A Hopeful Participatory Engagement with Rural South African Children

Avivit M. Cherrington
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
avie@worldonline.co.za

Abstract

Having hope has been described as envisioning a future in which a person would like to participate (Jevne, 2005). What hopeful futures do rural South African children, who live in communities with high levels of poverty, and ravaged by HIV and AIDS and crime, envision? Following a transformative paradigm, with the idea of carving a social justice path, I approached a rural aftercare centre in South Africa and recruited 12 enthusiastic children. Together we embarked on a yearlong journey to understand the concept of hope. Applying a community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology, and using a variety of visual data generation activities, my doctoral study sought to investigate how visual participatory methods exploring rural South African children’s expressions of hope could make a difference to their personal hope. This article is a personal reflection of the ups and downs of my research journey, learning about hope and social agency in an African context alongside a group of school-age children. It is based on observations and personal field notes, reflections, and personal correspondence with staff at the centre as well as with my academic supervisor. The experience taught me that three key considerations are essential for a fruitful collaborative research engagement: the community partnership, the data generation process, and working together towards meaningful change and mutual benefit. This discussion tackles both the difficult ethical dilemmas and perceived successes I experienced working with rural children. My contribution is a response to the demand for, and growing interest in, social research literature that investigates complex social issues and produces community-based and collaborative knowledge.

Keywords: community-based participatory research, hope, participatory visual research, rural children

Introduction

Positive psychology posits that a prerequisite for positive behaviour change is a sense of hope (Larsen & Stege, 2010; Yohani & Larsen, 2009). Hope as a virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), a desire (Erikson, 1964), an outcome or goal (Snyder, 1994), a human becoming (Parse, 1999), a dynamic life force (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985), or an orientation (Jevne, 2005), exists inseparably from human existence (Stephenson,
Hope or hopefulness is multifaceted and can be expressed as follows: rationally—a cognitive dimension; as a feeling—an affective dimension; and as a way of relating or being—a behavioural dimension (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990; Dufault & Martocchio, 1985; Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995). Theories of hope show that how children think about the barriers they face and their access to sources of support can contribute significantly to their sense of hopefulness (Snyder, Lopez, & Shorey, 2003).

Snyder and Lopez (2007, p. 171) remarked that “in the privacy of their personal thoughts, people can imagine wonderful visions of their tomorrows”. They can; but what if they don’t? According to Snyder (2000), a hopeful person has goal-directed thinking and is able to find the agency and pathways to pursue these goals. But context and circumstances can significantly affect these constructs. In a South African study of national hope levels, Boyce and Harris (2012) concluded that self-perception of one’s position in society and status of marginalisation appear to affect individual hope levels. In conditions of poverty, people often perceive otherwise achievable goals as restricted, and their belief in the lack of access to resources or opportunities diminishes their sense of efficacy. Individuals or communities are, therefore, less likely to manifest the motivation or agency necessary to pursue their objectives (Lopez et al., 2000).

Children and adolescents who lack a sense of hope and agency are prone to making poor life choices. Without a vision of future goals, or a belief in themselves to achieve such goals, there is very little reason for children living in the grip of poverty to avoid actions that might cause them further harm in the future (Barnett & Weston, 2008; Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010). Thus, hope plays a key role in influencing risk decisions, and whether or not a child has hope depends on a range of factors: economic, cultural, social, and psychological. Erikson’s (1964) pioneering work on human development posited that hope is based on an infant’s early experiences of trusting relationships and her or his cumulative experiences in society. Emerging findings point further to the importance of self-esteem, connectedness, a sense of identity, and social influences on an individual’s sense of hope. “Hope has its roots in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental/sociological experiences” (Farran et al., 1995, p. 16). Hope, therefore, develops and exists within an individual, between individuals, and among individuals in a community or society. Within a collective culture, the interconnectedness of these levels is paramount. An individual’s development of hope (or hopelessness) is thus largely determined by the presence of hope, or lack thereof, in her or his society.

Despite the promise of freedom, peace, and prosperity, after more than 20 years of democracy South Africa still has the dubious distinction of being an unjust and divided society (Boyce & Harris, 2012). Furthermore, with high numbers of children orphaned or living in dire poverty, it would be easy to think of South Africa as a country steeped in despair. Nonetheless, several studies have shown that children are indeed hopeful despite living in adversity (Adamson & Roby, 2011; Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Herth, 1998; Makome, 2011; Yohani, 2008; Yohani & Larsen 2009). Peterson and Seligman (2004) believed that even in the most adverse conditions hope is still present and can be found, and Snyder, Cheavens, and Sympson (1997) proclaimed that most children are abundantly hopeful. Adamson and Roby (2011) conducted Snyder’s Children’s Hope Scale⁶ in South Africa with children and adolescents from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds, and reported surprising findings. Contrary to their expectations, orphaned and non-orphaned children reported similar levels of hope and, in fact, the majority of orphaned children demonstrated higher levels of agency than did their non-orphaned counterparts. The authors believed this could be due to the former’s reliance on a wider network of support, and concluded that hopeful behaviour, regardless of circumstances, is heavily dependent on access to supportive and caring relationships. Other studies of hope in South Africa have shown similar results (Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Isaacs & Savahl, 2014; Makome, 2011), highlighting the ubiquitous and universal nature of hope. My

---

⁶ The Children’s Hope Scale (CHS) developed by Snyder, Hoza et al. (1997) is grounded firmly on Snyder’s theory of hope, which defines hope as future goal oriented, and thus measures it according to two key constructs: pathways thinking and agency. The 12-item scale consists of four questions targeting the pathways component, four questions aimed at the agency component, and four neutral, filler questions.
personal experience as an educational psychologist working with children and families in disadvantaged communities around the country is that hope is always present to some extent and once discovered and nurtured, becomes contagious and can be used as a tool for building therapeutic wellbeing (Larsen & Stege, 2010). It is noted, however, that not all literature considers hope a strength and positive virtue. To some, hope is merely an illusion seducing people towards false beliefs and promises (Snyder, 2000). Jevne (2005) believed that the concerns about the detriments of hope exist because the construct is most often manifested in times of suffering and despair. In more recent literature, Larsen and her colleagues provided an interesting reframing of the concept of working with a client’s false or unrealistic hope, referring rather to the possibility of unshared hope between the client and counsellor (Larsen, Stege, Edey, & Ewasiw, 2014). In my view, this study considered hope as a human process or orientation of being, rather than an outcome, therefore it was not about what one hopes for, but about simply being hopeful about oneself.

The Benefits of a Hopeful Community

The two components necessary and essential for successful hopeful thinking are motivation (having a goal or vision) and a sense of agency. But can hope itself build thoughts of self-efficacy that can then be transformed into action? Farran et al. (1995) claimed that continuous success in one’s life, such as achieving goals or solving difficult problems, builds a person’s sense of confidence and ability to solve future difficulties. With increased hope, people’s altered self-image propels them towards further opportunities to develop, test, augment, and maintain their basis for hope. This fuelled my curiosity about the ability of hope to nurture and inspire children to becoming social agents of change.

Hope literature focuses mainly on the domain of the individual, but there are also significant commentaries on the power of hope in bringing about social or collective wellbeing. It is understood that hopeful thinking reflects a way of interacting with other people as well as with one’s environment (Snyder, 2000). If hope is a learning process, inherently interactive, then it is possible to say that hope begets hope (Snyder, Cheavens, & Symson, 1997). If hope plays such a significant role in personal growth and the wellbeing of an individual, what impact then, could building hope have on the wellbeing of a community or society? Webb (2007) argued that resolute hope (a form of hoping against the evidence) is not only personally transformative but can serve a “socially conservative function” (p. 76). When a person accesses her or his hope to facilitate psychological wellbeing, the consequence can well be a reduction in personal despair and disillusionment, thus sustaining social stability. Webb presented an additional form of collective hope that he named utopian hope or transformative hope (2007, 2012). This mutually efficacious mode of hope sustains the belief that members of a group or community collectively share: that their voices will be heard and their shared goals achieved, thus bringing about social transformation, or as Webb (2007, p. 79) put it, “the transformative power of collective praxis”.

Literature further demonstrates that making hope explicit during interventions or therapy, opens doors for individuals to think about, and intentionally access, previously unexplored sources and benefits of hope available to them (Larsen, Eddey, & LeMay, 2005; Yohani & Larsen, 2009). From the readings and my experience as a psychologist, I was confident that exploring hope with children could open possibilities for their personal growth, but I wanted the research to be meaningful on a communal level too.

Research that Makes a Difference

The transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2009) highlights that research that is grounded in assumptions that prioritise social justice and human rights, and makes use of methodologies that encourage collaboration and involvement, has the potential to realise greater social change. The conceptualisation and execution of this study was driven by current literature that asked: What difference does academic inquiry make, and what relevance does it hold for the community that participated in the research? (Ferreira, 2013; Mertens, 2009; Mitchell, 2011). This endeavour followed two interrelated paths of inquiry: first, to explore how rural South African children experience hope, and second, to investigate how the visual and participatory nature
of the data generation process could increase the participants’ personal hopes, and thus perhaps spark future positive thinking, behaviour, and interactions.

My readings on building therapeutic hope, and extending that to collective community hope, connected with Freire’s (1970) ideals of critical consciousness and praxis in research. His conviction that people are experts of their own learning underscores how an emancipatory research process can facilitate individuals to realise they have the power to make changes in their life or society. This ideology, I felt, was best encapsulated in the methodology of community-based participatory research (CBPR), which promotes the practice of research and action done with people and not on or for people (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). According to Reason and Bradbury (2001), using a participatory methodology in a study is not just applying a theory of knowledge, but making a political statement as well. It implies building democratic relationships as the primary form of inquiry. The political dimension of participatory research affirms the participants’ rights and abilities to engage with decisions affecting them, instead of just contributing to research that generates knowledge about them. This article tells a personal story of engaging a community through research. It outlines the process, critical reflection points, perplexing ethical dilemmas, as well as some of the challenges and successes observed. As the study is not yet finalised, a discussion on the emerging themes and the relevance of working on hope with rural children will be presented in a future article.

Engaging With a Community for Meaningful Change

In CBPR it is crucial to create and sustain collaborative, equitable partnerships with various community stakeholders throughout the research process, which in turn builds community confidence and trust. This study taught me that fruitful collaborative research engagement requires three key components for a solid foundation: community partnership, the data generation process, and working together towards meaningful change and mutual benefit. I will elaborate further on how these components were considered and unfolded in the study.

The community partnership

As a key role player in the study, it is imperative that before speaking about the selected community, I position myself. On qualifying and registering as an educational psychologist, I was fortunate to join an international faith-based organisation working in the field of HIV and AIDS. In my capacity as project officer, I travelled regularly, providing therapeutic services to vulnerable children and families, and conducting informal training with staff members carrying out community programmes. My work with both rural and urban communities imparted to me the value of collaboration and the strength of the human spirit, while shaping my work towards positive psychology and solution-focused therapy. Thus, my beliefs as a social researcher, that even the most marginalised groups have the power to effect change when afforded opportunities through respectful, participative processes, have strongly influenced this study.

I selected St. Kizito Children’s Programme, situated in a rural community centre in South Africa, with which I had developed a close working relationship over the years working as a psychologist in the NGO field (Image 1).
I knew that the level of trust and rapport that existed between myself and the staff would allow for a creative and participatory research environment. I have learnt in my fieldwork that traditional leadership is very important when working in rural communities and, having met with the traditional chief’s son on a previous occasion, I knew that he (on behalf of his father) would support my research endeavour. After gaining consent from the Office of Batlokoa Traditional Council and the board of St. Kizito, I conducted a workshop with the adult community carers at the children’s programme to discuss the nature and purpose of the study, as well as to demonstrate some of the visual participatory activities I intended to do with the participants. Participant selection was then left to the community carers. My only prompt was that it be a mixed group of boys and girls who possibly needed hope, and could benefit emotionally from working with me on hope. A group of 12 participants was agreed on, with ages ranging from 9 to 13 years (the most predominant age group attending the aftercare programme). There was no mention of language capability because it was agreed that there would always be a community carer to facilitate the workshops and assist me with translation. Unfortunately, it was early in my research process and eagerness got the better of me. I did not record the group conversation around participant selection. It would have been extremely valuable and interesting to understand what their criteria entailed.

Engagement with the data generation process

The process of learning, sharing, and understanding was iterative because data creation is a reflective and relational process (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). Although I had in mind the type of activities that I felt would engage the participants and elicit information and sharing in a fun way, once we started the engagement sessions, I had to be flexible and innovative. Working with children required me to be creative and adaptable, even more so because there was no shared language or culture, so I refer to this stage of the study as knowledge creation rather than knowledge extraction (Clark & Moss, 2011).

Choosing to use a multi-modal approach, which incorporated written words, visuals, and verbal expressions through a variety of arts-informed participatory tools, allowed the group to bring together a collection of extensive, information-rich, and colourful data to deepen our understanding of hope (Clark & Moss, 2011). I expected that exposing the group members to multiple activities and modes of expression would also play a role in the transformative agenda I had in mind. As both language and culture were potential barriers in the study, I examined how children’s identification with an image or self-presentation through a generated image could provide a powerful way of capturing their emotions and experiences, thus reducing their reliance on verbal articulation (Reavey & Johnson, 2012). In this study the visual tools often enabled the participants to communicate their ideas and feelings symbolically, and provided a “springboard for more talking, listening and reflecting” (Clark & Moss, 2011, p. 8). Within the arts-based umbrella, participatory visual research is social research influenced by, but not based in, the arts (Cole & Knowles, 2008). It can serve as a mode of inquiry, of representation and dissemination, and as a mode of transformation.
(Mitchell, 2011). It is a methodology that pays attention to the process of engagement and expression as integral to the data generated. Combining participatory research with visual data generation enabled me, as an adult, to view the world through the lens of childhood, which was less intimidating for the children and more importantly, acknowledged the children’s rights through respecting their views and, also, their silences (Clark & Moss, 2011). Visual methods are less obtrusive, more inclusive, and incorporate an element of confidence building by handing over agency to the participants rather than having them think about and answer researcher-defined questions (Literat, 2013; Reavey & Johnson, 2012).

From my first meeting with the children, we organised subsequent 3- to 4-day engagement sessions that continued over a period of almost a year, mostly during school holidays. The lengthy nature of the study meant that the group size fluctuated, and that not all the participants were present for all the sessions. With every visit, I brought along two large plastic crates filled with a wide variety of stationery, craft materials, and drama props (Image 2).

Image 2: CBPR is messy and chaotic. Below are the boxes with materials and stationery as well as all the audio-visual equipment.

The children had to initially be told, and reminded, that they could freely dig into the crates and access whatever they needed, however, as the engagement progressed, they soon helped themselves without prompting. I believe that offering the children choices gave them a sense of power and control, orienting them towards taking ownership of what they were creating (Driessnack, 2006). At the end of our hope engagement, I left all the crates and their contents at St. Kizito for the staff to use for the benefit of the children’s programme.

Over the months together, we drew our hopes, made collages on hope, modelled our hope experiences in clay, and mapped out our community. We participated in a photo-voice activity taking photos of places that were hopeful and not hopeful to us. We made posters, we talked, we played, we argued, and we laughed, and together we learned about our hopes and those of the community. At the end of each day, the participants could choose either to take their work home or to paste it on the walls of the centre to exhibit to other children. In most cases, participants scrambled to proudly display their work and, after a year’s worth of photographs and posters, there was a desperate shortage of wall space, and a reorganisation was in order (Image 3).
Because of the complexity of managing a video camera, two cameras, and two audio recorders, as well as my tendency to forget to switch any of them on, the staff recommended a 16-year-old youth who also attended the children’s programme to be my technical assistant. During the first week, I explained how everything worked, how to charge batteries, and how to frame certain activities. In the beginning, he would focus solely on close-ups of the drawings we were making rather than zooming out and capturing the children actually making them, and the group interactions. So it was also a learning curve for me to instruct and guide him on valuing the process (conversations and presentations) rather than only the end products (visual material generated). Over the weeks of our engagement, the technical assistant became an integral member of the group and often facilitated translations and even joined the participants in several of the hope activities adding his own ideas and posters to the group. The participants all knew him well and his walking between the children and engaging them with the video camera while they were busy with the various activities, generated familiarity and conversations.

The participants were also taught how to use the camera and video camera and were often encouraged to make use of these to capture their own creations as well as any aspect of the research engagement. I always made sure to place two cameras in the room; they were circulated amongst the participants and community carers who facilitated the sessions. This proved to be a valuable source of visual data, especially at times when I was participating in group activities and not always able to pay attention to what was going on around me. It was always a delight and surprise in the evenings, to go through all the data from the day’s work and pick up casual snippets of the children singing into the audio recorder, having fun posing in front of the camera in funny costumes, and sometimes even delivering private messages of thanks to me or one of the staff members.

On my final visit to the centre, I brought T-shirts printed with “Hope Champions” as per requests from the group (including the community carers who had become part of the group). I also provided each participant with a folder containing photographs of themselves through our yearlong engagement, photographs of the data each child had produced, and the photographs they themselves had produced in the photo-voice activity. A discussion was held about the importance of sharing knowledge and especially sharing with others everything we learned about hope and being hopeful. I showed them an example of a university dissertation and an academic journal, explaining what academic dissemination entailed, and asked them to look carefully through their personal folders and let me know what we, as a group, were going to share (Image 4).
I also asked how they intended to teach others in their school and community and share our new knowledge, and how this knowledge might improve the wellbeing of their families, friends, and the community. It was decided by the centre management, community carers, and participants that the Hope Champions should host an open day to present their work and teach others, so that the hope sessions could continue and expand. At the time of writing this article, the group were rehearsing a drama, writing a poem about hope, and preparing their posters.

**Working towards meaningful change and mutual benefit**

In transformative research, participation is not just espoused as a key value and characteristic, but should be seen as the purpose of the research (Mertens, 2009). Thus, this research engagement was more than a study “about” the children’s conceptions of hope; the process of mutual learning became vitally intertwined with their developing sense of self and identity as competent Hope Champions within their community, as well with as my own growing identity as a young academic researcher. As a psychologist my work entails facilitating positive change, and I was adamant that my doctoral research should do the same. Freire (1970) championed the potential of social research to foster conscientisation or consciousness-raising, and it was my intention to engage in a research process that produced knowledge that afforded the participants an opportunity to critically reflect on their inherent strengths.

Various studies have demonstrated that working with hope indeed makes a difference to psychological wellbeing. Yohani and Larsen (2009, p. 260), exploring hope with refugee children in Canada through art-based activities, remarked that the actual process of talking about hope allowed the children to “begin the process of intentionally accessing strategies” to enhance their own hope. They also observed that when children can identify and access sources of hope (whether internal or external) it provided them with a sense of support and belonging. A feeling of empowerment in turn fuelled further activity, resulting in stronger relationships to others. I too, witnessed how the children’s confidence in interacting with me and other children in the programme seemed to increase as our engagement extended. While I discuss below some personal observations and examples noted in my research journal, which I feel might demonstrate the participants’ movement towards an increased sense of hope and becoming social change agents, my comments are of course speculative. Without the final analysis of the entire engagement and inclusion of the children’s own views on their hope development, what follows is a collegiate sharing and reflection.

An incident that stands out clearly in my mind started me thinking about how participating in this research study might be affecting the children’s sense of self. A quick 2-day visit had been arranged at very short notice, but unfortunately, only half of the participants got word that I was there. The children’s programme itself was undergoing several changes at the time and subsequently there were only a few children hanging...
around the centre keeping themselves busy with games. As the group participants excitedly greeted me and proceeded to grab things out of the crates and search for the cameras, other children stood in a corner staring on with total befuddlement. Seeing the hesitation and shyness of the other children, three of my fellow researchers (child participants) on their own initiative took them by the hand, sat them down at the table and instructed me to take out some paper and crayons for everyone to draw on. Later that afternoon as the children ate their lunch, I enquired about the giggles and conversations taking place and was told that two of the younger (new girls) said they wanted to join “our” group because we were doing fun things that are important, but the rest of the group had explained to them that you have to first learn about hope and become a Hope Champion. Another example occurred at the end of the school year when I was invited to attend the year-end St. Kizito Christmas party, and was seated at a long, beautifully decorated table reserved for important guests. I noticed that the Hope Champions group had been allocated the decorated table next to ours instead of sitting on the floor with the rest of the children. It seemed to me that within the community their value and status had been elevated, and I couldn’t help wondering if perhaps, in some way, the engagement had managed to erase (or at least blur) the label of vulnerability that hung over them at the start of the research.

I also found that as the engagement progressed, the participants became more concerned with ensuring that their artwork and voices were adequately captured. Somehow along the way, my focus on ensuring that audio tapes were recording, that voices were sufficiently loud in noisy rooms, and that artwork was being photographed, had shifted. Before presenting their work, the participants would remind me to put the recorders on, and made sure the red light was on before speaking loudly and proudly. On many occasions, I would spot one of the group members putting their artwork on the floor and then photographing it themselves, or proudly pointing to their work on the wall and explaining to another child what it was about, and why it was important (Image 5). These instances made me wonder if the children had moved beyond being group participants into the realm of coresearchers, taking ownership of what was being produced.

Image 5: Participants taking ownership and agency over photographing their own art work for inclusion as research data.

Reciprocity and generativity in social science research involves creating authentic partnerships, give-and-take relationships, and benefit (Swartz, 2011). Thus, “if a researcher takes participants’ ideas and time, he or she is expected to give back in the way of resources, skills, employment, or training” (Mertens, 2009, p. 74). I tried to reciprocate in various ways. When visiting the centre I not only conducted research activities, but also provided much needed free counselling services to the community as well as training and support.
for staff at the centre. As the children started to become more critically aware of their own capacity to hope, how they could make positive differences in their community, and started to question existing norms and power imbalances that hampered their rights to participate in their life planning, I simultaneously gained a more critical awareness of my identity as a social researcher. I started thinking how I might make a positive contribution in the field of academia, and questioned the practices and guidelines that I felt might be hampering the rights of marginalised people to participate in, and contribute to, research affecting their lived realities.

**Thinking Critically about Research Ethics**

There were times when I had to critically reflect on conventions and guidelines of ethics in social research, and question their value and relevance within transformative, participative community engagements. For instance, issues of consent and anonymity become thorny issues for a researcher aspiring towards social action and emancipation. One argument opposing anonymity is that it demeans the notion of agency. For example, Baez (2002) stated that confidentiality is framed by concerns for a person’s choices, rights, and freedoms and thus, according to participative and transformational frameworks, scholars should advocate giving individuals the right to choose and argue for personal control rather than obscurity. Similarly, it can be said that anonymising participants chips away at the ideals of autonomy (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). Transformative research stands for exposing and resisting oppression that undermines equality, and sometimes to do so requires openness, transparency, and risk-taking—all of which are weakened by secrecy, often veiled as protection (Baez, 2002; Mertens, 2009; Prosser & Burke, 2008). Embarking on a visual participatory study with children and aimed at nurturing critical consciousness further caused me, at times, to question established codes of practice in research. Matters of informed consent and ownership must be negotiated on a completely different level when taking into account the exposed nature of visual research (Reavey & Johnson, 2012). I should note here, that I am not dismissing the legitimacy of anonymity for maintaining ethical practice within certain types of research. However, I believe that in this particular study, as might be the case with similar CBPR, the principle conflicted with the nature of the study, the authentic dissemination of the knowledge, and with my obligations to the community and participants (see Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011).

Informed consent is central to following a path of good ethical practice (Prosser & Burke, 2008), and was continuously reflected on with the participants and community carers at various stages of the engagement. I began the process of gaining entry and consent from the community several months before initiating the fieldwork, ensuring I was following the tacit rules of the culture and community. Once I had gained the support of the “gatekeepers” to the community, I worked with the community carers to attain consent from the guardians of the selected participants. At our first round-table discussion, the children were presented with a visual consent form (Mitchell, 2011) ensuring that the information was conveyed in an age-appropriate and fun manner. I felt that presenting the children with something visual was not only in line with the visual and participative nature of the study, but would also be fun and simple to follow—breaking some of the formality of academic research. It was also a way to accommodate the possible barriers associated with gaining consent where language, culture, and education levels differ. The same process was taken with the board members of the children’s programme who requested that the name of the organisation be mentioned in all published material and thus, their involvement be acknowledged.

The dynamic nature of social research with communities invariably leads to changes in context, culture, and methods, which forced me to think on my feet. Mertens (2009) urged that ethical choices in research must connect to the realisation that discrimination and oppression are pervasive in all communities, and that researchers have a moral responsibility to understand the communities in which they work and to challenge the maintenance of societal processes. Viewing children as competent coresearchers or collaborators also carries the understanding that the participants have intent, and are thus able to voluntarily choose what (and when) they want to share or participate in. Anyone who has ever worked with children in any capacity knows all too well that children of all ages choose to participate, or not. I trusted
that, given appropriate and sufficient information, the participants had the capacity and right to make considered decisions. The children were always informed ahead of time what activities would be conducted the following day and their relevance, and it was always made clear to them that participation (and attendance) was their choice. Towards the end of the engagement, the group was presented with the data generated in visual form and we again resumed a discussion on consent, permission, ownership, and anonymity. The participants and community carers were shown examples of both a picture that blurred the faces of those in it, and one which showed faces and names. This was accompanied by a discussion on possible negative or positive consequences to each of the choices. After much thought and deliberation, the children unanimously agreed that they wanted full acknowledgement for their contributions and participation.

A final consideration when embarking on community-based participatory research is the debate surrounding concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Many advocates of participatory visual research view these criteria as simply another form of restrictive gate keeping on legitimate knowledge (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Mertens, 2009). I too felt stifled at times, struggling to fit my research process and interests into the rigid boxes of standards and criteria. There were different questions swirling in my head about whether my research was fair and authentic, not just trustworthy. How would I know if it was? Was I aware of my own biases and assumptions, and how would I know what I did not know? Was I providing an environment for building trusting relationships and encouraging quality interactions, and how could I best honour everything that the participants and I were doing together, so that other readers and reviewers would understand, appreciate, and value what we had created and shared? I decided to venture beyond these criteria and consider alternative guidelines to ensure that my research was respectful, fair, and significant (see Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Mertens, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). I faced these challenges by ensuring that I spent the quality time needed for developing trust and openness, which allowed me to deal with the different levels and types of power and agendas that arose (Mertens, 2009). I revealed information about myself in conversation and in drawings, and shared with the participants personal photos of my life, family, and home. Advancing from a position of wanting to learn and share, I was open to the children’s questions and to building authenticity and trust. I was always mindful that “although ‘doing least harm’ and ‘doing most good’ must surely remain as the cornerstones of our work as researchers, these clearly are interpretative areas in and of themselves” (Mitchell, 2011, p. 13). In the end, it came down to a balancing act between my role as a researcher and my duties as a psychologist.

Discussion: Engagement and Collaboration is No Easy Task

Jevne (1991) suggested that people who cope well but hope little are flat and lack inspiration, while people who hope but cope poorly lack the ability to transform their hopes into action. This comment resonates well with what I believe I have often seen in rural South African children and youth; there is hope in abundance but very poor coping and motivation to act on it. Perhaps Snyder and Lopez (2007) are correct; wonderful visions of tomorrow do exist in all people but need a platform to be shared. However, modern society has increasingly bound up knowledge with power, and power with expertise (Field, 1991; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Working according to the assumption that knowledge is relational, I had to find ways to encourage and nurture collaboration; working together for the benefit of all. This meant I had to reinforce the notion that each and every person involved in the study contributed different roles, abilities, and expertise, all of which was valuable and necessary for the inquiry to proceed successfully (Akerstrom & Brunnberg, 2012). This created an environment of meaningful alliance in which neither the participants nor the researcher were sole experts, but the power and possibilities lay in the experience of sharing knowledge and ideas (Coppock, 2011). The focus was not on holding on to power or giving the children more autonomy, but rather on creating an environment in which both the children and the adults felt comfortable participating side by side (Wyness, 2012). The result was a symbiotic collaboration where the participants and researcher mutually empowered and strengthened each other’s understandings, and together strove for agency and growth.
The engagement was also dotted with moments of triumphs and achievements. The principle of action and “change efforts” is a complicated one in the field of psychology and community development, and proved to be so in this study as well. Critical thinking about oneself is by no means inconsequential, and I embraced the notion of research that opens up local possibilities for movement (Baez, 2002). What I could not have foreseen was what the participants and community stakeholders would do with this movement. During the research, one of the community carers who had been very involved with the group from the beginning secured full time employment in a large non-government organisation, and embarked on furthering his education in leadership and management. It also transpired that St. Kizito Children’s Programme had mentioned its involvement in the university research study in detail when applying for new funding, and when reporting back to existing stakeholders. Members of its management had also been invited (by the chief’s office) for the first time, to attend a local traditional council meeting. This was a sign that they had gained status in the eyes of the local governing structures, and that the programme was regarded as playing a valuable and vital role in the community.

Conclusion

There has been a call in the field of social science (for example, De Lange, 2012; Ferreira, 2013) for academic research endeavours to descend from their ivory towers and engage meaningfully with the communities around them, with an eye to mutual benefit and sustainable social change. I believe this article study sheds light on the potential of such a venture.

This learning engagement was not an easy one, especially for an adult researcher attempting to enter a foreign world—not only that of children but of the lived realities of rural African Sotho-speaking children. I am none of these; I am a white English-speaking woman raised in a middle-class neighbourhood in Johannesburg during the apartheid era, now pursuing a graduate degree. There was no question that issues of power, privilege, and race were front and centre in this study and had to be engaged with constantly. The experience has taken me into unchartered personal territory, pushed me way beyond my comfort zones, and exposed me to a kind of knowing and relating that I had not known before.

Conducting transformative, community-based research is far from a simple linear process. It is characterised by close collaboration between the researcher and the study participants as well as other community stakeholders, and such relationships can offer many challenges and surprises. This article pays homage to the remarkable children and community members who took this journey with me, and taught me so much more than they will ever know. I believe it is also a benchmark for other students in the social sciences to brave the academic waters and seek new ways to conduct authentic and meaningful research that truly matters. As the philosopher Habermas noted: “in the process of enlightenment, there can only be participants” (1974, as cited by Wallerstein & Duran, 2010, p. 29).

Acknowledgements

As partners in this study, I thank the board members and staff of St Kizito, as well as the Office of Batlokoa Traditional Council, without whose guidance and support this Hope Journey would not have happened. I also extend gratitude to the 12 Hope Champions who were so excited about teaching me and including me in their world.

This work is based on research supported by the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa (Grant UID number: 78783). I, as student funded through a grant-linked bursary, acknowledge that opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication generated by the NRF supported research are those of the author, and that the NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.
References


Baez, B. (2002). Confidentiality in qualitative research: Reflections on secrets, power and agency. *Qualitative Research, 2*(1), 35–58.


