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CO-CONSTRUCTING EARLY ADOLESCENT EDUCATION THROUGH IMAGE-BASED RESEARCH

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Education at Massey University,
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ABSTRACT

Professional literature reporting the needs and characteristics, both educational and developmental of early adolescents presents a compelling case that students of this age group are distinct and require the development of a unique educational approach to best support their needs as learners and young people. Although much has been written about these students, little has been written with them, and even fewer studies have involved students themselves as co-researchers to investigate their own experience and understandings. The research reported in the thesis describes the implementation into practice of an image-based research methodology with early adolescent students themselves constructing and articulating their voice as the core focus of the research. The research was predicated on the belief that ‘student voice’ is the element vital in an educational approach developmentally responsive to students of this age group, and an element all too often missing.

Extended Visual Dialogue, the methodological approach devised to implement the research, was employed to conduct exploratory voice research with 38 early adolescent students in Years 7 and 8, across three participating schools in 2004. The approach combined elements from the research genres of voice research, participatory action research and image-based research and the students used a combination of auto-photography (participant-generated photography) and photo elicitation interviews to investigate how they perceive school and learning, perceive their identity as young persons and learners, and perceive the world in which they live. Through the processes of the research progressively, the students shared their perspectives with the adult researcher and brought themselves, and the researcher, to a deeper understanding of their unique point of view as learners in our schools, and as young persons in their own right. The findings of the research revealed the sound understanding the students have about their educational and personal needs, preferences, and agendas, and organised these into a framework representing the perspective of the students, accessible to their teachers as key stimulus for their development as distinctly middle level practitioners and their schools as authentic middle level education providers.

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This project has been reviewed, judged to be low risk, and approved by the researcher and supervisor under delegated responsibility from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

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Introduction

The research reported in this thesis carried out an exploratory study using a methodological approach combining elements from voice research, action research and image-based research genres. The purpose of the research was to investigate how early adolescent students perceive school and learning, perceive aspects of their identity as young persons and learners, and perceive the world in which they live. The findings produced from this investigation in turn, were intended to inform the design and development within the participating schools of pedagogy, curricula, and learning environments developmentally responsive (Stewart and Nolan, 1992) to the needs, characteristics, interests, agendas and preferences of the students of their early adolescent students.

The research involved working with 38 early adolescent students selected from Year Seven and Year 8 classrooms across three participating Intermediate and one newly established middle school in Hawke's Bay in 2004. The students worked as co-researchers (Atweh, Christensen, and Dornan, 1998) in the project alongside a university researcher. The teachers of the students participated also primarily as liaison teachers, whose role was to support the students as the key participants in the study. As co-researchers the students used image-based research methods of auto-photography (participant-generated photography) (Taylor, 2002) to explore their perceptions and experience in relation to the research focus outlined above. The photographs the students generated formed the stimulus for photo elicitation interviews (Clark, 1999) with the researcher that involved the students explaining their perspectives, and how these were represented in the images they constructed. The students participated in every phase of the research playing an advisory role to the researcher during the data analysis phase and verifying the authenticity of the analysis as reflective of their understandings and perspective at regular intervals.

The results generated revealed ways of working with, and studying, the perceptions of young people in ways that are different from most research conducted with students. Most often students are scripted roles as the subjects or objects of research (Graue and Walsh, 1998). The methodological approach devised for this research enabled the students to be positioned centrally as co-researchers investigating and exploring their own experiences and as partners in the research.

The findings of the research suggest new ways of understanding the perspectives of the students, theorising education for early adolescents and the role students should play ideally within the educative process, and suggest new ways of carrying out research with young people developmentally responsive to their needs and preferences and respectful of their voice.

The thesis report is structured in five chapters to address the five main components of the research as follows:

- **Chapter One: Concept and Design** describes how the research was conceptualised and how this conceptualisation led to the design of the methodological approach and overall design strategy used to implement the research.
- **Chapter Two: Research Design Applied** describes how the research was executed in practice using the image-based research methods to generate the perspectives of the students in relation to the focus of the research, reporting the research process chronologically through six main phases.
- **Chapter Three: Student Engagement with the Research Process** presents the results generated by the research relating to how the students participated within and across the focus areas of the research and how they perceived the efficacy of research process they participated in.
- **Chapter Four: Research Results** presents the perspectives expressed by the students using the image-based research methods as the results of the research. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Development (1979, 2005) was employed as the organising framework for the results.
- **Chapter Five: Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications** highlights key findings from the perspectives expressed by the students in Chapter Four as well as key findings from the trial of the methodological approach devised for the research reported in Chapter Three. The implications of the findings for future research with early adolescent students, and for pedagogy and curriculum design in the context of middle schooling are identified.