimate goal’. It is about behaving in a way that we want the world to be! And as Unwin and Youdell (2016, p 133) claim, these practices show that there are different ways of being and doing – and here I am thinking of socially just ways of doing research. So while as researchers we may well be caught up in *trading in the artefacts of misery and broken dreams of practitioners* (Ball, 1997, p 258) to some degree, if we try to incorporate more socially just practices, these can – we hope – become ‘a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy’ (Foucault, 1990, p 101).

¹ “Opportunity, equality and agency in England’s new VET landscape: a longitudinal study of post-16 transitions” (ES/S015752/1).

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