Enabling Agency through Reflective Writing at The New School

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Abstract: This participatory action research project aims to identify the impact of collaborative goal setting with young people for learning interventions at The New School UK. Methodologically, I draw on the work of Mary Louise Holly, Michael Connelly, Melanie Walker, and others to use reflective writing to trace the journey of a group of young people and their teachers across a year at the school. By prompting young people to set learning goals and reflect on what helps them meet these goals, young people were empowered to take part in the action research process and build tools alongside myself and their teachers. By tracing the impact of individualised learning tools on young people's engagement in the classroom, this project explores what resources are necessary to foster a truly equitable self-directed learning environment for young people of diverse learning needs and profiles.

Introduction:

In the field of action research, there has been increasing discourse about how to represent nuanced qualitative findings in a robust way. Action researcher Maírín Glenn warns against the rise of what she calls "Action Research lite," in which action research practitioners fail to embed the more rigorous or reflexive research protocols required to convey or fully analyse their findings. Furthermore, Melanie Walker outlines the methodological challenges working with personal narratives to generate robust findings. As research coordinator at The New School, a democratic school in Croydon that uses a relational practice of engaging with families and amongst staff, such questions have been at the fore of my work. Insofar as we aim to resist narrow attainment metrics of success by tracking factors such as children's mental health and life satisfaction, and we collaboratively create individualised learning plans with each child, producing any sort of standardised result can prove difficult. Furthermore, as a school in our third year, school-wide practice is constantly changing, which offered few control factors with which to compare the changes I was embedding. These challenges, however, gave rise to a more dynamic and collaborative means for data collection in my action research, one that could shift and flex with the non-standard ways we work as a school. Collaboratively setting goals with young people and their teachers,

then testing interventions against the goals we had collaboratively set, successfully engaged children in the process of conducting the research while offering us clear success criteria throughout the process.

It is worth briefly defining a few key features of The New School, which will be referenced in the "Background" section of this piece. The New School is a democratic school, which can have drastically different meanings in different settings. Our 2021 evaluation by the University of Nottingham identified the following as key facets of our democratic approach: our relational practice between young people, staff, and families; a participatory environment that invites young people to own their learning; and an emphasis on choice and agency for self-directed learning and participation; an emphasis on child wellbeing and non-punitive approach; and egalitarian decision making structures amongst staff (discussed later in this section). Overall, the school aims to foster a sense of agency and self-directions in young people, supported by these practices. As our school governance system, we use sociocracy, which is an egalitarian, consensus-based mode of decision making. Sociocratic decision-making is a central facet of The New School's practice of democratic education and draws heavily on the work of Ted Rau and the organisation Sociocracy for All. In sociocracy, circles are the basis of decisionmaking, and each circle, such as Curriculum and Assessment, Pastoral and Community Accountability, and Inclusion, has its own aims and domains. Each circle has its own remit for decision-making, and in order to make a decision, everyone in the circle must consent. The thread of collective, consensus-based decision-making is one that I have intentionally woven though this action research project.

I conducted this research initially to develop my own practice within the school, but the changes we have embedded as a result of this research are ongoing, as are the lines of inquiry to which this research project gave rise. This article, after offering some background on The New School, will explain the aims and questions of this reflective writing project as well as the methodological challenges we faced embedding collaborative goal setting and reflective writing to track learning interventions. Here, I intentionally combine real examples of young people I worked with alongside my theoretical framing to illustrate the way "collective sensemaking" was actually experienced by the young people. Most importantly, such methodological questions gave rise to exciting topics for future inquiry, including

multisensory approaches to young-person feedback and the parameters of methodological consistency in a holistic educational setting.

Background on The New School:

The New School is a non-fee paying, democratic school that opened in 2019, so we are currently in our third year of operation. We are based in Croydon in South London, and have 90 students with a 15:1 staff to young person ratio. Our young people come from many different backgrounds, including local mainstream schools, homeschooling backgrounds, and self-directed learning settings. We are a truly diverse school in many senses of the word: our children come from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, have a range of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and ethnic backgrounds. The school is free to all young people through our unique funding model, which draws on both private donations as well as partnerships with local authorities. We currently have reception to year 8 and will expand through secondary as the school grows. The aim of the school is to provide an alternative, more inclusive model to mainstream schools in practice and in our unique funding structure, demonstrating the high social return on investment to local authorities.

At the New School, we use mixed-age classes to ensure that we are teaching to a child's stage, rather than only age. The school is currently split up into 4 classes of 2-3 year groups each. Each of these year groups is typically taught by two class teachers and anywhere between 1 and 3 members of support staff, depending on need. This amount of support is absolutely crucial for our setting, in which teachers may need to differentiate across the knowledge base of 5 or 6 year groups in one lesson. Teachers take advantage of both lesson time as well as our daily self-directed learning time to conference with children individually or in small groups.

Our small class groups are also important because we do not use rewards or punishments in our setting.Instead, we see behaviour as communication, using class circles, restorative circles, check-ins, individualised needs plans, partnership with families, and other more holistic tools to understand and meet each child's needs. We try to understand the underlying causes behind challenging behaviour instead of using punishment. Young people begin and end each day with circles, in which everyone gets a chance to speak unless they

choose to pass. Young people can make decisions together as part of our sociocratic decision-making structure, as defined in the introduction to this piece.

One of the most unique aspects of an education at The New School is the My Learning Plan process that every young person goes through termly, or three times a year. Here, each young person sits with a parent or guardian and their teacher to decide together between 1 and 3 goals for the term. Young people can draw from a list of skills they would like to develop, including communication, self-knowledge, or problem solving, for example. They then pick a project or topic they'd like to learn about in order to develop that skill. For example, one young person this term wanted to work on his executive functioning and planning skills by coordinating a chess tournament for his class. Young people can work on these goals in class, from home, or during their self-directed learning time at school. At the end of the term, the young people evaluate how they progressed with their goal, and use their reflections to inform the next round of goal-setting. The My Learning Plan process is core to what we do as a school and was, as you'll hear, influential to the format of this action research project.

Guiding Questions of this Project:

I began my time in the school as a classroom teacher during which time a group of researchers from the University of Nottingham conducted an in-depth evaluation of the school, which drew in part on action research conducted by teachers. My research began as a study of class engagement, for which I conducted short interviews with young people who did not wish to participate in activities we did as a class, in particular, democratic decision making processes and self-directed learning. The work explored what barriers existed to participating in such processes, and if non-participation was valid or possible within our school structure. All of the notes from these short interviews, which answered questions such as, "What thoughts were coming up when you decided you didn't want to join the circle?" as well as the names of the children in my class, were kept in a spreadsheet. I was disappointed to see when I reviewed these names that they corresponded with some of the highest needs young people in my class, who either had pastoral difficulties or special educational needs that rendered the content either inaccessible, boring, exhausting, or some combination of these.

That year, I changed roles within the school to teach across the classes and take on more logistical responsibilities within the school, which included working with our Special Educational Needs Coordinator or SENCO. It was my role to action some of our SEN interventions in small groups or one to one in classes. It was a good opportunity to take this research project in a different direction. At previous workplaces and schools I had encountered, SEN interventions were adult led. Adults came up with assess, plan, do, review plans for children, took children out of class, administered the interventions, and the young people were rarely consulted in what kinds of support they might receive. This problem begged the question, "What tools and strategies could support democratic participation for young people with additional needs in our setting?" What interventions would allow them to engage in self-directed learning, sociocratic decision making, circles, and other core aspects of our school model?

The SENCO and I, by reviewing our SEN register, observing classes, and consulting with teachers, developed a list of young people and a timetable in which I would support them. At the beginning of each half term, I would write reflections on how I saw the child engaging in class, and record what the teachers were seeing as well. The goal was to offer the child tools they could use to participate fully in their class groups, which in our setting are already designed to be inclusive. At the end of each half term, I would review and consult with teachers and young people to see if these tools had worked, and adapt my interventions accordingly. This was an iterative process that took place over four half terms.

Theoretical Groundwork and Inspiration:

To understand the methodological use and scope of reflective writing for this particular project, the fields of youth participatory action research, student voice research and narrative writing were instrumental. In particular, I continually draw on the work of Gillie Bolton and Melanie Walker, among others, who explore the necessity and complications of reflective writing. Walker writes that the narrative format is foundational to action research itself, the primary question being, "How do stories help us think about teaching practice?". My intention was to craft a narrative with each young person, with the help of their teachers, to reflect on their learning journey across the two terms. In that vein, it was

important that the research wove itself organically into the work I was already doing in class. Carola Conle's work resonates very strongly here, as she explains how PAR can undo the unrealistic binary between the role of the teacher and researcher.

The voices of both the young people and their teachers were part of my ongoing narrative reflections recorded both during and after our sessions together. This practice comes from Michael Connelly's notion of the "collaborative story" which in this case features the voices of both the researcher, the teachers, and the young people as well. Scholars in the methodological field of reflective writing such as Monica Colombo and Denise Dallmer emphasise the process of sense-making as a necessarily inter-subjective one, that the potential for active collaboration involves working together to reflexively interpret a narrative. In the context of this project, that meant using questioning to co-construct a narrative with the young person and their teachers. An example of such a question might be, "How did you feel writing this piece compared to how you felt writing your story at the start of term?" or "You read that book aloud to me straight through, which you had trouble with a few weeks ago. What do you think helped you do that?" or "What things have we tried together for your handwriting do you think you've used the most? Used the least?". The collaboration in this process took place through goal-setting and reflective conversations that were collaboratively recorded through my reflective writing process, which in turn shaped my subsequent strategies for supporting the young people.

Reflective Writing Methodologies in Practice:

One of the first young people I worked with was extremely creative, empathetic, and curious about the world. She has a love for cats and draws them everywhere on her work. She came to the school with no prior knowledge of reading, writing, or numbers, so often found it difficult to engage in tasks that included reading instructions or taking notes, for example.

Here is an excerpt from the initial conversation I had with her teacher: "She has a go readily at activities and is curious, with many interests. Reading can be a barrier, and sometimes she does not know where to start with a task she can get distracted and doodle or play with something else. She came to school with little to no phonics knowledge, or knowledge of

numbers." This short piece is a good example of the kind of description written about each child at the start of each half term. It represents a summary of the kind of collaborative, goal-setting conversations that took place throughout the project. I would put together a few bulletpoints of what I heard the teacher saying, add my observations, and feed back what I had written down, checking that I had captured their thoughts accurately.

Once I developed closer relationships with the young people I was supporting, I used the same strategies with them. Having heard from their teachers that they might need extra support from me, I explained to them that we could spend some time working together every week and asked them what they needed more help with. Primary-aged young people need various levels of scaffolding to answer such a question, so these conversations sounded different from one child to the next. I would ask questions like, "What part of literacy lessons do you feel most confident in, and what bit is the trickiest for you?" or "How would you like to make your writing better, if you could change one thing?". Hearing both the child and his teacher's thoughts, I distilled them into goals with which we worked together to tinker until they reflected everyone's needs. After such a self-assessment, one child's goal was "writing stories, especially planning a plot and structuring paragraphs" which incorporated their thoughts as well as their teacher's observations. This is how, on the ground, I collaborated with students as partners in this reflective writing process and enabled their agency. I would use these co-created goals to plan learning interventions each half term, so the young people knew exactly why we were working on each content area. One gap in the work that provides space for further inquiry is the role of parents in the collaborative goal-setting process. Gathering observations and short, informal interviews with young people and their teachers was organic, as we already interact on a daily basis, but in the context of my work it was too much of an undertaking to arrange meetings with every family for this express purpose. Parental involvement in the reflective writing process would be a helpful area of inquiry in future action research projects of this nature.

Methodological Challenges:

As with many schools, our biggest methodological challenge is time. As we are a consensus-based school and use sociocracy, it offers teachers a huge amount of decision making power, but it also leads to meetings almost every afternoon of the week. Furthermore, the 1

to 1 time teachers spend supporting young people leads to teachers having little to no time for informal meetings during the week. This made the logistics of coordinating these reflective conversations difficult, and the conversations themselves short, where there wasn't a huge amount of time to delve into the nuances of each child's needs. One action we took to counteract this issue was to plan special pupil progress meetings in which time was dedicated to speak about each class and their learning needs. This was one positive impact this action research had in the school, and we are still developing the way we plan and structure such conversations.

Another methodological difficulty within our context was the fluidity with which we work with young people at The New School. Our relational approach means that we aim to be responsive to how children come to school in the morning, rather than carrying on as usual. This work was, by nature, long-term and proactive, but not necessarily designed to support a young person in crisis or struggling on one particular day. These two aims created a fruitful tension between the long-term goals of each young person and the responsiveness needed to help them achieve such goals.

I differentiated my reflective conversations with young people through my questioning, as I've described, and through the subsequent planning of their learning interventions. However, the goal-setting process with each child has room for further adaptation, particularly for children who struggle verbally or have not yet developed the tools to self-reflect. Future projects could incorporate more multisensory, play-based methods to engage young people throughout this process. Here I draw on the thinking of Susan Groundwater-Smith's work on engaging primary-aged young people in action research, as well as Alison Clark and Peter Moss's multisensory, "mosaic" approach to listening to children. Having tested reflective writing methods, I intend to incorporate more flexible tools to fit the needs of our young people in future action research projects.

Lastly, the lack of a "one size fits all" approach within our setting, and by extension, within my research called into question what factors did need to stay the same for the rigour of the data. Questions were differentiated to each child's verbal skills, which calls into question what elements need to stay the same for the sake of consistency. All exploratory

conversations I conducted with both young people and their teachers centered around the "What tools does this child need to access learning" and my focus was literacy. The way that question was posed, the length of the conversation, and the specificity of a child's goal varied from one case to the next. In our relational setting, this flexible approach was crucial to be consistent with the rest of our practice, but offers future questions about action research methodologies in more holistic settings.

Snapshots from the Young People:

The best way to understand the impact of the interventions from this project is to hear from young people themselves. As our practices are in flux as an action research school, and a new one at that, the interventions implemented in this progress made exciting impacts on whole-school practice. We can return to the example of M, who struggles with words and numbers, but loves animals, particularly cats. When she and I sat together, a main focus for me was getting a sense of what she wanted to use reading and writing for, so that we could do activities that resonated with her. She told me that her family often took care of a neighbour's cat, but that she didn't have a cat of her own at home. I asked her what she would like to write using the skills we had built together and she said "A card to a cat," and thus we decided she could work up to writing a card to deliver to her neighbour's cat. In the coming weeks, I gathered some early reading books for her that involved cats. I also drafted a letter she could write that only used cvc words, so we could do a dictation together. Her teacher expressed that she needed to build her phonics skills to be able to decode and represent sounds. She and I worked together to also incorporate her own goals of what she wanted to use reading and writing for. Thus, the process of writing and reflecting on her experience was an inherently collaborative one. At the end of the process, I would ask questions like "What did you get better at while writing this letter for your cat? What was the hardest part? How do you think you have improved?" in tandem with discussing her academic progress with her teachers. Moving forward, I would like to sharpen and specify the feedback that I am collecting from children so that we have a clearer picture of which tools were more and less helpful to them, and they can have an increased role in this research process. Nevertheless, the goal we formulated together offered a clear success criteria that had been agreed upon by myself, teachers, and the young person. It also reflected the My Learning Plan process, which the young person was used to.

For another child, the intrinsic act of reflecting and co-creating goals supported his development as a learner. When he first came to The New School, he often ran out of the classroom, because he found social interaction with classmates challenging and often frustrating. His teacher identified literacy as a gap for him, as he struggled with phonics and handwriting. A major strength for him, as we found over time, has been forming and maintaining relationships with adults. He thrives with one to one work and in particular enjoyed the phonics games we used to improve his spelling, such as word swaps and word building. In our sessions, I would support him by bringing 3 or so activities we could do together, and letting him choose the order and focus of our session from such choices. I would ask questions such as "Tell me more about why you'd like to read aloud together" or "Last week we focused on writing lowercase letters v. capital letters. What do you think your next step would be to practice this?". From the young person's comments and the way he directed the session, I would write observations to use for my narrative entry. This agency within the rhythm of each session supported the young person in owning our work together and developing his confidence as a learner, as we saw greater engagement over the course of the time that we worked together, as well as more active self-reflection.

Young people had different roles in the reflective writing process based on what they were working on, their verbal skills, and their self-knowledge. Furthermore, some work I did with young people was more flexible, developing a particular skill in the short-term in response to observations from their teachers or the young people themselves. In an open-ended conversation about one child's writing, she reflected, "Can we do some of the handwriting exercises from last year together? Those helped, I thought." This prompted a supportive conversation about what elements of the exercises were supportive and allowed me to show her some handwriting practice to try independently.   The core of the tool, however, was to initiate collaboration between myself and the young people, and their teachers, and to track and record that collaboration over time as we met and set new goals.

Looking Ahead:

Coming into this new school year, we took many lessons from the last two terms to refine and develop this action research. We are lucky to be partnering with a group of researchers from the UCL education department to capture democratic, self-directed learning through

photovoice and ethnographic observation. Our goal this year is to capture more clearly the set of practices that make The New School's work unique, and how those practices could be replicated in other settings. To complement that project, we will be developing an SEN toolkit of resources and interventions used successfully within our setting. I have structured this line of inquiry around the framework of "assess, plan, do, review." Taking inspiration from last year's work, I have written guiding questions about each of those four steps to structure shared reflection and development of our school SEN practice. One aspect of this project will be operational, as we will use this ongoing reflection to develop our assess, plan, do, review processes as a school. The other aspect of this process will be articulating our existing practices so that we can more clearly communicate them to other settings that want to be more inclusive. This year, the SENCO and I will carry out our "assess, plan, do, review" process with 8-10 young people each half term, refining and developing our practice in each iteration. For example, we have a needs plan template for young people who need additional pastoral support in our setting. This needs plan prompts teachers to write a weekly entry about how the child's week went and the practices were most supportive to them. We are working to expand the needs plan process to better capture young people's learning needs, acknowledging the many ways that pastoral and learning needs can be intertwined.

We are also launching an inclusion circle in which, at the start of each week, a group of teachers, SEN team, support staff, and our pastoral lead get together to discuss how we will support our highest needs young people. These are all changes we will be reflecting on in informal interviews, as well as shared written reflections. Hopefully, young people will have an increasing say in their needs plan process. Our upcoming action research will focus more on clarifying and developing our whole school practices and less on individual narratives as my research did, but we will continue to consider how we can engage young people as research partners in our upcoming work.

The methodology of reflective writing offers, as this research has shown, the flexibility to support action research in a dynamic and unique relational setting such as The New School. By collaborating with young people on their goals and success criteria in a way that mirrored existing school processes such as My Learning Plan, collaborative goal setting and written

entries recorded the impacts of learning interventions while allowing the freedom to be responsive to the children's changing needs. It has also opened exciting opportunities for future inquiry into more multisensory approaches to data collection and methodological rigour in relational educational settings.

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