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Participatory feedback and dissemination *with* and *for* children: reflections from research with young migrants in southern Africa

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Abstract

In this paper we discuss the process of feedback and dissemination that we adopted following research with children affected by AIDS in southern Africa. We outline our reasons for engaging in detailed feedback and dissemination, distinguishing between active or passive processes, and discuss the participatory methods we adopted. Through our reflections we consider feedback as an obligation to participants and dissemination as a potential agent of social change. In addition we evaluate the effectiveness with which we were able to truly incorporate the voices of young people in our dissemination and relinquish control of the outcomes to make them available for action among policy-makers. In conclusion we highlight that active dissemination, although not able to guarantee that research recommendations will be acted upon, at the very least opens dialogue and enhances understanding among those able to implement action.

Introduction

The call for geographical research to be more ethically and morally responsible has witnessed an increase in thought and writing on the ethics of research (Cutchin, 2002; Cloke, 2002; Hay, 1998; Smith, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001; Valentine, 2003). This has led Pain (2003: 655) to be optimistic that truly social geographies (those that seek solutions to social problems) are remobilizing. At the same time there is increasing awareness among funding bodies of the need to consider research ethics and several now require investigators to reflect on relevant ethical issues, if not to undergo an independent ethical review of their project as a condition for releasing funds (see for example, Nuffield Foundation, 2004). As part of this move for more morally responsible research (Cloke, 2002), the inclusion of appropriate dissemination strategies is now an integral part of research proposals with an expectation that research will be returned to participants and that dissemination will extend beyond academic outputs (see for example, ESRC, 2005).

Despite this, less than seven years ago Kitchin and Hubbard (1999: 195) recognised that although social geographers are 'happy to survey (and 'map') the exclusionary landscape, [they] rarely do much to change that landscape apart from the occasional token nod to 'planning and policy recommendations.'" In addition, most ethical guidelines and funding

agencies adhere to the idea that dissemination is both necessary and important. However, guidelines are often unclear with, for example, the British Sociological Association (2004) merely mentioning that researchers should 'spread their findings' and be cautious of funding agencies that restrict this process. Although there is a great deal of research that demonstrates participatory approaches and seeks to empower marginalised groups through the research process (Kesby, 2000), rarely has the ethical practice of how we disseminate our findings been discussed in detail. This appears to be crucial should we require our research to effect change by promoting the voices of participants among their communities/societies.

This paper considers the process of disseminating our recent research project that looked at young people's migration as a response to AIDS, and explores how employing a diverse range of feedback and dissemination strategies can counteract the problems associated with engaging both participants and user groups. Here we make two distinctions that we feel are helpful for researchers wishing to develop effective dissemination strategies that seek to be participatory in nature and action-oriented, handing over the research findings to communities and policy-makers². The first distinction that we make in the paper is between feedback, where we return the research findings to the original participants after comprehensive analysis, and dissemination, where we seek to have wider influence on policy and practice. In addition, we explore how these processes can be either passive, where the researchers take the lead, or active and participatory, where researchers engage with participants and practitioners³. Through drawing on examples from our research with young people and their communities, we argue that this latter 'active' approach is necessary in both feedback and dissemination for research findings to be effectively translated into meaningful solutions.

Participatory dissemination

Over the past decade many researchers working on children's geographies have adopted a perspective framed within the new social studies of childhood (Holloway and Valentine, 2000) and, as a result, recognise the need to work *with* rather than *on* children (James and Prout, 1997). This has resulted in a prolific increase in writing related to the ethics and practicalities of

² To ensure the anonymity of participants in this process only the analysed information was presented which highlighted issues rather than specific situations. In addition, all names used were pseudonyms.

³ The ESRC now employs the term 'knowledge transfer' in preference to 'dissemination' to emphasise that it should be a targeted practice. 'Knowledge transfer', however, still implies a process in which the targets (i.e. policy makers, practitioners etc.) are passive recipients of knowledge. This equates to what we have termed 'passive dissemination'. We prefer to use the term 'dissemination' (derived from: to sow seeds) to highlight that this process needs to go beyond a passive transfer of knowledge and is most effective when it involves those targeted in an active role.

undertaking research with young people (Matthews and Limb, 1999; Schenk and Williamson, 2005; Valentine, 1999). Previously, adults have underestimated the competencies of children in research often relying on adult testimonies as representations of children's perspectives and lived experiences. However, within the new social studies of childhood, where children are viewed as social actors in their own right, adults cannot presume to have insight into children's social and cultural worlds and need to recognise that they themselves are the experts (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). A key implication here has been the need to make research participatory (see Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Hart, 1992). This has resulted in research innovations that seek to empower young people in the research process (Alderson, 1995), both through the use of self-directed methods such as photography and peer interviews (Burke, 2005; Young and Barrett, 2001) and more specifically involving young people in the design and implementation of the research (Hart, 1992).

Despite the greater inclusion of participation and empowerment as complementary processes in research with young people, where researchers are keen to advocate children as active participants in their own lives (Holloway and Valentine, 2000), there is little evidence for similar discourses regarding children's participation in research feedback and dissemination strategies. In many research projects, young people are passively fed back to rather than actively engaged in feedback and dissemination processes. For example, McDowell (2001) discusses the ethics of involving young men in her research but reflects that she did not offer her participants an opportunity to be involved in the interpretation or writing of the findings before disseminating them to a wider audience. She further highlights that although adults are often now being considered in the dissemination process, this has not really been a part of research with young people.

Valentine's (1999) paper on the ethics of working with young people is one of the few to include issues of dissemination and points to the need for young people to be actively involved in interpreting outcomes through appropriate strategies. Although few concrete examples exist as to how this can be achieved, some notable exceptions are emerging where children's involvement is apparent, for instance where young people's voices are included in action-oriented research. The children's rights agenda, emerging from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1990), advocates children's involvement in decisions that affect their lives and this has had implications for the ways in which children are now included in action research.

Within the strands of development studies and planning research, children's participation in the research process has received more attention. In particular Robert Chambers' (1997) work on Participatory Rural Appraisal as a method for involving communities in their own development has been devised to incorporate learning as a key strategy under Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), which has been adapted for work with children (IIED, 1996). This places emphasis on communities themselves learning through the research process, which perhaps also reflects a growing concern with the outcomes of research, including dissemination, and how communities can be involved in seeking to inform policy responses to particular issues (Laws et al, 2003). Similarly in planning, action-research has been used to involve children in contributing to the design of their local environments. The Growing Up in Cities project (Chawla, 2001) illustrates a number of examples of the inclusion of children in both research and policy dialogue. However, involving children in the dissemination of such research is, more often than not, achieved through formal verbal presentations, which Valentine (1999) points out can be channels designed by adults where young people lack control over the process of translating research into action. We argue here that young people's involvement in dissemination can be more accurately achieved using participatory techniques such as drama, ranking/mapping exercises, posters and games (see Boyden and Ennew (1997) for a description of these techniques).

The strategies we discuss in this paper demonstrate our attempt to engage with active feedback and dissemination through involving the young research participants and the communities that we worked with during the research phase. Our rationale for doing this was to move beyond our earlier passive feedback to participants and user groups via a mailed report. Such passive methods are unlikely to have any lasting influence. It is not possible to know whether reports ever reach the intended recipients (as personnel move jobs) or indeed whether the reports are ever read (due to other commitments). We hoped that by giving young people a voice both in the research and through dissemination we would have a greater and more relevant impact on the policy process and provide a more accurate representation of the issues raised in the research. We advocate that researchers engaged in traditional research projects, which may have direct messages for policy, should do more than simply provide communities with research results. Involving participants in the processes of feedback and dissemination not only provides an opening for comments on the analysis and interpretation of their lives, but also

creates an opportunity for ownership of the findings to be handed over which creates a much wider influence.

Feedback and dissemination: reflections from research with young migrants

The rationale for feedback and dissemination

The dissemination activities that we describe and analyse here follow on from a research project examining children's migration as a context specific response to the AIDS pandemic in southern Africa. The initial research was conducted in 2001 in urban and rural communities in Malawi (which has a relatively long-standing experience of AIDS) and Lesotho (which has had a more recent, but particularly virulent, onset of the pandemic). Children aged 10 –17 years, and mainly in upper primary school, formed the majority of research participants, although some street children, children residing in orphanages and children out of school were also included to gain a more complete picture. Children participated in questionnaires and drawings (n=822), 31 focus group discussions (n=226: approximately 7 children in each) and making migration storyboards (n=65). In addition interviews were conducted with guardians who had received children into their care (40, equally divided between each location), local officials (including teachers and village chiefs), NGOs and relevant government departments. The results highlighted the special conditions faced by children engaged in AIDS-related migration and were disseminated widely in academic publications (see Ansell and van Blerk, 2004a; 2005; van Blerk and Ansell, 2006; Young and Ansell, 2003a).

During the initial phase of the research, feedback and dissemination were important aspects of the agenda. Posters of the preliminary results were returned to the schools, while a presentation was made to invited academics, representatives of government departments, NGOs and donor agencies, with the promise of a more detailed report to follow. In both places, although particularly in Lesotho where AIDS was only just becoming a high profile issue, few senior officials attended. On returning to the UK and completing the data analysis, we felt that the research had an important message, but recognised that the feedback and dissemination process we had conducted as part of the research had been very passive and was therefore unlikely to promote action. This was problematic for us given that one of the research aims explicitly sought to promote the voices of AIDS-affected young people. We felt this could not be achieved without the active involvement of participants. In addition, an external reviewer of the project report suggested that we should provide more detailed feedback to participants and highlighted that there was a need to develop specific recommendations on how the findings

could be translated into actions by governments, NGOs and donors. In particular the reviewer mentioned that NGOs could be involved in developing strategies to address the issue through, for example, training and videos. We applied for further funding for dissemination activities and in January 2003 received confirmation of the award.

We felt that it would be inappropriate for dissemination to take the form of a top-down, one-way provision of information (see Chambers 1997). Instead a more fruitful form of dissemination is to bring researchers, research communities, policy-makers and practitioners together to engage in productive dialogue around the project findings, in order to achieve local, national and international awareness of the issues. By bringing together the voices of participants and policy-makers we aimed to foster a generation of strategies that are practical, effective and widely acceptable to all (Chambers, 1997; Chawla, 2001). Our dissemination strategies included return visits to each of the research sites and had three key objectives. First, we sought to provide detailed and active feedback to participants of the fully analysed research results involving them in discussing the findings and commenting on the analysis. Second, we sought to promote the voices of AIDS-affected young people, and their communities, by giving them the opportunity to actively participate in dissemination that was designed to think through strategies for improving the supporting/coping mechanisms available for young migrants among their peers, families/communities, and policy-makers. Finally, the dissemination aimed to work actively with policy-makers to develop more effective and policy-relevant strategies to enable NGOs and governments to address the interests of migrant children in their work in AIDS-affected communities.

Key areas for dissemination

The research raised three areas of relevance to policy-makers and practitioners, which we felt required further development through dissemination. First, the findings raised the importance of empowering children to participate in the migration decision-making process. Many of the difficulties that children affected by AIDS faced in relation to migration could be overcome if they were more familiar with the people and places they were moving to and if they could participate in discussing their migration preferences (Young and Ansell, 2003b). Second, the research highlighted that some of the key difficulties faced by migrant children, particularly resource distribution and unequal treatment within the new household, were generally exacerbated by poverty. Additionally, economic hardship within receiving households was often the trigger for onward migrations. If costs, such as education, could be reduced or financial

support given, this would mean children would be more readily accepted into relatives' homes and this would diminish the need for multiple migrations (Ansell and Young, 2004). Finally, the research questioned the role of communities as the main support for young migrants, instead highlighting that it is the extended family that absorbs much of the burden of care. Although much policy concerned with AIDS in southern Africa emphasises the role of communities in orphan care, children being cared for in a particular community may not be fully accepted as they are relative newcomers. This suggests that policy needs to re-consider the role of family members in providing support (Ansell and Young, 2004). These points framed the feedback and dissemination.

The feedback and dissemination activities

Providing feedback is an ethical imperative of any research with young people (Hart, 1992). Therefore, with the assistance of a translator, in each of the four communities we conducted school-based workshops with children that involved providing feedback on the research, and PLA activities where they discussed the problems and possible solutions. Activities included developing strategies with the children to improve their own situations, as the UNCRC (1990) stipulates that policy interventions aimed at assisting children should take into account their own views. De Konig (1997) and Johnson (1996) demonstrate that PLA techniques, including drama, have the potential to empower children to develop their own ideas. Therefore the PLA techniques employed included a ranking exercise, where the young people placed the difficulties raised in the research in order of importance and suggested solutions including the potential roles that could be played by a range of actors. Once the most pertinent issues were highlighted, we created scenarios by amalgamating the main problems (of moving to urban and rural areas) from which the children created and performed two dramas. This was achieved by first discussing with the children the process of organising the plays, which included choosing characters, developing short scenes and rehearsing. The dramas were then performed to the other group and to the rest of the school, to actively disseminate the findings. In addition the dramas were video-recorded⁴ to ensure children's ideas and voices could influence the wider dissemination strategies (Cornwall, 1997; Lloyd-Laney, 1997; Smithies, 1997).

⁴ Although it is acknowledged that the videoing process could have been made more participatory by training the children to use the equipment, time constraints prohibited this and the recording had to be undertaken by one of the researchers. The children were, however, given the opportunity to watch their plays and comment on them.

Following the workshops with children, similar discussions took place within the local communities, where there was an opportunity for residents and local community-based organisation members to discuss the findings and to develop possible solutions at local and national levels. It was the intention that the children would participate in these meetings and perform their dramas, which could then act as prompts for discussion (De Konig, 1997). In practice, this was not possible and instead we explained the children's ideas from the posters they produced in the other PLA activities to ensure active dissemination, if from a more distant vantage point. Drawing on Hewitt (2000) and Laws et al (2003), we felt that involving the communities and local leaders in commenting on the children's suggestions and then adding their own ideas was important both for developing knowledge of the issues and to foster a greater sense of local ownership for the project. They identified a number of potential actions that could be taken by various actors including themselves (community members), NGOs, governments and teachers, putting them in a position to further disseminate the research among local NGO and government networks when we, the researchers, left.

The output from these sessions in the form of posters and videos was fed into a workshop for policy-makers and practitioners in each country from the Government, national and international NGOs and donors. The workshops were conducted in English, the administrative language of both countries. Again the findings were presented followed by discussion and work-groups for the development of specific policy-recommendations related to the policy objectives. The videos and posters produced by the children and communities were screened as part of this process allowing their voices (in local languages) to infiltrate the workshops (Harding, 1997). The main purpose here was to translate awareness of the issues into concrete actions, using the expert advice of local practitioners in the development of supportive and practical strategies. The results from all stages of the dissemination activities, together with the findings from the original research, were then fed into the production of a training manual for community workers (Ansell and van Blerk, 2004b), which also aimed to facilitate the dissemination and development of strategies among policy-makers and practitioners, locally, nationally and internationally.

The process of feedback and dissemination

Drawing on the feedback and dissemination activities outlined above, the remainder of the paper critically examines our efforts in terms of their ability, first of all, to create an active dialogue of information sharing and discussion and second, to promote young people's voices

in the policy process. For this we consider three areas of concern: difficulties of accessing past research participants, the distinction between feedback and dissemination and the mechanisms through which voices can be promoted.

Difficulties of access

As outlined, one of our key objectives was to involve research participants in active feedback and dissemination, particularly given the limitations of the feedback process during the fieldwork phase of the research. Although a copy of the research report had been sent to interested parties we were keen to go 'beyond the report', as Laws et al. (2003: 191) note that many of the people research needs to reach will never read a full report. The impact of sending the report was further limited as many of the copies did not reach their intended destinations, either because staff had moved on and not shared the information, or due to deficiencies in postal systems.

The greatest difficulty we faced in providing more detailed feedback to the children was tracing some of those who had participated in the research, including street children, out-of-school children and children in care. In addition, the two-year time delay in returning to the field (necessary for fully analysing the data) meant that we were not able to access all the school children that had participated. Some had already left primary school and could not be traced, while others had moved from the community. Tracing children was particularly difficult in the more transient urban communities where the schools and communities were larger. In all cases we were able to access a proportion of those who originally participated, yet given the difficulties we faced we have to critically examine the benefits of making return visits specifically for feedback purposes.

Although we missed many participants, there were additional benefits to returning to the field. First, the activities allowed us to provide more nuanced results to the participants and to obtain their reflections on our interpretations. This provided us with an understanding of what were the most pressing issues arising from the research and how the young people themselves interpreted possible solutions. However, the temporal dimension to the research needs to be considered in that the young people we worked with had changed and developed, as had potentially their circumstances, meaning that the issues of most importance to them may have also changed. Nonetheless, involving the children in the feedback process enabled us to highlight the current issues that need addressing. In addition to working with the children who

had participated in the research, we were also keen to disseminate the findings beyond these participants, to raise awareness among their peers. The research had highlighted that other children can either be a source of support to young migrants or hinder their integration into new communities, through lack of knowledge and awareness of their situation. We felt it important to raise awareness as part of our dissemination. This was achieved by working with our participants to create a presentation for the schools, which encouraged participation and discussion.

Accessing the communities raised similar problems. The two-year gap between research and dissemination seemed too long, and in some cases the communities were uninterested in hearing further reports on our results. In all communities we were, however, able to hold discussions with community leaders and AIDS community care workers who were interested in translating our findings into practical responses. We were particularly successful at accessing the communities in Malawi where community meetings were organised and enabled much wider dissemination beyond the initial research participants. In one community we worked with a youth drama group who performed sketches raising awareness of the social problems associated with AIDS and we had very stimulating and fruitful discussions regarding the policy implications of our research with suggested solutions for supporting young migrants. Had we had longer in the field we may have been able to organise similar meetings in Lesotho as other events in the rural community there clashed with our return visit. This raises issues over the often very short time frame that researchers have to disseminate their findings.

Feedback and dissemination: integrated yet different processes

Cahill (2004:273) begins her paper in *Children's Geographies* with this quotation from one of her research team members: "I never thought of research as a tool to talk back to the community...". This quotation introduces a discussion that raises the possibility that research can effect social change and complements our argument that although feedback is central to the process of wider dissemination, these processes need to also be considered as separate, yet integrated, and active rather than passive. Passive feedback and dissemination was all that we had managed to achieve as part of the fieldwork phase but we realised this was not enough for contributing to social change. Scheyvens et al (2003) highlight that research, and dissemination we would argue, needs to be participatory and action-oriented in order to make an impact. To do this we needed a wider set of strategies that would create outcomes for influencing policy and promoting practical solutions to problems. For this to be achieved, and

for research to have any possibility of sustained and real impact, researchers need to go beyond providing passive feedback and dissemination.

In our return visits we fed back to the research participants the more detailed and nuanced results that had arisen from a period of in-depth analysis. Although the participants engaged actively in the process, by discussing and commenting on what we had found and presenting this to wider local audiences, had we stopped here, our feedback and dissemination would not have been very wide reaching. This may have satisfied the ethical requirements of returning our research to those who participated (Valentine, 1999), and may have aided some improvements in the lives of local young people through awareness-raising among communities and peers, but it would not have incorporated their voices in policy dialogue. Our wider (policy-oriented) dissemination would have been little different from that of the social geographers, highlighted by Kitchin and Hubbard (1999), that provide tokenistic policy recommendations when they reach the end of a research project.

This highlights two important issues: first, the link between feedback and dissemination as active processes and second, the question of scale in dissemination. The link between feedback and dissemination is important in that we move away from considering dissemination as merely informing the participants we work with of the research outcomes and consider it as a process that can influence policy. For this reason, feedback can be only one part of dissemination, which must go beyond returning findings. The inclusion of workshops, drama and PLA activities enabled us to reflect on our findings with the participants and to feed these reflections into workshops with user groups providing not only a more accurate representation of the results and highlighting the most pressing issues, but also providing insight into participants' suggestions for possible solutions. In some cases these solutions are easily implemented and simply involved raising awareness of the difficulties children entering new families and communities face through local dissemination among the wider community, while others required greater action by practitioners and policy-makers. These could then be discussed with policy-makers for inclusion in the training manual and wider policy development. This illustrates the importance of the link between feedback and dissemination, demonstrating how the feedback process allowed us to obtain a more accurate representation of the results and incorporate this into the wider dissemination process.

This clearly moves our attention to the question of scale. At community level, it is important to disseminate to local audiences, who are actively engaged with the research participants, and can impact on their quality of life through how they treat young migrants. Our dissemination strategies among school children and local communities raised awareness of the problems of young people who move as a response to AIDS. This sensitisation process aimed to effect change at the community level. However, we argue that dissemination must also occur at the national and international levels through policy dialogue in order to generate any lasting and wide reaching outcomes.

Promoting voices through dissemination

The process of engaging with participatory dissemination leads on to the related issue of how participants are involved in the process. Although we used a variety of participant-centred methods in the research itself, we could not really claim to have undertaken participatory research, as the agenda was set prior to entering the field. Through dissemination, we wanted to ensure that the participants had the opportunity to comment on the findings from their own perspective and also to consider what should be fed into policy dialogue in terms of what was required to address their needs. As previously outlined, we implemented different strategies for this as we wanted to ensure that participation was not merely tokenistic. As Valentine (1999) points out, it is important to choose strategies that young people will feel comfortable with as a means to represent their views. We wanted the young people and their communities to have a voice in the workshops that we ran for policy-makers and practitioners but practically and financially we were not able to do this face-to-face. Further we did not want to replicate situations where young people are merely 'on show', uncomfortable in a context that they are unfamiliar with and expected to speak to a formidable audience. Under such conditions children's participation is heavily directed by adult researchers.

To overcome the tensions between giving children a voice in the workshops and appropriating their voices for our own purposes, we selected video and posters as means for expression and promotion of young people's voices in policy dialogue. The aim here was to allow the children to present the issues they felt important for discussion in a relaxed and comfortable environment. We felt this was an effective strategy to employ as the very personal and difficult circumstances some young people face could be portrayed without reference to individuals. Drama helped to reduce stigmatisation which may have occurred had we asked particular children to tell their stories. In addition we were not seeking to find solutions for individual cases

but to highlight the more general problems and difficulties faced by young migrants and explore ways in which replicable solutions could be developed. The dramas and posters worked well in the workshops providing a stimulus for discussion as well as drawing attention to the reality of the situation many young AIDS-affected migrants are faced with.

We struggled with two potential criticisms of this approach. First, where young people are not physically present, they are unable to engage actively in dialogue with policy-makers and therefore do not form part of the wider discussion. By removing the young people from the physical and temporal space where the workshop took place we also removed them from the ensuing discussions. This is clearly problematic in our attempt to promote their voices and there is no easy solution. However, exposing young people to intimidating circumstances would not have been any more fruitful in promoting their voices in the discussion. Instead we might have explored methods of training some of the young participants to act as facilitators introducing their own dramas and posters and later involving them in discussions. This would require more time and resources than we had available but might be one effective means of dealing with the tensions of promoting rather than appropriating young people's voices.

The second concern that we faced was not being able to ensure that the ideas and suggestions made would actually enter into policy or be used by practitioners supporting children affected by AIDS. This is an inevitable consequence of translating local research findings into more general contexts. Unlike action research, where the researcher aims to effect change in a community and participatory research, where the researcher enables the community to develop their own solutions, participatory dissemination involves children in highlighting the issues to a wider arena but does not have any control over the process of implementation. This is problematic if we are seeking to promote young people's voices, and raises questions over whether we are providing false hope to participants. In order to achieve success at this wider scale, researchers need to relinquish control of their research and find ways of handing it over to policy-makers to take action. In our case the active process that we created in the dissemination workshops was a means for doing this. By encouraging policy-makers and practitioners to engage with the research results and possible solutions, we facilitated their ownership of the material. Through this we envisage that they will then feed these recommendations into their own projects and programmes. Although we cannot be sure that this will be achieved, we can have more confidence in effecting wider social change through

this strategy than we had with more passive forms of dissemination because of our facilitation of discussion and policy dialogue.

Conclusion

In reflecting on how far we managed to achieve our objectives we consider whether dissemination was an appropriate means for impacting on policy and promoting the voices of young people within this. With respect to informing policy and implementing solutions to the problems faced by young migrants, we feel that we were more able to achieve this through additional feedback and dissemination than would otherwise have been possible. It is important to reflect upon issues of timing, as it is here where there is always a compromise in how far these objectives can be reached. For instance, restrictions, related to other teaching and research commitments, on when researchers are able to undertake feedback and dissemination can result in a long delay before returning to the field. As previously noted, this can have a negative effect on feedback, as we could not re-access all the original participants. The time delay, however, proved to be advantageous for our dissemination, in this instance producing more productive dialogue with policy-makers and practitioners. When we conducted the research in 2001, AIDS was only just emerging on the agenda in Lesotho and we did not attract a great deal of attention from the Government and NGOs. When we returned to the field nearly two years later, AIDS had a much higher profile and our research was enthusiastically received. This highlights that the time delay in returning to the field can have additional benefits for dissemination among policy-makers and practitioners. In addition, we were able to develop much stronger dialogue the second time as we were much more familiar with the analysed data. We were also able to move beyond passive feedback and work with our participants to seek solutions and raise awareness.

Therefore, we can confidently state that we achieved a high level of awareness raising of the important issues and promoted dialogue among local communities, NGOs and governments, we can be less confident in whether we were able to influence policy and effect wider change. Although the training manual has been returned to practitioners, how far the suggestions have been implemented is not known. Despite this, by employing active and participatory dissemination we feel we were able to facilitate a process where the research outcomes could be relinquished by the research team and handed over to practitioners and policy-makers to take forward the necessary action.

The second objective of our dissemination phase was to promote the voices of AIDS-affected young people. Again by engaging with active participatory dissemination we were able to promote the voices of young people in two ways: first through their active involvement in disseminating the research to their communities but also by incorporating their voices in policy dialogue. However, due to time constraints and the difficulties associated with tracing more transient groups of children such as street children, out-of-school children and children in care, we did not run dissemination workshops with those groups. In an attempt to ensure that the needs of such children were accounted for in the dissemination process, NGOs working with the three groups were invited to attend the policy workshops. On reflection, more time in the field would have enabled a more inclusive strategy in this regard. Further, additional time may have facilitated the process of promoting young people's voices in policy dialogue had we been able to train some of our participants to attend the policy workshops and participate in the discussion.

In conclusion we argue that by linking feedback and dissemination as integrated and active processes it is possible for social research to provide more than small-scale local solutions through action-oriented research, or tokenistic recommendations to unknown user groups, who may not have a full understanding of the research. Active participatory feedback and dissemination can help to overcome some of the problems associated with creating dialogue between outside researchers, participants and national and international policy-makers.

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