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Student Voices on Social Justice: how participatory story-telling can generate a public-political space

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Research Domains

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Abstract

South Africa has a majority youth population; social transformation must take youth voices into account. Using an intersectional capabilities-based conceptual frame of plurality, epistemic justice and participation, the paper recounts a creative story-telling project with students as a generative participatory space at a South African university. Deliberations about social justice among participants generated an alternative plural, public-political space, demonstrating that ordinary youth do not lack social justice concerns. With regard to the co-creating knowledge about social justice, by claiming agentic and reasoned understanding the participants manifested political voices, grounded in everyday experiences engaging meaningfully in debates about social justice in their lives, as well as expressing solidarity and connection with the lives of others. The ideas were categorised into a social injustice map of bottom-up, co-created knowledge. The process revealed what we might understand as a capability for fairness as crucial for youth contributions to public values and just societies.

Full paper

Given that South Africa has a majority youth population, social transformation ought to take youth voices into account. This paper therefore recounts a participatory story-telling project with graduate students at one South African university, focused on empowering their voices on social justice as they understood this. Empowerment and participation were understood as epistemic and political endeavours. Students categorised their stories in a social injustice map of co-created knowledge. The process revealed that a capability for fairness is crucial for credible youth contributions to making just societies. While the project acknowledged the wealth of knowledge on social justice, broadly, agreeing on the importance of societies which are equitable, inclusive and fair across multiple dimensions, the Youth Voices project wanted to understand social justice from the ground-up through the eyes of a group of diverse student youth participating in an arts-based project. Developing their own thoughtful understanding of social justice constituted

a political project on the part of youth, mobilizing their civic voices on injustices, and listening and understanding themselves as agents who can contribute to change.

The story-telling method was aligned with decolonial approaches which undo the epistemic exclusions of Southern youth as valued bearers of legitimate and credible knowledge about their own contexts. The project had a central concern with building awareness, revealing asymmetries of power, and affecting people's ability to critically engage with their realities. Producing slices of personal histories of the lives of ordinary people enriches how we understand such lives beyond a homogenising single story narrative, whether of African women, racism, or something else. The participatory process involved cycles of action and reflection through phases of producing individual and collective visual stories, then analysis and dissemination. First, an individual digital story (DST) was produced, and secondly a group participatory video (PV): 12 individual stories and two videos. The intense nature of the process and the technical support required meant only 12 young people could be included. Participants were recruited through snowballing, in which an initial group were contacted who, in turn, contacted others. A one-day information and training workshop was held in late February 2020. Six volunteers offered to participate in the first group to in March 2020, while another six volunteered for the second group in May 2020. The first was a face-to-face group and the second was online. The 12 brought different biographies as men and women, South Africans and those from other African countries, black and white, well-off and more economically precarious. The project archived stories: about gendered power in families; about struggles for equal higher education opportunities; about families fractured by the pain of inequality; about racism; and about how social media pressurises young people to be just one thing.

These story-telling outcomes generated a database for their own social in/justice analysis, while also offering a space to exercise agency, creativity, imagination, and to learn digital methods. The project had a broad theme - social justice - but the participants could define their own perspectives. In digital story-telling, the process takes between three and five days (and then another three on the group video), opening with sharing stories, developing a written script of around 300 words, a recorded voice-over, a storyboard, and then images added before everything is woven together and music added. At different moments drafts were shared and revised in the light of group feedback. For the video each group came together, chose a theme and then developed a script and collected audio and visual material before pulling it all together. Once phase 1 and 2 were completed for both groups (individual stories and a group video), the collective analysis phase took place in the second half of August 2020. The stories and the videos, together with people's experiences, comprised the data from which they extrapolated a map of social justice. Finally, we agreed disseminations events and conducted exit interviews in October 2020 with a short follow up in March 2023.

What emerged from their theorizing and their map is the importance of forming an ethical capability for fairness, which was mobilized and expanded in and through the participatory research process. Universities ought to protect and nourish this capability in order to educate and form youth who value making contributions to a more just society and to participating actively in their society; such a capability for fairness can be generalised as being of value to youth and society much more widely. This

is a significant contribution and output emerging from the project, alongside the process dimension which fostered the capability.

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