

## CELEBRATING OUR SUBJECTIVITY: Research as Lived Experience

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When we celebrate our subjectivity we are learning new ways of telling our research tales. The research becomes a narrative of the researcher's life, a biography of lived experience. A determinant of this lived experience is the extent to which the researcher identifies and becomes absorbed into the environment and the unique characteristics of the research site.

This paper is a celebration of learning from my research at two levels, the personal and the professional. This learning occurred at three overlapping phases of the research: problem identification and problem posing, power relationships and the role of participants, outcomes and methodology. I build on the view that there is an emerging epistemology of insiderness that sees the distinction between life and work as blurred. Subjectivity as lived experience legitimates individuals' consciousness and that reality is constructed within a historical and political context.

The research narrative with which I am concerned emerges from the lives of members of an urban school community who struggle to save their school and its environmental education program in times of hardship, restructuring and rationalisation. I propose that community members can initiate a process of participatory research by articulating the source of their oppression and devising actions through critical consciousness and reflection. In establishing this position I find that there are many similarities between my own experiences while being involved in a community-initiated participatory research and the work of feminist change-orientated researchers. I found that many change-orientated feminist researchers also formed strong relationships with other participants and reflected on these relationships as an intricate component of the research process. I begin the paper at the research site and develop my story as the events unfolded to me.

### VOICES EMERGING FROM THE SCOTCH THISTLE

The importance of this work is very hard to qualify. I find myself thinking about it quite a lot and personally the way I see it is that it's more than just an issue of planting trees maybe or bringing back some native grasses or cleaning the creek, it's more a social focus. Not so much the task of planting but the process and how that end process is achieved. It is getting people out of their homes and getting them together, to socialise and get some value back into their lives. (Chairperson and parent speaking at the Annual Let Laverton Creek Live General Meeting, 30th November 1993).

Laverton is a part of Melbourne's western suburbs. The western suburbs or western plains region owes its flat basalt terrain to the cooling of lava flows from a bygone era. Its close proximity to the city (10 minutes drive from the city centre), its vast open plains and the provision for sewage outfall into the bay, have made it a targeted region for developing offensive industries. Development of an industrial area such as the western plains region fosters a number of adverse effects and consequences. Many are environmental but many too are social and political.

The story that I am telling is that of a school and community located in this area as they work together to bring about changes not only in their local natural environment but also to their social and political environments. The process of change originated from a socially critical environmental education program at the local school. This program developed into a long term process of social change serving to empower the community. They have endeavoured to overcome the biases, injustices and stigmas that have shaped and controlled their destiny by celebrating their uniqueness and restoring their self esteem and pride. The

people who live and work in this industrial area carry the stigma of being the working class cousins of the affluent eastern suburb dwellers.

'I think the big problem we've got is that if you live in Laverton people look down on you'. 'We're the lower class'. 'I used to get it from the teachers - they used to say, who's going to care about you, you're in the lower class'. 'What does it matter they [*the politicians*] never listen, we just have to put up with it cause we live here'. 'We have no rights, we're poor'. (Comments by Local Residents, report prepared by Victorian Government, 1983)

Laverton Park is a small housing commission estate developed in the early 1960s to service officers and their families stationed at the local Royal Australian Air Force (R.A.A.F. Williams), base. The R.A.A.F. has since relocated its officer accommodation and what remains is affordable housing for low income families, the unemployed and ethnic populations. The area is a small island of humanity in a sea of industry and freeways. Bordered on all fronts by built environments that serve as barriers to isolate it from other recreational areas, the only area of open public space is McCormack Park. Once the local tip, McCormack Park was reclaimed over thirty years ago to serve as a storm water overflow and a catchment for any airborne litter. The long grass and scotch thistle were a haven for snakes and trashed cars and until recent times any attempt by the council to plant at the park were thwarted by large scale incidents of vandalism. The environmental education program implemented at Laverton Park Primary school focused on building links with the community through a revegetation program at McCormack Park. The park was especially important to the school because it butted onto the school grounds and could provide a valuable resource for outdoor learning classrooms. The principal at the school stated that the environmental education program was about:

developing a system of values for life .. that you have the right and ability to change your world, change your society, that you can influence it. A lot of people from this community don't believe they have the ability

or right to do that. We're trying to set up something where the community would in every real sense own it and make it, would drive it and lead it to wherever it goes ... empowering people to change society (Interview with School Principal, 25th October 1993).

The school program began in early 1992 after a successful application for funding from the Victorian Environmental Education Council. Community involvement was paramount to the goals of the program and played an important role in the development of strong school community relations. The environmental education coordinator told me that

Community involvement in the project was outlined in the submission, actually having community information sessions and evenings and getting the community involved in the planning and revegetation. We actually see this as a community development project. We are trying to develop it all within our school community and residents of the area, so it's not just a school program. In an area like this it is vital. It is a lower socio economic area with lots of related problems. The program has been developed to instil a sense of pride in the area, pride in themselves and skills in actually being able to bring about change (Interview with Environmental Education Coordinator, October, 1993).

I first became involved in the school and the community when Dr Ian Robottom and I visited the school in September 1993. The relationship between Deakin and the school had developed some time earlier when the school was selected for inclusion in the OECD- ENSI<sub>2</sub>. Our visit was in response to a request from a member of the staff (who was the environmental education coordinator) to provide support for their actions to keep their school open.

The basis for our discussions will be to tape an interview with [the environmental education co-ordinator] to record the background to the environmental education program running in the school and also to get some insight into the political climate that jeopardises its continuation due to Quality

Provision initiatives instigated by the Ministry of Education. The school has been targeted for task force investigations and has been subsequently listed for closure or merger with another local Primary School. [The environmental education coordinator] has asked Ian to write a formal letter to the Minister of Education with regards to these propositions in the hope that the school will be able to stand alone. It is within this charged complex web of political interplay that Ian and I attend the school to gain a better understanding of the school and its fight for survival (Personal Journal entry, 7th September 1993).

## RESTRUCTURING AND RATIONALISATION, A SCHOOL COMMUNITY UNDER THREAT

In 1993, state schooling in Victoria was faced with statewide restructuring and rationalisation of schooling in the name of Quality Provision. Based on the government's perceived need for constraints in educational outlay, a number of 'Quality Provision Task Forces' were organised in school communities statewide. The task force members were a combination of parents, teachers and principals representing the schools and a Ministry of Education consultant to chair the proceedings. The rationale behind the consolidation of government schools was stated by the Director of School Education:

...as a need for breadth and depth in curriculum choices for all students, the impact of demographic changes and the high unsustainable cost of maintaining our present school system. (Director of School Education, Geoff Spring, Quality Provision Framework, *Education News*, May 1993).

The Quality Provision Framework was preceded by the release of figures which stated Victoria spent \$274 million more on education than was necessary to provide a quality service in comparison to other states and that the reductions and efficiencies the new Victorian Government has put in place will deliver savings of approximately \$186 million in this financial year (*Sunday Age*, 22nd November 1992) The task force process was unmistakably

driven by an economic need rather than an educational need, although the Minister tried to play this down in the media. When asked "Is Quality Provision really about closing schools?", the Minister replied, "No, it's about school restructuring to improve curriculum facilities. This restructure can include the development of new schools where necessary. It also covers school mergers and school closure" (Minister of Education, Don Hayward, June 1993). School communities were provided with a variety of strategies to improve provision. These strategies were: merger, schools amalgamating on a single site to form a new identity; closure, schools closing if a clear relationship with another school is not evident; and structural change, a community of schools changing to accommodate a broader structure (such as lower and upper Secondary Colleges and annexing of smaller schools to larger schools). The possibility of 'stand alone' or 'leave us alone' was not advocated by the Ministry documentation. On the contrary, the framework document stated:

The Quality Provision Framework assumes that school communities will wish to provide a quality education for their students. It also assumes that with appropriate guidance and processes, school communities will recognise when there is a need to change schooling arrangements, and will seek to do so. It is anticipated that the Minister for Education's decisions to change schooling arrangements will be based on substantial community support. However where the DSE, perceives that students are being disadvantaged, because a school or group of schools is not willing to consider change, recommendations considered to be in the interest of students will be made to the Minister of Education. (Quality Provision Framework, *Education News*, May 1993)

The community at Laverton Park decided to present a case to keep their school open even though their own principal and representatives from the other school did not support their view.

When the whole process started we thought the term 'Quality Provision' was about what we were doing in the curriculum. We thought this is a good school, we are running a good

program, we are important to the community and we will fight to keep our school open (Environmental Education coordinator, Task Force member, November 1993).

## A COMMUNITY IN ACTION

The story describes a head to head hattle, a community against the state. Social inequality was the curtain raiser and school closure was the finale. A survey given to parents from both schools implicated by the Task Force negotiations (these were Laverton Gardens and Laverton Park Primary schools) revealed strong support from these two communities for both schools to stay open. When the school participants first found out it was to be involved in the task force it rallied together to construct a structure for disseminating information to its community members and the media. Because of the brevity of the consultative period, it was only six weeks, community members realised they needed to act effectively and efficiently. Parents and residents from Laverton Park embarked on a media campaign which continued relentlessly throughout the task force process. Their views were headed with slogans such as: 'Leave our school alone', 'No more cuts', 'Laverton Park raw deal once again'. Parents and concerned residents formed an action group:

We had a group running called 'NAG' (Neighbourhood Action Group) having meetings every Friday after assembly, just to keep parents informed of rallies and if they had questions I'd try to answer them (Interview with the parent representative on the Quality Provision Task Force, November 1993).

Parents walked the streets 'knocking doors' collecting names for a petition and held public meetings to discuss the issues. Many of the parents attended meetings outside of their region and worked collaboratively with the School Council Association, lobbying for support from schools outside their region. They marched alongside teachers in stopwork rallies organised by the FTUV (Federated Teacher's Union Victoria) and scanned newspapers and directorate memos for information to support their protests. The process of producing a supporting document to stand alone

was fraught with difficulties. These difficulties were the product of a lack of information and the constantly changing information given by the DSE. Task Force members commented on how they felt 'the DSE was making the rules as they went along' (Interviews with Participants, 1993). These conditions alongside the rushed time line provided little opportunity for members of the task force to consolidate their concerns and find answers. The final outcome of the task force proceedings was two reports. The report from the Laverton Park representatives was to stand alone, it was designated as the 'minority report' because of it was supported by less than half of the task force representatives. The Principal at Laverton Park crossed the floor and opted to vote for a school merger with the group from Laverton Gardens.

I was aware I was out of step with other people in the task force from our school. Here I was, the principal, supposed to be educational leader of the school and I was voting to for my school to close. What sort of leadership is that? [pause] and I was aware of that [pause] professionally it was a difficult decision (Interview with Principal, November 1993).

This decision would have implications far beyond the staff room on the that night. He became, and rightly so, the focus for the anger of a community who felt betrayed. The Minister of Education, who had already advised the community that a 'merger' was the preferred option, supported the 'majority' report. After the merger decision was made the two communities waited in trepidation for the site decision. If the merger site was Laverton Park the community believed there would be the opportunity to continue the environmental education program. Two weeks after the merger decision Laverton Gardens Primary school was selected as the merger site. At the onset of the process the Minister had publicly proclaimed he would not force a closure. The school was closed in December 1993.

We played by the rules. We went along with the guidelines they set even though in the back of our mind we felt that they had already made up their mind. I mean we tried our hardest, that's the best we could do (Parent interview, November 1993).

Although in this instance their actions had been unsuccessful, a fragmented community had been mobilised.

## LOOKING IN, LOOKING OUT: CHANGING LENSES

### **The outsider looking in.**

From the initial interview with the school's environmental education coordinator I began to realise the potential of the situation for my research. I use these terms potential and my research as indicative of my view of the research at this time. I saw my role as an outsider observing and documenting and interpreting the lives of the insiders:

As an outsider I will attempt to catch glimpses of this complex world from which these children evolve. As an outsider I realise that this can only be superficial. Like many of the teachers who work in the school, when the school bell rings at the end of the day I drive to my own place, far away from the smoke stacks, the freeway and the struggles (Personal Journal entry September 1993).

I started the research with a 'glass bowl' perspective. Initially I just hung around the staffroom listening to the conversations and becoming familiar with the school organisation. From these first visits I realised the staff were under enormous emotional and physical pressure due to the nature of the task force process. I decided that I wouldn't press for teachers and parents to be involved in the research project but extended a personal invitation to anyone to approach me if they wanted to be interviewed. The following week when I arrived at the school a number of teachers and parents had taken up my invitation.

I spent time after recess talking with J who spoke very openly with me about how she felt. At the end of the interview she said 'You know you're the only one who's ever showed any interest in how I am coping with all this. You're the only one I've been able to talk to'. In many ways my work is giving the staff an opportunity to feel that their voices

are being heard. If this is the only outcome of my work then it is all worthwhile. My activities have become a source of reflection and personal critique. It is a far greater role than I had ever anticipated. (Personal Journal entry 25th October 1994)

I often felt more like a counsellor than a researcher; a sympathetic ear. When I reflected on this, I wondered, was my 'womanness' the determinant of this occurring? Would a male researcher have found himself in this same position?

## MOVING INSIDE AND LOOKING OUT

I began to feel unsure of my role in the community. Members of the community started to seek me out. We want our stories to be told, they would say. It was at this time that I gave out an open-ended questionnaire to those whom I had been working with to find out how they felt about research and what their role was in the process. When asked, "How do I see my role in the research?" and "What have I gained from being involved?", some of the responses included:

To give my reflections /observations from the other side, that is, of a non professional (a parent, resident). To give a balanced look to issues that are generally biased toward authority;

An opportunity to reflect and assess my participation, performance thus far and judge what effect/change if any, and to what extent my involvement in this process has had on me;

As events unfold, and the benefits become obvious from a positive social reform, it will inspire more people to actively participate and lend their voice and hands to the growing chorus of dynamic harmony for social change (Questionnaire responses, 1993).

Distinct from my initial ethnographic role as an observer of the change phenomena, I became drawn into the activities of the community. I became critical of the research perspective I had initiated. I found myself rejecting the outsider role

and deciding to 'jump into the fish bowl' relying on my tacit knowledge and intuition. The distinction between myself and those with whom I was doing the research became blurred as I took on this personal role at the site of the community's struggle. My outsider knowledge and skills (the professional) soon became superseded by a far more 'useful' personal role. I became the minute taker, the spare teacher, the face painter, the driver, the sandwich maker, the photographer, the planter, the letterwriter, the cleaner. Formal interviews were replaced by spontaneous and informal dialogues and conversations within the context of our combined work. I adopted a position within the community which emerged from my own lived experiences as a teacher, a mother, a community member and an activist for social change. During this time I was reading literature on change orientated research (Lather, 1991, 1988; Maguire, 1987; Tandon, 1981, 1988; Reinharz, 1992 and Robottom and Hart, 1993) and engaging in critical reflection of the relationship between theory and practice, reflection and action, drawing on my experiences in the community. As a product of my praxis, I abandoned my initial research design and responded as an authentic participant. One crucial element of this shift my developing commitment to participate in the collective actions of the community. The fundamental goal of *their* actions were to challenge the power relationships that existed between the community and the authorities. This was made clear to me by a participant:

The aim of our actions is to be involved both practically and politically in issues and activities, that is to show it is our obligation/right to accept and share in the responsibilities of our social dynamics. Not merely as anarchist anti government activists but as spirited morally motivated, pro active citizens advocating socially just reform (Community member, interview November, 1993).

As a result of my changing relationship with the participants, I began to write and work subjectively; formulating my knowledge of the research from my new position alongside the other participants. This is evident in my journal entries in later stages of the research for example,

I feel a great upheaval of my own life, my

own fears being re enacted within the context of the chaos. Sometimes it hurts because it seems I have opened up my own pains, my own past. It was at this time that I turned to watch C to see how she was coping. She stood very still and silent and through my own tears I watched her holding still with all her will power. Brad by my side was shaking from the impact of his tears and I tried to comfort him. (Personal Journal entry 10th December 1993).

I began to view the community's actions within the broader context of a long-term process of social change. Was it an example of anti-hegemonic activities which questioned the power relationships that restrained them from making a contribution to the decision-making processes that controlled their everyday lives? Were the social actions to save the school a part of a larger movement for solidarity and consciousness raising within the community? My questions were guided by the words of Wax (1971:10) who stated:

If the researcher finds himself [themselves] in a field situation where he [or she] is limited by a particular method, theory or technique he [they] will do well to slip through the bars and try to find out what is really going on.

The following section traces my journey to find out what was really going on.

## CAN COMMUNITIES INITIATE THEIR OWN PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH?

Could the mobilisation of a fragmented community into an organised group to challenge hegemonic oppression be an example of a community-initiated participatory research process? This question led me to return to my readings and revisit the question of what counts as participatory research.

The object of participatory research according to Hall (cited in Maguire 1987: 5) is "a more accurate and critical reflection of social reality, the liberation of human creative potential and the mobilisation of human resources for the solution of social problems". Participatory research as defined by Francesca Cancian is:

... an approach to producing knowledge through democratic, interactive relationships. Researchers work with community members to resolve problems identified by the community, and the process of research is intended to empower participants (Francesca Cancian cited in Reinharz 1992:182).

Participatory research is a form of research inquiry which has the underlying assumption that "there is a political nature to all we do; all of our work has implications for the distribution of power in society" and that there is "no neutral or value free inquiry" (Maguire, 1987: 35). The act of shared responsibility and decision making between the researcher and the researched eliminates the traditional role of the researcher and replaces it with a egalitarian relationship which is based on openness, reciprocity, mutual disclosure and negotiation. "The term 'researcher' can refer to both the community or workplace persons involved as well as those with specialised knowledge" (Hall, 1981:8). The research becomes problematic to all those involved and the process of problem-solving becomes the source of negotiation and debate.

The three core features of participatory research are:

- (1) political action and individual consciousness raising...
- (2) relationships are democratic and participants share in making decisions and acquiring skills,
- (3) the everyday life experience and feelings of participants are a major source of knowledge (Cancian, cited in Reinharz, 1992:182).

Participatory research is founded on new forms of knowing, and insists on an alternative position regarding the purpose of knowledge creation. Central to participatory research is an acknowledgment of knowledge as a major base for power and control in societies. The creation and valuing of 'popular knowledge', (knowledge that emerges from the experiences of the community and is unique to the context) is a central goal of participatory research and its purpose is not to describe social reality (understanding 'what is') but to transform reality by providing a vision of 'what could be' (Tandon, 1981). Furthermore, its fundamental goal is to determine and implement concrete action(s) which will change the power

relationships that exist between the oppressed and oppressor. Participatory research, according to Maguire, aims at three types of change:

- \* development of critical consciousness of both researcher and participants;
- \* improvement of the lives of those involved in the research process;
- \* transformation of fundamental societal structures and relationships (Maguire, 1987: 29).

The partnership between research and action is a distinctive element of change-oriented processes, such as participatory research, which distinguishes it from other forms of inquiry.

## HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT IT?

We know that we have two main alternatives: either to continue debating about structural reform, as if we were demonstrating that knowledge itself is able to transform reality, or, to act collectively upon reality, making use of its potentiality, and overcoming its limitations in order to achieve sooner than later, the final victory ... participatory research has opted clearly for the second alternative (Vio Grossi, 1981:50).

The underlying theme of participatory research in process is the principle of shared power. doing research 'with' people rather than 'on' people. Guidelines and research models have been put forth on how to conduct participatory research (Hall, 1975, 1981; Maguire, 1987; Reason cited in Robottom & Hart, 1993; Reinharz, 1992 and Vio Grossi, 1981) but while these may present possibilities for practice, each author avoids the assumptions that participatory research is a linear process and that any one approach is true for every project. Participatory research is a dynamic process which is guided by the substantive issues that are presented through out the research. The following is a review of commonalities that researchers have noted whilst engaging in participatory research projects.

Reason (cited in Robottom & Hart, 1993) identifies that participatory research involves all the

participants, in three ways of knowing: propositional knowing (knowledge 'about' ideas, propositions and theories), practical knowing (knowledge of skills and abilities) and experiential knowing (knowing by encounter which is tacit, intuitive and holistic). He describes the process of doing participatory research "as a way of doing research that involves all participants in **all** of the stages of the research endeavour." These stages of the research are:

- \* creative thinking about what goes into the enterprise
- \* decision making about what is to be looked at (methods making sense)
- \* contributing to the action which is the subject of the research (working openly, directly and collaboratively with the primary actors)  
(Reason cited in Robottom and Hart, 1993:52).

Maguire (1987) also identifies three activities in the participatory research process: investigation, education and action. She elaborates on these activities to state that participatory research is:

a method of **investigation** of problems, involving participation of oppressed and ordinary people in problem posing and solving ... an **educational** process for the researcher and participants, who analyse the structural causes of named problems through collective discussion and interaction ... a way for researchers and oppressed people to join in solidarity to take collective **action**, both short and long term, for radical social change (Maguire, 1987: 29, emphasis added by author).

Maguire then adds that:

while collective investigation, education, and action often occur sequentially, these three activities can also occur in a variety of combinations ... they do not necessarily occur in a linear sequence (Maguire, 1987: 40).

Vio Grossi, Martinic, Tapia, and Pascal (1983) identified five phases common to participatory research projects undertaken by them.

These were:

- Phase 1: Organisation of the project and knowledge of the working area;
- Phase 2: Definition of generating problematics;
- Phase 3: Objectivisation and problematisation;
- Phase 4: Researching social reality and analysing collected information; and
- Phase 5: Definitions of action projects.

Phase one of the project (according to Vio Grossi *et al.*) entails identifying the problem and being invited or inviting the community or organisation to participate in the project. This phase is concerned with establishing relationships with the community and conducting initial investigations into the research problem. Hall (1975, 1981) determines that a key aspect of participatory research is that the research problem should originate from the community, rather than be determined by outsiders.

Phase two engages the researcher and participants in a critical analysis of the problems and the significance of these to the people involved in the project. This is the process of opening up dialogue between the researcher and the participants.

Phase three is what Maguire (1987) terms the 'educational' stage. At this phase the participants and the researchers identify and discuss the implications of their problems within the broader context of social reality. The project team will start to compile questions and themes and methods of investigating these. It is at this phase that the researcher will start to strengthen the participants' awareness of the possibilities for action and ownership of the project.

In phase four participants begin to design the project and start to develop their own theories and solutions to the problems. In Reason's (1988) terms they begin to 'make sense' of the subject of the research.

Finally, in phase five the researchers and participants work collectively to address the issues that have been identified. It is at this stage that the

participants become direct beneficiaries of the research and the researcher shifts to the role of a collaborator and activist who is expected to take a value position and act accordingly.

It is essential when analysing these examples of participatory research processes to be reminded of Hall's statement at the beginning of this section that the term 'researcher' can refer to both community members or outside experts. While it is evident that the majority of participatory research projects are initiated by a researcher outside of the community, communities themselves can also engage in participatory research.

The following quote by Tandon alludes to the essential role of the participants as researchers and their engagement in activities which have primarily been the domain of institutionalised intellectuals:

Participatory research attempts to present people as researchers themselves in pursuit of answers to the questions of their daily struggles ... it explodes the myth of neutrality and objectivity and emphasises the principles of subjectivity, involvement, insertion and consensual validation in order to develop its methods of data collection and analysis ... For ordinary people in participatory research the distinction between the researcher and the participant is irrelevant - they are both ... It is based on the belief that ordinary people are capable of understanding and changing their reality (Tandon, 1988: 5, 15).

Organic intellectuals or indigenous researchers can take a leading role in the organisation of a group within their community to articulate a problem and initiate a process of investigation, education and action to bring about change. 'Organic intellectuals' (a term coined by Antonio Gramsci, a Italian political activist and theoretician of the 1930s) refers to the development of individuals who, within the context of their community and through active struggle, obtain the expertise and consciousness to mobilise communities in actions for social change.<sup>8</sup> Tandon expands on this position when he states:

Participatory research is initiated in the context of actual reality. Therefore, an existing problem provides the initial

motivation for engaging in participatory research. Where people are already aware of a problem and articulate enough about it, they may initiate participatory research themselves. They may or may not use the resources of experts from the outside (Tandon 1981:24). Is the community group at Laverton Park embroiled in a process of participatory research? To answer this question I used Cancian's (cited in Reinharz, 1992:182) three core features of participatory research as a framework to analyse the actions of the participants.

The everyday life experiences and feelings of participants are a major source of knowledge. The project at Laverton Park emerged from the implementation of a socially critical environmental education program at the local school. The program aimed at developing a sense of pride and ownership of the local environment through a focus on social justice. "It was about people making informed reasoned decisions that are good for the environment and for them. It's also about empowerment to be able to bring about change" (interview with environmental education coordinator, October 1993). When deciding on the directions of the community group a number of forums were established so local residents and community members would have the opportunity to develop their own program of action. The discussions at these public meeting highlighted the injustices that local residents felt about the lack of consultation by authorities about decisions effecting their local environment. A comment from a local resident highlighted their concerns "Well Werribee people have a river, and people in South Yarra have the Yarra, they have places to walk, to cycle, to enjoy, but we have nothing. Its just not fair". But when the residents were given an opportunity to contribute to these decisions they devalued their own needs and knowledge. One committee member spoke about the difficulties of encouraging people to contribute their local knowledge:

I went to this meeting at the old school house at the other side of the creek and I looked at some photos of the R.A.A.F base and there was a house here and a house there, that was it. And I was talking to a lady there and she said 'I can remember when it was like that'. I said 'well you must know a lot about the

area', 'oh not really' was her reply. I mean she was there when there was probably a dozen houses in the area and yet she doesn't consider she knows anything (Let Laverton Creek Live Committee member, February 1994).

The issue of valuing and encouraging local residents to share their knowledge of the area became a focus for the group. This continued throughout the project. As one local resident stated, "It's not so much that they don't know how to think for themselves, it's just that they have got out of the habit of thinking for themselves. It's not a role they feel comfortable in". This final story illustrates the group's struggle to shrug off a continued investment in dominant knowledge constructions that serve to devalue their own forms of knowing.

Well Norm actually said that one night when we were planning for the festival. We were here and Mark and Benice [they were a team of professional landscape architects employed by the council to draw a revegetation plan based on the needs of the community] and they were doing this and that for the festival getting their displays ready and then Norm said "Well whose going to be there on the day?" and I said we were going to be here and Norm said "no, no, no" he said, "What experts are going to be there, are you [turning to Benice and Mark] going to be there on the day? any other experts?" I take umbridge to that. I didn't go off at him but made a point of telling him, you're as much an expert as anyone else, more so then Mark 'cause you live here. Get's back to one of Peter's terms 'the local providence' .. that's the beauty of indigenous planting, the seed stock comes from that area, it's specific to that soil, that micro climate and that's the same as the people. If you've been here thirty years you know the place better than anybody else. Probably that well you don't know it that well. What experts are going to be here? You've got to have an alphabet after your name before anyone takes any notice (Let Laverton Creek Live committee member, February 1994).

## RELATIONSHIPS [WHICH] ARE DEMOCRATIC AND [WHERE] PARTICIPANTS SHARE IN MAKING DECISIONS AND ACQUIRING SKILLS

There are many instances that I can draw on to illustrate the democratic processes the group organised to provide opportunities for participants to share in decision-making about the project. The many public meetings (often in the form of barbecues so food could be offered) and informal forums served to encourage participation by a large sector of the community. The use of language became a source of much negotiation as the core participants found themselves caught up in the politics of the situation. They often had to reassess how they were 'getting the message to the people'.

The hard part was getting the message to the people it seemed. 'Cause we'd been putting lots of things in newsletters and were speaking the wrong language. The closer you got to the centre of the issue you virtually lost touch and started speaking a different language. Because you became more aware of the jargon, you started using the jargon. Then one night I had a talk to the parents after sport one day, they were waiting outside to pick up their children and I grabbed a microphone and said we are having a meeting tonight and I said if you care about your school and if you want it to stay open you'll come. After that we had more parents come and that was the reason why. Because they read all the stuff in the newsletter but there was politics there was no connection between them and the politics, them and the school, yes, but they had that fuzziness in the middle that sort of disassociated that connection (Let Laverton Creek Live Committee member, October 1993).

This quote not only illustrates the importance to the group of consulting the community by involving them in the decision making processes, but also the critical skills of the group to identify the source of possible impediments and counteracting them. Critical and reflective skills are central to participatory research and environmental education. By marrying the two projects, the school-based environmental education program and the community-based program, they

become mutually supportive in directing a process grounded in valuing critical reflection and problem solving skills.

### POLITICAL ACTION AND INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

When asked what benefit they got from being involved in the project, one of the local residents stated:

More political, more personal in that respect. Just the personal growth more than anything else. You go to all these assertion classes .. throw them in a community group and they get it for nothing. And to see how the system works, dealing with councils and agencies. Just demystifying the whole lot, to take that aura away from being authorities and subjects. The truth is I don't know any more than anything else, if anything at all. They just have access to the resources so if they need to find something out quickly they can. It is just a big game, the game spends more time justifying itself then actually playing the game (Local resident, interview February 1994).

The Principal at the school reflecting on the changes he observed in local people involved in the actions to save the school stated:

Some people worked very hard to avoid a merger. They saw it as another thing that is dominating their lives. I saw a lot of growth within people trying to take charge of things. Now I'm hopeful that they won't have lost that ability. Now I'm hopeful that they'll feel "Gee, I was able to do that, I got up and spoke at a meeting or I went down to the railway station with a petition and people actually signed it, listened to what I said". So that the next time an issue comes up they'll try again, they'll think "I can change things, I don't have to accept this, I can try and do something to change this result or influence it" (Interview with Laverton Park Primary School Principal, 25th October 1993).

What makes this project unique compared with community revegetation programs is that the participants are engaging in a form of reflexivity.

They are constantly reflecting on the influence of societal structures that are embedded in their value or knowledge production and acting on this. By engaging in discussions at the community level on issues of knowledge production they are being alerted to alternative ways of viewing their own worth. In a community which has a long history of being ignored and down-trodden this is a shift towards understanding the source of their disempowerment.

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organised struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis (Paulo Freire, 1972:41).

Through the ongoing process of consciousness-raising, shared decision-making and skill acquisition the community has moved beyond a group of like minded people changing their immediate physical environment, to a community of politically literate individuals willing to engage in critical reflection and action, praxis. It is because of all these 'bigger picture' antecedents that I believe the group is participating in more than an isolated 'social action' but in participatory research, a research process that was embarked on prior to my involvement and which continues after my departure. The participants themselves may not label it this way, or even see the need to. They are concerned with the reality of transforming the oppressive and marginalised position they find themselves in. As a co-researcher and scholar I have intellectualised my involvement in the process through praxis. The following discussions continue my story as I position myself within the context of a community-initiated participatory research project.

### RESEARCH AS LIVED EXPERIENCE

#### Subjectivity and lived experience

Lived experience accommodates our shifting sense of ourselves as subjects and as objects, as acting upon and being acted upon by the

world, of living with and without certainty of belonging and being estranged (Michael Jackson, 1989:2).

The quote from Jackson portrays the duality of the researcher's insider/outsider role. The researcher moves in and out of the research context forever trying to find a compromise between becoming too involved or too detached. The research account is an interpretive story with every human situation novel and emergent (Denzin, 1989) and questions of subjectivity are grounded between fluctuating levels of absorption and detachment, "an insider's passionate perspective and an outsider's dispassionate one" (Van Maanen, 1988: 77). In the beginning I struggled to identify and establish a research role. I felt separated from the *subjects* because I did not share their experiences.

I wanted to show the community that I supported the fact they are trying to make a difference in their lives and I admired them for that. But I didn't know how I could help (Personal Journal entry, 14th October 1993).

As time progressed I found myself in a new and reciprocal relationship as the participants and I worked collaboratively towards a common research outcome, an outcome which evolved from the problem identified by the participants.

The relationship I have with the participants, the way we work and struggle together, it is an intricate part of the research. I realise now the importance of documenting my experiences as a part of (as opposed to separate to) the research process. I have found myself adopting an active role in social reform (Personal Journal entry, 9th November 1993).

## THE SELF AND OTHERS

Life experiences and background are obviously key ingredients of the person[s] that we are, of our sense of self. The degree to [which] we invest our 'self' in our teaching, experience and background therefore shapes our practice (Ivor Goodson, 1991: 144).

By reconstructing my role and drawing on my

personal experiences it became paramount for me to position my 'self' alongside 'others' within the research account. I wanted to be 'up front' about my own life experiences and background and how these influenced my research position. I also want to value the voices of 'others' by presenting their stories alongside mine. I became committed to the request of the participants to produce an account of their struggles in a form that would recognise them as individuals.

As women we shared our pains and I felt very close to her. I can't help but realise how much of my own life is relived through being a part of the process. As we all sat talking I could feel the strength of the bond that had formed during this time. How could anyone understand the pain unless they had seen the empty rooms or walked the silent corridors ... there was a strength in the knowledge that we had made it through together (Personal Journal entry 17th December, 1993).

The dilemma of the insider/outsider role dissipated as the researcher researched relationship became equitable and negotiable and the distinction between the project, my own life and the process became blurred. Going back to the literature on participatory research I searched for instances where other researchers had also engaged in these issues. It was with the literature emerging from feminist researchers, in particular feminist action/participatory research accounts that I found comparable experiences.

The changing role of the researcher is a common outcome of change-oriented feminist research. I found that many feminist researchers had also documented their personal involvement in the research process and the relationships they had formed with other participants. They describe their research in terms of personal experiences and reflect on these experiences as an intricate component of what is learned by the research process (Lather, 1988, Ruddick, 1989, Reinharz, 1992).

Shulamit Reinharz expanded this view when she wrote:

Although changing the researcher is not a common intention in feminist research, it is a

common consequence. In *On Becoming a Social Scientist*, I suggested that learning should occur on three levels in any research project: the levels of person, problem and method. By this I meant that the researcher would learn about herself, about the subject, about the subject matter under study, and about how to conduct research. Many feminist researchers report being profoundly changed by what they learn about themselves (1992:195).

By juxtaposing feminist accounts with mine I am able to reflect on the relationships formed in the project and illustrate how these relationships have informed and influenced my changing sense of 'self'. By presenting my voice alongside the voices of others, the research evolves as research **with** and **by** the participants rather than **about** or **for** participants. A consequence of this position is:

The sharing out of power, the ownership of information by everyone rather than just the researchers, and the rejection of traditional interpretations of 'objectivity'. This research insists that the primary recipients and users of feminist research should be the people who are its subjects rather than the researchers (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 19).

Participatory research, like feminist research, challenges the concept of value-free, objective knowledge production, claiming instead that social facts are subjective constructions; both stress the importance of human subjectivity and consciousness in knowledge creation.

## FEMINISING PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

The opportunity to construct a research narrative which challenges traditional participatory research through the representation of the voices of the participants alongside the lived experiences of the researcher provides an emerging framework for feminising participatory research. Feminist researchers explore an aspect of the objectivity-subjectivity dichotomy untouched by participatory researchers by proposing and using experience, intuition and rapport as alternative modes of knowing and learning from the research (Spender,

1981). By acknowledging and documenting our subjectivity as a social construction of our personal and political history we are identifying the multiple positions we assume in our lives and the influence this has on our research<sub>10</sub>.

Who we are, our subjectivity, is spoken into our existence in every utterance, not just in the sense that others speak us into existence and impose unwanted structures on us ... in each moment of speaking and being we each reinvent ourselves (Davies, 1992: 73).

Being a 'woman' or a 'man' has profound significance for who people take themselves to be and for the story lines through which they make sense of their own actions, emotions, bodily experiences and their positions in relation to others (Holloway, cited in Davies, 1992: 67).

Participatory researchers can learn from the work of feminist researchers and the many parallels that can be drawn between the two research perspectives.

## A PRODUCT OF PRAXIS

This paper is a reflective account of my first attempts to present the story of my research journey. I addressed the issue, "Can communities initiate participatory research projects?" I then looked at my subjectivity as a participant in a community-initiated project. Subjectivity as lived experience legitimates individuals' consciousness that social reality is constructed within a historical and political context. As an individual I cannot deny my history and the influence it has on every aspect of my life. It is the lens through which I view my world. My personal history is a construction of my lived experiences, fragments of my life contrasting, contradicting and rubbing against each other. By reconstructing the researcher-researched role the outcome was a close, empathetic view of the insider or as Reinharz (1992: 260) states, "a new 'epistemology of insiderness' that sees life and work intertwined". This expression of researcher subjectivity has evolved by valuing popular knowledge, researchers and viewing participants as interdependent and by accepting experience, intuition and tacit

understanding as alternative modes of knowing, learning and acting in research.

The writing of this paper is a move towards identifying the possibilities for an embracing of feminist theories of subjectivity within participatory research. It is the product of praxis. It is my celebration of subjectivity, a biography of research as lived experience.

*If I had seen the cracks  
I may have fallen in*

*If I had seen your tears  
I may not have cried*

*If I had strained to hear  
I may have missed the silence*

*If I had tried to enter  
I may have never been invited*

*If I had sought the true story  
I may have never changed*

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#### NOTES

1. The R.A.A.F. base at Laverton was established in 1926 and along with the Point Cook base at Point Cook, is the longest operating R.A.A.F. base in Australia. The two bases were amalgamated and renamed R.A.A.F. Williams in 1983.
2. OECD-ENSI is the acronym for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Environment and Schools Initiatives Project. The National report for the OECD-ENSI project was published in early 1993 and includes a number of case studies of schools in Australia who are engaging in socially critical, whole school community-based environmental education programs.
3. DSE: Directorate of Education
4. Issues of gender of the researcher are not developed within the scope of this paper but are recognised as an area for further development.
5. 'I' in this context referred to them. The questions were written in the first person to establish how they felt rather than to determine how they felt about me.
6. See Rajesh Tandon (1981: 23-27). In this article Tandon states the 'single most important basis of power and control' is knowledge and that because knowledge production has become a specialised profession 'ordinary people are not considered either knowledgeable or capable of knowing'.
7. 'Participants' includes the researcher who, whilst engaged in the research project, takes on a collaborative and equitable role in the research.
8. See Budd Hall (1981:11) for further discussions on the relationship between 'organic intellectuals' and researchers in participatory research.
9. Reinharz (1984) *On Becoming a Social Scientist: From Survey Research and participant Observation to Experiential Analysis*, Transaction Books, New Jersey.
10. These issues bring me back to the questions I asked earlier in the paper concerning the significance of my gender to the role I adopted (the counsellor) and the role which others expected of me (the minute taker, the face painter etc...) By assuming these 'feminine' roles' had I changed the researcher-researched dichotomy? The work of Ann Oakley (1981) is particularly illuminating on the formulation of relationships between women in research contexts and the changing relationship between the 'interviewer' and the 'interviewed'. These are challenging new areas I will endeavour to explore further in my dissertation.