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Peer-led focus groups as 'dialogic spaces' for exploring young people's evolving values.

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Although peer-led focus groups are widely used in research with children and young people, surprisingly little has been written that evaluates their methodological appropriateness. Drawing on data from 10 peer-led focus group sessions across 5 international schools, this article demonstrates how focus group discussions around moral and social values, which become more meaningful though the self-reflection provoked in encounters with different experiences and perspectives, can be advantageous for research. Peer-moderators, as both participants and facilitators, run focus groups that open dialogic spaces for exploratory talk that avoid the self-censure and deference that can emerge in the presence of an adult moderator. This is particularly important when participants are structurally disadvantaged and lack similar spaces for collaborative inquiry into their shared experiences. Video capture allows researchers in-depth access to these focus groups after the event, revealing evidentially and pedagogically rich dialogues.

Keywords: Peer-led; focus groups; dialogue; moral values; power.

Introduction

We used peer-led focus groups to investigate young people's evolving understanding of social and moral values within the Round Square network of International schools. The research was conducted remotely across 5 different schools in different locations around the world with young people aged 11-16. It required a method that overcame inequalities in power and status within school structures sufficiently to allow students to honestly express and explore their partially realised understandings of concepts such as democracy, leadership and service. We have suggested elsewhere that our understanding of, and commitment to, values such as democracy become meaningful through interaction with others, and cannot simply be taught (Higham & Djohari, 2018). Instead, these emerge in response to our encounter with different perspectives as we try

to bridge the 'dialogic space' between us and them (ibid.: 4). Yet, how does one capture this dynamic, emergent process of understanding without rendering it fixed? Within a formal education setting where a premium is typically placed on knowing the 'correct' answer, this requires a method that allows students space to explore doubts and not knowing, free from fear of judgement. In this paper we demonstrate how peer-led focus groups can promote 'exploratory talk' (Mercer & Dawes, 2008) that triggers and accelerates collaborative thinking about values. They allow researchers to observe how complex moral understanding dynamically emerges though interpersonal, discursive space; they also allow young participants to develop their own metacognitive, empowering understanding of their situation. This approach is not limited to research with children but may be applicable to research into complex concepts among groups where the presence of a perceived authority figure would constrain exploratory talk.

From focus groups to peer-led focus groups

For over 20 years, focus groups have been used by organisations working with under 18s to evaluate and develop programmes, enabling services to fulfil their Children's Rights obligation to facilitate young people's participation in decisions affecting their lives (Gibson, 2007). Researchers have successfully deployed focus groups to gather children and young people's views on sensitive topics such as sexual health (Gibson, 2007), mental health (Johansson et al., 2007), offending behaviour (Murray, 2006), and intimate partner violence (Baker & Carreño, 2015).

The adoption of peer-led focus groups, where young people become the facilitators, follows a trend towards peer-led, participatory and co-produced research seeking to democratise the production of knowledge and address the inequalities of research participation (Horner 2016). These projects often share a commitment to social change and the empowerment of participants though knowledge and capacity-building,

often influenced by the emancipatory pedagogy of Freire (1970) and Participatory Action Research (Fals Borda, 2001). Such methods seek to address differences in children's capabilities and counteract the structural disadvantage that privileges the adult voice and restricts children's ability to speak and be heard (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Researchers have subsequently advocated 'child-friendly' visual, creative or 'beyond text' methods that focus on the skills children have and their familiarity with certain modes of expression (Darbyshire et al., 2005; Punch, 2002). However, Punch (2002) is wary of the term 'child-friendly' and warns against assuming such approaches are always suitable, unproblematic or even desirable (2002, p. 337). Instead, it is how they are used that determines their impact (Buckingham, 2009).

In peer-led research there is an assumption that under 18s will speak more freely, liberated from the constraints of an adult presence (Kvale, 2006; Pyer & Campbell, 2012). The small group environment of 'focus groups' is thought to replicate ways of socialising familiar to children, where sharing recognisable experiences can potentially trigger memories or encourage participation (Hennessy & Heary, 2005). With greater control, peer-researchers can potentially identify more relevant topics, ask different questions and uncover unanticipated tangents that deepen understanding of children's experiences (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008, p. 122). However, young people's control of the research process is limited by the 'expert' oversight of academic researchers who frequently reinterpret the data into academic texts (Horner, 2016; Ozer et al., 2013; Piper & Frankham, 2007). Participatory approaches can also become a form of 'tyranny' (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), where the rhetoric of participation serves to maintain inequalities (Facer & Enright, 2016) or at best, to facilitate children's communication enabling them to produce data more effectively rather than increasing

genuine influence over the direction of the research (Punch, 2002, p. 334). Even the training of young people as peer-researchers belies the fact that what counts as acceptable knowledge is predetermined by the research team. Young people's adherence to these rules can limit their ability to successfully articulate their experiences (Schäfer & Yarwood, 2008, p. 123). Peer-led focus groups are not exempt from the 'messy' ethical issues encountered in participatory and co-produced research (Thomas-Hughes, 2018). However, by valuing the distinctive will to intervene found in peer-moderation, we suggest peer-led focus groups can facilitate collective inquiry that benefits participants.

Evaluating the appropriateness of peer-led focus groups

To date, two texts evaluate the methodological appropriateness of peer-led focus groups: Murray (2006) used focus groups to gather accounts from young people aged 14-18 on how they resisted or desisted from offending behaviour. Her concern with the unequal power dynamic of adult researchers collecting data on young people's prior offending led her to adopt a peer-led model. For Murray, they enable types of disclosure that may not be forthcoming with an adult present. She also found that young people used their preferred terminology and colloquialisms when discussing topics among themselves, rather than translating it into terms adults would understand (Murray, 2006, p. 277). Ngarachu's (2016) paper evaluated the quality of data produced by both adult-led and peer-led focus groups on ethnicity and politics at two Kenyan secondary schools. Comparing both approaches, Ngarachu found students were as competent as adults in guiding focus group discussions and both groups produced data of a comparable quality that addressed the research questions (2016, p 102).

For both Ngarachu (2016) and Murray (2006) the most significant difference lay in moderation style. Peer-moderators referenced shared experiences or knowledge of

each other and frequently contributed their own opinions. Such practices are discouraged in traditional focus groups where the emphasis is on neutrality and limited moderator participation to avoid their authoritative position influencing responses. But rather than identify these interventions as a failing, both Murray and Ngarachu suggest they are simply a difference that needs to be acknowledged.

In our use of peer-led focus groups, moderator involvement is identified as a distinct advantage for research focused on exploring ideas and values still in formation. In Nishiyama's (2018) critique of focus groups more generally, she argues:

> Even if the focus group interview succeeds in drawing out diverse perspectives, it risks being just an accumulation of ill-examined information as a result of the lack of moments during which participants reflect on what they/others say, value, and believe. The focus group interview is likely to emphasize how and what people speak (Kitzinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996), which makes it hard for a researcher to gain a deep understanding of research subjects. (Nishiyama 2018, p. 555).

Instead, she suggests that when focus groups run as communities of inquiry that allow people to reflect on lived experience and engage in dialogue, a cooperative exchange emerges that generates deeper knowledge and understanding. For Nishiyama, the aim of the latter type of focus groups is to generate and examine data, not simply to collect it (2018, p. 557). We suggest this possibility increases when focus groups are peer-led. The difference in moderation style enables moderators to be both facilitator and participant in a dialogic process through which values and experiences come to be shared, interpreted and ultimately understood. In the absence of adults who might provoke young people's deference or fear of judgement, peers with similar ages and experience share a dialogic space that facilitates deeper collaborative understanding of their situation. In this context, the process itself becomes valuable, not just the data produced.

Research Context: developing the method

From Nov 2015 to May 2016 we were commissioned by Round Square, a network of over 180 independent schools across 50 countries, to investigate how staff and students adopted, understood and valued their six guiding moral 'IDEALS' (Internationalism, Democracy, Environmentalism, Adventure, Leadership and Service) derived from the educational philosophy of Kurt Hahn. Round Square advocates the evolution of these IDEALS through direct, real world experience that encourages students to become moral, global citizens ready to make the best of their likely role as future leaders (Higham & Djohari, 2018).

We adopted a mixed methods approach comprising: a network-wide staff and student survey; stakeholder interviews; and case studies focused on the experiences of staff, students and parents at five Round Square schools around the world (see Higham & Djohari, 2018). In the case study schools, we were interested in how the IDEALS were evaluated and made meaningful, particularly how experiences were interpreted and drawn upon by students to justify and explain their value. Three questions guided our choice of method for this qualitative section:

(1) How do we capture young people's understanding of complex concepts that are forever being reworked and only really make sense when understood in context?
(2) How do we enable substantive inquiry and open dialogue so that young people can explore what their understandings are, when they should be applied, and how to apply them?
(3) How do we assure the quality of the process without seeking to control it?

Influenced by Dewey's Democracy and Education (1916), Wegerif on dialogic theory (2011) and Booth and Ainscow's Index for Inclusion (2017), we understand humane

values as dispositions to respond to difference, in others and one's environment, in a way that seeks to learn from that encounter and to enable the agency of all (Higham, 2016). We consequently required a method that allowed exploration of stakeholders' understandings of the IDEALS both as ideas and as embodied interactions within and beyond the school. We wanted to facilitate a dialogic space that would encourage students to reflect upon potentially half-formed values not previously put into words – a space for *not knowing*. The IDEALS are challenging and open-ended; there are no single right understandings or perspectives, and students needed to feel able to express doubts and ignorance, reflect, speculate and think critically in what Mercer calls 'exploratory talk':

> More symmetrical talk, in which partners have more equal status and potential for control, is likely when groups of pupils work together…. Nevertheless, most talk in classrooms is asymmetrical, with the teacher in the more powerful and authoritative role…. this is not necessarily a bad thing. But if learners are to make the best use of talk as a tool for learning, then they need some chance to use it amongst themselves, without a teacher. (Mercer & Dawes 2008, p. 56).

Drawing on Vygotsky, Mercer and Dawes argue that language is both 'a psychological tool to use to 'try out ideas', [and]… a cultural tool whereby people can use language to 'think together' (2008, p. 66). This in turn requires mutual trust, shared purpose and 'ground rules' for dialogue. These are the conditions not just for agreement, or a dialectic synthesis of pre-existing ideas, but the emergence of new ideas from the 'dialogic space' that opens up when two or more different perspectives meet (Wegerif 2011, p.149). This is particularly apt for discussing shared values such as democracy, where meaning does not pre-exist the discussion or await clarification, but become meaningful through discussion, action and reflection as embedded and developing properties of a community.

Our choice to adopt a peer-led model was also intentionally metacognitive, providing an opportunity for student self-reflection. Opening a distinct (and separate) space from the authoritative gaze of the school allowed students to explore, challenge and form their own collective understandings. Peer-led focus groups have the potential to generate research data *and* facilitate a space to identify ways to transform talk into action. This peer-led element fitted Round Square schools which prioritise students learning through direct participation and encourages stepping up to the responsibilities of leadership and service.

In response to Higham and Djohari's 2018 paper, some respondents questioned whether the high-quality peer dialogue reported would be achievable in non-selective state schools. Recent research suggests that, while cultures and practices of genuine dialogue are still scarce in any classroom environment, sustained interventions with teachers led by research experts have led to extended periods of high-quality dialogue between students (Davies et al., 2018; Hennessy et al. 2016). These studies were carried out in ethnically and socioeconomically diverse non-selective state schools in the UK, Mexico and New Zealand. Davies et al's study further found that teachers' withdrawing from classroom dialogues enabled higher-quality dialogue – but, as Hennessy and Davies (2019) recognise, 'only very capable and confident students managed to pose *challenges* to peers (p. 246, italics in original). We argue that the appointment and training of peer-moderators can enable teachers to withdraw while enabling the interrogative rigour that provokes genuine critical dialogue.

To stimulate debate, we provided peer-moderators with a discussion framework organised around the completion of sorting and ranking tasks. We designed this ourselves to guarantee provocation but encouraged peer-researchers to generate and follow the groups own subsequent lines of inquiry around the topics. We facilitated this

ability through skills training that emphasised how to encourage participation and discussion. Each case study school produced two focus group sessions (Session 1 and 2), which were jointly led by two peer-moderators in the role of lead and support. Sessions were video recorded to provide an independent copy for further analysis. The video camera, although placed to one side, was a prominent reminder of observation, and occasionally this awareness was revealed, for example when one student joked 'Sssh, Cambridge is listening' in response to another student's comment. While all groups produced quality data, the primary difference between the groups lay in how effective moderators were at establishing an environment that allowed for exploratory talk.

Applying the principles: conducting peer-led focus groups

A subsidiary model was adopted to delegate responsibility for organising the focus groups to the case study schools. We provided description of the qualities sought for the two peer-moderators required of each school and, once recruited, responsibility fell to moderators, working alongside their school, to identify a suitable location and conduct two focus groups comprising 6-8 students aged 12-16. School selection has the advantage that they are better informed to identify students that meet the peer moderator criteria and potentially avoid dominant or coercive personalities. This does introduce bias as participants are not necessarily representative of the breadth of students but drawn from the least troublesome or are picked to show the school in a favourable light. Nonetheless, our experience suggests that where peer-led focus groups successfully establish a community of inquiry, participants are willing to challenge each other over unduly favourable or critical representations of school life.

Written consent, countersigned by a guardian, was obtained for peer moderators and

focus group participants. Peer moderators also debriefed participants about the research and obtained oral consent at the start of the focus group session.

Training materials:

An information pack was provided outlining the research aims and a 'How to' guide on conducting focus groups. Rather than be prescriptive, the guide encouraged peer moderators to reflect on introducing themselves, locations, seating arrangements, camera placement, and making back-up recordings. Peer moderators also received an introductory script, an example icebreaker activity, description of 5 tasks, and printable task materials.

The tasks were designed to encourage the group to become co-inquirers and explore why they thought what they did. They began with simple calls for clarification (what did each of the IDEALS mean?) and evidence (where could IDEALS be seen in practice at the school?) and ended with a series of ranking activities chosen to provoke debate and encouraged students to reflect on how their own experiences shaped their understanding and prioritisation of the IDEALS (which of the IDEALS are most important for students?). The final rank attributed was less relevant than the ranking process itself, which necessitated listening to other's experiences and frequently provoked re-evaluation of personal values. These tasks loosely echo those devised for communities of inquiry discussed by Nishiyama (2018). Follow up questions to re-ignite discussion were also provided as examples. The training pack included access to an online training video created by the research team that focused on body language, voice, and phrasing; and a feedback form on the training process and focus group findings.

Online meetings:

Peer moderators met twice with the research team via online video link. The first session followed familiarisation with the training materials and provided an opportunity to ask questions about the research and focus group approach. Focus groups scenarios were explored to provoke moderator reflection on how they might apply some of the techniques outlined. The researcher also checked moderators understood the purpose of the research so they would be confident enough to rephrase questions, ask follow ups and pursue relevant tangents. Sessions lasted 40 minutes and questions about research careers and researcher background were also invited.

The second meeting followed completion of the focus groups. Moderators were instructed to upload videos to a secure online repository and complete feedback forms prior to this session. This meeting provided an opportunity for the research team to ask for clarification on colloquialisms and aspects of school life that were unclear in the video. Peer-moderators also presented their thoughts on their findings and provided feedback on the training process. Moderators received feedback on their performance which was followed by a debriefing session and explanation of what would happen to the research data and video content. Setting aside adequate debriefing time to explore the positive and negative aspects of participation is increasingly used as part of the ethical process of working with peer researchers (Logie et al., 2012).

Throughout the process we encouraged moderators to suggest word changes and reference examples from their own school, emphasising that their familiarity with student life made them 'expert'. Understanding the research goals alongside flexibility to use their own initiative avoids the instrumentalisation of students by bringing them inside the research process and provides a genuine opportunity to develop skills and

pursue the research experience. We also provided official letters outlining the training and skills they had developed which could be kept in their school achievement records.

Challenges:

Our experience identified the need for clearer technical guidance around data recording and transfer protocols. In total 11 focus groups were conducted by 5 pairs of peer moderators aged 15-17 with varying degrees of technical success. School 1 carried out three focus groups sessions having failed to successfully record session 2. We have labelled their sessions 1 and 3 to reflect this. In School 3, a camera battery ran out near the end of session 1, and in School 4 a battery needed to be replaced part way through session 1 resulting in students re-recording answers to the missing question. In School 4 and 5 the video was filmed in HD and consequently had to be sent via post rather than uploaded online.

Busy schedules and the voluntary nature of participation resulted in only 4 participants turning up for School 3's second session rather than the 6-8 recommended. Similarly, extra-curricular commitments in School 5, meant students struggled to arrange a mutually free time to run the focus groups outside of school hours. They submitted their videos after a considerable delay, and we were unable to arrange a follow up meeting in time.

Findings: the distinctive features of peer-led focus groups

Peer-moderators were involved in both generating and reflecting on evolving understandings created live through collective discussions. Such participation is not common to the traditional moderator role where the emphasis is on neutrality and detachment. In this section, we highlight how this dual role of facilitator and participant

shapes peer-led focus groups and facilitates the exploratory talk advantageous to studying humane values.

Exploratory talk

In the following example students are discussing why they have collectively agreed to rank democracy lowest among the IDEALS for what the school does best.

School 1, Session 1.

Peer Moderator 1: so why is democracy so low?

Student 1: As we have no form of influence in any school decisions in terms of a nice fair vote.

Student 2: That's pretty sarcastic in that respect, democracy, because we all do get say.

Peer Moderator 1: Or do we not just feel that if we do speak it's not taken into account, and it's irrelevant?

Group agrees.

Student 2: Yeah, but if we've got a valid point with a backed up reason it's not like somebody says no straightaway to us is it?

Student 3: It depends who you go to as well. Some teacher's listen some don't.

Peer Moderator 1: If they are more senior they don't listen? Or if they are more senior they do listen?

Student 3: Depends which senior it is.

Student 2: I think it's good that we can go straight to them, in most schools you might not be able to do that, go straight to the deputy head, or might not be able to go straight to the headmaster.

Peer Moderator 1: So it's easy to voice their opinions but....

Student 1: Sometimes they listen to you but then they never follow through.

Student 2: It depends on the importance of it, doesn't it.

Later on….

Peer Moderator 2: So democracy is just completely overlooked as an ideal within the school?

Student 1: I don't think we really taught about it to be honest. Looking at that word I just really think 'what's that' kind of? Obviously, I know what it is but I don't know whereabouts in school we have that. I know we all have a say but.

The intervention of Peer Moderator 1 after student 2's use of the phrase 'pretty sarcastic' opens up a middle-ground interpretation that takes the dialogue forward from the two conflicting opinions. A collaborative understanding begins to emerge that the experience of 'voice' may be contingent on which teacher a student may have spoken to. Note also how student 1's understanding of democracy appears to have evolved from having an influence through 'a vote', to the broader concept of 'having a say' in her final comment but now with the acknowledgement that she feels she should know what democracy is but does not feel it is made explicit within the school. She feels she can be 'honest' in admitting this seeming failing in her knowledge. In an institution where demonstrating knowledge is prestigious, it is significant that a space emerges where students are willing to say they did not know and discuss why that was. This is essential groundwork for exploratory talk, where criticisms are contained within a cooperative framework so that different opinions, doubts and not-knowing can be aired, considered and either built upon or rejected.

In the following transcript, different students are attempting to rank the IDEALS in order of importance.

School 4, Session 2.

Student 6: I think adventure is most important, because internationalism is important but only if you're adventurous will you have that international outlook. Internationalism means accepting other people opinions and respecting diversity but only if you are adventurous and only if you are open minded will you be international. So, I think adventure is first.

Student 7: You can only empathise about something if you can actually go out and be adventurous enough to go and help them out.

Peer Moderator 1: So, you think being adventurous is the number one step to achieving all the other IDEALS?

Student 8: I think you underestimate empathy; if you are not empathetic you won't serve anyone. If you can't put yourself in the position of a person who is starving on the streets you can't serve him in any case, so you need empathy and you can

> get empathy through internationalism, through awareness, and only then can you serve, you can't serve without being aware of an actual situation.
> Student 5: I agree, that unless you are aware and grateful for your circumstances, how will you ever be satisfied in your life? And that cynical approach will always exist in you, so I feel in order to be a responsible person your sense of service has to be there no matter what.
> Student 3: I agree with Student 5, having gratitude is very important, you can be adventurous, but adventure doesn't really teach you gratitude or how to be thankful, to be thankful for the environment, or opportunities you have for internationalism or adventure.
> Student 5: And I think if you don't realise or value what you have you can't go out and help others in the world or help yourself.
> Student 6: But I think to value what you have you have to move out of your comfort zone and that involves being adventurous…

In this example students collectively formulate a live understanding through opinions and counterpoints about the relationship between Service, Adventure and Internationalism. In a peer led focus group, particularly those conducted in schools, the absence of a teacher and/or researcher, results in an authority vacuum. This also occurs in teaching when the teacher, although physically present, actively works to remove his/her own authority from the classroom in order to force students into putting forward their own tentative interpretations of a text (Raney 2003, p. 90). Here, by putting forward suggestions and muddling through to generate an emergent, collective response to the ranking task, students collectively fill that vacuum, becoming the authority on the task in hand. Doing so, they figure out an understanding that makes sense for them as students which has not already been framed by a teacher or researcher.

The preceding extract demonstrates how the students come to realise that values can come into creative (dialogic) tension with other values. The discussion reveals both what students understand the IDEALS to mean − open-mindedness, empathy, gratitude − and how shared discussion allows them to develop and refine their understandings.

Peer-moderators as participants

When discussion involves strong feelings motivated by personal experiences the tensions created in the clash between ideas can be productive: young people either more firmly define their values in opposition or take on board a different perspective to adjust their position.

> **School 2, Session 2.**
>
> Peer Moderator 1: Could you maybe tell me which IDEALS you think are a bit harder to achieve, as a student, maybe for prep some are harder for you than they are for seniors?
>
> Student 3: It has to be service. I think we are limited in our ability to serve the community, to help them, because we also have our studies, we have other things to do.
>
> Peer Moderator 1: so, in terms of time?
>
> Student 3: The genuine desire is there, I just don't feel there are enough opportunities for us to serve.
>
> Peer Moderator 2; Well, I reckon it depends how you interpret Service.
>
> Student 6: Yes!
>
> Peer Moderator 2: Service isn't necessarily serving the less fortunate, I mean in the sense that a simple task, such as me helping you with a maths question, that's a form of service, so I think the way you are looking at it could be a bit narrow.
>
> Student 3: My perspective might be a bit skewed.
>
> Peer Moderator 2: But if we are to continue Service from that other perspective, do you still hold that opinion?
>
> Student 3: Interesting (appears to be thinking).
>
> Student 1 (to student 3): I also understand where you are coming from as well in terms of maybe we are not doing enough for the community, but I feel like at the same time [the school] does make at attempt to get involved as much as possible with the less fortunate around us.
>
> Student 4: Yes, when you think about [the activities] we do every week, the teachers, and collecting money. So in outside life it is just limited to helping your mum, but in school there is so much Service, every week, even picking up litter…!

Here the second peer-moderator steps in to challenge student 3's interpretation, taking

on the role of an interpretive or 'active interviewer' shaping the collective discussion and emerging understanding of Service (Nishiyama, 2018, p. 557). Contrary to the traditionally neutral moderator role, an active interviewer is deliberately provocative, encouraging participants to reflect and examine how their own experiences have influenced their opinions and understanding of the world. Here, the peer moderator's provocation of Student 3 encourages Student 1 and 4 to build and articulate a more nuanced position. Within peer-led focus groups the authority to generate understanding has been distributed; this has the additional benefit of inhibiting the peer-moderator's voice from becoming too dominant when they intervene as participants.

Here a different group of students are discussing their experience of Service work:

> **School 1, Session 1.**
>
> Peer moderator 1: So, can you think of innovative experiences where you went into it thinking one thing and came out changing what you learnt? Do you think it [service work] changed your views or your values while you're there?
>
> Student 1: I think once you're there you don't realise, but afterwards, especially when people ask you about it you have a different opinion of it to whilst you were there.
>
> Peer Moderator 1: You went to the zoo didn't you? So, you probably went with other kids.
>
> Student 1: But none of these kids were there for a residential, they were there for work experience.
>
> Peer Moderator 1: I know when I've done work experience it's always been a bit of an eye-opener because I come from a very privileged background. Did you feel like you were a bit more open to the world, or a bit more?
>
> Student 1: No, not me personally, but I'm sure some people would. But I have had quite a grounded life and upbringing as it is anyway. But it was an eye opener in respect of doing things. Staying in a hostel is probably something I've done before.
>
> Peer Moderator 1: Yes, but more like talking to other people, because I know when I've done stuff I've met 17-year-olds that are saying I need to go to work because I have to help pay the rent, and I know personally I would never be in that situation,

so it did kind of really opened my eyes a little bit. So, does anyone else think of experiences that they've had that kind of reality almost?
Student 1: I can understand where you are coming from, but I have had a job and pay for things anyway.
Peer Moderator 1: yes, but more the actual rent, having to do this to help their parents.
Student 1: No (forcefully).

In this session students generate the collective understanding that although they share the experience of service work, the impact is not necessarily the same. The moderator draws on her familiarity with the students to open a line of inquiry by recalling that Student 1 had worked at the zoo. She also uses her own experience of service work and subsequent moment of realisation to challenge Student 1 to confront and reflect on her own privilege. The peer status enables it to be a forceful challenge but not necessarily a coercive speech act. Although Student 1 resists, a discursive space is opened to explore these more challenging reflections. The informal environment, use of insider knowledge and willingness of students to present conflicting observations among themselves allows divisions to become more visible to the researcher. But it also allows for provocations that can trigger the evolution of more nuanced understanding of both personal and collective values among the students themselves. Note how Student 1 already recognises the importance of the role of the 'other' in formulating an understanding of events when she says that only when people asked her about her experience after service work did she develop a different opinion.

Moderator interventions, such as those described in these two examples, carry the risk of closing down discussion where there are status inequalities between students. It can also lead to over-disclosure when familiarity is used to encourage discussions (see Murray 2006). The diffusion of authority that can lead to collaborative inquiry is not

therefore guaranteed by the absence of the teacher.

Age and the limits of diffused authority

There is an expectation that students share similar experiences and status as a consequence of being 'students'; this inevitably hides asymmetric power relations derived from differences in ethnicity, socio-economic position, and age amongst others (Graham et al., 2012). This will be the case for state schools, particularly those with culturally diverse populations or the extremes of income inequality found in many cities. It is also true of fee-paying international schools where scholarships, pupil turn over, and an internationally diverse student population, disrupt any expectation of homogeneity. Dialogic space only emerges where different perspectives are heard and valued – we must be sensitive to the potential for asymmetries in power to prevent these perspectives being expressed and respected. In the observed sessions, the strongest predictor of how well exploratory talk could be established was the age gap between participants and peer-moderators. If focus group peer-moderators were within 1-2 years of participants, power imbalances within the dialogic space were reduced. It is usual to recommend focus group participants are within 1 or 2 years of each other so there is similarity in levels of comprehension and communication skills (Gibson, 2007). Reflecting on focus group sessions, our peer-moderators pointed out that within school, differences in age translate to different levels of familiarity with localised areas and experiences (school trips, exams, work experience). This results in participants drawing on different frames of reference, with older students using a wider range than younger students.

Murray (2006) has distinguishes between a community and a professional model in peer led focus groups. In the community model, a peer-moderator is drawn from a community group, such as a friendship group or those sharing a care home, where there

are multiple commonalties in life experience, gender, age, and location. In the professional model, a young person is a 'peer' only with respect to their youth and might facilitate focus groups with participants where there is very little shared life experience (Murray, 2006, p. 281). For our study, we decided peer moderators should be final year students as we felt they would have both a broader knowledge of the school activities discussed and able to run sessions across the 12-16 age range. This differences in age between peer-moderators and focus group participants resulted in the emergence of both a community and professional models. Where students were within two years of the moderator, discussions were lively and often referred to shared experiences such as school trips. Participants openly challenged each other, and viewpoints appeared to evolve. However, in the two sessions (School 3 and 1) where the age difference between peer moderators and participants were more than two years, moderators appeared to fill the authority gap by becoming 'teachers' by proxy, in effect closing down the space for exploratory talk. In the following session, the peer moderators are aged 16-17 and the four participants are aged 13-14.

School 3, Session 2.

Peer Moderator 1: So, as you guys know, you are here because we want to know how the Round Square IDEALS are represented in school. So, first we want to know, what the Round Square IDEALS mean to you. Do you guys know what they are?

Student 1 raises her hand, 'yes', and proceeds to list them.

Peer Moderator 1: Ok someone else, do one of you want to define them?

Student 2: Well Service is like helping others and doing things that are needed.

Peer moderator 1: Ok anyone else, environmentalism, do any of you know what that means?

Student 1 raises her hand.

Peer moderator 1: Go for it.

Student 3: Environmentalism is to care about the environment and to help the future generations have a better future.

> Peer moderator 1: Can anyone else think of any other IDEALS we haven't talked about?

Here, the peer-moderators fall into familiar practices associated with a teacher/student role: questions are asked of individuals and answers directed to the moderator rather than the group. When framed in this style, a question calling for a definition of the IDEALS implies a right or wrong answer rather than provoking a group challenge to collaboratively define a slippery concept. The difference is most telling when the students are invited to rank the IDEALS. Far from the debates and indecisions that typified the other focus groups, here the students huddled together, exchanging ideas in whispers to complete their task before presenting their 'group' answer to the peer-moderator.

In School 1, Session 3, where there was also more than a two-year age gap between peer-moderators and student participants, they did successfully generate discussion. Although peer-moderators appeared more confident in their task, having already completed two prior sessions because Session 2 had failed to record, Session 3 never evolved into exploratory talk. We suggest that where there is a greater age difference between moderator and participants, peer-led focus groups in schools function in a professional model, where there is little commonality beyond their youthful status. Consequently, success at generating discussion will develop as moderator skill and experience grow, but the format it takes follows the more traditional moderator role, with the moderator noticeably 'facilitating' the sessions rather than participating. If the intention is simply to collect data and there is opportunity for practice, then training students to hold sessions across age groups is perfectly viable, although taking advantage of cohort familiarity and limiting age differences makes sense where time is limited. But, where the intention is to generate space for collective

inquiry and exploratory talk, peer-led focus groups that emerge within the community model, with an age gap of less than two years, are far more conducive to success. Research has shown that age is significant in determining status hierarchies and differences in experience within school systems (Smith et al., 1999). When carrying out peer-led focus groups in schools, similarity of age between participants and moderators results in a similarity of status that can make the group more willing and able to challenge each other. When combined with a willingness to contribute reflections on shared frames of experience, a dialogic space can open to re-evaluate personal interpretations and provoke emergent collective understandings.

Conclusion

Conducting research in a school setting where relationships are governed by structurally defined roles and expectations is challenging, particularly when the research is to be done remotely. Developing a method that can navigate this context and allow students a degree of freedom to explore their own understandings, is essential to exploring complex values. Values, as we understand them, are dynamic and relational. They evolve and become meaningful through interaction with others (Higham and Djohari 2018). Researching values require a flexible research method able to capture their emergent, exploratory nature without rendering such dynamism fixed. The data we seek are consequently less rigid and defined, which necessitates a less prescriptive data gathering approach. Peer-led focus groups can achieve this by opening dialogic spaces where researchers can observe the evolution of understandings as they are formed live in the meeting of different perspectives.

As Murray (2006) and Ngarachu (2016) have identified, there is an inclination in young peer-moderators to be involved as both participants and facilitators. Rather than

discouraging such intervention, we propose rethinking the use of peer-led focus groups to harness this moderator/participant impulse as a methodological strength. Doing so enables us to use peer-led focus groups for establishing 'communities of inquiry' as described by Nishiyama (2018). As our examples have demonstrated, peer-moderators draw on personal experiences that resonate with each other and use familiar, informal language frames that enable students to challenge each other without becoming overly dominant or authoritative. The absence of an authority figure (a teacher/researcher) facilitates a space within but distant from the authoritative oversight of the school, encouraging young people to fill the authority vacuum and generate meaningful, collective understandings for themselves. This exploratory space is important when working with any group whose expression may be restricted by structurally defined roles and expectations, or who have lacked space for collaborative investigation into their own experiences. Researchers benefit from being able to observe how understandings evolve through dynamic encounters, but participants can also advance their own understandings, potentially transforming talk into future action.

There are inevitable limitations to this approach. While researchers can structure discussions through question and activity guides, 'exploratory talk' – as described by Mercer and Dawes (2008) – emerges only when researchers allow participants to take charge of their own collective inquiry. The peer-led approach we have proposed requires relinquishing a degree of research control and finding value in this exploratory process. Success is also dependant on being able to minimise power and status inequalities between students, so they are willing and able to challenge each other. Care is therefore needed when selecting participants and moderators, especially for more sensitive topics. Nonetheless, there is methodological value in using peer-led focus groups as a dialogic space for exploring children's dynamic understandings of complex

values, and a potential advantage in applying the method to research conducted within the asymmetric power relations found in schools.

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