

Exploring the future together with young people

Methodological considerations on playfulness, joy and silence as forms of participation

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Introduction

One of ALL-YOUTH's aims has been to understand how young people imagine the future and how they would like to contribute to its sustainability. To achieve this, we have explored young people's ideas of the future of working lives, well-being and sustainable societies (Honkatukia et al., 2020; Honkatukia & Lähde 2020; Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021). Making sense of these issues can be challenging in many ways. Future horizons and possibilities are entangled with social and power relations, which deeply shape people's imageries of the future. Individuals' backgrounds, experiences and aspirations affect how far they can or want to plan their future and how clear or ambiguous the future appears to them (Mische 2009). One can imagine how tricky the question of the future can be for young people from diverse backgrounds; while some view the future with enthusiasm and excitement, for others it can be daunting to think about it. However, we align with Mische (2009), who claims that even if the future does not often materialise as visioned, the imageries of it still have a significant impact on what kind of future we are building.

The overwhelming aim underpinning knowledge production in ALL-YOUTH has been to challenge what youth researchers have referred to as intergenerational pass-talking (Anttila 2010) or adult-centred approaches (e.g., Tilley & Taylor 2018). These conceptualisations attempt to capture the communicational processes in which some people's views are regarded as less valuable or remain unattended to because of their age. This situation reflects age-related societal power relations that give some groups an entitlement to dominate discussions without sensitivity to other groups' views or voices. In ALL-YOUTH, we have sought to avoid pass-talking through our methodological choices. This has meant that, in addition to using traditional data collection methods (interviews, questionnaires and observation), we have sought to increase young participants' involvement in knowledge production and establish a respectful interaction with them through exploratory fieldwork experiments (see Tilley & Taylor 2018).

In this chapter, we evaluate our knowledge production that arose through participatory and group-based methods, such as World Cafés (Honkatukia & Lähde 2020), collage creation in workshops (Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021) and group activities online. As youth researchers our aim has been to make the research encounters safe and convivial for young people, provide them with space for imagination in a supportive and comfortable atmosphere and enable the questioning of adult-centred understandings of society (cf. Hokkanen 2014; Lyon & Carabelli 2016; Janhonen 2017; Pasek et al., 2008). In planning these research activities, we have been motivated by earlier research findings, according to which open discussions and a supportive atmosphere can encourage young people to express their opinions, stimulate their creative thinking and help them reflect on their possibilities to impact the issues important to them (e.g., Pasek et al., 2008; Katainen & Heikkilä 2020; Davidson 2017; Hokkanen 2014).

In this chapter, we engage in a critical reflexive assessment of the realisation of our aims regarding these participatory and youth-centred methods, especially in studying questions related to the future and sustainability. We begin the chapter by discussing the challenges related to the future as a youth research topic and by presenting our methodological commitments. Thereafter, we reflect on some fieldwork experiences and lessons learned, especially those related to issues such as play, creativity, humour, but also to silence and withdrawal.

Studying young people's visions of the future

Even if the future is unknown, as a topic it touches young people in more concrete ways than other generations, as they are going through their transitions to adulthood and making significant choices concerning their future lives. For many young people, the future involves simultaneously hope, optimism and uncertainty (e.g., Franceschelli & Keating 2018; Cahill & Cook 2020; Leccardi 2005). Moreover, youth research scholars have for long analysed the fragmentation of traditions and collective identities from young people's perspectives, as well as criticised education and employment policies for their narrow focus on individual responsibility in finding one's path in an unpredictable world (Mertanen, Mäkelä & Brunila 2020; Brunila & Lundahl 2020; Wyn 2017; Nikunen 2017; Furlong & Cartmel 2007). In other words, these policies are maintaining a discourse of labour market citizenship that aims to activate and push young people towards taking responsibility for staying on the "right" route, as defined by the adult society (see Chapter 5).

These societal expectations can be a source of great insecurity for young people in their dynamic life stage. In recent years, the relationship between young people's increased mental health problems and intensified pressures has been debated especially in the Global North, even if unambiguous evidence of interlinks between pressures and mental health problems has proven difficult to establish (e.g., Madsen 2021). Also, young people's diverging social environments, which are greatly shaped by increasing inequality, significantly impact their imageries of the future,

opening horizons of opportunities for some while limiting others' imagination of their possible future trajectories (see Mische 2009; Moensted 2021).

Furthermore, it is important to note that despite the abundance of studies and interest in young people, there exists a less genuine willingness in society to include them in decision making, especially on issues that are regarded as important in society (see e.g., Chapter 4). Therefore, young people as a social group often experience intergenerational pass-talking in the discussions and decision making concerning the future (Mietola, Kallio & Honkatukia 2022). This situation seriously hampers the realisation of intergenerational justice, especially from the perspective of current young generations, as is argued elsewhere in this book (see Chapters 1 and 3).

Hence, it can be argued that both the future and youth are contentious research topics, let alone when they are studied together. Despite this, we believe that exploring the future in collaboration with young people can be meaningful, both for them and research. At best, discussions about young people's future visions can increase their trust in sustainable future horizons, helping them make sense of their possibilities. In terms of knowledge production, including young people's views democratises the research process and improves the quality of knowledge when the participants are motivated to explore the questions under study (see Chapters 4 and 6).

Playfulness as a methodological guideline

In engaging young people in research concerning the future, we have highlighted the importance of the conviviality of collective interactions, such as offering them possibilities for play and creativity in research situations. These features are visible, for example, in the creative renewal seen in the meme culture (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021) or in the recent youth protests against climate change, during which young people have been organised globally in unprecedented ways to demand political decisions for safeguarding the future for children and young people, as well as for future generations (Bowman 2019, 297). Besides serious demands, the protests have involved a cheerful and excited atmosphere and have made visible how excitement, play, laughter and fun are integral parts of resistance. Similarly, we have sought to inspire creativity and playfulness in our fieldwork and experiments to awaken young people's imaginations about the future. In research, these features have been documented to have the potential to break boundaries and stimulate discussion, as well as aid in dealing with the difficult and frightening scenarios the future might bring about (Lyon & Carabelli 2016, 442; also, Pyyry 2015; Wright 2020).

Our starting point has been that meaningful collaboration with young people in research requires a respectful approach and genuine desire to understand young people's lives and thoughts from their perspective. In this, informal, youth-oriented and creative group methods are useful because, apart from the sensation of joy, they have the potential to increase a sense of communality within the study participants. More traditional methods, such as thematic interviews with prepared scenarios and

question layouts, would not necessarily allow the playful use of imagination in the same way, and the young people's descriptions of their understandings of the future can remain more formal and guided by the researchers' questions; also, the participating young people may align with what they think they are supposed to respond (Lyon & Carabelli 2016; Pyyry 2015; Davidson 2017; cf. Holland et al., 2010).

It is possible to find support for our approach besides in empirical studies, also in more theoretically tuned research discussions, such as those related to sustainable well-being, where it has been argued that a sense of belonging through positive and meaningful engagements with others are important elements of individual well-being and societal participation (Helne & Hirvilammi 2017). Hence, interactional elements such as playfulness and fun should be regarded as the fundamental elements of well-being, and young people should be provided with situations that involve these elements. This is particularly important amid the individualistic pressures that many young people face in the society today.

Moreover, we have been inspired by the idea of play and joy as capabilities that construct human well-being and a sense of being valued in society, as argued by Martha Nussbaum in her renowned Capabilities Approach. Nussbaum (2011, 29–32, 169) views these activities as an example of key capabilities that should be provided to everyone so that they can live a life worth of human dignity.¹ Another key capability she identifies, that of senses, imagination and thought, relates to the freedom to use imagination and express oneself freely in creative ways (Nussbaum 2011, 33–34). According to Nussbaum, a creative and playful orientation to activities in communities and society are constitutive parts of a trustful, relaxed and accessible environment where the threshold for participation is as low as possible.

We have followed these contentions in our empirical experiments and attempted to offer the young participants possibilities for genuinely joyful activities and engagement. In the workshops we conducted, we wanted to break everyday routines in a safe and free space, where young people could build trust and reflect the research themes together with others and build new meanings through, for example, role-playing, that is, by absorbing different roles in a playful manner (Tuuva-Hongisto 2021, 81). We strove to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere with appropriate rhythm and time use, emphasised the voluntary nature of working and highlighted the participants' important contributions to research. We hoped that our efforts would create an accepting atmosphere, increase young people's sense of communality and encourage them to voice their views, and meticulously observed whether or not this occurred in the activities we organised.

Group-based participation in research

During our fieldwork, especially when experimenting with participatory and playful methods with young people, we became aware of the central importance of the communicative aspects in the research process, both in terms of young participants' experiences of inclusion versus exclusion in knowledge production and in terms of the nature of knowledge produced itself. We organised many group-based activities

with young people but report here those experiences that were derived from three particular settings, which we describe next more closely.

We analyse the meanings of humour in envisioning the future and sustainability based on two kinds of workshops. First, we collaborated with vocational education students, with whom we ran workshops by applying an empathy-based stories method (Wallin, Koro-Ljunberg & Eskola 2019). The study participants were given a short narrative to which they were asked to imagine in small groups a continuing storyline. They were given a task to imagine either a “successful” or “unsuccessful” transition from education to working life and then create a visual collage of magazine cuts (pictures, words, etc.) that would reflect their ideas (Ågren, Pietilä & Rättilä 2020; Ågren 2021). This method was used as an icebreaker for consecutive group interviews. Each small group first presented their collages to the researcher(s) and then engaged in a discussion based on the researchers’ questions that related to their visions of their future working life.

Second, we analyse how humour became visible in the virtual workshops we organised together with the “JÄLKES” research project, as part of the Researchers’ Night event during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ågren, Meriläinen & Järvinen 2021).² The purpose of the workshop was to inspire discussion on young people’s well-being and societal participation and offer them the opportunity to take part in interpreting the views produced during the workshop. The workshop gathered approximately 300 young people aged 15–17 in different educational settings. The participants operated in workshops behind pseudonyms and were guided by their teachers. The researchers communicated with them via a one-way stream service, and the participant groups had no direct connection to each other.

Finally, we contemplate the meanings of silence and withdrawal by analysing a specific chain of events in one of the World Café workshops we organised for young people in diverse educational settings (Honkatukia & Lähde 2020). In the series of workshops, the participants discussed topics related to, for example, the future of work and the ramifications of climate change on our way of life. The classrooms were transformed into a café-like environment by moving tables and chairs into separate groups and providing refreshments. For this chapter, we have chosen an example from our World Cafés for tenth grade, which was, at the time, a voluntary extra year of comprehensive school. As a group of five researcher facilitators, we regularly visited a group of 12 students aged 15–17 during their school year, over a period of nine months. We ran World Café workshops with them to produce different types of data, such as group discussions, fieldnotes and products of workshops. During the World Cafés, we also showed short films concerning the future to inspire discussions.

Conviviality as a means to explore the future with young people

When planning for the workshops with empathy-based stories, we were guided by the idea that a playful crafting task would help break the ice between young people

and us researchers at the beginning of the workshop (e.g., Lyon & Carabelli 2016; Pyyry 2015). In many groups, this task indeed brought enthusiasm. The reasons behind this may vary, but the young people seemed to engage more easily in a playful crafting task with a familiar group or friends, suggesting that the “naturally” formed groups were experienced as supportive and safe environment for addressing uncomfortable feelings and even expressing disagreements (Warr 2005). In these groups playfulness indeed helped the participants deal with the ambivalent aspects of the future and inspired them in a way we had planned (cf. Cameron et al., 2010; Johannessen 2021; Hewer, Smith & Fergie 2019; Wright 2020). After one group interview, for example, the participants stated that the workshop had been an important opportunity for them to talk about the forthcoming working life transition. For them, the icebreaker task had enabled playing with the idea of an unknown future and helped them discuss the future in meaningful ways (also, Lyon & Carabelli 2016).

On the other hand, in groups to which a teacher had gathered the participants from different classes, the atmosphere became relaxed more slowly. Moreover, we noticed that not all the students were immediately ready to start working after we had introduced the task. For example, two students hesitated to join the collage workshops because they regarded the collage task too difficult and were worried about the recording of the interviews (Ågren et al., 2020). They agreed to participate only after we promised not to record their interview. During the workshop, their hesitation gradually turned into enthusiasm, as they realised that the study provided them with a chance to be heard on their own terms (e.g., Wright 2020; Davidson 2017; Lyon & Carabelli 2016). During the interview, these at first shy and reluctant students ended up presenting their thoughts vividly and telling us that they found the research subject very important and relevant.

Joking and humour were common interactional features when the workshop participants prepared their collage works and presented them to the researcher(s). The light and joyful sociability that characterised these situations may depart from the common idea of research, which is often presumed to be serious-spirited activity where the researcher adopts a neutral role, and young people, through various forms of research bureaucracy, are positioned as obedient informants. Humour has, however, been documented to be an important element of research situations, having diverse functions. Humour can, for example, help address injustices, enable handling or challenging power relations and stereotypes or aid in processing unpleasant or troublesome experiences or difficult emotions (Wright 2020, 43; Hewer, Smith & Fergie 2019; Laakkonen & Juntunen 2019). In some situations, humour can create a friendly atmosphere and increase a sense of communality and belonging (Lahelma 2002). Moreover, through joking, it is possible for some participants to avoid or bypass difficult and too personal topics (Janhonen 2017, 1138). On the other hand, using humour may also have negative consequences. It can contribute to formation of unsafe spaces for some participants and prevent them from expressing their views. In the worst case, it can cause some participants’ feelings to be ridiculed or discriminated against (Hewer, Smith & Fergie 2019, 441).

In our study, especially the preparation of the collage on “unsuccessful” transitions to working life triggered a lot of joking and joyful interaction. One group, for example, depicted a failing working life transition through an image of a forest-dwelling hermit. In the interview, the participants presented the collage with giggling and bursts of laughter. Eventually, however, they engaged passionately in detailed discussions on what the failure to integrate into working life would mean for them. In the collage story, the hermit had not found employment after graduation, was kicked out from the childhood home and lived alone in the forest, spending his time fishing, hunting and consuming alcohol. When discussing this collage, the participants emphasised its exaggerated nature, how they did not wish this kind of a lifestyle for themselves in the future and how neither society nor “the taxman” would appreciate such a lifestyle. In this case, laughing and humorous imagination provoked important thoughts, conceivably leading the participants to a more in-depth discussion on the subject than would otherwise have happened.

Similarly, another group prepared a collage where they placed scant pictures and words, for example, the text “dead-honest demons drilled a hole in Jaakko [a male name]”. The collage was clearly meant to be funny – a joke. While analysing the transcript of the discussion, we realised how relevant the researcher’s ability to throw themselves into the discussion was in this case. Instead of bypassing the collage as a joke, the researcher asked the participants detailed questions of it and actively inspired their discussion on how failures at work can cause self-blame and low self-esteem; hence, with attentive listening and concrete questions the researcher enabled a possibility for the participants to explain the idea of “dead-honest demons” in the collage more closely. The participants might not have presented their critical ideas on transitions to working life at all had the researcher intervened in their collage preparation guided it in a more serious direction or shrugged it off as being insignificant (cf. Walters 2020, 374). In general, the combination of collage works and group interviews made it possible for the young people to unfold and collectively voice the meanings of the images and words of their own choosing in a group situation (also, Lyon & Carabelli 2016; Davidson 2017; Tilley & Taylor 2018, 2197).

Expressing belonging in a group setting

In the above examples, joy, humour, laughter and art making acted as inspirations for young people to express their views of a challenging topic: the future of work. In addition, our fieldwork included examples of the meaning of these elements in relation to belonging, here understood as an individual’s emotional attachment to a group or community (Anthias 2006, 21). As for all human beings, for young people, being accepted is important, and they may attempt to find meaningful ways to belong when they encounter contextual boundaries that they experience as preventing this basic need (Vesikansa 1988). In these situations, humour can be used as an attempt to find a legitimate position in a group or seek approval from

others, similar to how Paul Willis (1997, 29–43) has famously analysed the practice of “having a laff” as a form of young working-class lads’ defiant conduct, as an attempt to secure one’s position in the masculine peer hierarchies and a means to criticise and oppose the conceptions of the formal expectations and rules created by adults (also, Janhonen 2017, 1135–1139).

At times, the question of belonging became apparent in the workshops we organised exploring the future or the nature of sustainable well-being. An illuminating example of this is from the “Researcher’s Night” workshop. Simultaneously guaranteeing a sense of belonging and being heard for a large number of participants proved to be extremely challenging for the researchers in this remotely conducted event. In the workshop, the participants’ anonymity, along with the complexities in organising the workshop virtually, to some extent, compromised our aim to offer young people a meaningful participation experience (Ågren, Meriläinen & Järvinen 2021). Even if many participants followed the instructions, some took advantage of posting humorous memes and images to the joint platform, some of which were tacky and even discriminatory in style.

According to our interpretation, this kind of trolling may have signalled some participants’ frustration with the given workshop assignment and embedded power relations between the participants, as well as between the participants and researchers (cf. Hollander 2004). Being together in a virtual space with unknown young people and adults discussing a somewhat abstract theme – well-being, societal participation and the future – was probably confusing for some, and they decided to act defiantly, perhaps in the hope of receiving acceptance from their peers (e.g., Vesikansa 1988, 57–59). Their conduct, which they most probably knew would cause disapproval, can also be interpreted as resistance towards the roles that they were assigned to (Hokkanen 2014; Janhonen 2017) or towards the form of participation that they did not regard as comfortable or sensible (cf. Davidson 2017, 233). Moreover, they might have reacted to hierarchies between them and other young people in different educational tracks (the participants were in the ninth grade in comprehensive school and in general or vocational track in upper secondary education) or those between them and the researchers organising the workshop (cf. Davidson 2017, 235).

This example of a group engagement which was not successful in all its aspects shows that humour as a dimension of participation is a much more complex question than it appears at first glance. Instead of framing the above-described conduct only as senseless misbehaviour, joking or trolling memes, it can be interpreted as an attempt to have an impact. Such “unruliness” can be interpreted as critical comments on the topics under discussion (Mortensen & Neumayer 2021) or attempts to change the course of the workshop. Therefore, young people’s defiant acts should not be ignored or bypassed as mere nonsense or disruptiveness (Katainen & Heikkilä 2020, 661), as it would dismiss the meanings of these acts, position young people as inappropriate citizens who lack the skills to participate and influence in a meaningful way and risk strengthening their sense of inferiority in the (adult-centred) society (e.g., Bessant 2020).

The topics of trolling were often related to race, gender, sexuality and other societal divisions, which are all important dimensions in terms of the workshop's general theme of well-being and societal participation. Had this particular workshop lasted longer (than the assigned 75 minutes), it might have been possible to deal with the humour posts and memes together with young people, connecting them more firmly to the discussion on sustainable well-being, the future and participation.

Silence and withdrawal as participation

In terms of knowledge production, it is important to acknowledge young people's different voices and agency in group-based research activities. Scholars have reminded that accounts arising in group discussions should not be treated as factual knowledge in and of themselves, but instead, products of the interactive circumstances in which they are produced (e.g., Holland et al., 2010; Hollander 2004). Some young people can adopt a dominating role, while others may just nod or otherwise show that they comply with others' opinions; and there can be participants who appear quiet and inattentive (Katainen & Heikkilä 2020). What is said aloud in the group interview depends on many factors, such as the social relations between the participants, the nature of the research environment and the goals, visions, desires or prejudices young people have regarding group participation or research as a practice in general. Some topics may be too difficult to deal with collectively, and some participants may seek to please the researcher(s). It might also be challenging to get young people to openly reflect difficult issues, since as a kind of survival strategy, some may choose to talk about their circumstances in ways that do not threaten their sense of security (Kaukko 2015; Rättilä & Honkatukia 2021).

As researchers, we easily get carried away with the research methods that inspire us. Hence, we might forget that the methods we choose to use are not suitable for everyone. It should be admitted that creative and arts-based methods, for example, may limit the participation of those not interested in such engagements or of those who might experience these methods as threatening or difficult (cf. Lyon & Carabelli 2016, 432, 442). Therefore, the researcher should be attentive to one's assumptions that relate to the appropriateness of methods for each research group and its members, their capabilities and preferences and to knowledge production in general (cf. Walters 2020, 364).

From this perspective, it is important to pay attention to withdrawal and silence when evaluating group-based research participation (Hollander 2004). Remaining silent can be rational agency, drawing the line regarding what feels safe to say aloud (cf. Daley 2015; Hollander 2004, 615). Instead of signalling passivity or like-mindedness with others, silence can be a young person's active choice to, for example, resist, express disagreement, challenge or stand above the comments and opinions of others (cf. Katainen & Heikkilä 2020, 658–659). In some of our workshops, we encountered situations in which the young participants' reactions could be interpreted as a signal of frustration or anxiety towards the research situation,

for example, if a young person had previously had adverse experiences with the authorities or if the researchers had failed to clarify and justify the research in understandable ways (also, Pakkanen 2006). Yet we also noticed that silence may mark attentiveness or an attempt to listen carefully, learn and memorise what is being said or to discover the nature of the event and contemplate one's relation to it. During our fieldwork, some young people expressed afterwards their gratitude towards our efforts, even if we had found ourselves in awkwardly silent situations in the group activities they referred to.

As an example of the meanings of silence, we bring forth a research situation – reflecting back on our fieldnotes on it – with the tenth-graders, where the assignment of the workshop was to write opinion pieces in groups (young people and researchers working together; Lähde & Honkatukia 2019). After getting an assignment, one of the groups was particularly silent. The researchers collaborating with this group attempted in numerous ways to find out how to continue, but the group remained silent for a long time, which the researchers found difficult to bear. Eventually, however, the facilitating researchers managed to create some discussion. This led to the writing of a powerful opinion piece about the reasons behind silence, which related to their distrust of being heard and being taken seriously. The following fieldwork note describes the atmosphere and the course of events in this group:

The researchers [M & J] are facilitating a group discussion with three students on a teacher-initiated exercise: “Choose a subject for an opinion piece and give justifications for it”. The start is uneasy; the students seem reluctant to talk/play a part. None of them makes an effort to choose a subject for the opinion piece; one of the students withdraws and moves to the couch. Silence. M & J are “testing” ideas with the two students remaining in the table: trying to promote discussion and collaborative take on the exercise and facilitate the group to pick up a topic for the opinion piece. The students are quiet and do not respond. M & J end up “talking alone”, exchanging uncertain looks with each other. Finally, after a long uncomfortable silence, one of the students says quietly, “I don't want to say my opinion, as it's worthless anyway. It makes no difference what I say or think ... and it may just cause trouble”. M & J take up the idea and suggest: “Why don't we take this as an opinion to write about?” The students at the table agree. This marks a change in the course of interaction. Little by little, M & J are able to elicit ideas, arguments and examples from the students. We have only five minutes left. J takes his laptop and puts together an opinion piece based on the ideas and arguments the students bring up as we chat. Finally, we ask them to check if they can “own”/accept the piece. At the end of the discussion, all groups read aloud their opinion pieces. Each piece is applauded. The class ends with the teacher asking, “Who felt your voice was heard today? Please, raise hands”. Both “I” and “E” [students in the group] raise their hands.

The fieldnote illustrates how silence can be an active choice for young people to express their feelings and experiences. Even if the group work involves awkward

silence – and it can be claimed this was needed here – they were able to express a view that their opinions were not valued and, therefore, that they considered it better to stay silent. The way young people participate in a research situation, whether they are talkative, quiet, seek to change or rebel against the course or topics of conversation, is indication of how young people interpret the situation and their own position in it (Katainen & Heikkilä 2020). In the same way as humour and trolling, this example shows how silence can be an expression of political opinion or a manifestation of young people’s disapproval of how they interpret adults’ opinions of them and their role as societal actors (cf. Hokkanen 2014).

Acknowledging silence, giving it space, dealing with it and understanding it, requires attention from the researcher, both in the research situation and when analysing, for example, group interviews. In the above example, the researchers were alert in the situation and managed to deal with silence so that the young people could eventually experience that they had been heard. Walters (2020, 374) has similarly pointed out that researchers are inclined to intervene and interrupt situations considered irrelevant or uncomfortable. However, as the above example shows, nonessentials may turn out to be very important for the participants and the research alike. In the above case, an attempt to do away with silence could have led to bypassing essential observations. The case also makes visible how young people may participate in research in ways that differ from the researcher’s plans and understandings, and these ways should be allowed if the researcher is seriously interested in young people’s thoughts (cf. Davidson 2017; see also the book’s Introduction and Chapter 8).

Conclusion

During our research journeys, we have become aware of various forms of and meanings of interactional features such as humour or silence when encountering youth groups. From the beginning, we have attempted to make the research situations comfortable for young people, but along the way, we have learned a great deal about possible obstacles to this. Acknowledging these interactional features adequately in the knowledge creation processes is crucial if one wishes to avoid intergenerational pass-talking, where young people are placed in an inferior position as citizens and knowers (Anttila 2010). According to our observations, playfulness and humour have potential; they can make the research situation easy-going, convivial and productive, but likewise, analysing research interaction carefully can reveal ambivalences – even flaws, as well as reveal significant research ethical dilemmas.

Our observations support the earlier research findings, according to which appreciating young people’s choices of their preferred form of participation – be it silence, boundary making or complying with the given instructions – is one important means to equalise the research relationship. This can occur if the researcher can keep the research situation flexible and secure so that young participants find pleasant and comfortable ways to engage (Davidson 2017). At the same

time, it is important to bear in mind that even the most participatory research constellations do not completely eradicate the power imbalances between researchers and participating young people or ensure that all young people have equal possibilities to participate or that they feel that their voices are heard and valued (Davidson 2017; Holland et al., 2010).

Therefore, asking young people to engage in research activities requires responsibility and skills from the researcher. Conducting group-based participatory research demands constant sensitivity, self-reflection and understanding of the research environment as a living communal space that is constantly changing (Goessling & Wager 2021). Moreover, in participatory research with young people, the nature of interaction is as much an ethical question as it is one of the choices of the research method (Tilley & Taylor 2018). Therefore, it is an ethical duty of the researcher to observe the development of the research interaction and do one's best to ensure that each participant feels safe and comfortable.

Furthermore, researchers conducting participatory research with youth groups should be constantly alert to identify and acknowledge the different ways in which young people's participation manifests itself not only as verbal accounts, but also as silence, withdrawal, acts of humorous troublemaking, rebellion or defiant conduct. From the researcher's perspective, encountering such interaction can be uncomfortable and may require interventions because of research ethics (cf. Walters 2020). While recognising this, we wish to emphasise that, from the point of view of knowledge construction, all participation is valuable. Ignoring or suppressing some forms of it may lead to bypassing important critical voices in relation to the topic of the research.

Therefore, the data produced in participatory settings also require epistemological reflection. It has been pointed out that young people's accounts may not be automatically compatible with the researcher's framework and require genuine sensitivity to the complexities of young people's avowals and agency in research situations (Lyon & Carabelli 2016). Participatory research tools can aid in making visible such young people's ideas that adult researchers are not aware of. At the same time, young people's sometimes intermittent ideas risk being overridden by the researcher's interpretation, and critical self-reflection is necessary here, too (Tilley & Taylor 2018, 2197; also, Holland et al., 2010, 373; Walters 2020). In addition to the fact that we, as researchers ourselves, already make assumptions about research methods that appreciate young people or meet their needs, the interrelations between young people participating in the study, the context of the research, young people's assumptions and opinions concerning the research and the activities they are asked to engage in, all entail complex power relations and may delineate, hinder or make invisible some young people's views and actions in the research (cf. Hollander 2004; Katainen & Heikkilä 2020; Walters 2020).

In conclusion, we would like to encourage researchers to give young people the space and opportunities to participate in the research process in the way they find comfortable – be it joking, playful or humorous engagements. In the same way as Nussbaum (2011) has determined that enabling joyful and meaningful experiences

to the individual is a duty of society, we see that guaranteeing joy to young people is a duty the researcher should aim to fulfil. This means that a researcher working with young people should acknowledge the situational communicational features arising in a research encounter from the perspective of well-being (e.g., Cameron et al., 2010). We claim that a convivial, safe and respectful research atmosphere, along with being an avenue to high-quality knowledge, can also be an important possibility to value young participants as who they are, that is, to strengthen their sense of belonging and sense of being acknowledged as important (Anthias 2006). To genuinely achieve these aims requires acknowledging the diversity of participants and sensitivity to how their needs can be fulfilled in research encounters. This challenges the researcher to constant critical self-reflection, attentiveness, flexibility and high tolerance of discomfort. Young people may experience the research situation quite differently from what researchers expect and can participate in ways that, without attentiveness, may remain unnoticed and unacknowledged as participation and a valuable source of knowledge.

Notes

- 1 Nussbaum (2011, 29–32, 169) lists ten capabilities that must be secured by society to guarantee its citizens opportunities to live a life worth of human dignity: (1) life, (2) bodily health, (3) bodily integrity, (4) senses, imagination and thought, (5) emotions, (6) practical reason, (7) affiliation, (8) other species, (9) play and (10) control over one's environment. All capabilities must be guaranteed at a minimum level, and the capabilities of affiliation and practical reason create a basis for all the other capabilities (Nussbaum 2011, 39).
- 2 Researchers' Night is a European-wide science event celebrated annually on the last weekend of September where researchers present their work to a wider audience through workshops, science lectures, researcher meetings and laboratory visits.

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