This paper seeks to explore the interface between Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Arts Based Educational Research (ABER). Offering perspectives on methodology and field research, the paper explores the means through which PAR and ABER actively support each other. The paper will also provide some context on my research. In conclusion to the paper I will offer emergent findings around PAR and ABER.

**PAR & ABER**

Building on the Lewinian foundations of action research, PAR not only seeks to engage in the “study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of the action within it” (Elliot, 1991, p. 69) but seeks to become a “living dialectical process, engaging in critical dialogue and critical reflection that, changes the researcher, the participants, and the situations in which they act” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1). This critical dialogue and reflection is represented through the recursive, cyclical process of PAR. The cycle involves; questioning, refining, implementing, developing plan, investigating, and reflecting (McIntyre, 2008, p. 7) or planning, researching, reflecting, and recommending (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010, p. 165). These cycles operate within the four main phases of PAR; naming the inequality, broadening horizons, reassessment and change agency (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010, p. 169-172).

Throughout the phases and cycles of PAR, one of the underlying tenets is its emancipatory intent (change agency). Freire (1970, 1974) creates this connection between engagement in critical dialogue, reflection and emancipation in his theory of ‘concientization’. Similarly, Maxine Greene (1995, p. 177/178) argues that it is only through imaginative dialogue in “situations that have been made intelligible” that one can gain the consciousness required for freedom or emancipation.

Similarly, Baron & Eisner (2012) argue that engagement in ABER may attempt to persuade those involved to engage and revisit the world from “a different direction, seeing it through fresh eyes, and thereby calling into question a singular, orthodox point of view” (p. 16). It is this consciousness and realisation of ‘other’ perspectives that offers those involved in ABER emancipation or provides them with the impetus and opportunity to act in an effort to transform and change.

In addition to this consciousness, the arts are inherently modes of expression. That is, a means through which persons can express their thoughts, feelings, fears and inadequacies, as well as represent previous or desired experience. Furthermore, the arts have the unique potential to facilitate viewers and participants in exploring and making meaning from its various forms, thus providing added perspective. The arts’ ability to generate and convey meaning is not limited to the personal however; it transcends the personal to the social. Mirroring the emancipatory intent inherent in PAR, through providing persons with an alternative vehicle for expression and meaning making one can see the innate transformative and emancipatory intent present in all ABER.
In addition to the common emancipatory intent of both PAR and ABER, they also share a number of additional elements; participation, thoughtfulness, co-construction, and a focus on student voice. In terms of participation, McTaggart (1997, p. 28) states that “[a]uthentic participation in research means sharing in the way [it is] conceptualized, practiced, and brought to bear on the life-world.” In terms of both PAR and ABER, authentic participation is imperative to the fulfilment of their transformative intent. Directly linked to this authentic participation, and as a means of ensuring participants assume an active role in the research process, both PAR and ABER require the generation of student voice, in an effort to maximise participants’ role in co-constructing the work.

Over the last number of years student voice has been conceived as a radical and subversive, democratic and empowering means of growth and evolution (Czerniawski & Kidd, 2011, p. xxxvii). Accessing this voice is a requirement if one is to engage in the creation of “valid knowledge [which can only be produced] in collaboration and in action” (Fine, 2007, p. 613). In this vein, PAR and ABER must position the participants as “architects” (Oliver, 2010, p. 31) who provide an innately personal perspective on the research construction, design, and outcome. This co-construction and architectural standpoint create the situation where valid knowledge can be generated. In addition, it also has transformative potential by facilitating the participants’ growth in terms of “gaining the confidence to express their own personalities [through the arts]” (Burton, 2010, p. 41).

**Field Research**

The current research is Phase 2 of a long-term research project. Set in a disadvantaged school, the fieldwork involves participants in a post-primary TY classroom. The fieldwork began in November 2011 and concluded in May 2012.

The research centers on the participants’ experience of and attitude towards the arts and this is one of the primary research questions. Additional research questions are concerned with PAR, the arts, and some of the methodological tools used.

As a means of maximizing student voice and presenting it as authentically as possible, one of the primary data generation tools used in the project are Participatory Data Collection Methodologies (PDCM). The aim of PDCM, as outlined by Veal (2005, p. 254), is to “facilitate reflection, debate, argument, dissent and consensus, to stimulate the articulation of multiple voices and positions, and ... lay the foundations for empowerment.” These PDCM are entirely visual / arts based and serve as both photo documentation and photo elicitation within the fieldwork (Rose, 2007, p. 243).

Recognising the power of social networking sites and social media, Facebook has been included within the project for a number of reasons; it will provide the participants with a cyber platform where they can discuss the project and thus participate and communicate with the researcher (Waller, 2011, p. 97), and will provide an additional means of photo elicitation for interviews and focus-groups. As well as these, the inclusion of an electronic platform for communication will allow for an assessment of its impact on the research from both the participants’ and researcher’s perspectives.
The relationship between PAR and ABER will culminate in the presentation and dissemination of the research. PAR’s emancipatory intent mandates that “knowledge gained through research [must] become part of people’s lives” (Swantz, 2008, p. 45). The dissemination will take the form of an arts based performance- to the communities concerned- depicting aspects of the participants’ and researcher’s journey through the PAR process. In addition, the performance will also form part of the final PAR stage (change agency) and the performance space may be considered one of the sites of transformation (Goffman, 1959) for the participants.
References


