

The Importance of Youth Voice in Qualitative Research

KEYWORDS

youth voice, qualitative research

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

This article focuses on analyzing the testimonies of one student and the important adults in his life in order to better understand why some students succeed in school and others do not. When analyzing interview data, the researcher found that the student's voice was consistently drowned out by adult voices, which were originally interpreted by the researcher as more legitimate. This article was written as a reflection on the fact that the student voice often disappears in research. Therefore, the author argues that researchers should develop a more reflexive approach to analysis to ensure that the student voice is accurately captured.

METHODOLOGY

In order to find students willing to participate, the researcher contacted local community organizations that specialize in working with high school youth. Because the author wanted to better understand how student trajectories differ, she sought out three groups of students: one that identified as succeeding in school, the other as having difficulties, and one more consisting of students who had dropped out. All students were of Haitian descent and between the ages of 14 and 19, with the exception of one who had dropped out and was 26 at the time this study was carried out. The students all went to Montreal schools labelled as "disadvantaged."

This article focuses on a set of interviews with one student, Julien. Julien was asked to discuss life in and outside of school and his future plans. He was also asked to identify several important adults in his life so that the author could interview them regarding Julien's experiences at school. These interviews were carried out between September 2010 and March 2011. The author found that during the first analysis of these data, the adult voices were prioritized over Julien's, effectively erasing his perspective. However, during subsequent analysis, the researcher chose to more carefully explore the data from Julien's point of view.

KEY FINDINGS

During both interviews, the student, Julien (real name withheld), presented himself as being successful at school. He insisted that he was a fast-learner who is intelligent, has a good memory, and does not need help in order to succeed academically. When discussing his future goals, Julien explained that he saw school as necessary to achieving his dream of being a professional basketball player in the NBA.

However, this greatly contradicted what the adults in his life said about Julien. At his mother's insistence, Julien signed up to attend a tutoring program to help improve his grades. Although he was making progress, he refused to continue to attend as soon as he entered high school. His mother was worried about her son's future and has always hoped that he would become a doctor.

When compared with how Julien described himself to the researcher, his mother's interview presents him in a rather unfavourable light. The initial reaction of the researcher was to accept the testimony of Julien's mother. However, upon further analysis, the researcher found that Julien's opinions, goals, and plans were effectively erased and his account of school rejected in favour of his mother's.

In her subsequent analysis of the data, the researcher recalled that Julien had stated that he saw school as crucial to becoming a basketball player. Succeeding in school clearly meant something different to him than it did to his mother, who saw post-secondary education as an important next step for him. According to Julien, succeeding in school meant simply doing the average required because it would be enough to eventually join a professional basketball team. Since he was not excelling academically and did not show interest in academic pursuits, Julien's plans did not align with those of his mother or the traditional definition of success. However, it is important that we take his perspective into account: since he aspired to be a basketball player, he may have been right in that being an average student was enough to achieve his career goals.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This type of research is important for any organization that offers programs for youth. Accurately capturing the desires and hopes of youth makes them feel that they have a stake in the organization or program designed to serve their interests. The article also demonstrates what can happen when a reflexive approach, grounded in interpreting the data specifically through youth voice, is not in place — the data provided by

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This article offers a researcher's reflection on how easy it is for student voice to disappear in qualitative research that includes adults. Researchers are advised to adopt a more reflexive approach when analyzing data.

adults is privileged over that offered by youth. Gathering the perspective of adults is valuable, but researchers need to be sensitive to the lived experiences, perceptions, and values of the youth in the programs they study.

“To ensure that student voice is not overpowered by that of the researcher, it is necessary that the researcher adopt a reflexive stance. Such a stance leads the researcher to be conscious of and reflect critically on their position, their identity, their history, their theories, and the way that these impact the relationship with the subject.”

Lafortune, 2017.

RECAP

This article highlights how a young person's voice was initially lost in the analysis of several interviews because the testimony of the adults in his life was given preference. However, after adopting a more reflexive approach to analyzing the subject's experience, the researcher was able to provide some useful reflections on how to ensure that his voice remained integral to the analysis.

APA CITATION

Lafortune, G. (2014). Donner la parole aux jeunes et faire entendre leurs voix : défis d'une recherche auprès de jeunes d'origine haïtienne à Montréal. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 37(1), 258-282.