Article

Exploring School Bullying: Designing the Research Question with Young Co-Researchers

Niamh O'Brien [1,*] **and Audrey Doyle** [2]

1   Faculty of Health, Education, Medicine and Social Care, Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford CM1 1SQ, UK
2   School of Policy and Practice, Dublin City University, D09 NA55 Dublin, Ireland
*   Correspondence: niamh.obrien@aru.ac.uk

Abstract: Participatory Action Research (PAR) empowers young people to work alongside adult researchers to determine the purpose/scope of research projects. By naming the purpose of the research, young people have the potential to transform it. Beginning with a broad question, we worked in collaboration with secondary school students (co-researchers) and staff to decide on the focal research question. Prior to recruiting the co-researchers, we conducted an 'exploration study' using a qualitative online questionnaire distributed to the wider school population, to ascertain the core bullying issues. Although the questionnaire highlighted complexities in recognising bullying, misogynistic behaviour was stressed as a particular concern. In-depth discussions with the co-researchers and reflections on the questionnaire findings over several months gave us further insight into this issue, as well as the complexities of determining bullying/banter. Our research question was determined as: "Does gender bullying happen at this school?" Two distinct methodological and process-related insights arose from this work: power dynamics and the construct of time as duration and a non-linear process. This paper contributes to the literature on hearing stakeholder views as well as on actively including students in designing and developing research foundations, that is the research question, an under-explored topic in the wider literature.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research; developing the research question; young people as co-researchers; secondary school; power; time as duration

1. Introduction

This current study is located in a co-educational fee-paying day and boarding secondary school with approximately 800 national and international students (O'Brien and Doyle 2023). One-third of the students are boarders, and the gender divide is evenly distributed. In November 2020, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were invited, by the headmaster, to conduct a study on the core bullying issue(s) in the school from the perspectives of staff and students and to work with both groups to determine an 'Action' in response to the research. This paper sets out the beginning of a larger Participatory Action Research (PAR) project that is still underway. Here we focus specifically on the initial exploration phase and the first cycle of research where the core research question emerged. We begin by discussing the rationale for using Participatory Action Research (PAR) and offer the underpinning definition of bullying used in the study. The paper then maps out how the research question was co-constructed and how it emerged through the PAR process. Before concluding, we discuss two distinct methodological and process-related insights arising from this work with young people as co-researchers: power dynamics and the construct of time as duration and a non-linear process.

1.1. Participatory Action Research

Paulo Freire was a core advocate for Participatory Action Research as it emerged in the 1960s and, in his work with illiterate children, Freire advocated that changes in education

should be based on "actual experiences of students and on continual shared investigation" (Koch and Kralik 2009). PAR falls under the paradigm of 'critical research' underpinning the idea that research does not have to be conducted by professional researchers but should involve those at the centre in all aspects of the process (Webb 1989). Also referred to as 'Action Research' and 'Community-based Participatory Research' when working with young people, Chabot et al. (2012, p. 424) argue that despite the variety of 'action approaches', all hold a "*commitment to general goals and assumptions*". Herr and Anderson (2005) suggest that participatory forms of research have grown from many different disciplines and research traditions and will, therefore, evidence themselves differently within the various disciplines of study. Our study utilised a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. Cahill (2007b, p. 268) in her work with young women in New York suggests that PAR:

> "*is a collaborative approach in which those typically 'studied' are involved as decision makers and co-researchers in some or all stages of the research*".

Consequently, an underlying principle of PAR is that it engages those who are not necessarily trained in research but represent the interests of their wider community who are the focus of the research (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020). These people are often referred to as 'co-researchers' or 'peer researchers' and they work alongside academic researchers to explore the issues at play (Vaughn and Jacquez 2020). Although there is a paucity of literature about whether to include young people in research, there is considerable discussion about how they can be actively included in the research process (see, for example, Camino 2005; Chabot et al. 2012). Indeed, young people are consistently recognised as the experts on issues affecting their lives (Bergström et al. 2010) and Brady et al. (2018) propose that they should be involved in youth-centred research that leads to change that better reflects their priorities and concerns. Certainly, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) stipulates that the opinions and interests of children and young people must be taken seriously. The UNCRC, therefore, includes 'participation' as children and young people's central right in conjunction with 'protection' and 'provision' (Hinton and Fischer 2008; Reynaert et al. 2009). A PAR framework, within the context of this study, allowed for the full involvement of a group of student co-researchers in determining the overall research question and inputting into data collection methods and analysis[1]. Staff were also involved through a steering group. This approach enabled relationships to develop between adults and young researchers in the sharing and generation of new knowledge. This paper contributes to the literature with regards to the initial phases of PAR and highlights the importance of navigating and hearing the voices of students to name the research question.

1.2. Understanding and Recognising Bullying

The absence of a universally recognised definition of bullying is noted in the research literature (Migliaccio and Raskauskas 2016; Slattery 2019) and this has implications for study outcomes as well as for some bullying intervention work (Younan 2019). However, researchers tend to agree that bullying involves aggressive repeated intentional behaviour, underpinned by a power imbalance, and is aimed toward an individual or group who cannot easily defend themselves (Olweus 2013 Vaillancourt et al. 2008). Bullying takes two forms: a traditional face-to-face form and a cyberbullying form. Cyberbullying involves using online tools, particularly mobile phones (instant messaging, social networks, and emails) to target victims.

Drawing on recent research, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Anti-Bullying Forum (WABF) (O'Higgins Norman et al. 2021, p. 2) propose a revision to the generally accepted definition of school bullying which adopts a more sociological approach:

> School bullying is in-person and online behaviour between students within a social network that causes physical, emotional or social harm to targeted students. It is characterized by an imbalance of power that is enabled or inhibited by the social and institutional norms

and context of schools and the education system. School bullying implies an absence of effective responses and care towards the target by peers and adults.

This definition recognises that bullying is not just about personal harm but that through dominance (Evans and Smokowski 2016) it has an impact on the social relationships of the victim and the wider peer group. Social networks contain the bully, the victim, and the bystanders, regardless of their role in assisting the bullying or defending the victim (Hart Barnett et al. 2019). These networks connect to the rest of the school community, so imbalances are enabled or inhibited by the institutional and social context of the school, the education system, and more broadly by the social norms of society. The proposed definition shifts the focus from the deliberateness of '*aggressive behaviour*' (Olweus 2013) to also emphasise the '*harm*' experienced by an individual or group. Repetition is a key feature in understanding what bullying is, but the new proposed definition takes a holistic understanding of this where the physical, emotional, and social harm experienced by the victim is highlighted rather than the repetition of the incident. This takes into consideration the effects of one instance of cyberbullying, for example, whereby a message or photo can have devastating harmful effects (Slonje and Smith 2008).

Much of the research conducted in the bullying field is based on adult-imposed categories, which often negate the views of young people. Differences have been found in how children and young people define bullying and how researchers define it. In Spain, Cuadrado-Gordillo (2012) found that repetition was not important for young people regardless of the role they played in a bullying episode (bully, victim, or bystander). Vaillancourt et al. (2008) in the USA found that children's definitions were often spontaneous, and did not always encompass the elements of repetition, power imbalance, and intent. In Australia, Jeffrey and Stuart (2020) explored the views of bullying held by twenty 14–17-year-olds and suggested that young people's understandings of bullying are diverse. They found that participants focused predominantly on the reaction of the victim and the wider friendship group as well as the publicity of the episode as factors influencing their bullying definitions. Research in Sweden (Hellström and Lundberg 2020) involving twenty-nine 11 and 13-year-olds found that the 11-year-olds perceived bullying in private settings as more severe while the 13-year-olds perceived repetitive bullying in a public setting as more severe. The lived experiences of young people need to be generated and explored to add to our knowledge of what bullying is and how it is experienced by those at the centre. One way to do this is to actively involve young people in studying bullying at their school.

The next section details the process we followed to develop the research question about what the core bullying issue(s) in the school were, alongside student co-researchers and staff steering group members.

1.3. The Present Study

One intention of the larger PAR study is to add to the knowledge regarding bullying, particularly in private day and boarding schools where understanding is limited[2] (O'Brien 2021), and began with the idea that bullying is a social construct involving ordinary children in particular situations (Horton 2011, p. 269). We were also interested in the power relationships between individual students and student groups in relation to bullying. Indeed, the UNESCO and WABF's (O'Higgins Norman et al. 2021) proposed bullying definition highlights how social networks are often catalysts to enabling school bullying. Our study used this proposed definition as a foundation to help us navigate how bullying can be understood within this school context.

Despite conflicts in understanding what bullying is and how it is recognised, research regarding defining and identifying bullying in schools from the perspective of young people has not been a priority (Thornberg and Delby 2019). Therefore, the second intention of this work is to encourage debate about involving young people in research and about how they can become agents of change in their community (Percy-Smith 2012). A preliminary literature review revealed limited publications specifically within the focus of this study;

although, some research involving students as co-researchers to address bullying in similar contexts has taken place (see, for example, Stoudt et al. 2010; O'Brien et al. 2018).

2. The Research Process

This study began with a broad research question: What do students and staff of this private day and boarding school view as the core bullying issue(s) and how do they want to address this? Our intention was to work with staff and students to determine this issue and implement 'Action' from what we found. This process is taking place over three distinct phases. The first (exploratory) phase between March and May 2021 was to find out from staff and students what they regarded as the core bullying issue(s) at the school. These findings led to the first PAR cycle (November 2021 until May 2022) focusing on the '*core bullying issue(s)*'. The final phase is the implementation of the 'Action', which is taking place at the time of writing. The research question that was developed relating to the 'core bullying issue(s)' was decided in the first PAR cycle and was underpinned by the exploratory phase and detailed discussions with the co-researchers and staff steering group members.

2.1. The Exploratory Phase

Before embarking on our first PAR cycle, we conducted an 'exploratory phase' using a qualitative online questionnaire to understand more about the core bullying issue(s) from the perspective of staff and students. Braun and Clarke (2022) discuss the value of using online qualitative questionnaires and suggest that methodological discussions about this method are lacking in the research literature. However, they suggest that online questionnaires offer several advantages including flexibility for both researchers and participants. This method was particularly useful at this time as COVID-19 restrictions meant most students were returning to school after the second national lockdown and visitors were restricted in the school limiting the data collection options available to us. Due to its online nature, staff and students could complete it at their own convenience.

The questionnaire (see Supplementary Materials Files S1 and S2) was designed based on the research literature, contextual data from the school, and discussions with the headmaster. The intention was to determine the core bullying issue(s) from the perspectives of staff and students to provide us with the multiplicity of these perspectives. The benefits of using an anonymous questionnaire, at this stage before relationships were formed through the PAR process, included providing respondents with an opportunity to provide honest responses, as well as the freedom to respond without fear of reprisal or embarrassment, which may not be possible through other research methods (Patten 2016).

The questionnaire questions were similar for students and staff. Each questionnaire contained four sections for students and five for staff and focused on demographic data, safety at school, bullying experiences, and a section for additional comments. The staff questionnaire also included staff professional development. Participants were asked to respond to some questions using their own words to add to the authenticity of the data and to capture contextual issues and language used to describe and discuss bullying behaviour and attitudes in the school. Using this approach helped the research team with the second phase of the study because it enabled us to use the language and terminology of the students and staff in developing the wording for the chosen data collection methods (Lushey and Munro 2015). A total of 36 students and 34 staff members completed the questionnaire.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to analyse the data. Initially, both authors coded the data separately and then discussed and agreed on the codes and subsequent themes. Four dominant themes emerged from the data.

The first related to the importance of a safe environment and the need for belonging:

> "*There is a strong sense of the school being more than simply a place to receive academic education. There appears to be a degree of pride among students as part of being in the school*". (Staff Participant SP, Female)

Data also suggests that this school offered an environment that encouraged a space of belonging and inclusivity:

"We have an LGBTQ+ committee and an anti-racism group", (Student Participant (Stu, Female))

"a multi-cultural day, anti-racism club etc.", (Stu, Female)

"Have students from all over the world". (Stu, Female)

However, the physical spaces of the locker rooms, corridor areas, and dormitories were reported as spaces where bullying takes place. The school environment encompasses both the physical environment, including safety and security, and the psychological environment, including the school climate, classroom management and discipline, and the relationships between teachers and students and between students themselves (Attawell 2019). Literature suggests that reports of bullying and victimisation are lower when the school climate is positive (Schwartz et al. 2016; Hamada et al. 2018).

The second theme was the multifaceted perceptions of staff and students regarding bullying. This was particularly evident in relation to 'banter' among students, which at times was misinterpreted by staff.

"The staff are oblivious and just let the one person get away with it Every Single Time. It's like he gets a slap on the wrist and gets on with life. I don't want a big scene about it I just want that person to stop it. He sexualises 14-year-old girls and it's not okay.". (Stu, Female)

Consequently, intervention is prevented, a finding which is consistent with the literature (Vaillancourt et al. 2008; Eriksen et al. 2018).

The third theme highlighted the recognition of the inclusion of a wider socio-cultural context and community in dealing with bullying:

"It's the society that we're living in right now in that people are just acting out more and people are like not really caring what's going on. And not really caring about other people". (Stu, Male)

The recognition that the school is an open system (Scott 2008) and interacts and nests (Resnick 2010) in the surrounding domain of the family, community, and society was noted and, therefore, any intervention required the inclusion of this wider domain. The key and heart of the education system are the relationships and collaborative interactions between all its elements. Fenwick (2012, p. 145) explains that these systems are:

" . . . nested within one another, co-implicating and cohabitating. Yet each retains its own distinct identity, organising logic and emerging patterns".

The final theme related to the challenges of reporting and responding to bullying. Data evidenced the presence of a strong cultural understanding of the need to report and tell when bullying had taken place, but this was stymied by a more powerful cultural fear of "ratting" or "snitching". Both staff and students underscored this cultural challenge:

"Stitches for snitches is still a popular phrase. We are finding it difficult to become a telling school". (SP, Female)

"You would get slagged by students if they become aware". (Stu, Female)

O'Brien et al. (2018) note that, due to perceived implications associated with reporting bullying, students often have to navigate a 'complex web' in their decision about reporting it. The Ditch the Label (2020) annual survey of 13,387 UK school and college students reported that of those who had been bullied 21% did not tell anybody because they were fearful, embarrassed, or did not have any trust in the offered support systems. Other studies found that students are less willing to report threats (physical or otherwise) if they do not perceive the threat as serious, and if they expect that reporting a threat will lead to being labelled 'a snitch' (Brank et al. 2007; O'Brien et al. 2018).

Although the response rate was low, the findings from the exploratory phase provided us with a broad understanding of how bullying is recognised and responded to at the school. These findings support the UNESCO and WABF's (O'Higgins Norman et al. 2021) proposed definition of bullying with regard to the wider social networks and the perceived responses from adults towards reporting bullying. This exploration phase brought us into the midst of the perspectives of real-life bullying issues in the school.

A presentation of these findings by the two authors was given to students who represented the various student fora including the school council, mental health awareness group, LGBTQ+ group, and the Diversity and Inclusion group. Staff members supporting these groups as well as those with responsibility for pastoral care and well-being also attended. COVID-19 restrictions were still in force at this point (November 2021) so a whole school assembly presenting the findings could not take place. This is consistent with other research carried out during the pandemic (Meinck et al. 2022; Mohan et al. 2020). We asked the staff and students to work together in small groups to discuss the findings and feed their thoughts back to the wider group. We explained that this session was the start of narrowing down the 'core bullying issue(s)' underpinning the questionnaire data and, consequently, what we would research going forward.

Overall, this discussion suggested that problems were apparent around normalising misogynistic behavior. Whilst the questionnaire uncovered this concern, we were surprised by the trajectory of the discussion. Teachers highlighted how in the junior years there was an acceptance by the male students of viewing female students as objects to be "physically categorised", "touched", "named in a derogatory manner" and regularly "tripped and pushed" (Field notes October 2021). Students told us about the different expectations for girls and boys on the sports fields and in the classrooms. While boys were expected to be competitive, gentlemen, and good at sports, girls were expected to be academic, sensitive, and the role of women in sports was not taken seriously:

"Most of the girls I think just kind of sit and kind of be quiet.". (Stu, Female)

"And like if they're asked a question, they answer.". (Stu, Female)

"Yeah, but you don't really like . . . Not that you don't engage in the class but it's mostly like, if a girl tries to be funny, it's not funny. If a boy is funny, it is funny.". (Stu, Female)

The discussion also mapped the difficulty of a lack of upstanding or calling out witnessed bullying behaviour. This was confirmed by a teacher who explained that students are often hesitant to report bullying because:

"There's a huge culture of not being a rat around here . . . . I mean, it goes way back you know.". (SP, Female)

2.2. Recruiting the Co-Researchers and Steering Group

Involving the students and staff in determining the direction of the study and in contributing to research decisions throughout was paramount. Therefore, following this initial meeting and before we began the first PAR cycle, we recruited two groups who are integral to the development of the study. These groups, alongside us, are currently working on the research 'Action':

(1) *The Research Team*: Responsible for conducting the research, comprises seven self-selecting students (co-researchers), four females, and two males aged 13 to 18 years, and us as the university researchers. These students were recruited from those who attended the meeting on the questionnaire findings. Although the student co-researchers were self-selecting, we recruited them through already-existing groups where they were active in student-voice work. It is acknowledged that this is a limitation in participatory work and can add to the marginalisation of other students who did not have an opportunity to be involved. Horgan (2017) found that schools were more likely to select articulate students and those who would represent their schools well. Our initial intention was to open the recruitment process to any interested students in the school and to reflect diversity.

However, COVID-19 impacted this intention so we agreed with the headmaster that we would recruit from the various student groups. Similar to the work of Livingstone et al. (2014), students from these groups volunteered to participate on the research team and were not enticed or forced to be involved.

(2) *The Steering Group*: Responsible for guiding and shaping the project, sits alongside the research team. They comprise members of the school staff team, a co-researcher representative, and us. Like the work of Manchester and Pett (2015), we acknowledge the value that young people bring to the study as co-researchers and as social actors in their own right. However, we agree with these authors that the young person's views, in this case of bullying and school life, must be considered in line with the wider social networks around them. As a result, recruiting school staff to the steering group enabled the incorporation of adult views in navigating the 'core bullying issue(s)'. Through the development of both groups, the co-researchers were provided with opportunities to have their voices heard on two distinct levels. Through the co-researcher representative who sits on the steering group and feeds back to the research team, opportunities are provided to challenge the school status quo that staff have possibly not considered (Mitra 2009). In addition, it enables a safe space for these conversations to take place away from the usual adult–child meeting points and potential power imbalances.

Once these groups were established the research training commenced. We delivered several sessions about the research process including ethics, methods, and dissemination. This iterative training programme was developed to ensure the co-researchers were equipped to understand the research process. Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015) highlight that, regardless of how the training programme is established, young people should be given opportunities to practice their skills. They further emphasise that, if the research is to benefit from the involvement of young people, then it would be unethical for them to be unprepared to undertake this role. However, a greater number of sessions than we had planned focused on co-constructing the research question.

2.3. Deciding the Research Question

The PAR process provided opportunities for constant reflection on the findings from the questionnaire as well as the individual views and lived experiences of the research team and steering group. This reflective dialogue allowed for a plethora of discussions about what the area of research should and should not focus on. For example, several bullying issues were identified through these discussions and reflections including racism, misogyny, and homophobia. As we discussed each issue in turn, the co-researchers agreed that the school was working on reducing racism and had recruited a Diversity and Inclusion Manager to address this. A staff member advocated:

"In recent years a great deal has been done to address this issue and will be continued to do so, which is very positive". (SP, Male)

Homophobia was not viewed as a main concern, as students felt:

"the LGBTQ+ group are working very hard to encourage inclusion". (Co-researcher CR, female)

Misogyny as related to bullying was evident in the data and the lived experiences of the co-researcher team, and further agreed by the steering group as the area of concern:

"I think we should focus on Misogyny or/and Sexism in the school because these issues are very prevalent across the entire school. There are sexism issues concerning both the teachers in the school and the students and I believe that they need to be addressed" (CR, Female)

The authors explored the literature around misogyny and its link with school bullying. For the purposes of training and encouraging critical discussion, the following definition of misogyny, from Wikipedia (2022) was presented to the co-researchers to begin the dialogue:

" . . . dislike of, contempt for, or prejudice against women".

In research team discussions, it became clear that this definition was a narrow understanding of what the co-researchers and steering group members were describing. Contextual conversations emerged and as the school is co-educational, it was possible that boys were also feeling negatively targeted due to their gender/perceived gender norms. Our role as researchers and facilitators and contributors to these discussions was not just about listening but also about making sense of the complex story that the students were trying to tell us. This involved unpacking their experiences, taking the risk of asking sensitive questions, and at times challenging contradictions and double standards. A narrative was emerging about the workings of the relationships between the sexes, as illustrated below:

> "I've experienced some gender bullying in the school . . . . It's more sort of like how you sort of dress and how you look . . . . Sometimes they can say very nasty sort of names. Or like they just call you stuff, or maybe talk about you". (CR, Female)

During these discussions, we entered a space with the co-researchers that was highly personal and sensitive. As the group began to trust each other and the walls and barriers of age, power, and gender began to tumble, our journey took us through the sharing of bullying encounters and the deep emotions that accompanied them. It was in the wake of these conversations that our ground rules (please see Figure 1), pledged at the beginning, were highly important.

These rules were discussed and agreed upon by all research team members. All members signed this document:
  a. No judgement – come from a good place.
  b. Confidentiality – everything discussed here stays here.
  c. Focus is on the whole school issues of bullying and not just our own experiences.
  d. Importance of language – jargon and contextual language needs to be explained.
  e. There are no silly questions.
  f. Always ask for help if needed.
  g. Do not interrupt others when they are speaking.
  h. Be punctual.
  i. Be honest, if something upsets you reach out and speak about it.

Figure 1. Research Team Ground Rules.

There were times when we reminded the group about confidentiality. After the exchange of some very personal stories, we sent an email to the co-researchers:

> "At yesterday's meeting, a few of you shared some personal viewpoints and stories so just a reminder of the importance of confidentiality in our sessions (ground rules [Figure 1] that we set at our first meeting) and not sharing other people's stories outside of our discussions". (Email 1 March 2022)

We also reminded them about the support available in school.

After a further two sessions of intense discussion on gender equity at the school, the broader area of sexism and gender was suggested by us to the co-researchers:

> " . . . prejudice or discrimination based on one's sex or gender. Sexism can affect anyone, but it primarily affects women and girls. It has been linked to stereotypes and gender roles and may include the belief that one's sex or gender is intrinsically superior to another". (European Institute for Gender Equality 2021)

The research team agreed that the core bullying concern was about *gender* and bullying and that there was a question about where the line is drawn with banter and bullying in relation to gender:

"And I don't know, I think that it might be hard for especially some of the boys in our year to decide if it's like stop as in a joking stop, or stop as in like just stop". (CR, Female)

The co-researchers highlighted that bullying happens in all schools, but reflected that sexism is normalised at their school and questioned how the school deals with this issue.

"I don't play rugby anymore but the boy's rugby team would get new jerseys every year and the girls just don't ever get rugby jerseys. But then for hockey, it's similar but like not as bad, not as noticeable as the rugby I think between like boy's hockey and girl's hockey". (CR, Male)

They noted that a transparent approach to reporting bullying was needed so students know that their complaints and concerns are taken seriously.

" . . . . if a school wants to prevent bullying to certain people, vulnerable people. If they want to remove misogynist sayings about women, or even males, they have to push their protocol they have to do every single step. What . . . is actually getting done? How is it being done? What are the repercussions of this? How are we going to help the bully? How are we going to help the victim?". (CR, Male)

This search for transparency is a view supported in the literature (see, for example, Wójcik and Rzeńca 2021). The core bullying issue and research question was decided as: Does gender bullying happen at this school? The following sub-questions also emerged: How does the school deal with gender bullying? and Where is the line between banter and gender bullying? Consequently, the determined research question focused on an area the school community wanted to explore while the co-researchers were pivotal in its design.

3. Discussion

As well as drawing on our past experiences of working with young people in participatory research projects (see, for example, O'Brien and Moules 2007; O'Brien and Moules 2012; O'Brien 2016; Dadswell and O'Brien 2021), before we entered the school, we also amassed important insights from the wider literature (Kellett 2010; Åkerström and Brunnberg 2012; Anyon et al. 2018). We knew that building relationships comprising trust, listening, and ensuring that the co-researchers had a sense of ownership over the process (Cahill 2007a) were imperative for success. The empowerment of the co-researchers in the process meant that for any meaningful development of agency the capacity of the young people as researchers had to be built (Skelton 2008). The following discussion argues that the development of the research question with young people as partners is paramount to the research process, in finding answers and developing worthwhile 'Action' from a study. Indeed, working with young people in this way in the early stages of the process is novel. Shamrova and Cummings (2017) note that researchers are less likely to involve young people in the early stages of a PAR project. Actively including young people in designing and developing research foundations, particularly the research question, is under-explored in the wider literature. Two distinct methodological and process-related insights emerged during this phase of the research:

a.   Acknowledging the complexities of power dynamics.
b.   Understanding time as duration and non-linear.

3.1. Acknowledging the Complexities of Power Dynamics

In this PAR study, those with academic and local knowledge and expertise came together to develop a research question grounded in what the school community wanted us to explore, but power imbalances were inevitable. To mitigate these, it was the responsibility of the adults to ensure that all young people were respected throughout the process, felt their voices were heard, and that their viewpoints were acknowledged (Mayall 2000). In the initial meetings of this first PAR cycle, we established ground rules for collaborative working (please see Figure 1 above). We did not want to impose these on the co-researchers

but rather develop them together to demonstrate how adults and young people could make decisions collectively (Merves et al. 2015). During our first meeting, we discussed the ways we can work together in a fair and respectful way. Each member of the team (adults and young people) signed a co-developed document containing the ground rules, demonstrating a sense of ownership over the process that all team members were mindful to work within during the process. As we worked through determining the research question, we returned to the ground rules as needed.

Indeed, power imbalances were presented early in the study regarding the recruitment process. Recruiting the co-researchers was intended to address the power imbalances reflected in the wider literature where young people can be excluded from having their voices heard because schools and other organisations often 'hand-pick' those deemed most articulate to participate (Spyrou 2011; Horgan 2017). In our study, access to the wider student group was impacted as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. This meant that recruitment needed to come from already-existing groups. Attempts to reflect diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and ability levels were provided by opening recruitment to all members of these wider fora and not just those deemed most articulate or most able. However, we acknowledge this as a limitation of the study.

Although hearing from the co-researchers, as those with lived experiences at the school, was paramount for ensuring the research question was focused on a significant bullying issue, it was also important to give voice to the adults. In developing the research question, the steering group and wider management needed to be kept informed about the decisions made by the research team and needed input on some of these decisions. Additional meetings with these adults ensured this happened and the co-researchers had opportunities to feed into these conversations through a volunteer co-researcher to the steering group. Lundy (2018) suggests that feedback is pivotal for meaningful participation. Feedback loops were important, so the co-researchers, steering group, and school management were aware of how the research was developing and how the wider decisions about the research, in particular the research question, were being made. These loops also mitigated the question being developed from an entirely adult perspective.

At times, the adults had to guide the research meetings when the co-researchers went off-topic or to remind them of rules around confidentiality, while at other times the conversation was left uninterrupted to see where it would take us. Based on earlier discussions with the headmaster and initial coding of the questionnaire data, we perceived that the 'core bullying issue(s)' would relate to bullying definitions or focus on homophobic or racist issues. However, because the co-researchers are current students with lived experiences that the adult researchers do not have, how they conceptualised the bullying issues in their school was different to how we, the adult 'outside' researchers, viewed them. Through the PAR process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Lewin 1946) the co-researchers were able to shed light on the bullying issues from an insider perspective. This knowledge and insight coupled with the questionnaire findings enabled the adult researchers to understand the wider issues at play. Kellett (2010, p. 195) suggests that participatory research with children:

> " . . . generates different data from adult-to-child enquiry because children observe with different eyes, ask different questions and communicate in fundamentally different ways".

3.2. Understanding Time as Duration and Non-Linear in the PAR Process 779

Academics rarely discuss how 'time' is utilised in research studies. They outline the time needed to conduct aspects of the study (Nyman et al. 2022), thus focusing on the longevity of a project and reducing time to measurement, segments, and numbers (Linstead and Tharem 2007). In our study, although consideration is given to how long aspects of the study should take, time is also viewed as a process whereby past, present, and future are integrated and time is viewed cyclically rather than as a linear process. In setting the research question and determining the 'Action' needed, narratives from

the school's past, brought into the present dialogue, activated a future response from the school community to bring about future change. Indeed, McNiff and Whitehead (2011) in discussing the principles and practices associated with PAR acknowledge that previous historical interests act as drivers for current social practices. Past, present, and future become one so there is a concentration on the becoming and emergence of knowledge and understanding rather than on clocks, minutes, and hours (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Time, therefore, is about the duration of the experience of dialogue and exploration that is needed to generate new knowledge and, consequently, change was embedded in what the school community wanted.

Traditionally, engaging in research requires the development of a research question (Bryman 2004; Mason 2002). The question directs the process and is central to the design and methodology of the study (Ozer and Douglas 2015). In this PAR study, we entered the process with a broad research question centred around what the school community identified as the 'core bullying issue(s)' with the central research question designed alongside the co-researchers and not set entirely by adults (Cooke and Kothari 2001). The exploration phase, which generated data that served as a springboard for the many discussions with the co-researchers and, consequently, informed the 'Action', happened by default due to the COVID-19 restrictions (Meinck et al. 2022). We had no access to the school or the students at this time and we had to re-imagine the early design of the study. We argue that the duration of time spent on this early holistic exploration of the core bullying issues enabled the development of a research question embedded in what the wider school community wanted. This question was not focused solely on an adult agenda or the perspectives of the co-researchers. Indeed, in planning the first PAR cycle, we intended a specific timeline to develop the research question. However, it soon became apparent that time became the duration that was needed for the required dialogue (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Colebrook 2002) including revisiting the process to plan, act, observe, and reflect (Lewin 1946) to ensure the research question was underpinned by the perspectives of the wider school community.

PAR studies are usually long studies (Nyman et al. 2022), but this initial stage on naming the research question with the co-researchers was unexpectedly long and initially presented as a limitation as it was preventing us from moving forward with the project. We had a planned agenda to build the co-researchers' capacity (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor 2015), but we were stalled on the complexity of what the core bullying issue for the school was. Tofteng and Bladt (2020) suggest that authentic participation is achieved by aspiring from the start to engage community members as full partners throughout the research process. From the beginning, the research team needed time and space to unpack the contradictions, emotions, and diversity of their perspectives and sought to see how these aligned with the wider school community perspectives. The co-researchers narrated past and present bullying stories and wider experiences and applied them to the exploration data. This helped us as outside adult researchers to make sense of the core bullying issue(s) and, consequently, a relationship developed between the research team that could not be segmented into minutes, hours, or weeks. According to Brydon-Miller et al. (2020), PAR offers researchers new challenges and opportunities to engage in caring relationships with others to explore democratic ways of working together to achieve positive change. Viewing time as the duration of the experience needed ensures that a PAR study is focused on building relationships centred on trust rather than keeping to a time schedule.

4. Conclusions

This research began from the idea that bullying is a social construct (Horton 2011, p. 269) and the construction of a response to bullying demands a social process of engagement and dialogue (Thornberg and Delby 2019). The PAR process highlighted the importance of the knowledge, perspectives, and insights of students and staff in a school in the search for the core bullying issue. Recognising the importance of the intricate process involved in the recruitment of the co-researchers (Spyrou 2011; Horgan 2017), developing

feedback loops across the school (Lundy 2018), and acknowledging the multiplicity of knowledge, both local and academic (Kellett 2010), assisted in navigating the complexity of the different power dynamics in the study. This was evidenced in the data provided by staff, students, and our fieldnotes. Through the PAR process, power differentials between adults and students were continually interrupted and challenged. We appreciate this is a continuing process as we move further into the next cycle of the study. The recognition of time as non-linear and the duration of the experience needed (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) ensured that the co-constructed research question was rooted in what the staff and students saw as the core bullying concern of the school. Going forward, it is important that the students and staff continue to be involved in the development and implementation of the research 'Action'; as Lewin suggests, "*Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice*" (1946, p. 35).

Notes

1. The latter two to be discussed elsewhere.
2. The findings from this study will be presented in a future publication.

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