'Do Differences Destroy a "We"?' Producing Knowledge with Children and Young People

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ABSTRACT: Participatory action research (PAR) is a research approach that aims at egalitarian and inclusive knowledge production through collaboration between researchers and lay people. PAR's aim is to not only enhance scientific insights, but even day-to-day practices. Although it is a promising concept in terms of applicability and of grounding research, this paper focuses on challenges arising from power imbalances and hierarchies between all participants involved. By analysing an empirical example from a two-year PAR project with children, we aim to critically reflect upon how all participants negotiate their demands and desires during the course of research. The article draws on Standpoint/Sitpoint Theory, as well as on disability studies, to understand how categories such as ability and disability play a significant role when it comes to the production process of knowledge. Focusing on tensions produced by the heterogeneity of positions, relations and conflicts, the article concludes with suggestions on how to deal with hierarchical power structures within and across different groups of research participants.

KEYWORDS: participatory action research, children and youth, research with children, standpoint theory, sitpoint theory, research methods.

This paper focuses on the opportunities and difficulties a participatory action research (PAR) approach creates for modes of knowledge production in schools and in academia. On the one hand, our article intends to illustrate how PAR approaches influence hierarchies and power relations in our own processes of knowledge

production. Joanne Hill reminds us that 'the relationships that are developed between researchers and participants, the knowledge that is produced and the epistemological and theoretical foundations can be affected by how, as powerful researchers, we aim to observe and analyse" (Hill 2013, 133). On the other hand, we offer considerations on how power relations at play within (!) the group of co-researchers contribute to the complexity of the research process. While different positions, interests and resources between researchers and co-researchers are often described in the literature on PAR (e.g. Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; Reason and Bradbury 2008), we argue that these also have a significant impact on ways of knowing between and within different (groups of) researchers and co-researchers. We would therefore like to address the following questions in our article: how can we as researchers deal with heterogeneity among co-researchers? How does it affect the research process and the results? What can we learn from failed attempts to listen to one another? The handling of power imbalances between and within groups of participants poses challenges for the research process and the usage of research results, but we argue that PAR as an ambitious, participative research paradigm opens up space to reflect on these.

This paper presents empirical data, reflections and analysis gathered in the course of our work in a participatory action research project called 'Grenzgänge. Feldforschung mit Schüler_innen [Transgressing Borders. Fieldwork with Pupils],' conducted by the Vienna-based association Science Communications Research.[1] We – five scholars with transdisciplinary backgrounds in sociology, political science, cultural anthropology, arts education and psychology – conducted field work with 18 students at a Viennese secondary school, aged between 9 and 14 years. The school is an integrative all-day school with mixed-ability learners. It offers mixed-age classes, which are mostly geared toward Montessori and Freinet pedagogy. We were thus working with students of different ages, genders and abilities, from very different economic and educational as well as migrant and non-migrant backgrounds. In the course of five months, the students and social scientists worked together in eight different research groups around questions the students had chosen, within our overall topic of 'borders at school'. Within this research framework the students could choose any topic for their research projects. As the students were not involved in writing the project proposal, we as accompanying researchers tried to keep the topic as open as possible.

The empirical data consists of observational protocols of all the research group sessions, written by the relevant social science researchers, as well as audio transcripts of discussions and interviews conducted by the co-researchers. Additional material we were able to use includes entries in the research diaries and posters created by the students, summarizing their research content and their analysis. Our analysis is based on the Grounded Theory methods developed by Strauss and Corbin (1996), and on the technique of *Sequenzanalyse*, as elaborated by Froschauer and Lueger (1992).

Participatory Action Research – Aims and Ambitions

Participatory action research as a research paradigm not only fosters the active involvement of 'lay people' in the research process, but allocates them a central role as co-researchers: PAR aims at exploring research questions and using methods that are chosen by non-scientist actors in a social field. PAR is therefore a research approach that creates knowledge which questions the borders between academic disciplines, and between scientific and non-scientific ways of knowledge production (Reason and Bradbury 2008; Whyte 1999). By advising and supporting non-trained researchers in conducting joint research projects at school, we as researchers – in collaboration with the pupils – produced sets of (scientific) knowledge about their school and lifeworlds. This knowledge was not only developed to understand everyday practices, but also to challenge, change and enhance these practices. In addition, PAR as a research paradigm opens up space for critical self-reflection on epistemic preconditions, and on the ongoing academic boundary work within scientific fields.

In our case, the co-researchers are not only non-scientists, but also children and school pupils. This means that they, even more than adult co-researchers, are perceived as receivers of knowledge rather than as producers of knowledge. Due to their age, they are seen as less experienced and knowing (for a critical view of this see e.g. Kellett 2010; Groundwater-Smith et al. 2015), and at school they are often perceived as 'learners', not as 'knowers' or 'teachers' (e.g. Feichter 2014). Nevertheless, there is a growing number of studies that address children as researchers. Literature on participatory (action) research with children often focuses

on children's rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, arguing in favour of including the perspectives of children in social research (e.g. Groundwater-Smith et al. 2015; Trollvik et al. 2013; Prout and James 1996). We want to argue that in addition to political and democratic motivations, there are also epistemic reasons to do participatory research with children. Taking into account Standpoint and Sitpoint Theory (Harding 2004; Garland-Thomson 2002), as well as theoretical concepts of objectivity which draw on communities and networks as the main unit of knowledge production (e.g. Longino 1990; Haraway 1988), we argue that it is difficult to produce knowledge about borders at school without integrating the students' knowledge.

Standpoint and Sitpoint theorists argue that all knowledge is situated, and that every person speaks from a unique point of view, which is shaped by social categories such as race, class or gender, and by experiences, world views, or ideologies. Each standpoint enables us to see, question and address certain issues, but prevents us from seeing others. While this would lead to relativism if knowledge production were conceptualized as an individual process, authors like Donna Haraway (1988) or Helen Longino (1990) stress that scientific knowledge is and should be produced in communities or networks. Longino (ibid.) argues that the more heterogeneous the participants of these communities are, and the more democratic and egalitarian the process of communication is, the more valuable and objective is the knowledge elaborated in these communities. Therefore, the variety of knowledge producers should not be limited to scientists. Everybody affected by the results of scientific knowledge, including lay persons (Longino 1990, Rose 1994) should be involved. Accordingly, it seems a pressing matter to involve students' perspectives in research on schools. The validity of knowledge about school increases, if those who are most affected by it take part in its production. Additionally, this approach contributes to blurring the boundaries between science and its application, while trying to improve both. As we will see later on, the involvement of actors who are not experienced in using research methods often requires non-canonical procedures and takes unusual forms.

Currently, the consideration of students' perspectives takes different shapes in different research projects, and some involve students as objects of research rather than as active researchers (for a critical view of this see Kellett 2010; Feichter 2014). We believe that including students' perspectives means giving them a chance to

address and ask their own questions, and supporting them as they develop their own reflections and analysis. However, the results of this research are used differently by different participants. In another text (Wöhrer and Höcher 2012), we have tried to capture this way of working together, sharing ideas and reaching seemingly common results, while still having different understandings of the situation and different overall goals. For this we have used the concept of the 'boundary object' (Star and Griesemer 1989). In their analysis of the foundation of the Berkeley Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Susan L. Star and James R. Griesemer show that objects which inhabit several social worlds and have different meanings in each of them may function very well as communication tools in processes of knowledge production. What is most interesting for us is their observation that these boundary objects never had the same meaning for all the different people involved. Nevertheless, they were able to cooperate successfully: boundary objects formed spaces that everyone could somehow identify or work with. In participatory action research, it is particular terms, concepts, ideas, tools or aims, or even research approaches that form such boundary objects. All the researchers and co-researchers involved can somehow find a use for this idea, tool, concept, etc. and deploy it for their own requirements. As researchers, it is our aim to discuss epistemic and methodological issues around PAR with academic communities, e.g. through publishing in this journal. This accounts for a part of our lifeworlds as scientists, while the students are more involved in researching and changing their immediate school environment. Our joint PAR research provided opportunities for various goals. This article represents our voices as researchers, however, we published texts and research presentations by the students on the webpage of our previous project (Tricks 2009), as well as in the forthcoming book on our research (Wöhrer et al, forthcoming).

Theories of Knowing: Contradictions, Partiality, and Legitimacy

Conflicts about whose voice is legitimate, reasonable and deserves a hearing are enmeshed in power structures, which can be found in schools and academia alike. As described above, the assertion that social position influences truth claims is a well-developed argument in feminist standpoint theory (Harding 2004). This the-

ory makes three principal claims: (1) knowledge is socially situated; (2) marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized; (3) research, particularly research that focuses on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalized.

When we consider these claims of feminist standpoint theory, PAR seems to be well suited to including the perspectives of the marginalized – in this case the students. Yet these claims give no pointers on how to deal with the conflicting, contradictory and intersecting power imbalances within different groups of students and researchers. What if the claim that research should begin with the lives of the marginalized were ambivalent, because PAR researchers as well as co-researchers are enmeshed in privileged positions? Bringing participants together to engage in collective research on power relations is often simply not enough. We will quote disability scholar Margaret Price to point to some difficulties for participatory research processes:

> The notion that any rhetor, including a student or professor, can engage in dialogue about oppression presumes that all rhetors share a universal and 'reasonable' basis for that dialogue. But (…) all voices in the classroom are not and cannot carry equal legitimacy, safety, and power in dialogue. Nor do all rhetors bring an equal (or rather, equivalent) sense of what concerns are 'reasonable', what are 'rational' and 'appropriate' ways to voice ideas – in short what sort of human to be in the classroom. (Price 2009, 40)

The hierarchical power structures at play in the classroom influence the process of knowledge production, shaping it with *contradictory, partial, and irreducible means* (Price ibid.). If we think this position of disability scholar Margaret Price through, the position of the rhetor (signer) affects the attribution of abilities (and disabilities) to certain actors in the process of scientific knowledge production, in universities, classrooms and beyond.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) therefore suggests an extension of feminist standpoint theory by calling her body of work 'sitpoint theory'. Her use of the term 'sitpoint' particularizes standpoint theory to disabled women by calling attention to the ableist, normative assumption that one perceives the world from

a standing rather than a sitting position. The author thus sees 'disability' as historically contingent, cultural and socially organized or constituted. From this sitting vantage point, Rosemarie Garland Thomson formulates a critique of ableism (the notion that a person always functions in a healthy and able manner and the construction of an other based on everything that is in any way deficient). A key point in this 'project of ableism,' as Fiona Kumari Campbell calls it (2009, 3), is the normative notion of a bodily and mental ideal standard that can be fundamentally distinguished from everything that deviates from it. The 'healthy' body/mind norm is constituted by distinguishing it from bodies/minds considered 'disabled' or 'dysfunctional.' In this sense, 'disability' does not refer to a physical impairment, but to the entire context of practices, structures and institutions, that is, mechanisms of exclusion that discriminate and, as such, create disability in the first place. Garland-Thomson uses the concept of misfit to grasp the relationship of bodies and environments, stating that the constitution or arrangement of an environment constitutes persons as not fitting, furthering exclusion, discrimination and alienation of people with disabilities (Garland-Thomson 2011, 597).

Ableist normative assumptions can be traced in ways of knowing in both academia and schools, with 'compulsory able-bodiedness' and 'compulsory able-mindedness' (Kafer 2013) at their normalizing centre, setting standards for ways of knowing. As Margaret Price (2009, 30.) puts it so poignantly, being reasonable, rational, appropriate, and in control of bodily and mental functions is a requirement that is highly valued and trained by academic and educational institutions. Failing these standards – as all humans do, some more often than others – also means failing as an intelligible human. However, various types of embodied knowledge might never become visible due to this normalizing power. Sara Bragg reminds us that most literature on students' research builds on an 'unwritten contract' that students 'speak responsibly, intelligibly and usefully' (Bragg 2001, 70), whereas we might possibly learn the most from those who seem to be 'incomprehensible, recalcitrant or even obnoxious' (Bragg 2001, 70). She argues that we should take our time and learn from the anomalous, from incidents that produce unexpected reactions or disrupt our assumptions.

In the following section we will analyse how differing positions within students' and scientists' voices make a difference in the process of knowledge production, by comparing and analysing ways of knowing from a research group that dealt

with differences within the classroom. Our considerations and findings reflect different strategies, interests, positions and power structures in an interview situation, all of which contributed to the group's knowledge production. Our empirical example might be described as a 'failed' research situation. However, it is this failure that made us reflect and learn important things about PAR.

Researching Heterogeneity in a Classroom. Where should we begin?

Participatory action research usually starts from problems or points of irritation (Wadsworth 1998). We encouraged our co-researchers to do the same, and to transform their displeasure into research questions. During the first term of our research project, three able-bodied students named Sascha, Nick and Jona[2] formed a research group around the question 'Do differences destroy a 'we"?'[3] The research topic soon focused on issues about what it means to be disabled in this classroom. Overall, the three able-bodied students had the impression that children with disability status were favoured by their teachers and that the status 'disabled' constituted a sort of unfair advantage for children who had it. Although they tried to understand why pupils with disability status had different sets of classroom rules, they wanted to focus on their criticism of unfair situations. In the classroom and in interactions with teachers, they felt that there was no space to articulate their own position – which was always subordinated to the discourse of inclusion and understanding. When talking to or in front of teachers about these problems, they already incorporated a socially accepted appreciation of why children with disability status are treated differently, and have advantages they do not have. But during the research project, the struggles between different orientations surfaced; the students had to combine personal interests and the feeling of being disadvantaged with the requirement to be appreciative and inclusive. After narrowing down their research topic, they decided to do interviews, one with the teacher about rules for disabled children, and one with Chris, the pupil with a mental impairment status they had been talking about a great deal. They decided to ask about different topics such as friendship, getting angry, being at school and participating in school activities. Chris hirself did a research project about 'Why do siblings fight?' and conducted several interviews with students from hir class,

including Sascha, Jona and Nick. The following situation captures the moment when they swap roles: Chris has just ended the last interview with Sascha and the three pupils now plan to interview Chris.

> *Chris*: I am scared.
>
> *Nick, Jona or Sascha*: Come on, Chris!
>
> *Manu, the researcher*: Well, Chris, dear 'We'-research group, Chris is afraid of being interviewed. I think we first have to clarify what is ok for Chris as an interview and what is ok for you.
>
> *Nick*: You know it's ok. Look!
>
> *Chris*: No, no, no.
>
> *Nick*: Wait, I'm not starting the interview. Well, would it be ok for you if we ask questions and if you don't want to, you just don't give an answer.
>
> *Sascha*: Then you just say 'I'm not saying'.
>
> *Researcher Manu*: Yes, you can always say, I'm not saying.
>
> *Sascha*: Would that be ok?
>
> *Nick*: It's not so bad.
>
> *Sascha*: Look, Nick, if we split these two questions, then there are two other questions left.
>
> *Researcher Manu*: And if you say, 'No, I don't want to answer this', is that ok? Is that ok for you?
>
> *Chris*: I want to ask something.
>
> *(Sascha, Nick and Jona discuss their set of questions)*
>
> *Researcher Manu*: What do you want to ask?
>
> *Chris*: I want to ask them what district they live in.'
>
> *(Interview session, We-group; 20140428; translated from German to English)*

This initial sequence of the interview shows many of the positions and strategies that are enacted by the different protagonists throughout the interview. By repeatedly telling the others that the interview situation is intimidating, it got obvious that Chris was afraid. Nevertheless, the three interviewers continued to discuss their own agenda of dividing up the questions, and insisted on doing the interview with Chris. In later sequences, they oscillated between accepting Chris' refusal to answer questions, and pressing the student to give them answers by repeatedly posing questions, especially about the topic of friendship and anger. They continually overstepped the boundaries Chris tried to set. The researcher Manu attempted to mediate between the desire to conduct the interview and the wish to refuse or shorten it, but was also interested in letting it happen. Implicitly, these interests indicate that the researcher is the person supervising the situation meaning that zhe has the power to continue or end the interview and to intervene and redirect the group interactions due to the adult-child hierarchy. In a collaborative research setting however, the hierarchies between adults and participating students become blurred, for the children have – or at least should have – a say in the decision making process. Nevertheless, it is the accompanying researcher who is first and foremost accountable for research ethics. The situation described above illustrates how difficult it is to mediate between ethical conduct and discarding such principles while mediating different needs in a collaborative research process. Besides, our positionality as researchers is complex as it includes f. ex. being an adult, being a trained researcher, not being a teacher, being a confidential person for some students, being partial and sharing the experience of living in/with a temporarily abled mind/body.

Negotiations in Practice: Talking about. Talking for. Talking with. And what about Listening?

At the beginning of the interview, all the participants negotiated whether and under what conditions it could take place. Even though Chris initially refused to do the interview at all, the student reluctantly agreed to answer the questions on the condition to refuse to answer when desired. In the first minutes, the research group accepted Chris' refusal to answer a question about hir desire to play football, but then they insisted on answers to their questions about friendship and anger. This insistence partly put Chris in a difficult position, for example when the interview-

ers did not accept his answer that there is only one best friend in class. It seemed that the research group wanted some confirmation of their own theories about Chris' friendships instead of listening to hir experience. It is striking that Chris, who is preconceived as not being able to control anger, remained quite calm during the whole interview, despite the interviewers' attempts to imitate everything that might make Chris angry – to the point of explicit provocation (making awkward sounds, telling Chris names, tapping Chris' leg slightly). Although it was rather the interviewers who seemed emotional, and who became impatient when Chris did not say what they wanted to hear, this research situation echoes 'compulsory able-mindedness' in the classroom by trying but failing to re-stage two clearly separated modes of conduct: Acting reasonably and calmly on the one hand and 'freaking out' and getting angry on the other. This demonstrates how disability and ability – and the exclusion of the former – are iteratively re-constructed in the classroom. In reference to Price (2009), one could argue that the three students set themselves as rational and reasonable people, against Chris, who is staged as unreasonable. By using disability as a justification for differentiation, they repeated their own inclusion into the social fabric of the class, and demarcated their position as better off.

During the interview, the research group seemed to be more interested in their own social positioning in the research group and in the classroom than in obtaining information about and with Chris. Here and in other parts of the interview, the three researchers not only negotiated doing the interview with Chris, but at the same time distributed the tasks of asking certain questions among themselves ('Look, Nick, if we split these two questions, then there are two other questions left'). The division of the questions defined who was allowed to say what during the interview. Fairness and rules in this matter were very important for the group, especially for Sascha, one student who held a structuring position. The importance of structure became even more obvious during the interview, when one student asked a question beyond the prepared questionnaire, which was promptly criticised by another interviewer.

Chris' strategies for getting heard and being articulate for hir standpoint spanned from saying 'no', to explaining the reasons ('I am scared.') to changing positions ('I want to ask something'). In addition to these strategies, Chris sometimes refused to answer a question or seemingly changed the subject. This last strategy might be a strategy of resistance, but it may also be a strategy for contributing to the interview on a different level. Although it seemed at the time that Chris was simply changing

the subject, the student actually contributed to the interview, but with different examples that were more distanced from the socially charged group dynamics in class. Chris told family stories, which would have fitted perfectly well into the interview if the research group or the accompanying researcher Manu had listened more attentively. For example, Chris told a story about being forced to wear a suit and go to church, both things Chris did not want to do, at a point in the interview when Sascha, Nick and Jona were ignoring Chris' continual attempts to reject a question about what else makes hir angry. During the interview, none of the others interpreted this story a) as an answer to the question about what makes hir angry (namely to be forced to wear a suit and go to church) and b) as a way of articulating hir uneasiness with the interview situation. We realized this only later on in our analysis. This incident points to the crucial matter of listening to each other. At times, our ableist prejudices about Chris' status as mentally impaired hindered the research group as well as the accompanying researcher Manu to actually listen. In this failed PAR research moment, the researcher's and the research groups' ableism becomes visible as a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces us as a species-typical, fully human self and body and prevents us from listening.

At school, as well as in the classical social sciences, linear thinking and concise arguing are highly valued skills and the focus of much of the training. Moreover, they seem to be a prerequisite for reaching enlightened ideas. This in fact fosters a rather narrow understanding of knowledge production in schools and academia alike. There is hardly any regard for associations or nonverbal modes of expression in interviews and other traditional modes of data gathering. Considering that different people use different modes of expression, the example above shows that we as researchers have to rethink the epistemic borders and methods that are used and taught to co-researchers. In our empirical example, it might have been better to use methods that encourage the skill of listening on the side of the epistemically privileged, instead of conducting a rather confrontational semi-structured interview.

Being a Social Science Researcher – Responsibilities, Strategies and Blind Spots

Supporting children and young people in completing a research process comes with some challenges. Social researchers come from outside this environment

and have few obligations to school requirements. They can create an environment where different topics can be discussed, and bring different tools for working together and getting information. What differentiates researchers from teachers in this setting is the lack of a pedagogical impetus on the part of the researchers, as they a) have a different goal when working with the pupils, and b) do not know the school-specific set of rules for communication. This difference might be especially important when it comes to the question of who has the authority, the voice and the means to articulate matters of interest. Yet, researchers do also have pedagogical as well as ethical demands in the situation. Moreover, they have the legal responsibility to watch over minors. These requirements may conflict with their role as observers and facilitators of open modes of exploration.

The concrete handling of hierarchies and power relations amongst and across researchers and co-researchers in a research group is a tricky task when, like in this case, we as researchers share the privileged experience of being temporarily able-minded. In our empirical example, the accompanying researcher Manu was in a position where zhe had to protect the interests of all the participants including hirs. On the one hand, zhe tried to mediate between Chris' reluctance to participate in the interview and the research group's desire to conduct the interview. Manu did this by suggesting alterations, e.g. that Chris could say no if zhe did not want to answer a question ('And if you say, 'No, I don't want to answer this', is that ok? Is that ok for you?'). On the other hand, we as social science researchers are not impartial, either. Although Manu tried to protect Chris, who was in a vulnerable position due to hir status as mentally impaired, Manu shared the desire to conduct the interview. This was because it was part of the research curriculum, and because it seemed fair, since the research group had been interviewed by Chris beforehand. Social scientists supporting such projects may find themselves in a position where they must choose between gathering data and acknowledging that some research situations may simply fail. It is a position full of ambivalences, in which the researchers have to keep in mind their own aspirations (e.g. publications about the project or reports for funding bodies), the different positions of the co-researchers and their needs and wants in the concrete situation, and their own role in the situation. In retrospect, it might have been more productive to cut off the interview at an early point to then collectively reflect on the situation, the power dynamics and the uneven capacity to listen to each other.

Circles of Reflections – Learning from Failures

In a collective process – such as the carrying out or the interpretation of an interview – the participants do not share the same standpoints or have the same technical and social skills. In our case, we observed that every standpoint facilitates some insights and prevents others. Jona, one co-researcher knew the position of being an outsider first hand, and could therefore articulate experiences and observations about Chris' social relations that the other group members were unaware of. Nick turned out to be very empathic towards the emotions and situations of others, but at the same time tended to be patronizing, since this co-researcher thought zhe understood other people better than they did themselves. Sascha was not really interested in understanding the positions and standpoints of others at all, but was good at structuring and planning the research process. Manu, the accompanying researcher, initiated a discussion about communication needs within the research situation, but was too torn to cut the interview off when Chris' borders were clearly overstepped. This led to different interpretations about Chris' answers. Their reflections about what Chris said in response to their questions about friendship, and why, started a discussion about friendship: who is friends with whom and why, what is a friend, and what is the difference between being friends and just being nice or not so nice to someone? The students also discussed methodological questions such as how to ask questions and how to interpret the answers in the course of a research process. The researcher Manu chose to take this failed research situation to ponder on prerequisites of knowledge production within participatory research.

Manu sensed the need to talk more about methodological issues, and gave some input about asking questions, conducting interviews and interpreting data, in order to prevent such an invasive situation in subsequent interviews. At the end of the process, all three co-researchers and we, the researchers, still had different interpretations of the question 'Do differences destroy a "we"?' but we had all gained some insights. Throughout the whole process, the co-researchers, we as researchers and at some points, the interviewee, had the chance to articulate and reflect on how to deal with these imbalances. We talked about our own positions and behaviour in the classroom, in academia, and towards students with mental disabilities. The collective process of reflection and discussion gave us an oppor-

tunity to articulate our own opinion, and to listen to and think about the opinions of others. Through the tools of social science research, both the students and the accompanying researchers could distance themselves/ourselves from concrete situations and reflect on structural causes and conditions. Sascha, Nick and Jona used the theme of disability to formulate a critique about school structures and rules, and to object to boring and repetitive content in lessons and strict teachers. They used students with disability status to project their own struggles within the institution. In the interview with the teacher they were able to make their points about their feelings of being treated unfairly, and about class rules that they felt should be changed.

As shown above, the process itself involved messiness and failures in interpretations and social interactions. Collective reflection about these allowed the students and us as researchers to gain some insights. We have to keep in mind that learning how to do research needs space to fail and try again, to reflect upon research situations and implicit presumptions, and to plan how to do better.

Conclusion

Participatory action research aims at actively including so called 'lay persons' and persons affected by scientific research in the process of scientific knowledge production. It seeks to provide academic knowledge grounded in the experiences of people living in the fields under examination, and to bring about an improvement in their conditions. In an ideal PAR research setting, one would fulfil these aspirations by striving to cooperate as egalitarian as possible. Here, however, we wanted to point to some difficulties which arise from power imbalances, and from the different aims and motivations of participants in a research project. While it is usually the difference between trained researchers and co-researchers that is most elucidated in PAR literature – and even texts explicitly addressing the challenges of PAR usually concentrate on this line of differentiation (e.g. Grant et al. 2008) – we focused on hierarchies, differences and conflicts within and across different co-researchers and researchers, and on our own (partly failed) attempts to handle these.

In the given example we can see that it is not easy to provide everybody with adequate space to articulate hirself equally in a research group setting. We could

show how the people involved – the interviewers, the interviewee and the accompanying social science researchers – struggled to find a common language to listen to and talk to each other, and negotiated interests and power while doing research together. As a conclusion, we suggest two points for consideration concerning hierarchies and power relations among co-researchers in participatory action research projects, and some possible strategies to deal with them.

1) One main aspect of knowledge production in PAR is co-operation between people with different social positions. Although every position is supposed to be equally heard and recognized, and although research opens up new spaces for articulating matters of interest, these positions are still hierarchically interrelated. Some students have more (socially approved) skills to articulate their issues than others. Researchers as well as teachers may share certain privileged/minoritarian experiences. These are shaped by and shape interactions with teachers, as well as with researchers. The concrete handling and counterbalancing of hierarchies and power relations among co-researchers in a research group is a tricky task when, like in this case, the researchers share the privileged experience of being temporarily able-minded/able-bodied. Reflecting on these power relations with the co-researchers is an important step in the research process, as it helps researchers and co-researchers to understand structures within the group as well as within institutions and organizations. Furthermore, it encourages the participants to reflect on their own actions, options and obstacles. Even in the planning phase of a PAR project, we recommend allowing space and time for conflicts. Otherwise the results and the implementation of the research in each of the social worlds involved will reproduce untroubled power relations.

2) Another important point for participatory action research practitioners concerns the use of methods during a project. In many PAR projects, three layers of research occur. There is the first layer of participatory research, conducted by researchers and co-researchers together. This layer is mostly well described in the literature about PAR, and often involves traditional as well as non-traditional methods. The second layer consists of project planning and scientific outputs such as this article, carried out solely by the social scientists. The third layer comprises the research that is done by the co-researchers themselves. The set of methods taught to co-researchers is hardly ever described in the literature. We suggest that co-researchers should be taught to use non-canonical, e.g. visual and performative

methods like theatre of the oppressed, etc. Having a broader repertoire of methods enhances the appropriateness of the tools deployed. This is important not only for young people, but for many kinds of co-researchers e.g. when researching people who are illiterate or do not have a good command of the dominant language.

Finally, we see it as the task of the trained social scientists to provide co-researchers – young and old – with the means, the time and the space to reflect on differences and power relations within and across all groups of research participants. By calling attention to the ableist, normative assumption as unfolded in Garland-Thomsons Sitpoint Theory (2002), we conclude that it is key not to perceive the world without scrutinizing the normative orderings of our location. From this vantage point, we daily have to unlearn the construction of an other based on everything that is in any way deficient to an imagined norm.

Endnotes

[1] In our research project most of the 'academic' outcomes such as articles and conference papers were produced by the accompanying researchers without the pupils' cooperation. This is mostly due to the common focus of the project elaborated with the teachers and students, which prioritized the collaborative data gathering and analysis as well as presentations in the school context before the written text production. Nevertheless, pupils were authors and co-authors of several texts in our forthcoming book (Wöhrer et al. forthcoming). .

[2] As the students used ambivalent gender identities for themselves in some of our interactions, we did not want to attribute them more rigid categories than they would use for themselves. Therefore we use gender-neutral names as pseudonyms for the students and the researcher as well. Accordingly, we also use the gender-neutral pronoun 'zhe', 'hir' and 'hirself'.

[3] They chose the topic and created the research question, rather an abstract one in our view. The German original was 'Machen Unterschiede ein "wir" kaputt?'

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