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9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The final chapter reviews the research experiences presented throughout the volume in an attempt to reflect on important issues raised from the contributors. Focusing on individual experience from the outset contributed to our understanding of those aspects which made the research project meaningful for the researcher and the researched, and important for the field of study.

CONTEXTUALIZING OURSELVES

A critical synthesis of our research projects began with an appreciation of the distinctive features of individual context, which determined the selected research theme and guided a series of decisions, we were called to make, throughout our work.

Importantly, all the stories collected in this volume were informed by the researchers' background experiences and conceptualizations of disability issues, which urged them to engage with disability issues. To begin with, although the social model of disability became a guiding idea of our chosen research topics, each one of us came to know and appreciate it in different ways. Some of us grew up with dominant charitable and medically driven ideas and thus, the acquaintance with the social model of disability was influential in changing predetermined professional and/or research trajectories (for example, D'Alessio, Gavrielidou-Tsielepi). Others were raised to believe that living with disability is 'normal', but yet again, discovering the social model of disability proved liberating and life changing (for example, Reichart). Furthermore, despite our common interest, our background knowledge/studies varied, influencing dramatically the way we sought to link theory to practice, through research. Some of the authors were education graduates with work experience in mainstream class or special education settings (for example, D'Alessio, Gavrielidou-Tsielepi) and were more interested in employing the social model of disability for research exploring the nature and enactment of educational policies. Other authors attempted to explore the place of the social model of disability in a particular work setting they were familiar with or in a legislative framework (for example, Kelly, Reichart) and in these cases, both background knowledge and personal experience of disability were closely related to the choice of topic.

Another important conceptualization is that the contributors of this volume when choosing their research topics were driven by their own personal interests, and influenced by their background studies and their cultural context. For example, one

important issue was the gap between policy and practice in the implementation of integration and the reproduction of special education under the name of inclusion. The authors from Italy (D'Alessio), Cyprus (Gavrielidou-Tsielepi) and Greece (Spandagou) sensed the dangers inherent in misinterpreting integration policies in their countries and they formulated their research questions to address this issue.

Last but not least, it seems that most of us shared a feeling of gratitude to our supervisors and mentors who introduced us to the social model of disability and at the same time opened new ways of thinking. In many cases, their suggestions to attend a conference or to read a book defined the way many of us finalized our topic. Our own reading and familiarization with the work of key authors in the field (for example, Len Barton, Michael Oliver, Colin Barnes) are remembered as influential and thought provoking.

Overall, all of us as novice researchers, were driven by a desire to contribute to change.

POSITIONING OURSELVES IN THE RESEARCH

Our collection of personal stories suggests that personal identities (shaped by gender, age, ethnicity, impairment, background knowledge/studies, and so forth.) defined our intention of research to a great extent. According to Barton and Clough (1995), the researcher needs to act as a 'critical friend' who is aware of the responsibility and privilege stemming from his/her role and who will endevor not to reproduce the system. Many of us addressed these issues as important for the selection of the research topic and other stages of the research.

Particularly, the fact that some of us were non-disabled researchers raised important issues that we needed to consider regarding our position in the research. The role of non-disabled researchers has been critically debated within disability studies, with concern attached to the lack of shared experience between disabled research participants and non-disabled researchers, and thus the absence of authenticity in the research process (Duckett & Pratt, 2001; Kitchin, 2000). In response, Oliver (2009) asserts that it is a question of control rather than experience. For Barnes and Mercer (1997) because non-disabled researchers live in a disablist society, non-disabled researchers are able to contribute to both disability theory and research. On the one hand, the non-disabled contributors of the volume addressed their concerns regarding their positioning in the research and the right they had to conduct disability research (for example, D'Alessio, Spandagou). On the other hand, the disabled contributors of the volume acknowledged that regardless of their experience of disability, it was not until their acquaintance with the social model of disability that they felt liberated. Being freed by the social model, released them from a fear or anxiety about their right to be involved in the research (for example, Kelly, Reichart).

Our position in the research was further influenced by gender. Some of us explained that being a female researcher influenced our research at some point or

determined important methodological decisions regarding the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Thomas (2006) reports on the gendered experience of disability, which was emphasized by disabled feminists and asserts that being a disabled woman can be more difficult than being a disabled man. However, whether researching from a disabled or non-disabled position, most of us acknowledged the fact the gender did play a role at different stages of the research process. For example, Kelly reports that in the presence of a woman researcher, women participants appeared more willing and co-operative than male participants. Furthermore, being a young woman was also reported by some of the researchers as a factor which influenced the way they were accepted by the participants. For example, Spandagou notes that being a woman in her mid-twenties made her look like an undergraduate student and not as a researcher, something which gave her access to information that she might not have gained otherwise.

DECIDING UPON OUR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One shared aspect of our work is that we all placed the social model of disability at the centre of our research, without rejecting the use of broader theoretical frameworks. Such approaches would have been considered problematic a few years ago, as initial discussions about disability research emphasized the need to strictly locate research within the social model. Barnes provides an explanation about why we, as novice researchers, viewed the social model of disability as the guiding ideology of research while at the same time we used it with other theoretical ideas:

> A decade ago adopting an overtly social model perspective represented something of a radical departure from conventional wisdom in discussions of disability and dependency. But this is no longer the case. Indeed, in some respects the social model has become the new orthodoxy. (Barnes, 2003, p. 10)

Some of us positioned the research in disability studies and others in inclusive education research and thus, we enriched our theoretical framework with ideas developed in these fields. One important thesis is that researchers operating under the theoretical assumptions of the same field (for example, disability studies) may combine different approaches according to their own conceptualizations of the research project. For example, Kelly explained that she adopted a socialist feminist perspective enhanced by the social model and Foucauldian ideas in order to research the practical influences of the social model in a welfare setting.

RESOLVING METHODOLOGICAL DILEMMAS

A recurring theme in our writings was the discussion around the potential of adopting an emancipatory research methodology or combining other research paradigms that seemed more appropriate in answering our research questions. Oliver (1992) located emancipatory research in the social model of disability and

emphasized its relationship with the goals of the disability movement. Stemming from critical theory, emancipatory research became central in discussions around disability research, with disabled activists who strongly believed in the approach (Barnes, 2003; Barnes & Mercer, 1997; Oliver, 1992; 1997; Zarb, 1992; 1997) and others who recognized the importance of alternative research paradigms in conceptualizing both disability and disability politics (Goodley, Lawthom, Clough & Moore, 2004; Shakespeare, 1997; Thomas, 1999). The choice of an emancipatory research approach was a more straightforward option for researchers who experienced disability, although the practicalities of such an approach were appreciated, particularly when working towards doctorial research (for example, Beauchamp-Pryor). Some of us, regardless of whether we were researching from a disabled or non-disabled position, discussed the option of an emancipatory research approach, but decided to adopt different approaches for different reasons. For example, Kelly adopted an ethnographic approach mainly because prior to becoming disabled she used to work for the welfare setting she chose to research. Our choices indicate the value of different types of research in contributing to the emancipation of disabled people in different ways. The examples presented in this volume demonstrated that the divide between 'activism' and 'the academy' (Goodley & Moore, 2000) can be overcome, not necessarily by conducting emancipatory research, but when researchers contribute in furthering conceptualizations of disablement.

DATA COLLECTION, DATA ANALYSIS AND WRITING-UP

Data collection and analysis is a phase full of surprises for novice researchers. During data collection, researchers may end up with more data than they initially expected or they may face barriers in detecting the predefined data. D'Alessio, for example, explained that during data collection, she had to detour from her original goal because the interactions taking place in the research setting pushed her to collect a different kind of data. Allan and Slee (2008) note that data analysis does not follow the neat and tidy process described in textbooks, but is a messy process which novice researchers usually fear. Those of us who tried to interpret qualitative data hoped to construct the best possible story, although at the same time we were aware that our story would be influenced by our viewpoints (for example, Kelly, Reichart). This meant that our final account would not be 'ideology-free', but according to Allan and Slee (2008, p. 98) this is something to be expected in inclusive education research. Writing-up was another important learning experience for us, as we were required to submit a thesis with specific academic requirements within a deadline. For some of the contributors, this took longer than initially anticipated, for different reasons. Those who were within the schedule, confessed hesitation to negotiate the data and other important decisions about the research with respondents because of the restrictions of monitoring a doctoral project (restricted time, organizational issues and inexperience of handling disagreements).

WAS OUR RESEARCH WORTH DOING?

Compiling a doctoral thesis marks the end of a precious learning experience, for which we were all proud of. Some of us felt that our research was extremely important and that it would make an important contribution to the field or to the group/setting researched. As Barton and Clough put it, we had 'a desire to see change take place at the material, institutional, political and attitudinal levels of society' (1995, p. 142). In a similar tone, Allan and Slee warn novice researchers: 'don't expect too much, too soon' (2008, p. 101). Today, some of us feel that perhaps our research was not as influential as we initially expected. However, most of us mention in our accounts that we tried to disseminate our findings, hoping that our work would reach all interested parties. Importantly, some of us can see the usefulness of our research in the long run and we came to believe that our research did have an impact, albeit in other ways we could not anticipate.

A NOTE FOR STUDENTS AND NOVICE RESEARCHERS

The chapters in this book confirm that novice researchers undertaking research leading to a doctoral degree have certain characteristics that differentiate them from experienced researchers: novice researchers are constantly processing new ideas, which they refine by reading and discussing; they think about how best to conduct their study; and they are open to new ideas and ways of conducting research. All these are great features if they are managed for the sake of the research project. If not, novice researchers may face different problems throughout the process. As editors, our engagement with the contributors in this volume (as well as our own research experience) taught us that novice researchers are generally highly motivated and can accomplish high quality research: 'we really (really) wanted to do the research' (Allan & Slee, 2008, p. 97). Our accounts indicate that we experienced our role as researchers in the ways Barton and Clough (1995) describe: the researcher as change agent, researcher as critical friend, accountable researcher, researcher as learner, researcher as teacher and researcher as subject. But no matter how well we performed the researcher's role, we are aware that our research is not the only piece of research out there. We also know that our doctoral theses might be the outcome of inspired work, endless reading, long struggles to float in the data, but our final accounts may entail mistakes, imperfections and compromises. Still, we are all proud of our doctoral work and we are still learning as we research, because surprisingly, our research journeys did not end with the submission of our doctoral theses. We hope that this volume makes a valuable contribution to strengthening the resolve of readers to pursue high quality and meaningful disability research.

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