**Student participant-researchers: Learner agency and creative engagement**

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This chapter has its focus on student-led pedagogy, and examines the ways in which young people can become actively and creatively engaged in project-based research. Here, we further advance theoretical ideas on the power of personal stories to engage learners and empower young people as active social agents in their learning.

The chapter begins by describing, in a replicable way, the student participant-researchers (SPR) model used in the Multilingual Digital Story-Telling (MDST) project. Student participant-research has been discussed at length by Fielding and Bragg (2003) and Rudduck and Flutter (2003); the model described here is informed and influenced by their work.

The SPRs who are the subject of this chapter were a small pool of students drawn from the larger group of multilingual digital story-makers who met with us, designed their own project-related research questions, and, following a research methods training programme, undertook their own qualitative research. The middle section of the chapter lays out the theoretical basis of the SPR model. It starts with Butler’s (1993; 1999) work on identity to introduce the idea of personal stories as an antidote to stereotyping. It proceeds with Freire’s (2005) and Bruner’s (1962) ideas on learner-led research agendas, looks at whether student-led research projects can be ‘identity texts’ (Cummins *et al* 2011) and draws on Foucault’s (1977) clinical dissection of the technologies of power to investigate how to challenge applications of youth voice activities which merely pay lip service to young people’s ideas. Hart’s (1992) challenge to tokenistic student voice is also addressed. The resultant SPR model worked to empower learner participation in the design and governance of the MDST research project. In this way, the SPR model, as it was used here, has fed into the design of language teaching methodologies and the production of related policy recommendations. The third section of the chapter lays out the ways in which the SPR approach effectively produces confidence both in being and in action; a more genuine student voice; active citizenship; and learner autonomy. It concludes with a summary of the broader themes emerging from the enhanced research findings derived from the SPRs’ involvement- for example, young people’s concept of language learning as a route to personal stability and as a source of future economic capital.

**Illuminate: a Student Participant- Researchers Model**

The SPR model used for the Multilingual Digital Story-Telling (MDST) project, ‘Illuminate’, was developed in response to a two-year ethnography on school exclusion (Carlile 2013). The research found a lack of student voice in the institutional governance of their lives. It also found that where student voice was called upon, it was done so in a tokenistic manner (see Hart 1992, discussed below). The Illuminate methodology was designed as an attempt to challenge these problems.

An Illuminate project begins with a discussion with the adult stakeholders who have the power to action systemic or structural change. This is essential if students’ voices are to be taken seriously. It involves the development of a research brief or set of briefs: in this case, the lead researchers on the MDST project. Together we decided that the briefs, summarised in Figure 1 below, would cover the range of issues which the MDST project hoped to address.

Figure 1: Research Briefs

* Collaboration between schools in the Critical Connections project
* Out of school learning in home and community as part of the Critical Connections project
* Language learning in supplementary schools as part of the Critical Connections project
* Digital storytelling as part of the Critical Connections project
* Learning through multimedia and online as part of the Critical Connections project
* Language learning including English and English as an Additional Language in mainstream schools as part of the Critical Connections project

Once we had the briefs, we met with twelve young people from across seven schools- both mainstream and complementary- for SPR training and research supervision sessions. Most of these were held at the university; where students could not come in to the university, sessions were delivered in the schools.

The first step was to support the SPRs to come up with their research questions. This is achieved through the use of the Illuminate Route to Questions Sheet. Each SPR used one of the briefs as a starting point:

*Route to Questions Sheet*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| logo_small  **Illuminate: Route to questions**  **Brief:** | |
| **Discuss and record**  **Key words and phrases: what does this title make you think about?**   * Write, doodle, draw, illustrate, or speak your ideas * Write or draw on the back of this page if you need more space |  |
| **Focus in on some ideas:**   * What do you want to know? * What should other people know about this issue? * What are some of the important concerns? |  |
| **Research question**   * Specific, local, and measurable **or** describable, within range of time and location |  |
| **Sub-questions**   * **What three themes might be drawn out of your main question?** * **What is your main question about?** | 1.  2.  3. |

Taking students through the process of brainstorming the brief, focussing in on some important questions, and then developing a research question and sub questions enabled them to discuss and think deeply and to get beyond initial, surface thinking responses.

The SPRs then learned and practiced ‘active listening’ skills. This process, influenced by Carl Rogers’ person centred counselling approach (see for example Rogers and Farson 1957) requires that they listen using a variety of tools, including silence; verbal nods (such as ‘right’; ‘ok’; mm-hmm’); reflecting, which involves speaking some of the speakers’ words back to them; reframing (paraphrasing); and giving the speaker the last word. Each time they practiced these skills the SPRs were asked to discuss their research briefs. This helps the SPRs develop what Bruner (1962) calls ‘the arts of inquiry’ (93). He explains that one way to develop these ‘arts’ ‘…comes from intuitive familiarity …sheer “knowing the stuff”’ (ibid). The SPRs practice all of their research skills by talking about the research briefs. This means that by the time they conduct actual research interviews, they are very familiar with the material and able to listen for subtle details in their data collection.

The next step was to ask the SPRs to develop a series of interview questions, beginning with their research and sub questions. SPRs tried out these interviews on each other, practicing their active listening skills, and using a special interview form. The use of the interview form inculcates a set of good research practices of the sort referred to by Bruner (1962) in his writings about ‘discovery learning’ as ‘the formal aspect of inquiry’ (93). It thus requires them to record the time, date and focus of the interview; the names of interviewees and researcher; and the interview responses.

The SPRs then used a research planning form to decide who, when, where and how they would find and interview people. For most groups, this was usually the end of the first workshop session, and between this and the next one, SPRs interviewed parents, teachers, fellow students, and anyone else who they thought might be interested in helping with the research. The first workshop ensured that by the time SPRs conducted their interviews, they had practiced the material; understood the layers of possible interview responses; refined and honed the questions; and developed the concepts beyond the first glib possible answers. This enabled them to probe for deeper responses during their actual interviews.

The paperwork developed during the first workshop session was, however, not merely for practicing. It was data in itself. As the SPRs brainstormed, developed questions, and practiced their interviews, they recorded their thoughts in writing. At the end of the workshop, the paperwork was photocopied before returning to the SPRs. Much of the data discussed below in this chapter is drawn from these documents.

The second workshop session involved research supervision; SPRs brought their interview data to the university and reported what they had found out, developing further research questions and deciding on who to interview next.

Finally, the SPRs came back to draw up their presentations. The Illuminate model manages the key ethical issue in ‘youth voice’ work- whether, once we have asked young people to speak, anyone will be meaningfully listening- by building in opportunities to pay serious attention to it immediately. In youth voice projects, it is important to follow through with the promise of listening with a symbolic and meaningful, but not tokenistic (Hart 1994) opportunity for the young people to present their thoughts to influential listeners. So it is important to plan for both frequent opportunities for feedback and discussion, as well as a destination event for performed closure. Braye and McDonnell (2013), in their discussion of participant-research projects with vulnerable young people, identify the fact ‘that time might move at different rhythms in the lives of all involved’ (277). Any research articles or books could take up to three years to appear in print; students at secondary school might by that time have moved on to different things. So, as well as validating SPRs’ thoughts by listening and responding to them during the research workshops, we asked them to report their findings in a PowerPoint presentation to be shared with their teachers and with the university researchers, as well as at the MDST film festival at the end of the academic year. The PowerPoints thus had three functions: they helped SPRs organise their thoughts; provided a template for the voicing of findings; and they were also collected as data.

**Theoretical basis of Illuminate, the SPR model**

The Illuminate SPR model was, as explained above, designed in response to the silences echoing through a study of young people subject to school exclusion. Related to this was the broad and entrenched institutional prejudice based on stereotyped representations of young people with regard to their gender, class, ethnicity, and linguistic abilities and statuses (Carlile 2013). In other words, the lack of students’ own stories left a vacuum which became filled with doom-laden myths about marginalised young people. Butler’s (1993) post-structural work on identity points to the need to understand that identities are fluid and to the importance of self-conception, and this drew me inexorably to the idea that personal stories might function as an antidote to stereotyping.

*‘Identity texts’*

So, underpinning the model is the imperative that SPRs are able to define their own personal understandings of an issue or a brief. Head teachers working on these projects often want to give the young people their research questions, but it is through their own decisions about the questions they want or need to ask that Illuminate can help to develop a student’s senses of confidence and belonging. In many ways, the Illuminate model produces what Cummins *et al* (2011) describes as ‘identity texts’. Cummins *et al* (2011) explains that these are student-created texts which hold up ‘…a mirror to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light’ (3). In this case, the completed ‘Getting to a Question’ forms and the PowerPoint presentations developed at the end of the project (and described above) function as identity texts. Because, in an Illuminate project, SPRs come up with research questions meaningful to their own experience, and interview or otherwise conduct research with those in their home, community and school spheres, the research findings they produce are infused with their own identities. These are reflected back in a positive light when they share their findings with us in workshop discussions and we respond with interest (see below for a discussion of student researcher Ahmad’s changing identity, below, for example); and also when they present their findings more formally to us and to their schools and teachers, as PowerPoint presentations.

*Challenging tokenism*

It is important that the presentations are felt to be meaningful to all involved. Hart’s (1992) ‘Ladder of participation’ delivers a challenge to the potential tokenism inherent in student voice activities. He suggests that the least tokenistic, most participatory form of youth voice involves collaboration with adults in a youth-led project. Adult stakeholders, given humility and a stake (through the research brief), have the financial resources and the social capital necessary to make a SPR project result in something meaningful. Braye and McDonnell (2013) question the ‘degree of power-sharing’ or ‘graduated involvement’ (280) possible in a SPR project. Their identification of ‘shallow or deep participation’ (280) resonates with Viet-Wilson’s (in Macrae *et al* 2003) concept of a strong or weak practice of inclusion and exclusion, the degree of strength referring here to the extent to which institutional and societal structures can be changed.

Illuminate is an attempt to empower the SPRs to such an extent that it is experienced as a change to an institutional structure. Cummins *et al* (2011) defines ‘empowerment as the collaborative creation of power’ (13). This is in line with the top of Hart’s (1990) ladder of participation, where children participate in collaboration with adults. As Cummins *et al* (2011) explain,

…any educational reform that seeks to close the achievement gap between students from dominant and marginalised groups will only be effective to the extent that it challenges the operation of coercive relations of power within the school and classroom.

(13)

Illuminate’s design, drawing on adult stakeholders’ interests, but insisting that the SPRs ask the questions, is an attempt to manage these issues. MDST teacher-participant Reem talks about how her students’ participation in the SPR element of the project has changed her pedagogical structure, later in this chapter.

*‘Studying up’ on and changing powerful institutions*

As described above, the Illuminate model draws on Foucault (1977) in the way that it identifies the pressure points of adult stakeholders’ interests through obtaining research briefs from them. In other words, if adult stakeholders are to listen to youth voice in a way which transcends tokenism, we need to ensure that they are invested in what the young people have to say. Foucault’s (1977) clinical dissection of the technologies of power offers significant opportunities here. His work enables us to identify the key pressure points, structures, functions and discourses which influence powerful institutions’ decisions and activities. So if we ‘study up’ (Nader 1967) on powerful institutions, we might be able to find out how to work with, or within them, for social justice-oriented goals. This praxis is called ‘critical bureaucracy’ (Carlile 2012; 2013), and is behind the Illuminate strategy of drawing out a research ‘brief’ from the adult stakeholders at the start of a project. Often this will be a school head teacher and senior staff; in this case, it was Dr Vicky Macleroy and Dr Jim Anderson, the research team leads. From a Freirean (1996) point of view, it might seem counterintuitive to ask the adult stakeholders for the brief, rather than the SPRs. However, as Bruner (1962) suggests, ‘(i)t is sentimentalism to assume that the teaching of life can be fitted always to the child’s interests just as it is empty formalism to force the child to parrot the formulas of adult society. Interests can be created and stimulated’ (117). As explained above, it is ethically important to ensure that any youth voice project results in serious attention being given to what the speakers actually say. Planning to develop a SPR project which will be given serious regard by the adult stakeholders means taking care to establish their interest from the very beginning.

*Academic and linguistic capital*

An Illuminate project is thus a delicate balance between stakeholder briefs and student-led research. The need to allow SPRs to project their own identities and interests onto the task at hand is one reason why it is so important that we encourage them to formulate their own research questions. But there are other key benefits to practicing the arts of inquiry. Bruner (1962) notes, ‘(i)f man’s intellectual excellence is the most his own among his perfections, it is also the case that the most personal of all that he learns of that which he has discovered for himself’(82). In the creation of the multilingual digital stories which are the subject of this book, the story-tellers were able to expand their own vocabularies through their own linguistic discoveries, led by their creative needs to tell their stories. Similarly, the SPRs, using Illuminate, were able to introduce us to personal, unique insights springing from the discovery of their findings.

Because they learn the techniques of inquiry-based learning, Illuminate SPRs could be said to be developing academic-linguistic capital. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) argue that students must achieve ‘successful acculturation in order to meet the irreducible minimum of academic requirements as regards language’ (73). In other words, in order to be resilient to institutional prejudice on the basis of language and thus to succeed in education, students- especially, here, those who speak English as an additional language- need to learn to speak the language of the academy. Here we refer to both academic (often inquiry-focussed) language and to the range of useful languages spoken. By academic language, I mean analytical, critical, and articulate speech, and through its practice of inquiry, this is something which Illuminate is designed to develop. To this end, and in this context, it includes active listening, interview question drafting, interview practice, and the development of the PowerPoint Presentations described above. The ‘range of useful languages’ may vary according to their uses and significance, but in the MDST they included Arabic, French, Mandarin and English. This book and the SPR work discussed below illustrates how these languages are variously useful for reasons relating to creativity; cultural belonging; economics; participation in education; and identity development. Bourdieu and Passeron (1970) argue that ‘…students who reach higher education have necessarily undergone more stringent selection, precisely in terms of the criterion of linguistic competence’ (73). It is hoped that through participation in the Illuminate research element of the MDST project, students can develop linguistic capital, one of ‘…the major points of leverage or teachers’ assessments…’ (ibid 73). In turn, this has the potential to directly broaden the SPRs’ range of educational choices and opportunities.

*Learner agency through dialogue, inquiry and discovery*

Freire’s (2005) ideas on education-as-empowerment and the need for dialogic learning and learner-led research agendas are also a crucial element in the design of the Illuminate SPR model. Freire (2005) advocates ‘problem-posing education’ (80) and the development of a research agenda by those participating in the research: this again underpins the requirement for SPRs to come up with their own questions about the issue to be researched. As I have touched on above, the approach is also in line with Bruner’s (1962) arguments for ‘discovery’ or ‘inquiry’- focussed learning. Similarly to Freire’s (2005) description of ‘dialogic’ pedagogy, Bruner (1962) calls this way of teaching and learning ‘the hypothetical mode’, explaining that in this paradigm ‘(t)he student is not a bench-bound listener, but is taking part in the formulation’ (83)- that is, of knowledge and ideas. There are many benefits to this way of learning for Bruner (1962), including in relation to intrinsic reward; to developing knowledge of ‘the heuristics of discovery’ (83); and to maintaining the memory of things learnt. He states that an ‘(e)mphasis on discovery… helps the child to learn the varieties of problem solving, of transforming information for better use, helps him to go about the very task of learning’ (87). In fact, Aoife and Haizel, two of the SPRs, identified this in the MDST project themselves, describing digital storytelling as an ‘interactive’ medium, and predicting that they would enjoy it better than book work or class work which involved the teacher ‘telling you’ everything.

So the Illuminate model is partially designed with the understanding that an important element of SPR work requires that participant researchers ‘get something useful out of it’. In other words, we are not just ‘using’ young people to collect data. SPRs gain their own knowledge and power from the experience (more of this to be discussed in the third section of this chapter, below).

The next section of this chapter addresses the impact of the SPR component of the MDST project, and will present evidence of meaningful power-sharing; participation in the design of the research project which was more than tokenistic; and a strong version of inclusion: one which has the potential to value and stimulate strong identity development; develop individual resilience to inequitable institutional frameworks; and to improve on institutional structures.

**What the SPR model produces**

As Braye and McDonnell (2012) explain, ‘the interactive and iterative processes of participation are…productive in themselves’ (275). The findings below are drawn from Illuminate SPR paperwork, discussions, interviews, and presentations. They are presented in three sections. The first will consider the benefits to students of participation in the SPR element of the project. These include the development of confidence in skills and in identity- self-possession in both acting and being. The second section evidences the impact on schools and teachers of their students’ participation in the research, addressing the ways in which it spreads knowledge of the project, develops ownership, and extends the space for students to shape their learning. This grouping of data also explores what teachers learn, through their students’ participation, about what might be pedagogically possible, and what their students might be capable of – particularly in terms of the greater potential for ‘student voice’ work. And it demonstrates the home-school links, further described in the next chapter, which can be developed through a research methodology which encourages SPRs to interview their families, friends and neighbours. The third and final section looks at what the SPRs’ involvement in the MDST project can tell us about multilingual digital storytelling and language learning.

***The impact on student participant researchers: self-possession in acting and being***

For the SPRs themselves, participation in the Illuminate element of the MDST project seemed to develop their confidence at several levels. This was particularly evident when students presented to peers, teachers and researchers in Illuminate training sessions and at the film festival. Haizel, a SPR from St Michael’s Catholic Grammar School, told us after one such presentation event that participation in the research would help with '…speaking, listening, and confidence'. Joshua at Hua Hsia school also explained that ‘… you build your confidence by speaking in front of other people telling them what your research is like and what your topics are and things’.

However, confidence derived from participation in the SPR element of the project went further than that produced through the experience of reporting findings through public speaking experiences. An interview I conducted with some of the multilingual digital story makers from Corelli Academy- a group of English as an additional language learners- revealed a keen focus on what they described as ‘being comfortable; being confident’. For them being ‘confident’ and ‘comfortable’ came together. It meant feeling that it was acceptable to exist and act as themselves. ‘Being comfortable’ meant being listened to, and being understood. It often meant being able to speak English. For example, many new arrivals to the school from countries outside the UK were put in lower mathematics sets; once they were able to communicate in English they were often able to persuade their teachers to move them up to a set more appropriate to their abilities. Others, through films and PowerPoint presentations they made during the MDST project, were able to tell stories to teachers and peers about their travels from their countries of origin, and how their experiences of leaving family and friends and having to learn to communicate in new languages had impacted upon them. These are the sorts of results which Corelli Academy students described to exemplify what they meant by feeling ‘confident and comfortable’.

Illuminate work conducted by Year 8 SPRs Prerak and Rose, at Hendon School, exemplified an attempt to work with the SPR process as an ‘identity text’ (Cummins *et al* 2011) in order to feel more confident and comfortable. They both took the opportunity to try to address problems they were experiencing in school, and which were affecting their confidence. The following section describes the thinking processes Prerak and Rose went through in planning their research. I will not be reporting on their own research results, as it is the planning process and related discussions which form the data I would like to comment on here.

Following a group Illuminate session at Goldsmiths, I visited Hendon School to work with Prerak and Rose. They had been unable to attend the first group session at the university, so the goal was to bring them to the same stage in the process. We began the ninety minute session by looking over the calendar in order to gain an overview of the project activities. Prerak and Rose looked at the research briefs provided by the MDST researchers and brainstormed the briefs, eventually arriving at tentative research questions and sub questions. We discussed active listening and interview skills. Prerak already had experience of interviewing his peers, and was able to offer his advice as to what worked well. The students then drew up a research plan for their initial piece of research, and finished by planning to meet virtually (on Facebook) over the weekend to plan the questions they would ask during their interviews.

The brief Rose chose to look at was ‘Collaboration between schools in the Critical Connections project’. She was particularly interested in the part of the project which required multilingual digital storytellers to upload their digital stories onto the internet, and then, crucially, to comment online on each other’s stories. She felt that ‘being able to contact others and feed back on their films and comment on them’ was an important and intriguing element of the project. She also identified the possibility for ‘significant problems’ such as ‘disagreements [over] choosing the best ideas’.

After some thinking time, Rose explained that she was interested in how collaboration on the project could inform us about how rumours develop. She decided to try to find out about ‘the psychology of students... [the] interpretation of what’s been said by others and how they respond to it... does the result link to the start of the rumour?’ Her sub-questions became: ‘When ideas branch off new ideas and introduce more, is it better than the original, and what would you commonly expect as a result?’; ‘Why do rumours start, and why do they develop this way?’; and ‘How could we distinguish when rumours are true, and how can we stop mean or unnecessary rumours?’ After some thought, Rose added, ‘Are rumours mostly positive or negative; why are the majority like this?’ Rose decided to interview teachers and students for her research. Here, we can see how the research materials were becoming ‘identity texts’ (Cummins *et al* 2011). Rose was considering the project on many different levels: personal friendships and related problems; bullying; how the research could improve the way in which the films would be discussed; and what the online collaboration could tell us both about the films and about the nature of the development of group ideas (and rumours). Having the opportunity to think and talk about these issues gave her the ‘positive feedback and affirmation of self’ (3) which Cummins *et al* (2011) assert are possible through the use of identity texts.

Prerak’s chosen brief was ‘Out of school learning in home and community as part of the Critical Connections project’. Itprompted thoughtsabout the ‘larger audience’ of the digital stories. Prerak wanted to ‘discover languages’; ‘collect ideas from others’ and ‘find a link between opinions’. He wanted to know how he might be able to use a film to ‘create a safer environment for different communities’. He wrote, ‘I want [to] know what others’ opinions are (in the community and society) to create a movie which inspires children. Other people should know about the economic/social issues behind the film. Racism can be accounted as a concern’. He asked rhetorically whether people would ‘make fun out of’ students ‘if they don’t know the language’. Like Ahmad, another SPR whose ideas are discussed below, Prerak’s thoughts about language learning were partially to do with survival and security.

After spending some time looking at a chart of ‘Countries of the World, their Populations and Languages’ in his school journal, Prerak noted that many countries have a ‘main language’ which is usually English, rather than a language which originated in the country itself. He noted that some countries had ‘adapted’ to speaking more than one language- such as Kenya, and South Africa- and felt that this might somehow present a possible solution to the isolation felt by some of the people he knows and which he feels may arise from language issues. Here, Prerak was instructing me in the implications of being a learner of English as an additional language and a new arrival in a country: as Cummins *et al* (2011) explain, ‘students whose schooling experiences reflect collaborative relations of power participate confidently in instruction as a result of their sense of identity being affirmed and extended in their interactions with educators.’ (25). Prerak came up with several solutions- ‘Maybe children would feel comfortable if their own language was taught at school as well as English. They could slowly mix together and adapt. Or have a translator with them all day. So if they’re very bright... [it would] help them learn communication skills and if in the future if they want to open a business they’d understand how it works around here’. I asked whether there was support for children who speak different languages at Hendon and Prerak explained, ‘there’s clubs here but we don’t endorse all languages. Hendon is a multicultural school, I’d like other schools to endorse [lots of languages]’.

Prerak said that he wanted to make ‘an inspiring film to support people who may lack confidence or be teased’. He explained, ‘I know people who have suffered and are quite shy... can’t express themselves or communicate well to put [forward] their thoughts and ideas, which results in them wanting to go back to their own country; but I want them to fit into the environment- [to find out] if they are comfortable and why- and use that in my film’. His research question became, ‘What languages do you speak?’ His sub questions were: ‘Do you speak English fluently (to be able to use it in everyday life?) Why?’; ‘Do you feel comfortable living in a country where you only speak English? Why?’; ‘How long have you lived in the UK and have you suffered any racist comments?’; ‘If you are comfortable, how did you develop this attitude?’; and ‘What is your input about diminishing racism and bullying?’. Prerak decided to interview an Afghan student and a French/Polish student at school, and his parents at home. He wanted to ‘target people who have been here less than five or six years’.

Like Rose, Prerak responded very strongly to the experiences of other young people he knew. It felt as if he had an enormous amount of empathy for his peers and really wanted to solve their problems. I thought that perhaps this reflected Prerak’s own experience and how he had overcome past problems of his own through learning about what he described as ‘how it works around here’. He was eager to help others to solve the problems he had encountered himself. Prerak’s work here exemplifies what Cummins *et al* (2011) describe as ‘(t)ransformative pedagogy’ which ‘uses collaborative critical enquiry to enable students to analyse and understand the social realities of their own lives and of their communities’ (29). They go on to explain that ‘(s)tudents discuss, and frequently act on, ways in which these realities might be transformed through various forms of social action’ (28); clearly a goal for Prerak, who offered plenty of ideas for action.

Listening to Prerak, Rose said, ‘translation is an interpretation. Rumours can be linked to translations... results are always different. So translation into five languages could result in five different ideas’. Rose and Prerak decided to partially blend their projects. Whilst they were concentrating on separate briefs in a general sense, they developed a list of interview questions which they would both be asking. Prerak said, ‘if [Rose’s] brief and my brief link together maybe we could solve something. We could solve the issue and get people to stand up...create a film that really inspires them and show the solution; [how] to get comfortable’.

Both students clearly took a personal and political interest in the project. They took their roles as researchers very seriously and saw many ways in which their research could enhance their creative work as part of the project. In line with the Illuminate methodology’s propensity to lend itself to the production of identity texts (Cummins *et al* 2011), Rose and Prerak drew extensively on personal experience as well as on what they understood to be the theoretical and substantive basis of the Critical Connections project. They also showed signs of an emancipatory-research/research for social justice orientation along the lines of that proposed by Freire (1976).

This example also demonstrates how the peer researchers developed key research skills: questioning, analysis of problems and development of ideas about how to research them. Here they were developing academic- linguistic capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) through the development of the skills necessary for ‘discovery learning’ (Bruner 1962). In this sense they were developing the ‘knowledge of how to organise questions in cycles and how to summarise things to [themselves]’, demonstrating the development of their thinking from ‘episodic empiricism’ to ‘cumulative constructionism’ (86). Finally, this example demonstrates the ways in which the SPRs’ involvement in the MDST research was able to inform us as to directions of thought which we may not have considered- such as language learning as a route to stability (see Ahmad’s story, below).

***The impact on schools and teachers***: ***pedagogical possibilities and the potential for ‘student voice’***

The SPRs affected MDST work in schools by spreading knowledge of the project, developing ownership, and extending the space for students to shape their learning through questioning, collaborative talk and reflection. Teachers reported that when SPRs were asking their classes to participate in a focus group discussion, or complete a questionnaire, respondents took the request very seriously, and appreciated being asked their opinion. As Osler and Starkey (2003) suggest, it is often assumed of young people ‘…that as non-voters they are not involved or engaged in political processes’ (248). The SPRs on the MDST project show this to be a mistaken belief. Moreover, the fact that ‘(y)oung people from minority ethnic backgrounds in post-colonial societies may be even more harshly judged’ (Osler and Starkey 2003: 248) suggests an even greater urgency for those who are learning English as an additional language to be involved in such activities.

The Illuminate work also developed a deeper understanding in teachers as to what might be pedagogically possible; what their students were capable of; and greater potential for ‘student voice’ work. This is very much in line with Freire’s (2005) plea for a teacher who ‘… is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach’ (80). In its second year, teachers whose students were part of the SPR element of the project indicated that they were far more likely to give space to students to work on their own, both on MDST topics and in other areas of their teaching. In St Michael’s Catholic Grammar School, instead of having one elected student council representative in each class to speak on an issue, there are permanent SPRs who now report to the nominated student representative on a great range of issues which are consistently fed back to their student parliament. Louise, a teacher from the school, explained that she was ‘amazed’ at how the students could structure questions. As Freire (2005) explains of students involved in ‘problem-posing education’ (80), ‘(t)he students- no longer docile listeners- are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher’ (81). Having had the experience of approaching learning ‘as a task of discovery’ (Bruner 1962:88), these students asked their teacher for more opportunities to undertake SPR work. Through experience, they had developed the motivation to conduct further investigative learning. Bruner (1962) explains that this arises from the student’s experience of being ‘rewarded by discovery itself’ (88).

Reem, another teacher, at Ealing Arabic School, wrote the MDST team a long email detailing all the ways in which her pedagogy- and thus the learning experiences of her students- had been changed by the project. Here she describes the ways in which some of her students have begun to develop ownership for the projects through which they learn Arabic:

I was always taking the lead and doing the work and researching and writing, so although the students did learn, I was the one doing all the work. Letting students choose their project has motivated them and made them want to research and find out more and more. I am so proud of them. I must give you some examples as I am bursting with pride … The most interesting … is the decision of three teenage girls; a Palestinian Muslim, an Egyptian Copt and a Lebanese Christian discussing the Hijab. I did not help. I just listened and offered resources and answered their questions. You may want to know that all three girls were part of MDST last year and two of them were … Junior researchers (SPRs)…

Reem is here demonstrating Freire’s (2005) suggestion that in emancipatory, problem solving education, ‘The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them’ (77). Her students, in investigating an issue of key personal importance- the Hijab- were projecting their own identities onto the experience of learning Arabic. They were creating ‘identity texts’ (Cummins *et al* 2011). Further, they were benefitting from Bruner’s (1962) ‘discovery learning’. As he explains, ‘…any organisation of information that reduces the aggregate complexity of material by embedding it into a cognitive process a person has constructed for himself will make that material more accessible’ (95-96). The three young women Reem describes were learning Arabic by embedding the work into a discussion about something that deeply interested them, thus making the language learning ‘…more likely to be placed along routes that are connected to one’s own ways of intellectual travel’ (ibid: 96). Having engaged with the Illuminate SPR method, these students had developed the skills necessary to make what Bruner (1962) refers to as ‘speakers’ decisions’ (83). And having seen her students engage with SPR work, Reem was able to trust that they would learn through ‘dialogic’ (Freire 1996) means, and recognise what they needed for support. Her joyous report of her students’ investigations exemplifies what Freire (2005) describes as ‘(a)uthentic thinking’. For Freire, this is ‘…thinking that is concerned about *reality,* does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication’ (77).

The SPR work did not merely involve communication between teachers and students, and between students and their peers. Many of the SPRs interviewed their family members, voluntarily linking home and school (for more on this, see Chung’s work in the next chapter ‘Crossing the school gates: connecting homes and schools’). Here, students were drawing on parents as a resource. Joey, aged eight, at Hua Hsia supplementary school, brought back findings from an interview with his father about why it was important to learn Mandarin Chinese. He reported that his father felt that the world economy and the increasing development of computer hardware components in China meant that within fifty years American children may be learning English for fun, whilst Chinese would need to be spoken for business. This piece of research does not only reconfirm the SPRs’ consistent concern with their place as economic actors in a neoliberal world (see the discussion of Ball (2012) and Couldry (2010) below), but demonstrates a clear link between home and school in the practice and motivation of language learning.

The next section outlines some of the findings about the MDST drawn from the collaboration with the SPRs.

***What the SPRs’ involvement in the MDST project can tell us about multilingual digital storytelling and language learning***

*Young people see themselves as future economic actors in a capitalist system and see language learning as a key element of this*

One of the SPRs at Hendon School, Prerak, described above, mentioned that the MDST project may help him develop what he needs to ‘start a business’ and ‘learn communication skills’. This indicates an awareness of a link between schooling and the production of workers, albeit from the point of view of someone already on the way to understanding, as he described it, ‘how things work’. Schooling has long been theorised as a system for creating productive participants in a capitalist system. This line of theory runs from Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) Marxist view of schooling as reproducing socioeconomic hierarchies to Ball’s (2012) current analysis of schooling as subject to a neoliberal system driven by market logics, including as a producer of young people who are economic actors, consumers and self-branded products. Couldry’s (2010) Foucauldian analysis of neoliberalism details the ways in which it inculcates the development of people’s identities as internalising the disciplining features of market logics. So it is unsurprising that the SPRs are conscious of their futures as personal brands and economic participants. Their talk of jobs and CVs are all part of this discourse. Rim and Ahmad, SPRs from Peace School, expressed this view.

In looking at the brief ‘Language learning in supplementary schools as part of the Critical Connections project’, Rim and Ahmad decided, during one of the university-based SPR sessions, to find out whether other students felt that learning new languages through the Critical Connections project would affect their choice of jobs; affect their future; and help their 'everyday life' and grades. Ahmad also asked whether the MDST project would help him when he goes to university. His research question addressed how many languages you can learn at one time, and what the effects are. He tried his questions out on Rim who felt that 'having more than one language helps you get a good CV'.

Similarly, Soraya, from Ealing Arabic School, asked at the same session whether there is future career potential in both language learning and digital storytelling. Zahra, from Wanstead School, wanted to know ‘if you had a chance to collaborate with different peers and learn different multi-lingual skills how would it benefit you?’ Zahra thought the answer to her main research question would be related to ‘jobs, CVs, [and] employment’.Samiah, from the same school, asked, ‘Would collaborating with peers help to learn other languages?’Samiah talked about future careers. She interviewed Zahra, who felt that language learning would help her with job applications, her CV, and with communication.

I interviewed Zahra and Samiah after this SPR session, and Zahra said that the project would be ‘something to put on my CV to make me stand out from everyone else’. This resonates with Couldry’s (2010) exposition of the ways in which the neoliberal environment pushes people to work on themselves as an individual brand. Samiah said that the workshop: ‘improved my skills to interview, showed me how to respond to someone’s ideas, and open my ideas to more options; to get more confident’. She said it had helped to ‘get to know other people and bond’ and that it ‘gives more business sense, strength- the project would look good on my CV and give me a slight more chance of getting employed’. She felt she could use her own experience of the research project to help other students; that it shows you basic skills to pursue and develop in media or modern foreign languages- ‘it gives you a head-start’. Both young people felt that the project would be ‘helpful for future jobs’.

*Multilingual digital stories can function as ‘identity texts’ (Cummins* et al *2011) which demonstrate ‘transcultural capital’*

Many of the SPRs used the opportunity to negotiate multilingual identities. The research process became a mirror which reflected back and affirms their complex identities in a positive light *(*Cummins *et al* 2011*)*.

Ahmad, from Peace School, explained that he had left Palestine at the age of four, had lived in several countries and knew four languages, including Dutch. He enjoyed telling the group this, as most people were surprised, expecting that his languages would not include a European language other than English. He said that he would like to know ‘more about how people think of learning languages- for example, people who know more than four languages’. In one session, he decided that he wanted to ask: ‘How is it, going to school on Saturday when your friends are at home?’ And ‘How do you think supplementary school would help you in the future?’ Ahmad was, here, working out the benefits of learning more than one language. From the frequency with which he discussed his languages in Illuminate SPR sessions, it is apparent that he identifies strongly as a person who speaks four languages. He enjoys going to supplementary school and feels that other young people should see the benefit of it, too.

Ahmad made a MDST film about a trip to his uncle’s wedding in Palestine. When I asked the young people in the SPR sessions to introduce themselves, most of them mentioned their school. Ahmad had also done this at a previous session, explaining, ‘my name is Ahmad and I am from Peace School’. This time, several months later, Ahmad said, instead, and with some force, ‘I am Ahmad and I am from Palestine’. It seemed that language learning was a key element of his attempts to make sense of the various journeys he had made from country to country and the feelings he experienced during these journeys and his time in each country.

It felt very much as if Ahmad was seeking security and that this was one reason why he felt that language learning would be useful for future paid employment. This SPR experience helped me to understand that young people’s frequent talk about language –learning for economic purposes may sometimes not be solely about the neoliberalisation of schooling (that is, education for productive workers for a capitalist system: Ball 2012), but also about what is needed to thrive multiple and ongoing immigration experiences. As Cummins *et al* (2011) explains, ‘(t)he significance of identity texts … for marginalised students derives from their role as tools of empowerment, which we define as the collaborative creation of power’ (4). In this situation, Ahmad was able to foreground his immigration experiences as of such importance that they transcended the powerful neoliberal narrative running through much current educational research, and described above. More importantly, he was able to explain his multiple languages and immigration experiences not as a serious problem to be overcome, but as the source of many important linguistic and social skills- what Meinhof (2009) has identified as ‘transcultural capital’.

*Learning outside school and with peers*

The research briefs given to the SPRs also asked them to address ‘learning outside school’. They struggled to identify any learning outside school which did not amount to ‘lessons’ taught by ‘teachers’ out of school, although there was a slowly growing awareness of the implications of using family and the internet for research and storytelling inspiration. The students explained that they like developing ideas and being creative and seemed to be saying that it was not their usual experience of schooling, which they conflated with ‘learning’. They liked that learning with peers in groups outside of school (both in terms of the research and the digital stories) could help them to develop their own ideas, and they appreciated having their ideas taken seriously. Cummins *et al* (2011) wrote the following in their discussion of identity texts in general, but they could just as easily have been referring to the MDST: ‘Common to all of this research is the conviction that pedagogy can transform the lives and academic experience of marginalised students by identifying and challenging exclusionary power structures that have become infused and normalised within the education system’ (10). The students’ difficulty with seeing anything outside school which did not involve ‘a teacher’ as learning, and their surprise at being listened to and taken seriously, is indicative of the nature of the system in which they are accustomed to being educated. This chapter has outlined the potential of student engagement in alternative pedagogies.

**Conclusion**

I have looked here at the ways in which the student participant-researcher component of the MDST project were designed and implemented. The theoretical underpinning of the Illuminate SPR methodology was described, and data emerging from the SPR sessions was analysed using that theoretical framework.

What emerges is the close interweaving of the philosophical and theoretical concepts and praxis of both SPR and MDST elements of the project. The data presented here evidences ongoing involvement in inquiry-based learning, both by students and by teachers, and the fact that all participants are motivated and enriched by the experience. As Cummins *et al* (2011) explain, ‘students whose schooling experiences reflect collaborative relations of power participate confidently in instruction as a result of their sense of identity being affirmed and extended in their interactions with educators. They also know that their voices will be heard and respected within the classroom’ (25). What I hope is that students like Rose, Prerak and Ahmad carry that sense of affirmation with them.

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