A counter-narrative of a 'failed' interview

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ABSTRACT In a broader research project about students' perceptions of their rights in New Zealand high schools, the first author conducted an interview with a group of students that was noticeably different from her interviews with groups of students at three other high schools. This article was prompted in the first instance by a sense of this 'noticeably different' interview being a 'failure' because of the limited spoken text elicited. In this article we demonstrate what we can learn from data regarding embodiment, the interview setting, silence, laughter and, in the process, we attempt to practise 'uncomfortable reflexivities' advocated by Pillow (2003). We argue that an apparently 'failed' interview has a great deal to teach us about the theory and practice of qualitative research and the tenuous nature of the production of knowledge. We finish by identifying how our experience of this 'failed' interview informs our current research.

KEYWORDS: *embodiment, interviewing across difference, interview setting, laughter, silence, uncomfortable reflexivities*

Introduction

In a broader research project about students' perceptions of their rights in New Zealand high schools, the first author conducted an interview with a group of students that was noticeably different from her interviews with groups of students at three other high schools. This article was prompted in the first instance by a sense of this 'noticeably different' interview being a 'failure'. The sense of 'failure' had to do both with the first author's experience of the interview and with her first (but not subsequent) reading of the transcript. The words 'failed interview' describe her initial sense during and after the interview that she had failed to conduct an effective interview and

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evidence of this was the minimal amount of spoken text she elicited. In focusing on the role of the interviewer in this article, we wish to avoid constructing the students as 'failing' to provide audible text.

To place a 'failed' interview at the centre of an academic article is risky and exposing. After all, the academic arena is a competitive one where 'success', rather than 'failure', is rewarded. Nevertheless, we plan to demonstrate how attention to our apparent research 'failures' might provide a useful tool for investigating the theory and practice of qualitative research, and a way of practising 'reflexivities of discomfort' advocated by Pillow (2003: 187).

Given that the goal of research is to generate meaning from data (Miles and Huberman, 1994), this interview represented an opportunity for us to reflect on what happened and to consider data other than the spoken word (Mazzei, 2003; St. Pierre, 1997). In the process of reflecting on what the first author initially understood as a 'failed' interview, we have come to question that evaluation. We will argue that an apparently 'failed' interview might be a more effective prompt than an apparently 'successful' interview for researchers to consider the influence of settings (Agee, 2002), to question what counts as data (St. Pierre, 1997) and to be reflexive about 'who we are in relation to those whom we study' (Reinharz, 1994: 195; also see Pillow, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

Pillow (2003: 188) describes 'uncomfortable reflexivity [as] a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situat[ing] this knowing as tenuous'. In subjecting one 'failed' interview to reflexive analysis, we are aware that we are writing about *our* interpretation of the interview without asking the students for their response to our interpretation;[1] therefore our knowing in relation to this interview is partial and tenuous. In our reflexivity, we 'bring the teller of the tale back into the narrative, embodied, desiring, invested in a variety of often contradictory privileges and struggles' (Lather, 1991: 129; also see Pillow, 2002 but compare with Magolda, 2002). Rather than leaving the narrative to one teller, in this case the interviewer, we hope to model a way of practising uncomfortable reflexivities – that is, how we might write with co-authors to interrogate our practices as researchers.

In qualitative research, we are usually dealing in voices (Reinharz, 1994) and, in doing so, privilege what is said rather than what is not said (Nairn, 1997). In our writing we are attempting 'to speak by listening' (Freire, 1998: 104) to what we can learn from data provided by attention to embodiment, the interview setting, silence and laughter. Like St. Pierre (1997: 175) we argue that 'out-of-category [data is] not usually accounted for in qualitative research methodology' but that such data provides an important lens for considering power relations between researcher and researched, especially in relation to adults researching in schools where students are often understood to be relatively powerless in relation to teachers/adults. The theoretical resources that we bring to our writing encompass feminist poststructuralism (see for example, Davies, 1991); indigenous (see for example, Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and critical race theories (see for example, Frankenberg, 1993); and the sociology of childhood and youth (see for example, Lansdown, 1994). Our conception of power is informed by feminists utilizing Foucault's ideas to consider the operation of power in everyday settings (see for example, Jones, 1991).

We begin by providing a description of the broader research project and then follow the interview as it unfolded. We make a case for understanding how an interview with limited spoken data might be reconsidered as one rich in data if we consider the notion of data more broadly (Mazzei, 2003; St. Pierre, 1997). As we analyse the interview, we demonstrate how reflexivity about embodiment, settings, silence and laughter enables us to interrogate who we are in relation to those we study (Reinharz, 1994; also see Pillow, 2003) in order to provide a fuller account of the power relations of research in schools. We will argue that an apparently 'failed' interview which might not be included in data analysis on that basis, should always be revisited because, first, a reflexive analysis might yield more understandings than initially seemed possible and, secondly, it provides information from which we, and other researchers, can learn.

RESEARCHING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' RIGHTS[2]

We employed research methods that would elicit students' (and teachers') written and spoken understandings of four sets of rights defined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), namely: rights to participation, safety, health and recreation. Data collected in the first phase of a three-year project were written responses, from students and staff, to a nation-wide survey conducted towards the end of 1999.[3] The second phase, conducted in 2001, was more qualitative in approach, and included paid student researchers interviewing their peers, group interviews with student-only and staff-only groups, and one-to-one interviews with principals or senior administrators in four case study schools.[4] The second phase, therefore, was primarily dependent on spoken text as the basis from which knowledge of young people's rights in school would be constructed.

The school at which this interview took place was co-educational and located in a large urban centre in the North Island of New Zealand. A high proportion of the school population were Māori and Pacific Island students. The school had been categorized as decile 1 by the Ministry of Education, indicating that students generally came from families on very low incomes. Access to conduct the research in this school had been negotiated with the Principal and Senior School Administrator. An interview with a senior administrator and a group interview with staff had already been completed a week prior to the student group interview that is the focus of this article. The peer research component was already in process and involved the paid employment of two senior students who interviewed students during school breaks.[5]

Considering embodiment and setting

In this section we focus on how the interviewer's embodiment and the setting of the interview might provide additional data and therefore possible explanations for how the interview 'failed'. Agee (2002) shows how the social and cultural significance of familiar settings such as schools shape activities and ways of thinking. Our prior socialization in these settings shapes assumptions which we argue are conveyed (consciously and unconsciously) in our embodiment and ways of speaking (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). 'The body is constructed in the articulations of discursive and affective relations of power, as they are expressed in and across gender, sexuality, race, and class' (Probyn, 1991: 116) as well as in and across age. For example, the interviewer is aware of how her prior socialization as a high school teacher is likely to be still 'written' on her body, such as in her comportment 'as though she is confident' (even if she is not) which could be read by others as her assumption of authority. In other words, 'the body is always outlined by the structures of a given social formation, and it is always lived at a tangible level . . . caught within the tensions of both "structure" and "feeling"' (Probyn, 1991: 117). We use the word 'embodiment' to describe this conjuncture of structure and feeling. We also imagine the body as a text that can be read and the term 'body language' is useful for describing how we might read the specifics of embodiment such as comportment, facial expressions, laughter and silence as indications of feelings and structural relations. In considering embodiment and body language as data, we are interested in the discursive effects of the interviewer's body (Probyn, 1991). At the same time we acknowledge that it is not possible to be conscious of everything in relation to our (and others') embodiment in order to write it into a rational academic account (Bondi, 2002; Pillow, 2002, 2003; Rose, 1997).

Attention to embodiment in particular settings is one way to address the question of how 'embodied experiences are situated in and productive of larger social, cultural and historical discourses' (Moje, 2000: 25; also see Davis, 1997; Nairn, 1999). While our focus is the embodiment of the interviewer, 'the body (like any other concept) exists only in relation to others' (Probyn, 1991: 114). In order to provide an account of the 'discursive and affective relations of power' (Probyn, 1991: 116) engendered by the interviewer's embodiment, we therefore provide readings of the students' body language such as comportment, facial expressions, laughter and silence as indications of the affective relations of power. Like Kamler et al. (1994), we believe it is important to find ways to attend to data other than 'spoken words' in qualitative research (also see Bondi et al., 2002; Nairn, 1999).

The interviewer is Pākehā or Palagi,[6] middle class (overlaying an earlier working-class childhood), '40-something', a former high school teacher turned researcher, from the South Island. We believe her embodiment and her way of speaking (shaped by social class, age and geographic location) would have been interpreted by this group of students in a variety of ways including the likely assumption that they could not relate to her, at least initially (Moje, 2000). In the case of the interview under discussion, most of the nine female and male students were from diverse Pacific Island backgrounds. The group also included a small number of Māori students[7] but no Pākehā or Palagi students.

'Difference' in New Zealand is most often understood in bipolar terms involving a distinction between the experiences of Māori, who are the indigenous people, and Pākehā, who are the descendants of colonizing settlers (Larner, 1995; also see Mohanram, 1998). But Mohanram (1998: 27) argues that this bipolar distinction reveals a hierarchy of bodies in New Zealand:

> It is precisely within this notion of biculturalism that the non-white, non-indigenous New Zealander is disavowed . . . the black immigrant disturbs the biracial Māori–Pākehā body by revealing the hierarchy of bodies. In this hierarchy, Pākehā come first, Māori second, and the black immigrant a distant third.

These broader cultural, historical and geographical discourses have implications for the social relations among the nine students as well as for the social relations between students and interviewer. While Wall (2000) has argued that Pacific Island and Māori students share music subcultures that are often attributed to shared Polynesian ancestry and an identification with African-American street cultures, it is important not to construct this group of student interviewees as somehow similar to each other in opposition to the 'different' interviewer. The first author gained a glimpse of the complexities of the differences among students at this school during the interview. For example, among Pacific Island students a key distinction was whether one was New Zealand-born or Island-born. And the comments of some students in the interview group, that they felt Māori students in the Kaupapa Māori programme at this school received preferential treatment, demonstrated their sense of a hierarchy of bodies (Mohanram, 1998) which, in its attention to Māori, elides the hierarchical position of Pākehā.

The interviewer was already aware of the wider debate about the politics of conducting research with participants from 'racial' or ethnic backgrounds different from her own, especially if the researcher is a member of the dominant ethnic group. Just as DeVault (1995: 616) points out that African Americans in the United States context 'are called on to do far more than their fair share of "explaining" to others', this also is the case for Māori and Pacific Islanders in Zealand. While the history of researchers 'putting the Māori under a microscope' (Mita, 1989: 30; also see Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) is better documented than it is for Pacific Island groups, the politics of members of dominant groups researching 'the other' has received considerable attention in qualitative research (see for example, Bishop, 1998; Fine, 1994; Fine et al.,

2000; hooks, 1992; Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

With an awareness of these politics, we therefore designed a two-pronged approach to data collection: first, we paid student researchers to interview their peers in an attempt to take account of ethnicity, gender and age, and second, the first author conducted all other interviews across the four case study schools in an attempt to achieve some continuity. In other words, the interviewer was cognisant of the importance of finding ways of researching across difference. At this particular school there were two senior students, one female from Niue and one male from the Cook Islands, who were employed to interview their peers. Nevertheless, given the diversity of Pacific Island cultures, and the gender and seniority of these students, we did not assume that this methodological approach would guarantee a sense of ease for all interviewees. Indeed Dyck (1997) found that, despite her efforts to match interviewer's and interviewees' ethnicities in an attempt to create more comfortable interview contexts, some participants appeared reticent to share information with interviewers who were part of the same community and/or stated a preference to be interviewed by the university researcher who was perceived as having more status.

While it is important to find ways to attend to the differential power relations of who interviews whom, there is a risk that we re-produce a set of rules underpinned by essentialist assumptions. In simplistic terms, such rules would mean only women can interview women, only Māori can interview Māori and, in the case of the research described here, only young people can interview young people. Following this logic, it could be concluded that a '40-something' Pākehā interviewer was inappropriate for the interview under consideration and this explains why the interview 'failed'. One solution would be for Pākehā researchers to absent themselves from interviewing non-Pākehā participants, but we are persuaded by Bishop (1996: 18) who argues 'if Pākehā researchers leave it all to Māori people it is to abrogate their responsibilities as Treaty partners'.[8] While it might be easier as Pākehā researchers to absent ourselves from the politically risky enterprise of interviewing 'the other', we argue that in seeking 'comfortable' research we might be less likely to interrogate the politics of producing knowledge. In a similar vein, we would argue that if adult researchers absent themselves from researching young people because they are not the right age (or ethnicity or gender) then that is also an abrogation of responsibility. Instead, adults researching young people need to continue to develop their reflexive practices, building on the groundwork established by authors across diverse fields (see for example, Clark and Moss, 1996; Cook-Sather, 2002; McDowell, 2002; Valentine, 1999).

So the interviewer entered the field with an awareness of this broader literature, questions about whether she should be there, and an idealistic desire to be a listening adult in a setting where young people are not always listened to. Perhaps her desires and tensions were visible in her face and her body, so that the students sensed in the opening stages of the interview that their interviewer was not sure of her *place* and her *self* in relation to this particular group of students.

A BAD START TO THE INTERVIEW

In the process of seeking participants for the student group interview, the first author was directed to a teacher who had responsibility for co-ordinating the student council which then promised to find some participants from the council. This seemed appropriate given that under the rubric of rights to participation, we were interested in the effectiveness of forums for participation such as school councils. On the day of the interview, the interviewer had been allocated a room in the administrative area of the school for her interview and had organized the table and seating so that students could sit in an approximate circle around a tape recorder located relatively centrally on a table. The interview took place during class-time and this was limited to one hour so the interviewer was aware in advance of the challenge of establishing rapport *and* eliciting information within this short timeframe.

It was clear from the students' body language, in particular from their comportment and facial expressions, that they were not enthusiastic about being interviewed. After further questioning, it was evident that these students had been conscripted by the teacher in charge of the school council, rather than consulted as to whether they wanted to take part in the research. Informed consent was therefore problematic and this process contradicted the fundamental premise of a project about students' rights. There was also a sense that this kind of thing had happened before for these students in relation to other school activities and tasks. For example, some students commented that they did not know that they were on the school council until the day of the interview. Even though the interviewer acknowledged this and offered the opportunity for students to leave, this did not happen. Indeed it would have been difficult for students to return to the class run by the teacher who had nominated them in the first place. In retrospect, it would have been better to work with the two student researchers to recruit students for the group interview, rather than with teachers who are in a powerful position in relation to students, making it difficult for students to refuse a teacher's request to participate in research.

The interviewer invited questions about the research and asked for first names in an effort to establish rapport prior to beginning the interview. Once the interview was under way, it quickly became obvious that the questions did not engage the students. These questions were based on selected findings from the survey phase of the project. It was anticipated that discussion of particular findings across many schools might act as concrete examples of rights and a prompt for students to discuss how these related (or not) to their own school experiences. This approach was chosen instead of direct questioning

about rights at a participant's school given that rights are a relatively abstract concept.[9] Nevertheless, it is not surprising that these students were not interested in discussing results from an earlier phase of the research project, a phase that they had no part in or that had no meaning for them because the results were presented in the form of general findings and percentages (each student was provided with these results on paper as well as with a verbal rendition).

We quote the beginning of the interview and then discuss how the interviewer's words, and other data, such as details of embodiment and setting, construct the researcher and the students in particular ways.

Karen: Well, the first one that I'm interested in is um from our research only 70% of the fifth form[10] students that responded to the questionnaire said they felt safe at their school and um, and then there were 5% who said that they didn't feel safe, and there was the 25% that, you know, were both safe and unsafe. What do you think of that, that figure? Do you think it's, you know, 5% is pretty low, um, I mean like when you add it to the 25% there's 30% that didn't feel safe at all, or couldn't claim that they felt safe. Is there any comments?

Participants: (long pause)

Karen: No comment? (laughter from everyone). Well I'm just interested, like I mean how, what about here at this school do you feel safe?[11]

As researchers we learn to ask questions that we expect participants to answer. While we might intend interviews to be informal, semi-structured and even conversational, the question-answer format still prevails as the dominant mode of discourse. This question-answer format reproduces relations of authority reminiscent of classrooms and other settings that position students as less powerful. The question/answer mode of discourse is also the one most recognized and rewarded by teachers in schools (Brice Heath, 1986; Jones, 1988; Nash, 1999). The interviewer, in referring to research findings and percentages also replicates what teachers 'usually do' – that is, the student interviewees are expected to understand 'facts' such as percentages and indicate their understanding in their responses.

Instead of being able to be relatively invisible and/or silent in a class where there may be up to 30 students, the interview context meant there was a heightened expectation of verbal response given there were only nine students. Ironically the arrangement of seating for the interview in a circle around a table, consciously chosen because it is different from conventional classroom seating in rows and for the practical purpose of audio-recording nine students, might have had the effect of making students feel more visible and audible than they felt comfortable with. Silence and laughter would therefore be useful strategies for coping with what might have been an embarrassing situation. By creating a space to see and hear students who may not be used to this in classrooms and may not even want this, the interviewer may have transgressed some assumptions about who talks and who listens

framed by the school setting but also by the respective cultural backgrounds of the students and the interviewer (Jones, 1988; Nairn, 1997; Ormond, 2001).

The interviewer's prior experience of high school teaching and current experience of research interviewing were likely to be conveyed via subtle body language that would have indicated an expectation that students would answer her questions. But it is not as simple as this, because the interviewer also did not feel confident of the students' willingness to be interviewed as indicated by their body language and the circumstances of their participation already outlined. As one interviewer with nine students, she also felt they could refuse en masse to be interviewed. Indeed their laughter, silence and unwillingness to repeat answers *felt* like a form of refusal. But as the interview itself unfolded, and as the analysis of the interview and the writing proceeded, we realized more complex readings of this interview were needed.

The interviewer tried to recover from this bad start by reminding the students 'Well I'm just interested' which was her attempt to move from a teacher-like position quoting percentages to the position of a researcher who is interested in seeking students' perspectives. She refocuses by asking a less long-winded question about whether they feel safe at their school and which groups of students might feel unsafe.

Participant: Um, the small ???,[12] girl students.

Participant: ??? (laughter)

Participant: ??? I won't say (a couple of students???) ???

Karen: Yip. So um, so younger students um, female students, students who have just come straight from the Islands.

Participant: ??? (laughter)

Karen: So you're thinking that they might not feel so safe because they might feel excluded or out, you know, sort of out on a limb. Is that, or are things likely to happen to them?

Participant: ???

Participant: Yeah.

Karen: Which? (laughter) Which of the two things?

Participant: ??? (laughter)

Karen: Hmm. Yip. Yip.

Participant: ??? they'll be stuck because *they can't understand the teachers.*

The students provide some useful data about students who do not understand teachers and the language barrier which they identify as an issue for younger students who have come straight from a Pacific Island to New Zealand. This parallels the barriers constituted by the interviewer's language and the students corroborate this a little later in the interview. These students have identified language barriers as a safety issue and their interpretation prompted us to realize that the interview and the language used by the interviewer probably constituted the interview as an unsafe space for (some of) these students who found ways to protect themselves via silence, laughter and other acts of resistance. In other words, this interview did not provide the

safe space that Reinharz (1994) argues is necessary before researchers can expect to hear anything worth hearing.

It may be idealistic for interviewers to expect to establish rapport *before* an interview begins; indeed we would argue that the emotional, and often invisible, work of establishing (or losing) rapport is a process that occurs throughout an interview (Bingley, 2002). So it is not surprising that students did not perceive the interview as a safe space in its early stages. It could even be argued that finding a safe interview space at schools, where power relations generally favour teachers and adults rather than students, is relatively difficult. In spite of this, we would argue that we did hear things worth hearing, even during the early, more halting parts of the interview and this is indicated in the dialogue quoted earlier. The pauses, silences, inaudible comments, laughter and the audible text itself are all rich in meaning and convey how students feel unsafe as a result of not being able to understand their teachers, or for that matter their researchers.

Although the interviewer re-framed her questions and the students were polite in providing some spoken text, it was clear that the interview was not working. The interviewer felt that the students effectively resisted within the bounds of an acceptable politeness (fieldnotes, 2001). Indeed, the interviewer felt that the students were relatively generous in terms of their patience with a questioning style that, in her struggle to make it accessible, became more wordy than it might otherwise have been had she felt the interview was going well (fieldnotes, 2001).

The social and discourse practices of the interviewer were similar to those of middle-class school teachers (Brice Heath, 1986; Jones, 1988) which probably worked against any desires she might have held to align herself with the students, given she wanted to hear their perspectives. The social and discourse practices that the students brought in to the interview did not conform solely to school norms in spite of the school setting and the teacher-like interviewer. They did not act like 'students' and willingly provide answers to the interviewer's questions. But in their politeness towards the interviewer they still might be understood as conforming to expectations of students as polite in school settings (Agee, 2002). This may not be solely attributable to the school setting, however, but also to broader cultural expectations in Māori and many Pacific Island cultures that young people are polite towards adults. Politeness, however, is only one reading of what the silences might mean. We turn now to considering what data such as silence, laughter and banter or jokes might tell us about the power relations between students and interviewer.

In her fieldnotes written after the interview, the first author recorded how the witty repartee and forms of 'in-house' or 'in-group' humour among the students did not mean anything to her. 'It felt like another language . . . I was really not "with it" when it came to youth cultures and it made me question whether I could research effectively with young people, especially Māori and Pacific Island young people from [names city] – this school felt like another world!' (fieldnotes, 2001). The interviewer constructs the young people she interviewed as 'the other' in terms of ethnicity, age, language and geographical location, and she describes how she felt constituted as 'other' to this group of students.[13] Just as the students may have felt alienated by her style of language, she felt alienated by the students' style of speaking and they may have consciously and unconsciously intended this.

In spite of the apparent line-up of factors that might lead us to expect otherwise, the student participants were *relatively powerful* in finding ways to resist a research encounter they had not volunteered for. In other words, despite the school setting, the highly visible and audible research setting and the teacher-like interviewer with school-like questions, many of the student participants managed to evade questions with silence, laughter and banter.

Interpreting silence, laughter and banter

Nairn (1997) has already argued that students are powerful whenever they make their own decisions to talk or not talk in classrooms, and that we cannot interpret silence solely as an indication of powerlessness as some feminists have done in the past (also see Hazel, 1994; Ormond, 2001). At the same time it is important to point out that a simple revaluing of silence as an indication of the exercise of power, without taking account of setting, social class and culture, does not do justice to the complexity of interpreting silence (Mazzei, 2003). For example, Jones (1999) shows how the separation of Pākehā students from Māori and Pacific Island students had the effect of creating a classroom space that Māori and Pacific Island students said they felt more comfortable to speak in. Understandings of the setting (Agee, 2002; Jones, 1999), and of what constitutes agency (Davies, 1991), are necessary for considering whether silence represents a powerful or powerless position (also see Ormond, 2001).

Jones (1988) has demonstrated how working-class Pacific Island girls' silence in the classroom meant they were disadvantaged compared with middle-class Pākehā girls who practised the forms of discourse most recognized and rewarded in school and later in the labour market (also see Nash, 1999). Notions of voice and silence are cultural constructions which will be understood differently across different cultures. For example, the protocols around speaking in public in Samoan culture stress the importance of timing, of knowing the proper words for the particular moment and situation, and knowing also when to be silent (Tagaloa, 2000). Protocols differ within cultures too depending on gender and age, to name two key dimensions (see Irwin, 1992).

Drawing on the insights provided by this literature, we consider another excerpt from the early stages of the interview and focus on how the students were relatively powerful in avoiding the interviewer's questions.

Karen: Yip. So I mean, like what do you think could be a good way to change that situation? [Referring to the different perceptions teachers have of bullying compared to the students] I mean like, you know, one of the things that we're wanting to do with this research is actually use it to educate teachers a bit more about how you think about your rights. Like, you know, for example it would be useful for them to know your definition of bullying for example. Yip. And use that as part of talking about it. Um, I mean one, one of the other things that we, we asked about, just going to the third bullet point, is whether teachers are bullies?
Participant: Yip, I guess.
Participant: ???
Participant: ??? (lot of loud laughter)
Participant: ???
Karen: Now I missed, I missed that. What did you say?
Participant: ??? (can't hear comment)
Participant: ???
Karen: Do you want to say that again?
Participant: (no reply)
Karen: Ah, OK. So people are saying that teachers are bullies. In what ways?
Participant: (laughter).

The students' laughter, refusal to repeat inaudible comments and silences mean that the interviewer is not getting what she is seeking – audible spoken data. This could be interpreted as a reversal of the usual power relationships in schools between adults and young people, so that the nine students occupy a relatively powerful position in relation to the researcher. The interviewer is struggling to find out what it is these students are saying, and experiencing some frustration at not gaining access to this.

If, as Miles and Huberman (1994) point out, research is about generating meaning from data, then the interpretation of silence presents different challenges to the interpretation of words. Although we might still need to offer multiple readings of particular words and phrases, there is a sense of finiteness to this task which is not the case in relation to silence and laughter. While it is possible to generate meaning from silence and laughter, as we are attempting to do in this article, they are nevertheless more slippery than words to interpret (Mazzei, 2003).

In this interview, which lasted for about an hour, there were 62 bouts of laughter and it was constant throughout the interview. Walker and Goodson (1977: 212) suggest that 'humour thrives on ambiguity and paradox'. Laughter and banter could be understood as a form of escape from an embarrassing situation and facing the interviewer's questions. Humour and joking can create personal relationships but at the same time work to exclude by defining boundaries (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). In this interview it would seem that laughter and banter may have provided a way for the students to control the situation to some extent. It seemed that in the banter there was group solidarity being formed, but we do not know whether everyone in the group felt this. A counter-view to this is that the joking and laughter were a means of initiating an encounter with the researcher that could have led to something constructive.

The laughter and banter that is pervasive throughout the interview may also be understood as something that is part of the interactional style of these Māori and Pacific Island students (Ormond, 2001). In situations where roles demand close contact, but where persons wish to retain privacy, joking provides a diversionary form of interaction. Also joking while resisting can seem appropriate within the proviso 'we were just joking'.

The interviewer asked the students about 'health rights' in relation to drugs, alcohol and sexuality. From a Pacific Island cultural perspective some of these topics, especially sexuality, may be out of bounds at this age (Park et al., 2002). Walker and Goodson (1977: 213) suggest that laughter glosses over social ambiguity but that it also 'marks mutual acknowledgement and . . . acceptance of the nature of particular boundaries and where they lie'. While we may see laughter as creating a barrier between the students and the interviewer, we also suggest that it has the potential to open up the interview space and to be freeing for the students. Walker and Goodson (1977: 215) suggest that those who experience 'long-term immersion in relatively powerless roles often have highly developed subcultures in which humour is a key element'. They argue that oppression appears to be fertile ground for humour. Whether the interview represented a site of oppression that participants responded to with humour is conjecture. What is clear, however, was the effectiveness of humour and silence in deflecting the interviewer's attempts to find out what these participants thought about their rights at school. The interviewer did not persist with an approach that was clearly not working and attempted to re-negotiate the interview not long after the interview began.

Renegotiating the interview

The school setting, the teacher-like interviewer, the school-like questioning style compounded by a middle-class, Palagi, speaking style, would seem to add up to an insurmountable barrier for the interviewer and to constitute an obvious explanation for this 'failed' interview. But as intimated in the introduction and the title, we want to provide a counter-narrative of this interview as an incentive for ourselves and other qualitative interviewers to dig deeper into apparently 'failed' interviews to inform ongoing development of the theory and practice of interviewing. Producing a counter-narrative may reflect the interviewer's desire to have a happy ending in spite of failure, but there are other reasons. The changed interview process demonstrates what interviewers need to be open to every time they interview – that is, to renegotiating the interview when necessary, and to shaping the research encounter in ways that confirm young people's agency within the interview process.

Tuhiwai Smith (1999: 159) suggests that [re]negotiating involves 'thinking and acting strategically' and 'respect, self-respect and respect for the opposition'. The interviewer acknowledges that she has got it wrong and wants to do the interview differently, and in doing so she attempts to convey a sense of respect for her interviewees and to place young people in an authority/expert role.

Karen: Yip. [long pause, no reply from other participants]. Lost? [some participants laugh]. Well one of the things that um would be good to do is just kind of check how you're finding this um way of doing things because like one of the ideas was for us to get you to comment on these results and see what you think, because it's a way of um just talking about some of these ideas. And I'm just wondering how you're finding my questions and this way of doing it? Because I'm interested in how I could improve this, because I'm just wond[ering], have a sense that it's not something that's working that well and I just want to check it out with you. Any comments? [no reply]. Like be honest because you know, I won't be hurt I'm, *I want to actually improve this.*

Participant: (no response)

Karen: Anyone?

Participant: Approach people ???

Karen: Yip, yip. Instead of.

Participant: ???

Karen: So my language doesn't help, yeah.

Participant: Yip. You sort of ???

Karen: Yeah. And so like it makes it sound more complicated than it needs to be?

Participant: Yeah.

Karen: That's a fair comment because like what I've done is done this with staff groups but you're the first student group that I've done it with. Yip. So, so I need to think about the wording. Is there anything else that I could change? (no reply). I mean is it, is it very interesting to talk about results from research or would you much rather just talk about your school? Which would you prefer?

Participant: ???

Karen: Pardon? Like would you much rather just talk about your school?

Participant: Yes. ???

Participant: *Because we know more.*

The students initially do not respond and we interpret this as all nine students being uncertain about 'telling the interviewer like it is' (Reinharz, 1994). But in spite of the interviewer's reassurances that she will not be hurt by their feedback, the silence continues and this could indicate a number of things. First, silence might be a form of politeness. Second, no response could mean that some students were at a loss as to what to suggest to the interviewer. Third, silence could be understood as a form of resistance to an interview that participants had not volunteered for. Nevertheless, in response to the interviewer's plea 'anyone?', some students hesitatingly offered feedback about the way the interviewer had approached them, which we interpret as the way she spoke, asked questions that did not relate to the students' school and/or recruited the students via the intermediary of a teacher. A questioning style as well as questions that are not meaningful for Māori and Pacific Island research participants risks rendering these participants as not knowledgeable and therefore disempowered (Jones, 1999). Their resounding 'Because we know more' (in relation to their school) makes this connection between knowledge and power explicit. This is hardly new information for researchers working with human participants, or for that matter for ourselves as long-time researchers with children and young people. But there are two important points here. First, in the enactment of the moment by moment relations of interviewing that unfold very quickly over the space of an hour (in this case), even experienced interviewers make mistakes that go against their theoretical and epistemological understandings and their best intentions. Of course the interviewer has learned a great deal from this interview and, in writing an article, we hope to share what has been learned. Second, in the process of interpreting this interview – that is, 'hearing it like it is' – we hope to return some of the patience shown by the students.

CHANGING THE SETTING

We now consider how a change in setting, initiated by some of the students, shaped a different research encounter. This provides data to support Agee's (2002) claim that settings are significant in educational research. It also illustrates how an apparently 'failed' interview was recuperated by the participants in this instance. One male student suggested at the end of the hour-long interview that he could show the interviewer the school entrance they had spoken about as unsafe during the interview. Five students elected to join this student so that six of the nine students showed the interviewer around during their lunch break. Reinharz (1994) points out that, if you want to listen to a particular group, you have to go and hear them in their space, on their terms, and the interview comes a little closer to this goal when the students initiate their own process for conveying information about their school.

Somehow, during an interview that the interviewer was not proud of, these students had still gained a sense of her genuine interest in their perspectives. Their initiative also indicates how these students can be understood as both powerful and powerless (Jones, 1991); they were not simply disempowered by the interview; indeed some students took up a relatively powerful position by initiating the school tour. Most importantly for the purposes of our argument here, the setting changed and so did the students' and researcher's role in constructing knowledge about students' rights. The students were in charge, they took the interviewer to the sites they wanted to show her, walking around the school grounds with her. She did not attempt to record or take notes during this tour but wrote up fieldnotes after the tour had taken place.

Concluding remarks

We have argued that what initially appears to be a 'failed' instance of data collection should act as a prompt to re-consider the data collected under such circumstances, the method itself and the social relations of the research. Although the amount of audible data elicited by the interviewer was limited in the case of the group interview under discussion, we have argued that attention to other forms of data regarding embodiment, setting, laughter and silence may provide a richer set of data. Our focus in this final section is to summarize what we might learn from this particular 'failed' interview in terms of the theory and practice of qualitative research with examples of how we are conducting our research differently.

The complexity and messiness of the research process is often concealed within articles that present a coherent narrative. Readers might never find out about data collected but never presented, the emotional labour invested in data collection (Boler, 1999; Reay, 1996), and the politics behind any one particular instance of the production of knowledge (Burawoy, 1991; Gibson-Graham, 1994; Pillow, 2002). In presenting the politics and the problems of one particular instance of data collection, we are re-stating the importance of researchers attending to the *process* and *politics* of knowledge production so that readers of research articles have broader contextual information as a basis on which to judge the meaningfulness of that knowledge.

It could be argued that the group interview would have been more successful and comfortable for the participants if it had been conducted by a Pacific Island young person, but we believe that answers to the dilemmas identified in this article are more complex than this. For example, Tuhiwai Smith (2001: 177, emphasis in original) described how she worked with a researcher who was a 'former street toughie with an attitude' who assumed it would be straightforward to interview Māori and Pacific Island youth because he was from 'similar social circumstances' but found he had to work hard to make a connection or *'to find the join'*. Even when the identities of interviewer and interviewees seem most closely aligned, a successful interview is not guaranteed.

We argue that we must be careful as researchers to not rely on simplistic resolutions to dilemmas of researching across difference. Simplistic resolutions include 'matching' interviewers and interviewees on essentialist grounds that can never be fully realized. For example, matching ethnicity may leave other dimensions such as social class, gender, age, sexuality and religion unmatched. We are also concerned that this strategy might be used as an excuse by researchers from dominant groups (such as Pākehā or adults) to absent themselves from interviewing 'the other'. This would leave members of dominant groups with the relatively comfortable option of interviewing 'the same' or people like themselves. If researchers always employ 'the other' to interview 'the other' (whether this be on the basis of ethnicity and/or age to use two examples) then researchers are analysing data that they have not been involved in collecting. Questions remain, therefore, about the social relations of data analysis and reporting if the research is still being analysed and written up by members of dominant groups. Attending solely to *who* does the data collection may divert our attention from *who* analyses and reports the data (Bishop, 1996).

Educational research in schools means researching across age differences. Given that we do not have a culture of adults listening to young people (Lansdown, 1994), then adults listening to children and young people is a political act, and one that we need to continually improve (see for example, Biklen, 2004; McDowell, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 2001; Yates, 2003). We would argue that the research interview offers one space for teacher-like Pākehā adults (such as the interviewer in this article) to defy the usual circumstances of adults' encounters with young people in schools and to find ways of being worthy listeners (Tuhiwai Smith, 2001). While the interviewer's attempts were not immediately successful, we would argue that she conveyed her willingness to listen and to learn in a school setting where adults do not usually admit they have got it wrong. Just as the interviewer *with* 'street credibility' in the interviews reported by Tuhiwai Smith (2001) had to work hard, we argue that adult interviewers *without* 'street credibility' also need to work hard to find the connection. Finding 'the join' is not impossible even with differences in age and ethnicity (see for example, McDowell, 2002). It becomes possible if we work hard at listening, are prepared to renegotiate research methods during the process, and are open to the serendipitous opportunities offered during research encounters such as the school tour. This must be accompanied by continual questioning about whether we (as adult researchers) are doing it right, as one example of the practice of 'reflexivities of discomfort' advocated by Pillow (2003: 187).

Many authors have already documented the importance of flexible multi-method approaches to researching with children and young people (see for example, Alderson, 2000; Christensen and James, 2000; Clark and Moss, 1996; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Punch, 2002). Ideally this literature should be read in conjunction with indigenous and critical race theories as one prompt for Pākehā or Palagi interviewers to interrogate 'the discursive and affective relations of power' (Probyn, 1991: 116) of their usually unmarked 'white bodies' (Frankenberg, 1993) in research encounters. As part of this process, we believe that it is important to situate research with children and young people within the broader social, cultural, historical and geographical discourses of the place where the research is conducted, in this case New Zealand (see in particular, Bishop, 1996, 1998; Irwin, 1992; Jones, 1988, 1999; Larner, 1995; Mohanram, 1998; Ormond, 2001; Park et al., 2002; Tagaloa, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, 2001; Wall, 2000).

We turn now to some of the more specific ways of how the 'failed' interview described here has changed our research practices. For example, in the design of a year-long pilot project investigating young people's identities as they

negotiate their transitions from high school, conducted by the first and second authors, we have included the following features. First, we wrote our university ethics application to describe the broad areas we intended to interview young people about but made it clear that we would involve young people in the development of specific interview questions. Second, all recruitment was conducted face-to-face and we did not rely on teachers as recruiters. Third, we planned multiple interviews with participants so that it was possible to build relationships over time. Fourth, we have set up a parallel research process so there are adult and youth interviewers conducting the interviews because we are not advocating an 'either/or' position; rather we want to consider what is possible by involving both adults and young people as interviewers on a project about youth identities. We have also attempted to involve these paid youth researchers in stages beyond data collection – that is, in interview transcription and data analysis while being aware of both the possibilities and ethical dilemmas of this approach (see for example, Alder and Sandor, 1990; Alderson, 2000; Clark and Moss, 1996; Cook-Sather, 2002; Nairn and Smith, 2003b). Fifth, we have not conducted interviews in school spaces or within school time (Panelli et al., 2002; Valentine, 1999). Finally, we wanted to open up spaces for young people to articulate their identities in ways that they chose. We therefore invited our research participants to create a portfolio that could include any or all of the following items: music, photos, videos, writing, images, etc. as alternative means of conveying their sense of self. We then interviewed our participants about these portfolios but the questions were determined by what the young person had provided.

We have also altered our practices as researchers. For example, research assistants have sat in on the first author's interviews in order to learn what, and what not, to do. In the process, we realized that two interviewers (of different ages and ethnicities) can interview together to good effect thereby providing two different 'faces' that might facilitate connections for different participants in a group interview (Tuhiwai Smith, 2001). We realized that sharing and analysing interview transcripts across a research team provides a forum for learning more about different ways of interviewing from colleagues and for providing feedback. We believe it is important to find ways to practise collegial, rather than individual, forms of reflexivity because our colleagues may be able to ask us more challenging questions than we can ask ourselves. Although the collegial aspects of reflexivity practised among the three authors of this article are not readily visible, we found our collective resources, experiences, questioning and writing invaluable to the process of being reflexive. We have also purposefully avoided the scenario of senior researchers delegating all interviewing, believing instead in a notion of senior researchers 'handling their own rat' (taken from psychology parlance) – that is, being involved in as many research tasks as possible so that senior researchers are not distanced from the politics and practice of research that are often most evident in the 'contact zones' (Pratt, 2002: 1) of research interviews.

Finally, we note that the students in our 'failed' interview did not 'write off' the interviewer as a 'failure' but introduced another method of data collection instead. In doing so, they offer researchers a valuable model. It is important that we do not 'write off' data that initially does not appear to be useful, but re-consider it in order to find out more about who we are in relation to the people we research, the tenuous nature of the production of knowledge, and the struggles and desires we have as researchers which may make it difficult for us to confront failure even though it may have a great deal to teach us.

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NOTES

1. We would argue that seeking a further interview with these students would pass the responsibility of interpreting the interview back to these young people when we see it as our task to listen as effectively as we can to what these young people have already provided us.
2. The project was called 'Constructions of Young People's Participation, Health, Safety and Recreational Rights at Secondary School' and was supported by the Marsden Fund administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand.
3. The following publications report Phase 1: Smith et al. (2004); Nairn and Smith (2003a); Smith et al. (2003); Nairn and Smith (2002); Taylor et al. (2001); and Nairn (2001).
4. The four case study schools were selected on the basis of the following criteria: co-educational or single-sex; socio-economic status of school catchment (indicated by a school's decile rating); urban or rural; and included two schools from the North Island and two from the South Island of New Zealand.
5. This methodology was deployed in all four schools and has been written up in a separate paper (Nairn and Smith, 2003b).
6. Pākehā is the Māori term for white New Zealanders although this is contested (see Mohanram, 1998). Like Alton-Lee and Nuthall with Patrick (1993), however, we use the term as a mark of respect for the right of the indigenous people to name those who came after them. Palagi is the Samoan word for white New Zealanders. We use Māori and Samoan terms as ways of naming the interviewer's racialized white identity, an identity that often goes un-named and un-marked (Frankenberg, 1993; Mazzei, 2003).
7. It is not possible to be categorical about this because the interviewer collected students' names but did not ask them to complete a form describing their ethnicity. It seemed inappropriate to ask for this data at the end of an interview that students did not seem to want to participate in.
8. Refers to the Treaty of Waitangi which was 'an agreement between two sovereign peoples', that is Māori and the British (Pākehā), signed in 1840; and is considered to be a founding document of Aotearoa/New Zealand (Wilson, 1995: 2; also see Kawharu, 1989; Orange, 1987).

9. This student-only group interview was the first conducted out of the student group interviews across the four case study schools. At all four schools, staff facilitated the bringing together of students for the group interview. After the experience of the 'failed interview', the interviewer was prepared with questions based on survey findings *and* questions tailored for each school. It is relevant to note, however, that students from the other three schools were generally prepared to discuss the survey findings in relation to their school. This explains why the interview discussed in this article is distinctive, but we reiterate that this point is not meant to imply that the students who participated in this interview were lacking in some way compared with their counterparts in the three other schools.
10. Fifth form (or Year 11 students) are usually aged 15–16 years in New Zealand.
11. The first author continues to feel embarrassed each time she reads her opening, long-winded question and is aware of the vulnerability of exposing the ineffectual moments of interviewing when she usually focuses on her participants' spoken text based on the assumption that her own text is superfluous. We believe that the process of working with co-authors to interrogate our practices as researchers is one way of 'keeping ourselves honest'.
12. We use ??? to indicate indistinct words.
13. The first author's acknowledgement of feeling 'other' in relation to this group of students should not be interpreted as indicating that she understood that some simple reversal of relations of power and/or privilege had taken place. Indeed it raises the question of whether a researcher who will always occupy a position of structural privilege in terms of 'race', age and social class (in this case) can use the term to describe their feelings (Roman, 1993). Nevertheless, the term has been included to indicate that the interviewer felt her position of structural advantage was questionable and that relations of power are not solely hierarchical (Foucault, 1978).

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An evaluation of voice recognition software for use in interview-based research: a research note

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ABSTRACT This small research project investigated whether it was feasible and beneficial to use voice recognition software to transcribe tape recordings of multiple voices. Two methods of use were trialed and it rapidly became clear that the 'listen and repeat' method was the leading contender. Through an iterative process, we developed guidelines to increase the usefulness of the software for research purposes, the main points of which are incorporated in this report. Our results suggest that voice recognition software has many advantages, and few disadvantages. It is of particular use for researchers for whom prolonged keyboard work is difficult or unsafe and for researchers with slow typing speeds, but any researcher may find it advantageous.

KEYWORDS: *focus group transcription, interviews, interview transcription, researchers with disabilities, voice recognition software*

Voice recognition software (VRS) has been used by some social researchers for 'writing' field notes, reports and papers since it first came on the market. Over the years its accuracy and ease of use have improved. The research described here investigated whether it was possible to use readily available commercial software to assist researchers to transcribe interviews and group discussions.[1] We chose Dragon 5 Professional™, current when the research started but now at Version 7.[2]

The initial impetus for this evaluation came from the observation by the senior author that perhaps one-third of her graduate students and several other researchers she knew suffered from medical conditions that made conventional transcription or note taking from taped records of interviews and group discussions very difficult. However, this evaluation project has shown that VRS has applications well beyond this group of researchers.

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