CHAPTER 13

NEW FRONTIERS IN RESEARCH

Using visual methods with marginalised communities

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the potential of utilising visual methodology with marginalised communities. Before discussing the concepts of appropriate methodologies with such communities, first there is an exploration as to what the notions of inclusive communities and marginalised groups are. To illustrate some of the benefits and complexities in engaging with visual methodologies, this chapter draws upon research conducted with Maori children in New Zealand.

Marginalised groups essentially conjure an image of people without voice; whose values and desires are unheard and; whose rights as human beings are often ignored or not adequately attended to. Such populations may include among others, children; the elderly; women; disabled people; those living in poverty; ethnic minorities and indigenous populations; those confined by political and religious repression. The list is extensive and indeed reflects that on a global level, this covers a large proportion of the population.

Bearing in mind the vast range of people who may be considered to be part of a marginalised community or group, the shared experience of such people, appears to be that they are less able to lead a life they are entitled to. They may not be able to access sufficient resources to experience a just life or have their own values and opinions recognised in an appropriate or sufficient manner for them to be equal human beings. The above list incorporates wide groups of people that in isolation may have built their own communities and some may seem to have access to resources but the fact remains that their human rights are often compromised.

In contrast, the inclusive community provides all members with the opportunity to fulfil potential regardless of disability, sexuality, ethnicity, class, gender or age. This is embraced through the social, physical and cultural environment, where differences are acknowledged and valued (Gunn et al., 2004). Members of the community are able to take an active role, have a sense of belonging, have their voices heard and build shared understandings between one another. Equal rights,
feelings of respect, being valued and having positive relationships are experienced. Participation is practiced whereby members of the community are able to make their own decisions and choices about matters that affect them. The concept may seem ‘utopian’ yet if equality of life and human rights are to be fairly respected universally, then it should be seen as an expectation.

BACKGROUND

To illustrate the use of visual methodology with marginalised groups, a research programme involving mainly Māori children (aged 8-10 years old) in New Zealand will be drawn upon. The children discussed in this chapter lived in a small village on the outskirts of Auckland, New Zealand as part of a wider research project also based in England. The research explored the well-being of primary school children from their own perspective utilising visual methods in combination with participative and indigenous methods.

New Zealand has a very small population of just under 4,300,000 (Statistics New Zealand, 2008). According to the 2006 Census, approximately a quarter of those people live in the Auckland region, the largest population within the whole of New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2008). The particular village where the school is located has a population of 2,500, 31% of whom are Māori and 12% Pacific Island Peoples, this is different to the rest of New Zealand where 15% of the population are Māori and 7% Pacific Island Peoples. Current census statistics also reveal that 60% of the Māori population is under the age of 25 (Waikato University, 2008).

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF, 2007) examined children’s well-being in rich countries around areas of material well-being, health and safety, education, structure of family and relationships, behaviour and risks and health. Within this report, New Zealand demonstrates child poverty above 15% contrasting sharply with less than 5% in four Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark). The report links such statistics with, for example, the likelihood of poor health, learning and behavioural difficulties and underachievement at school. In fact, in New Zealand 16% of children are living in households where the income is less than 50% of the national median (UNICEF, 2007).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES WITH MARGINALISED COMMUNITIES

The interpretive perspective enables knowledge to be formed through building understanding from the individuals concerned within a research project and through sharing subjective experiences (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Qualitative approaches allow stories to be told from participants’ viewpoints, building a more holistic and possibly honest reflection of their lives. Christensen and Prout (2002) and Aubrey and Dahl (2006) consider that children are experts in their own lives and as such, should be an integral aspect of the research process. Without accessing the views and opinions of participants, a substantial part of data would be missing. There are several tools that have been utilised to access participants’ experiences