

Youth Participation in Research on Multiliteracies: Ethical Perspectives

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Abstract

In research ethics, protecting the anonymity and privacy of research participants is the norm, especially vulnerable children and young people. By contrast, publicity and authorship are key features of the participatory media culture surrounding youth in everyday life. Participating in publicity and taking pride in one's media text can be empowering for youth. Thus, how can protection and participation be consolidated into an action-based research study on multiliteracies with the aim to empower minors as actors in public media culture? The pedagogy of multiliteracies aims to involve participants in redesigning the acquired understanding of, for instance, media texts. This paper examines the ethical challenges of conducting a study with vulnerable young people and discusses overcoming these challenges. The research consists of seven sub-studies as media workshops promoting self-expression among youth. Its participants are mainly 15–20 years old (altogether close to 100), including unemployed, depressed, dyslexic and immigrated individuals. The data includes observation diaries, interviews, audio-visual materials and questionnaires. A central ethical dilemma identified was the difficulty in balancing the protection and participation of youth. To overcome this dilemma, this paper discusses four key issues of research ethics arising based on the research: informing, privacy, anonymity and co-researching. Finally, it is proposed that research ethics be reconsidered a constant process and awareness of ethics throughout a study. This kind of approach to ethics emphasises the good intentions of researchers and—especially with vulnerable youth in focus—the understanding of participation as exercising self-determination, including involvement in decision-making in research ethics.

Keywords: action research, media participation, research ethics, vulnerable youth

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Introduction

‘What does publishing mean?’ (15-year-old immigrant girl in autumn 2015)

Today, an inherent part of young people’s lives is public, such as publishing on social media. Cope and Kalantzis (2010: 97) suggest that if education is to be relevant to contemporary social needs, it should consider young people as public agents. However, encouraging young people to participate through public media in educational settings or in research leads to many ethical questions, starting with the fact that not all young people fully understand what publishing actually means. In this article, we reflect on the ethical issues of young people, primarily vulnerable ones, participating in media publicity in an action research project. *Young People in the Limelight. Towards Agency through Multiliteracies* (hereafter YPAM) is a media educational study being implemented in 2015–2017 at several locations around Finland. The research aims to develop a media pedagogy that gives young people a voice (e.g. Livingstone 2012) and supports their identities through multiliteracies, including public participation online and in exhibitions offline.

Participants of the study are mainly 15–20-year-old young people who are at the edge of dropping out of school and society (altogether close to 100 persons). For example, one of the sub-studies was implemented in a special youth house, while another was implemented in a refugee centre with unaccompanied asylum-seeking boys (e.g. Kaukko 2015). The total number of sub-studies (i.e. media workshops) is seven plus a pilot. In the workshops, the youth were encouraged to express themselves and to publish their creative works based on their interests (e.g. photographs, videos, drama). The concept of

multiliteracies involves mapping this kind of action-based *design* together with young people in media learning (e.g. Catzden et al. 1996; Cope & Kalantzis 2010). Multiliteracies include public orientation when designing and producing media for publication. Here, we focus on the ethical aspects of this kind of co-research, which aims towards youth empowerment through public media. Moreover, the study has been conducted in collaboration with institutions, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and municipal youth centres, which often function more for the protection of vulnerable young people than for public media participation.

From a linear perspective, youth around 18 years of age are mainly living through adolescence, and their desires and practices, including media use, are on the move (Mannheim, 1928/1972). The current understanding of being young is more about shifting contextual positions, meaning their vulnerable conditions and their relations to the media: moving backwards and forwards, taking different subject positions as more nonlinear, etc. (Asthana 2012). All youth under the legal age are vulnerable in the sense that they have unequal power relations with adults. In a narrower sense, as in this text, vulnerable refers having diminished motivation, the inability to make personal life choices and to maintain independence or a lack of everyday life skills due to situational, psychological or physiological factors, such as unemployment, living in a difficult family situation, depression or learning or social difficulties (e.g. Liamputtong 2007).

Respecting vulnerable young people's agency and life differences has been the starting point of this research in the spirit of the UN Convention of Rights of the Child (1989), together with the increasing research perspectives on youth participation, especially in media (e.g. Kotilainen & Pathak-Shelat 2015; Livingstone 2012), and the increase in studies on young people as co-researchers (e.g. Bradbury-Jones & Taylor 2015). Youth media participation is understood here 'more in terms of cultural activities, which may include societal and even political elements. Most youngsters in peaceful democracies such as

Finland are more motivated in cultural issues and participatory activities close to their living environment and thus participate, for example, in voting online for better food in their school' (Kotilainen & Suoninen 2014: 39). Finland has a small population (5.5 million) and is one of the welfare states situated in Northern Europe. However, a recent report states there are alone over 50,000 marginalised young people (5% of all 15–29 year olds) and many more are on the edge of marginalisation (Myrskylä 2012). This has been identified as a problem for society, and solutions for youth empowerment are being researched from diverse directions, for example, through the YPAM study with public media participation in focus.

Action research in this case includes multiple forms of participatory activities with young people. For example, the youth decided with what kind of art and media activities they wish to get involved, and they have planned public art exhibitions. Furthermore, some young people have acted as peer interviewers. All sub-studies are critical and transformative, aiming to change learning and youth identities, as well as to develop media education for vulnerable youth. From this perspective, the research is pragmatic (Cresswell 1998). Each study has been adult-initiated but planned together with young people. Thus, activities can be called youth-based. In sub-studies, the action research spirals of action have varied from one to several, depending on the context of the study and time in use (e.g. Reason & Bradbury 2006). In addition, the seven workshops (sub-studies) plus a pilot can be seen as spirals of one large action research, as they were organised partly at different times, and the later workshops benefited from the reflections of earlier workshops.

The researchers (eight in total) conducting YPAM media workshops designed and organised the workshops together with youth workers. The data collected from mixed methods includes (e.g. Cresswell 1998): 1) observation diaries, 2) semi-structured and in-

depth interviews with youth and adults, 3) audio-visual materials (e.g. photographs, videos, discussion in social media) and 4) short questionnaires about the backgrounds of the young people (e.g. age, country of birth, media usage) and, later, of their workshop experiences.

Six media workshops have been implemented in care-taking institutions or youth houses with their own rules and law-based restrictions for youth public performance. In each sub-study, questions related to ethics were soon posed. Research ethics as applied ethics is considered here a field of science inspecting normative judgements about appropriate norms, codes and rules of moral behaviour in research (e.g. Kuula 2011; Madge 2007). In the workshops, the main difficulty was the consolidation of the participation and protection of youth as demanded by youth institutions and research ethics (e.g. Bier et al. 1996; Warrell & Jacobson 2014; Romero & Walker 2010).

The questions posed in this paper are: What kinds of ethical challenges are connected to vulnerable youth-based audience research aiming towards public media participation through multiliteracies? How can one overcome these challenges?

Towards the participation and empowerment of vulnerable young people

In the YPAM workshops, the aim was to create opportunities for participation and conditions for empowering vulnerable young people. According to Zimmerman (1995), psychological empowerment consists of three components. Intrapersonal empowerment refers to a personal control: a person starts to believe in oneself, one's skills and in the possibility of exerting influence in life. Interactional means critically understanding one's socio-political environment: a person is aware of one's options to act and the resources needed in a given context. Behavioural component is about engaging in behaviour to exert control in a given context. Consequently, the goal of YPAM was to create circumstances and activities in which youth could gain encouraging experiences related to their identities,

skills and ability to accomplish something on their own terms and to participate in society. They were promoted to express themselves freely through artistic activities and to publish their accomplishments. In a couple of workshops, they were also asked to reflect on their lives, problematize the current world and express their related opinions (cf. Freire 1973). Depending on the workshop, the youth published journalistic writings, videos and poetry on a public blog, published photographs on social media (e.g. Instagram) and held public art exhibitions or performed in a media-based theatre play touring around the county.

The aspect of possible media publicity especially led to many complicated ethical issues in the workshops. Many of these questions are familiar to the research ethics of qualitative studies, especially audience-based online research (e.g. Barnes 2004; Beau-lieu & Estalella 2002; Denison & Stillman 2012; Madge 2007; Moreno et al. 2013; Romero & Walker 2010; Whiteman 2007). However, as YPAM is an action research containing direct interactions between researchers and research participants, we approached these questions from a slightly different viewpoint regarding the vulnerable youth. Differences in perspective are caused mainly by the fact that in action studies, the researched people do not appear so much as study subjects, but as participants or co-researchers. The most controversial ethical questions of YPAM lie in the four key issues of qualitative research ethics: informing, anonymity, privacy and co-researching. The particular themes of YPAM are summarised in Table 1.

TABLE 1: The themes of research ethics in *Young People in the Limelight*

<i>Issue of research ethics</i>	<i>Themes in YPAM</i>
Informing	Assuring comprehension of a study; Inclusion of vulnerable participants; The process of informing
Privacy	Definition of private and public; Illusion of privacy; Research participants' interpretation of privacy and publicity
Anonymity	Stigmatisation; Authorship and copyright; Beneficence; Online identity; Pseudonym
Co-researching	Appropriate method; Proper training

Informing vulnerable participants about a study

In the first phases of each YPAM workshop, the youth and the legal guardians of minors were asked to sign informed consent forms. At the same time, they were given 'all the information that might influence their decision to participate' and explained the voluntary nature of their participation (Barnes 2004: 217; Bier et al. 1996: 144). However, it was difficult to ensure that e.g. newly arrived immigrants with limited language skills comprehend the given information. In YPAM, a conflict arose between informing and participating, that is, regarding letting young participants attend the workshops. Not informing would have been unethical, but failed informing could have led to the exclusion of some youth participants from the workshops, which offer them a channel to make their voices heard in public and hence possibly empower them (Johnson & Guzmán 2013; Warrell & Jacobson 2014). Furthermore, those who were most difficult to inform often needed plenty of encouragement in life. Consequently, not letting the ones truly at the edge of social exclusion attend and express their thoughts would have been questionable, as beneficence (doing good) is an important ethical principle in research, especially with vulnerable communities (Denison & Stillman 2012: 1039).

Studying difficult-to-inform people is no excuse for leaving out details, which meant that in practice, in YPAM, informing was a continual task. To begin, some young immigrants did not realise the study's purpose until the workshops had been functioning for a while. Some even signed the consent forms late. One could argue the informing task failed. On the other hand, if they had been excluded at the beginning, one could say they would not have been given enough time or tools to comprehend. In addition, if the study had been explained only once at the beginning, one could ask for whose protection the consent forms were actually signed: the research participants or the researchers and their organisation. In the YPAM workshops, the ethical stance was to form a trusting relationship with research participants, to ensure they are not pressured to take any actions and to establish ongoing consent, even after consent is first established. In other words, participants' rights to withdraw at any moment and to contribute as they wish were highlighted (Sharkey et al. 2011).

As action research is an innovative scientific approach starting with an open-ended research design, its direction, goals and risks can significantly change during fieldwork. In addition, publicity as part of our study made it difficult to anticipate courses of action. In action research, informing repeatedly of the aims of the study is crucial, as its constitutive idea is to involve participants in a joint project as co-researchers (e.g. Reason & Bradbury 2006). Consequently, YPAM participants were asked repeatedly to reflect on the organised activities and to express their opinions. The constant enquiry was also necessary, because many were withdrawn or shy to speak out. At the same time, these discussions offered the researchers opportunities to remind participants of the study purpose and their voluntariness and to re-evaluate the inner state of youth: to reflect on their well-being and willingness to continue participating in the workshop. After all, the difficulty was not so much in how to consolidate 'informing' and 'participating' but instead how to understand

'research ethics'. Is ethics merely a formality a priori a research study or yet a constant awareness of ethical issues throughout research?

Illusion of privacy

Some young participants began to ask, 'What does publishing mean?' while signing the informed consent forms. Some did not know the term 'to publish'. Some who were familiar thought that publishing meant only presenting something, for example in a printed newspaper. They did not consider social media a place of publishing, but more of a semi-private space. Thus, they had 'put' things (e.g. videos) on the Internet. However, it was not simply a question of semantics. Especially, the youngest (13 years old or even older) could not comprehend the magnitude of the potential audience of social media, even though they knew anyone could see their work.

Privacy is a major ethical issue for online research, as it is a factor when pondering the necessity of informed consent, the protection of participants and the citations of participant texts (Barnes 2004: 203). Roughly speaking, if an online forum is understood as public, consent is not usually required (Anderson & Kanuka 2009: 119–120; Clegg Smith 2004: 232; Moreno et al. 2013: 709). However, there is no distinct agreement on what is public and private on the Internet. When defining, one has used as criteria the explicit statements of privacy rules and the purposes of online forums. Some have based their definitions on whether a web page itself requires a username and password login. If they are not needed, the page is understood as public. Public online forums have also been considered 'semi-public' or 'publicly-private' when users must sign in to them (Moreno et al. 2013: 709–710; Whiteman 2007: 4).

Many scholars agree that free accessibility to the Internet does not necessarily mean the participants of online forums themselves understand the spaces as public (Madge,

2007: 661; Moreno et al. 2013: 709–710). Whiteman (2007: 4) explains, ‘a user can transition from seemingly public space, to spaces that appear private, to commercial spaces without realizing that a change has taken place’. She adds that many online forums encourage using aliases, which might contribute to the illusion of privacy. Barnes (2004: 207) notes, ‘When individuals build close Internet relationships with other, they can forget they are communicating in a public space’. In the same manner, Baym and Boyd (2012: 323) state that based on the theoretical analysis of Eden Litt, people may for instance imagine speaking only to the ones who most often comment on their texts. Hence, the audiences may be imagined or even appear invisible to the users of online spaces (Barnes 2004: 206–207; Baym & Boyd 2012: 323).

In YPAM, the illusion of privacy and imagined audiences complicated the protection of the privacy of young research participants. In other words, involving the youth in public media participation within research seemed to clash with the issue of privacy and further with protection. Especially, the privacy of children and young people (18–20-year-olds) must be protected (Child Welfare Act/Finnish law, 2007). Many scholars emphasise that the level of protection should be considered in relation to how the users of online spaces themselves interpret the publicity or privacy of the space (Barnes 2004: 219; Buchanan & Ess 2008: 280; Madge 2007: 661). In qualitative audience-based online research, determining the informants’ understandings of publicity based on their writings can be difficult. Furthermore, researchers are advised to make their online presence known to research subjects, but not to interfere with, for instance, talks on discussion forums (e.g. Whiteman 2007). Therefore, how can subjects’ view of publicity be determined?

Perhaps the idea of an online ethnographer as ‘a fly on the wall’ should be reviewed. In offline research, the depth of the understanding of an ethnographer as ‘a fly’ who does not participate in the actions of an investigated community and thus gain an authentic experience of the particular situation has been questioned (e.g. Emerson et al. 2001). The

direct connection between a researcher and a research subject in participatory ethnography or action research can positively affect the validity of a study. Moreover, for a researcher, such a connection provides the opportunity to discuss explicitly with informants their views on, for instance, the publicity of Internet spaces or to assess vulnerable participants' levels of comprehension, as occurred in YPAM while interacting with young participants. The privacy and publicity of the Internet were brought up many times in ethical discussions with research participants, and these discussions were integrated into educational situations. Thus, ethics was constantly on the minds of researchers. Due to a direct connection, one could also involve research participants in the decision-making related to research ethics itself, such as in deciding how much privacy and confidentiality they want. Yet in YPAM, this possibility was denied by youth institutions for reasons that are discussed in the next chapter together with the issue of confidentiality.

Dilemma with anonymity and authorship

The intention of YPAM was to provide youth with positive experiences of participating in society through publishing. Thus, they were encouraged (and asked permission) to publish their media texts in social and mainstream media and in other public forums, such as an art exhibition. Most workshops were held in youth institutions, so it was natural for the youth to act as representatives of the particular centre where they lived or frequented. However, to protect the youth, several institutions demanded concealing from the public the name of their centre, the reason being for example that certain youth centres are targeted towards special groups and may be quite commonly known in Finland as such a place, thus carrying a certain stigma. For fear of stigmatising the youth, two of the centres strongly forbade mentioning their name. They also requested the names of research participants be concealed. These demands are, however, in line with an important issue of research ethics: protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of participant identities (e.g.

Madge 2007; Moreno et al. 2013). A common practice of research ethics is to create a break between fieldwork and a researcher's accounts, which is usually established by removing identifying details, such as using pseudonyms for participants and places or by reporting only general findings (Beaulieu & Estalella 2012; Warrell & Jacobson 2014).

However, anonymity is not a simple issue from the perspective of ethics of emancipatory action research. The purpose of such research with marginalised or oppressed people is to offer them a chance to make their voices heard in public (e.g. Johnson & Guzmán 2013). In addition, presenting oneself in publicity with one's real (offline) name can be empowering. In the pilot phase of YPAM, the concealment of the youths' real names was not made clear enough. Some youth were thrilled by the chance to publish their media texts with their real names in an authentic printed magazine. The idea of stepping forward publicly with real names was empowering, especially for youth hoping for a career in the creative culture. Realising the ability one has to influence their own life and the chance to accomplish something can lead to psychological empowerment (Zimmermann 1996). Likewise, Romero and Walker (2010: 223) noticed that in the lived worlds, their young research participants (minors) emerged through participation in youth media as legitimate and proud authors of their works and identities.

The 'power of research to be emancipatory and empowering for participants' should not be underestimated, as Warrell and Jacobson (2014: 31) stress. It is also unethical to inhibit the chance for empowerment. The YPAM research team and some experts discussed this dilemma of anonymity after the pilot, and it was first decided that in the following workshops, young people of legal age could decide for themselves whether to use their real names. The emphasis was on the potential beneficence and empowerment of action research. Furthermore, according to the Finnish Copyright Act (2015), 'A person who has created a literary or artistic work shall have copyright therein, whether it be a fictional or descriptive representation in writing or speech, a musical or dramatic work, a

cinematographic work, a photographic work or other work of fine art [...]'. In addition, 'the name of the author shall be stated in a manner required by a proper use'.

Using online data has provoked debate as to whether the already-published writings of research subjects are copyrighted texts and whether people in charge are considered subjects or authors of blogs, web pages, etc. (e.g. Bassett & O'Riordan 2002; Beaulieu & Estalella 2012; Madge 2007; Romero & Walker 2010; Warrell & Jakobson 2014). Some authors of weblogs and web pages have considered the omission of a proper reference to their texts as a copyright infringement (Madge 2007: 660; Barnes 2004: 212; Clegg Smith 2004: 234). In our participatory culture, even amateur artists may wish to be credited as authors of their works (Bruckman 2002).

It has been suggested that if research participants are considered subjects, there should be a greater sense of confidentiality. If they are understood as authors, the requirement of confidentiality is lowered. (E.g. Ess & the AoIR, 2002: 7; Madge 2007: 660; Warrell & Jacobsen 2014: 30.) The work of Bassett and O'Riordan (2002) indicates that in each study, the participants' relation to authorship should be considered carefully. They present their published study of an online discussion forum of a lesbian community website. The web page was freely accessed on the Internet, but because users made confessional postings on the forum, the researchers perceived it as a semi-private space. In hindsight, they report to have chosen the 'safest' option: concealing the actual name of the site and using pseudonyms for participants. In retrospect, they interpret the pages as having a political agenda, as it contained coverage of lesbian and gay film festivals and pride events. Therefore, they question their earlier decision of anonymity and ponder the possibility of having contributed to the homophobic myth and further marginalising the group.

In YPAM, the conflict between anonymity and empowerment through authorship was not solved by reconsidering the requirement of confidentiality and privacy in research, because the research participants were vulnerable and needed special protection. Many

youth workers participating in YPAM were worried for the physical safety of young people, especially immigrants, many of whom had unusual names in the Finnish context. If their names were published, this might hint towards their whereabouts in Finland. Such a revelation could pose a serious safety risk, such as if immigrants have fled their homeland for political or religious reasons. After all, the use of pseudonyms in place of participants' names was encouraged in all workshops to protect the youth, except in the theatre workshop, as the youth could be identified anyway when performing.

In many workshops, young people marvelled at the concealment of their real names. Some were unfamiliar with the practice of research anonymity. Many were used to publishing on social media with their real names without any concern. In addition, the contents of their media works were mostly tame or unproblematic, so it was difficult to conceive of the harm resulting from publication. However, not all of the youth were conscious of the delicate line between private and public spaces on the Internet. Thus, the consolidation of the anonymity (protection) and authorship (participation, possible empowerment) of the vulnerable was challenging and it turned out to be even more complicated than anticipated.

A new challenge emerged with the pseudonyms. Some youth wanted to use pseudonyms already in use on social media. Consequently, their family and friends could identify their media texts. The purpose of using a pseudonym can be 'both to conceal a person's real identity and also to intentionally represent oneself in a particular way' (Warrell & Jacobson 2014: 31). Online identities (e.g. pseudonyms, screen names, avatars) can be as real and meaningful in online forums as our names in offline life (Bruckman 2002: 221). Buchanan and Ess (2008: 279) question using in research the same screen name or pseudonym already being used online by referring to copyrights and, above all, privacy. Revealing a pseudonym could harm one's identity in the online world. On the other hand,

one could claim that such a meaningful pseudonym could fulfil the requirement of the Copyright Act to mention the author's name.

In YPAM, allowing the use of an 'old' pseudonym seemed empowering for some young people. However, in some cases, the 'old' pseudonyms were not covered well and their real names could be easily revealed. Some youth did not care whether their identities were disclosed. Some vulnerable youth, despite being of legal age, were not mature enough to understand the possible implications of disclosure. At one workshop, the youth were asked to make their 'old' pseudonyms completely anonymous. After this talk, one young person did the opposite. This act did not seem so much an act of rebellion as a desire to be seen in public as in the offline world. The publicity given by the workshops was an opportunity to become noticed as a competent person, which may support intrapersonal empowerment (Zimmermann 1996). Publicity can also offer concrete benefits for a participant; for example, one could add a publication to one's curriculum vitae.

In YPAM, the issue of anonymity was the most difficult to overcome, and it was decided independently in each workshop. A functional solution was to involve the research participants in the ethical discussions about anonymity and to make an informed decision together with participants, as took place in the theatre workshop. However, this solution was not possible in all workshops due to the strong ethos of protection in some youth institutions or due to the safety or maturity of the youth, as explained earlier. As some institutions denied involving the participants in decision-making already before starting a workshop, the opportunity to discuss anonymity with the youth later, after the contents and publishing places of their media texts were revealed, was also ruled out. In a similar manner, in research one has given research participants an opportunity to review the research reports prior to publication (Buchanan & Ess 2008: 279).

Co-researching: pursuing empowerment

In all workshops, the aim was to create circumstances for empowerment through inviting young people to be co-researchers, giving them yet another chance to show skills and to speak their opinions. Co-researching can involve different approaches and levels of engaging the research participants in a study. Roughly, it can help set the research agenda, gather and analyse data and disseminate results (e.g. Leitch et al. 2007; Mearns et al. 2014; O'Brien & Moules 2007). During the workshops, the youth were repeatedly asked to reflect on the workshops, such as on inspiring media activities. In two workshops, they also gathered data themselves, including drafting interview questions and interviewing peers. In the first one workshop, the data was collected only for research purposes. In the second, the interviews were edited as a radio programme as well.

Many ethical questions were brought up through co-researching. As many YPAM youth have a low interest in participating in general, one could ask whom it really served to engage the youth in academic work in which many had no interest. Nevertheless, our research team was convinced they could produce favourable experiences in co-researching. Therefore, this task was presented to them as voluntary. In addition, they were asked to take on the role of interviewer with remuneration. Offering a co-researching diploma did not motivate the youth, but a movie ticket attracted many more to complete the task. Still, there was a large variety of enthusiasm and engagement between different individuals and groups, as Mearns et al. (2014: 453) discovered as well.

Some argue that involving children could lead to a narrowing of highly sophisticated methods and approaches, as Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015: 163) report. However, they emphasise that even worse is to exclude them because of the methodological complexity. They remind though of the importance of employing age-appropriate methods to ensure maximum engagement of the children. In YPAM, engaging youth as co-research-

ers did not narrow but added methods. Selecting an appropriate method was yet challenging. More difficult than finding an age-appropriate method was considering their central challenges, their lack of inspiration and their individual limitations and characteristics (Woodhead & Faulkner 2000). Some artistic methods were perceived as more fulfilling for youth than verbal analysis and interviewing. They were abandoned, however, because of the degree of difficulty in relation to age, language skills and social and learning difficulties. Instead, interviewing appeared a potential method, for example, for a young person with attention disturbances, as one can write down the interview questions. Struggling or failing the task is surely not empowering. Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015) and others (e.g. Kellett 2010, O'Brien & Moules 2007) highlight the importance of proper, comprehensive training for co-researching. As some youth had little interest in co-researching, it was pondered how much of their spare time could be asked for training in an artistic method (e.g. producing a short film). Furthermore, the principal researchers may yet need to analyse such artistic data later together with the co-researchers (Leitch et al. 2007: 469-472). Consequently, interviewing as a separate co-researching task seemed simple and short enough for the vulnerable participants.

Determining in what way the vulnerable participants could become involved meaningfully as co-inquirers was thus the most challenging ethical question of co-researching. In other words, the challenge is to discover the fine line between empowerment and discouragement. Many youth also had a tendency to please adult actors and so they expressed liking almost all organised activities. Contrarily, some youth were rebellious: they seemed to express the opposite of their experiences. In addition, the detached comments of the youth were sometimes contradictory. Therefore, it was difficult to interpret their authentic experiences. The researchers had to be highly alert in all situations to observe the tiniest hints of their opinions and experiences.

In the separate radio interview task, the three young participants reflected on the workshops more seriously and critically than in the first co-interviewing situation. This change was probably because the youth had gained more experience with interviewing and over the year, a more trusting relationship was formed between the researcher and the youth. They also took the task more seriously than before, as the recording was a real radio programme. In other words, they interpreted this authentic chance to participate in society as an appreciation of their opinions and so they invested more in co-researching. At the same time, the radio interview brought the youth confidence in their skills and opinions. Co-researching as part of the workshops and as a special task provided some fresh insights into the youth's experiences, interests and aspirations. Consequently, we recommend more research on co-researching with the vulnerable.

The solution to the ethical dilemma of the fine line between discouragement and empowerment was in the end the careful planning of the co-research design and the alertness and extra sensitivity in each co-researching situation with the vulnerable youth. In other words, research ethics must be re-evaluated separately in each situation. Ethics is more a process throughout research than a formality at the beginning of research.

Discussion

The goal of a pedagogy of multiliteracies is to reform education to be based on a broad vision of a good life and an equitable society. According to New London Group (Catzden et al. 1996: 67), an authentically democratic view of schools—and all youth institutions—should consider the cultural diversity and individual challenges of youth, provide tools and skills for everyone to participate in society and give a real chance for meaningful success. In addition, a pedagogy of multiliteracies should offer all youth, including the vulnerable, a real chance to acquire 21st century skills and an opportunity to experience empowerment in relation to one's identities, skills and capacity to exert influence in life. However, it is not

so simple when vulnerable young people are in focus and, for example, possess limited language skills, low self-esteem or difficulties with learning.

Based on our action research including several sub-studies around Finland, we have discussed a wide range of ethical issues concerning the vulnerable. As the main result, we identified the challenge in consolidating the protection and participation of vulnerable youth. More closely, an identified dilemma was how to integrate informing and participating when youth have limited language skills and fluctuating inner states. Another challenge was how to shield the privacy and confidentiality of youth while encouraging them to participate in public and thus allow their voices to be heard in public. Yet another factor was how to consolidate anonymity as a requirement of research ethics and authorship, which can lead to youth empowerment. Lastly, the ethical dilemma with co-researching was how to identify the fine line between discouragement and empowerment.

In research ethics, the protection of the confidentiality, privacy and anonymity of research participants is common, especially with vulnerable subjects. By contrast, publicity and authorship are key features of the participatory media culture surrounding youth in everyday life. The more media culture is investigated, the more likely it is the aforementioned features will clash with each other. For example, in Finland, when a published media text is under study, the anonymity of the author must be guarded, unless the author is, for example, deceased (Kuula 2011). In contradiction, the author of a published media text (e.g. a blog, a photograph, a video) has in many cases a copyright on their work, including a right to be properly referenced. This is not a new challenge, but the participatory media culture raises even more the question of anonymity as a premise or presumption of research ethics. Furthermore, this case study shows that being credited in one's media work is empowering for youth. Romero and Walker (2010: 223) emphasise their young research participants' right to recognition as authors and right to take part in the

dissemination process fully. Their claim is to uphold democratic values to sustain equitable opportunities for new learning among marginalised groups of young people.

After evaluating thoroughly the aforementioned dilemmas, the challenge is actually not so much in how to consolidate the protection and participation of vulnerable youth but rather how to define 'research ethics'. Is ethics understood as a compulsory formality to be handled a priori a research study or is it instead an awareness and a process constantly present and re-evaluated throughout research? Informing, shielding privacy, anonymising and protecting research participants from all possible harms are still valid issues of research ethics. However, their content or nature may fluctuate during research and thus decisions regarding these ethical issues should be made continually. One should be persistently aware of ethics.

As a conclusion to overcome the ethical dilemma of protection and participation, this study supports earlier studies that suggest research ethics be understood as a process (Beaulieu & Estalella 2012; Booth 1998; Cutcliffe & Ramcharan 2002; Stalker 1998). Cutcliffe and Ramcharan (2002) criticise the decisions of UK's ethical committees, drawing too much from medical and quantitative research. They propose 'ethics-as-process' as an approach of qualitative research. This approach emphasises the complexities of qualitative research, the good intentions of a researcher and ethics being an ongoing process of a study. For a researcher, this approach means sensitively observing the fluctuating situations of research, the changing psychological and physiological states of research participants and keeping in mind their best interests and balancing potential harm against potential benefits constantly, not only while signing consent forms. (Booth 1998; Cutcliffe & Ramcharan 2002; Stalker 1998.)

Based on our case study, we recommend research ethics committees be careful not to make too-detailed and strict rules that limit the possibilities to conduct innovative stud-

ies, such as qualitative research with participative nature or studying the vulnerable. Furthermore, we suggest 'ethic-as-process' could also mean involving research subjects significantly more in the decision-making of research ethics (e.g. privacy, anonymity, confidentiality). However, such involvement does not eliminate the researcher's responsibility to one's work. Second, minors and vulnerable persons must still be protected carefully from undue risk. The suggestion implies, though, breaking down or at least loosening the old hierarchy between a researcher and a research participant, wherein the researcher is in a much higher position to decide on issues concerning the participation of the research subject.

Our suggestion of involving young people more in the decision-making of research ethics should be reflected further in the context of Western countries. We agree with Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010: 358–361) in their conclusion that in 'Western' countries, one the most significant barriers to youth participation is adult concerns about protecting children, when the majority of the world seems to believe in young people's abilities to make informed decisions. We can even ask if the downside of the welfare of 'Western' countries is too paternalistic. Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010: 361) stress that participation also involves exercising self-determination: the ability to make choices and decisions in one's life. This should also be taken into account in research ethics.

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