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Suitcases, storyboards and Newsround: exploring impact and dissemination in Hull

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Impact and dissemination strategies are key subjects for debate within geography and academia more broadly. Drawing on our experiences of a qualitative study in Hull, where we worked with 46 children and young people to explore their experiences of long-term flood recovery, we describe and evaluate the evolution of a creative methodology for disseminating research results in tandem with non-academic audiences. Reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of this process, we draw three key conclusions: first, we highlight the importance of reciprocity in research. Second, we outline the role of dissemination in providing a means by which other topics can be discussed and explored. Crucially, we also argue that the impact agenda, though controversial, has the potential to provide positive benefits for those interested in working with rather than on research participants, provided researchers are attentive to developing appropriate processes and tools for dissemination. This is particularly the case for those working in children's geographies, where it is suggested that impact could pave the way for a more radical form of research that is able to address 'bigger issues' and audiences.

Key words: *Hull, children's geographies, dissemination, schools, reciprocity, impact*

Introduction

What do the following have in common: a large suitcase, a community artist, CBBC Newsround and an audience with the Oscar-winning actress Emma Thompson? The surprising answer is research dissemination. Using the example of a 15-month research project where we worked with children and young people to explore the effects of flood recovery on their lives, this paper explains how and why this seemingly diverse collection of people, institutions and objects came to co-exist in the spring of 2010.

Dissemination is rarely the sole focus of debate within children's geographies, yet it lies at the heart of some key questions for social research: What are the goals of such research? Who should it be for? How – and by whom – should the findings be represented and disseminated? (McDowell 2001). Here, we link the discussion about dissemination to wider debates about the economic and social 'impact' agenda within research. We argue that the new focus on impact, while not without its problems, has the potential to make a more positive contribution to geographical research by helping researchers interested in working *with*, rather than *on*, participants and stakeholders (Pain *et al*. 2011). More specifically, we also suggest that the impact agenda can provide a means for children and young people's voices to transcend the immediate context of the research, thus allowing them to address some of the 'big contemporary issues' that Vanderbeck (2008) has argued are lacking from debates within children's geographies. However, achieving this more positive vision of impact involves paying attention to the ways in which the dissemination process is conducted. In pursuing this discussion, we reflect further on the distinction between dissemination *activities* and the dissemination *process*. Like Pain *et al*. (2011), we value the importance of process and not just the visible kinds of activities that may appeal to auditors (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) 2011). However, we add to this discussion by showing that the relationship between process and activities within dissemination is not straightforward or linear because seemingly discrete activities can snowball – acquiring a momentum of their own which contributes further to the dissemination process

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and, often, to the development of new processes and activities. This is particularly the case when working with children, where finding creative ways of working is especially important. Finally, we highlight the importance of reciprocity in research, particularly when working with children and young people.

Research dissemination and the impact agenda

Reflecting on her experiences of dissemination on a project with young men, Linda McDowell (2001) highlights the conflicting priorities facing the researcher in terms of the purposes of, and the audiences for, the research:

> It is sometimes hard even to raise the question 'for whom am I writing?' when the answer may include for, with and about the informants (which are not at all the same thing), for the funding body, for academic peers, for the next research assessment exercise, to improve one's own status, to gain promotion and so forth. It is often difficult for a researcher to disentangle these audiences and motives and to address their implications. (2001, 95)

Although McDowell is talking specifically about writing, her comments outline the dilemmas of critical social research, which must frequently 'traverse the boundaries between research policy, activism and theory construction' (p. 95). Debates about dissemination have never been more topical than in the face of the current – and highly contentious – inclusion of economic and social 'impact' as a criterion for assessment in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). As highlighted in a recent discussion within this journal (Pain *et al*. 2011), while the audit culture is now well established within UK universities,[2] the focus on impact, which will carry a weighting of 20 per cent within the 2014 REF assessment (HEFCE 2011), is a new feature of the system.

Critics of impact argue that it represents a threat to academic freedom (University and College Union (UCU) 2009) and that it is symptomatic of the increasing commoditisation of knowledge within academia (for a discussion of which, see Barry *et al*. 2008). Further criticism also surrounds the extent to which it is possible to measure impact, with Pain *et al*. (2011) arguing that too much focus is placed upon scale rather than quality, and that impact 'outputs' tend to be privileged above the process of engagement with stakeholders and participants. They also highlight the problematic way in which impact is framed as involving a one-way transfer of knowledge from 'expert' researchers to those outside the academy. A similar argument can be made about the dissemination process itself, which may be conceptualised as conforming to a 'deficit model' of communication (Hilgartner 1990; Frewer 2004), whereby it is seen as the role of the researcher to 'educate' non-academics about the research findings.

However, despite such critiques, there are also arguments for a more positive view of impact. This is particularly the case for researchers who have a strong commitment to working with stakeholders (Rickinson *et al*. 2011) and research participants (Pain *et al*. 2011). For these scholars, the new focus on impact provides additional leverage that can be used to promote the value of more equal research relationships and to enable universities to play a stronger role in generating progressive social change (Pain *et al*. 2011).

Whilst remaining sensitive to the critiques outlined above, in this paper we provide evidence for this latter position by arguing that developing creative, interactive dissemination processes and tools can result in a very positive form of impact for researchers, participants and stakeholders alike.

Here, Van Blerk and Ansell's (2007) distinction between active and passive forms of dissemination is helpful. Passive forms of dissemination are those where the researchers take a lead role – perhaps through the preparation of reports. However, active forms of dissemination, which the authors argue can be more effective, involve the researchers working together with stakeholders and participants to share and promote the results in interesting ways. Such conclusions sit well with Laws *et al*.'s assertion that 'many of the people research needs to reach will never read a full report' (Laws *et al*. 2003, 191). Consequently, researchers across a range of disciplines are turning to more innovative forms of dissemination through the arts (Hayley 2001) and using games or guided walks (Davies and Dwyer 2007).

There are particular benefits of taking an imaginative approach when working with young people. Firstly, research can be a means of channelling their views so that they can be used to influence the political decision-making process (Kelley 2006; Cinderby 2010). Secondly, there are additional benefits in the form of the skills and ideas gained from an active involvement in research dissemination (Bingley and Milligan 2007). Studies of out-of-school learning experiences show that opportunities to engage in such activities vary greatly between schools, with poorer families and children with behavioural problems most likely to miss out, despite the fact that these are the children most likely to benefit (Power *et al*. 2009). In thinking about these issues, it is helpful to return to Pain *et al*.'s (2011) distinction between the 'outputs' and the 'process' of impact. Such arguments show that, if we focus only on dissemination *activities*, it is hard to tell whether the research has involved a narrow, 'passive' *process* or a more active approach,

which may result in a wider range of benefits for all those involved (Van Blerk and Ansell 2007).

A methodology for dissemination

The research on which this paper is based explored how children were affected by the floods of June 2007, in which one man died and over 8600 households were affected in the city of Hull, in North East England (Coulthard *et al*. 2007). The idea for the project emerged from an intensive qualitative study of 44 adults as they tried to get their lives and homes back on track after the flood[3] (Whittle *et al*. 2010). The adults told us how hard the floods had been for their children and grandchildren and, as a result of this gap in understanding, we were successful in launching a 'sister' research project to explore the experiences of 46 children and young people (aged 9–19 years), across Hull.[4]

The majority of the young participants were accessed through two schools. Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the schools and the participants.[5] As the statistics on eligibility for free school meals show (Table 1), both were challenging schools in areas of above average social and economic deprivation.

This paper focuses on the dissemination process and, consequently, the project methodology is only described in brief here (for more details see Walker *et al*. 2010).

The main methods used in the project were storyboards and interviews. At the storyboard workshops, we asked the children to represent their 'flood journeys' on A3 paper, using whatever methods seemed most appropriate to them (their choices included pictures, words, poetry, diagrams). We then conducted one-to-one interviews with the children using the storyboards as prompts (Loizos 2000, 98). For example, in Zain's interview (see Figure 1) we talked about the bucket, the flood water reaching up to, and then receding from, the letter box, the builders and the cement mixer.

As previous researchers have commented, the audiences for dissemination will depend on a range of factors, including the personal convictions of the researcher and the participants (Hopkins and Bell 2008) and the institutional and social context of the research. To these factors we can add the new pressure for 'impact' within academia (Pain *et al*. 2011). In the case of the Hull Children's Flood Project, a commitment to academic and institutional learning was built into the project through our co-funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Environment Agency (EA) and Hull City Council. The fact that we were researching flood recovery – a subject attracting a high level of policy interest (see, for example, The Cabinet Office 2008 and the Flood and Water Management Act 2010) was a further incentive for us to work with stakeholder audiences. To help us do this, we followed the adults' project in setting up a steering group of policymakers and practitioners with an interest in flood recovery and children and young people's services (see Figure 2), whilst also benefitting from the established network of stakeholder contacts on the existing project.

It would, however, be misleading for us to imply that these external pressures were the deciding factor in our approach to dissemination. As outlined previously, our experiences represent a more positive take on 'impact' and, consequently, while the institutional context that we have described created important opportunities – and, in

Table 1 School profiles

School Profile	Marshside Primary School	Edgetown Secondary School
Type	Community (LA maintained)	Community (LA maintained)
Admissions	NA	Comprehensive
Gender	Mixed	Mixed
Age range	3–11	11-16
Students	329	1200
% Eligibility for Free School Meals in 2007	56% (compared to England National Average of 15.9% (DCSF 2007))	23.5% (compared to England National Average of 13.1% (DCSF 2007))

Table 2 Participant profiles

Project Participants	Marshside Primary School	Edgetown Secondary School
Cohort	26 (9–10 yrs)	17 (11–15 yrs)
Free School Meals	15	1
SEN (pupils learning needs requiring extra support)	9	0
EAL (English as an additional language)	1	0

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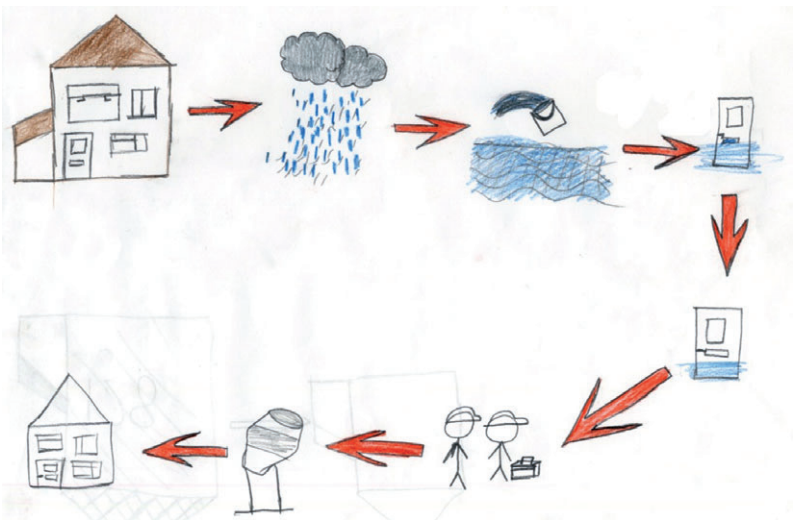

Figure 1 Zain's storyboard

Children's Project Steering Group		Adults' Project Steering Group
Lancaster University	⟷	Lancaster University
Middlesex University	⟷	Middlesex University
Environment Agency	⟷	Environment Agency
Hull City Council	⟷	Hull City Council
University of Surrey		Association of British Insurers
Representatives from the participating schools		Cabinet Office
		Humber Primary Care Trust
		JBA Consulting
		Hull Community and Voluntary Services
		Hull Residents and Tenants Association
		National Flood Forum
		North Bank Forum
		University of Cumbria
		Neighbourhood Resource Centre
		Diarist

Figure 2 Steering Group membership

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the longer-term, rewards[6] – for us to work with non-academic audiences, the primary motivator for dissemination was our own belief in the importance of reciprocity in research (Harrison *et al*. 2001; Pain *et al*. 2011). When setting up the project, the headteacher of Marshside School mentioned that they had been disappointed by researchers in the past because 'they never came back and told us what they found'. We felt that it was important to address this disparity and began thinking of ways in which we could return to the children and teachers who had helped us. This paper explains how our commitment to return initiated a creative process that took us – and the young participants – on a new journey that also had the effect of broadening the audiences for the research. However, while this *process* was the driving factor, it was not the whole story. Instead, the *activities* that we created along the way fed further into the original dissemination process, whilst also sparking new activities and processes of their own. The fact that important opportunities in research can start from chance connections should not surprise us in view of Limb and Dwyer's (2001) comments about the messiness of data generation. However, this 'messiness' is seldom discussed in relation to dissemination.

A suitcase?

Our journey began with an invitation to enter the ESRC Festival of Social Science, a nationwide annual event that aims to promote awareness of UK social science research among non-academic audiences.[7] We reasoned that, if we could find the right concept, we could create a resource that could be used to (a) help us return and discuss the research with the participants, and (b) engage with local children in Lancashire (who had never experienced flooding) as part of the festival week. In short, we needed something that could inspire, educate and entertain a young audience about the experience of flood recovery.

Our initial ideas revolved around using surprise and revelation – the magician who pulls objects out of a hat and *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, where fur coats and furniture lead to the discovery of another world, were conceptual models for the kind of thing we wanted to achieve. Fittingly, however, the answer came from one of the participants who had drawn a suitcase on her storyboard as a way to represent the whole family having to leave home at short notice (see Figure 3). It was an experience shared by many of the children taking part in the project and, as a result, the idea of 'the suitcase' was born.

Working with local community artist Shane Johnstone,[8] 'The Suitcase' (see Figures 4–6) was designed as a resource, container and focus for a series of interactive workshops around the experience of flood recovery. Following the C.S. Lewis theme, it belongs to 'Lucy and Peter', a fictional brother and sister who left their home the morning after the floods. While the outside of the suitcase appears to contain Lucy and Peter's clothes (packed as if they are going on holiday), the inside of the case reveals an image of the damaged personal belongings they left behind that are now irreplaceable. The case

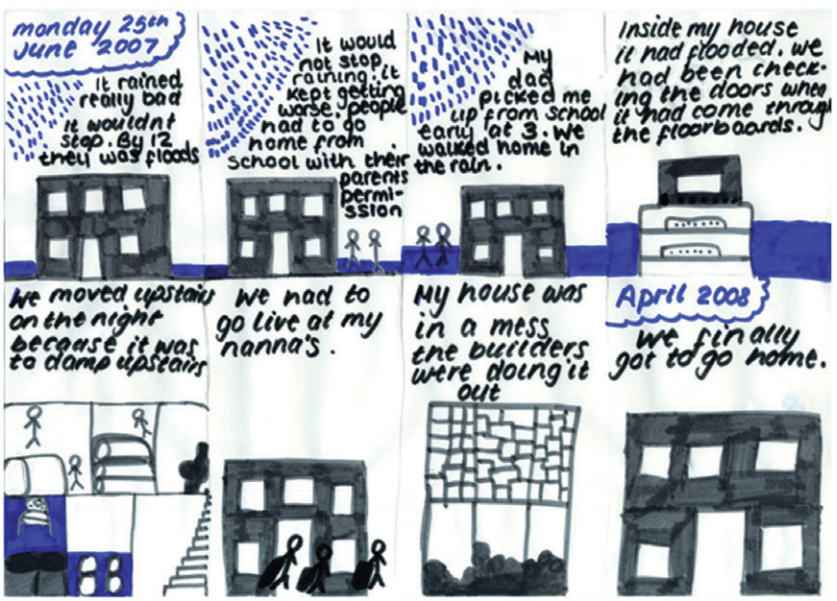

Figure 3 Laura's family leaving home with their suitcases

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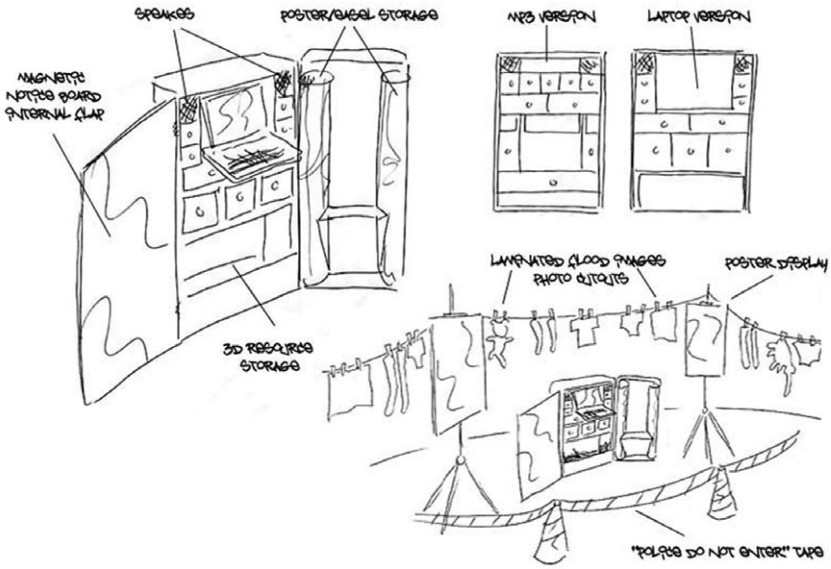

Figure 4 Artist's design for the suitcase

Figure 5 Suitcase exterior

also provides storage for the workshop resources, including anonymised interview transcripts, poster, whiteboard, washing line, sound effects of 'rain', and an interactive classroom-sized game of 'Flood Snakes and Ladders' (involving PowerPoint slides, anonymised quotes from the adults' project and a large inflatable dice).

The workshops were tailored to Key Stage 3 science, geography and citizenship curriculum areas and were adapted to suit individual audiences. Figure 7 lists some of the activities and exercises – the majority of which drew heavily on the data generated by the children.

The act of creating the suitcase, however, added a new momentum and some new directions to the dissemination process. This resulted in three activities that are described below.

ESRC Festival of Social Science

During the festival week we visited three schools and worked with groups aged 14–18 who had not experienced flooding. However, parts of Lancaster and Morecambe, where the workshops were centred, are predicted to be at risk of fluvial and coastal flooding. As a result, we finished the workshop with a GIS flood simulation scenario showing how the local area could be affected by flooding in the event of climate change. This led us on to the subject of what the students thought about climate change. In this way, the dissemination of the research results provided an avenue through which wider environmental issues could be discussed.

Working in Cumbria

The Cumbrian floods of November 2009, in which a policeman was killed and 2000 homes and businesses were affected, occurred at the same time as we were

Figure 6 Suitcase interior

- BBC news video footage from the Cumbrian floods of November 2009
- Displays of the young participants' storyboards from Hull
- Picture explanation of relief rainfall
- Photographs of homes in Hull taken during the repairs process to show flood damage, building work etc.
- A 'what would you pack in your suitcase?' exercise
- Anonymised quotes taken from participants' interviews and a mini date analysis exercise with these
- 'Flood Snakes and Ladders' classroom sized game with floor tiles
- A GIS-based 3D flood simulation based on a scenario of sea-level change and river flooding

Figure 7 Exercises used in the suitcase workshop in participating schools during the ESRC Festival of Social Science

developing the suitcase. As a result of contacts on the steering group for the adults' project, we were invited to work with Cumbria County Council and Cumbria Primary Care Trust to see if our research could help the recovery effort. Part of this process involved us going in to work with a group of sixth-formers in Workington. Once again, the suitcase provided us with a resource to do this and we adapted our workshop for the occasion – starting by showcasing the experiences of the young people in Hull and then asking the Workington group to reflect on how their stories were similar or different. We then worked with them as they created storyboards of their experiences and concerns, which were presented to stakeholders at a subsequent workshop.

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Returning to Hull

Finally, the suitcase allowed us to fulfil our original intention of returning to Hull and discussing the research with the participants. However, our ethos of working closely with the schools resulted in additional opportunities for the young participants to get involved in dissemination activities. Firstly, the year 7 and 8 children were able to take part in a day's filming in which they discussed their experiences and storyboards for CBBC Children's Newsround. Secondly, a connection through a colleague at the University of Hull gave participants from both schools the chance to take part in a writing workshop with the actress Emma Thompson. The workshop was MC'd by two of the young participants who interviewed Emma and then led a 500-strong audience of children in asking questions. At the start of the workshop, a selection of storyboards from the flooding project were showcased to make the link with writing for film. Earlier in the project, a connection with the adults' research project had also resulted in the participants getting a free trip to the Hull Truck Theatre to see 'Everytime it Rains', a commissioned play about the floods.

Discussing dissemination: the benefits and challenges

The dissemination activities described here allow us to reflect more on the process of dissemination, which was both interesting and challenging.

In terms of the participants, our experiences confirmed our opinion about the importance of reciprocity in research. The children's reactions to the suitcase, the Newsround filming and the Emma Thompson event showed that they had developed considerable pride from seeing their work contribute to a resource that was adding to the body of knowledge on flood recovery. Our return visit was particularly important in the secondary school where the flood-affected young people were drawn from a range of classes and year groups. Here, the group activities that we had engaged them in had given them the opportunity to share their stories with other young people who had similar experiences. For example, the teacher responsible for the group explained that few of the young people knew each other beforehand. He felt that the 'flood group', as the students came to call themselves, provided 'constructive emotional support' by giving them a forum through which they could talk about their experiences (for a discussion of 'therapeutic spaces' also see Convery *et al*. 2007). The fact that our process of engagement involved repeat visits (including for 'fun' activities such as the theatre and cinema trips) meant that this support was sustained, as the students were able to discuss developments in their home situation over the period.

Our experience of using the suitcase in Workington suggested that, while younger children may be able to benefit from 'circle time' (Convery *et al*. 2010), older students are not necessarily given the classroom space to talk about difficult issues that are affecting them (Walker *et al*. 2010). Hockey (2008) has observed that we learn more about our own situation by comparing ourselves to others, and our work in Cumbria suggests that the wider dissemination of social research – if done in a reflective and interesting way – has the potential to contribute to this process by helping young people with the challenges they face.

There were also wider benefits for the students and schools. The schools we worked with struggled to offer the kinds of additional opportunities described by Power *et al*. (2009). For the headteacher of Marshside, therefore, the research was almost secondary in importance to the wider experiences that it would bring the children. Through their participation in the project process they gained access to theatre trips, a cinema trip and a workshop with Emma Thompson, while the older children had the additional opportunity of filming Newsround and talking to the media about their experiences.

This emphasis on expanded horizons and new opportunities was also in evidence at the school where we piloted our ESRC festival workshop, which draws from a similarly deprived area. Here, the head of science focused on the opportunities for forging links with the university and expanding the career options of students. He noted that we 'provided those students aspiring to studies beyond secondary school with . . . a valuable insight into research as a career'. Getting involved in research and dissemination is also of strategic importance for schools operating in an educational market place (Ball 2003), where demonstrating 'added-value' to parents and inspectors through collaborating with universities is an important part of this process.

Finally, the dissemination was also of interest to wider stakeholders, including the recovery managers and policymakers at the workshop we organised in Cumbria. As noted previously, the traditional end of project report may never be read in full (Laws *et al*. 2003). There is also an inherent conflict in the case of research with children where the report is written by the researchers using technical language, thus distancing the children's voices from the audience (Van Blerk and Ansell 2007; Mayall 1994). However, the visual impact of the suitcase and the interactive workshop, which drew so heavily on the words and images of the young participants, provided an immediate and engaging way for stakeholders to access the key messages of the project (Tolia-Kelly 2007).

Nevertheless, taking an active approach to dissemination can also be challenging. Our activities involved a major time commitment in working with the artist to

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develop the suitcase, organising the workshops in schools and liaising with the media. There were thus many occasions when we worried that our focus on dissemination was taking time away from other essential activities such as writing papers (Cameron 2007).

We also learnt some important lessons about working with schools, which act as gatekeepers and have their own goals for the engagement process. Our experiences in Hull illustrated the importance of allowing children from areas of economic and social disadvantage to take part in research projects and other extra-curricular activities (Taylor *et al*. 2009) and we therefore targeted the state sector when planning our workshops. This strategy worked best in the two schools where the teachers who welcomed us had PhDs; like the head at Marshside, they understood the research process and the value that such wider experiences might have for the students taking part. Consequently, we were allowed access to 'normal' classes and the teachers were willing to work with us beforehand to help things run more smoothly (in terms of finding the best space for the workshops, how best to link into the students' syllabus, allocating sufficient support staff to the events etc.). In contrast, the schools that did not have this understanding of research were not willing to allocate staff time in advance and only allowed us access to their AG&T (able, gifted and talented) sets (possibly due to fears about bad behaviour or a desire to make sure the schools were represented in a good light).

Conclusion

This paper has tried to give an honest overview of the processes, challenges and rewards involved in developing active research dissemination with young participants. To conclude, we leave you with three key thoughts.

Firstly, we hope this paper acts as a testament to the importance of reciprocity in research with young people – particularly when working in areas of economic and social disadvantage. After the fieldwork we returned four times (for the Newsround filming, the theatre trip, the suitcase workshop and the Emma Thompson event). We realised that returning was important not only from an academic desire to check the analysis; it was also of vital importance to the young people themselves in terms of the opportunities it gave them to develop confidence, self-esteem and to accrue wider benefits through new experiences (Power *et al*. 2009; Bingley and Milligan 2007). For the schools, too, there was the opportunity to develop status and valuable contacts from their relationships with the university and the wider network of stakeholders that this gave access to.

Secondly, there are lessons about how we use research dissemination in educational settings more generally. In this paper we have suggested that creative approaches to dissemination can be used as a way to work with children and young people to discover new forms of knowledge. This finding has not yet been tested in full. However, our experience in Workington, where we were able to use the Hull project as a way to talk to the students about the Cumbria floods, and our work during the ESRC festival, where the suitcase prompted a discussion on climate change, suggests that, when research results are disseminated in an engaging way, they can be used as tools to stimulate further discussion on a range of linked topics. Such techniques could be useful for both researchers and teachers in future.

Finally we can reflect on the relationship between the dissemination process and dissemination activities, as well as on the impact agenda itself. The *activities* we have described resulted from our desire to develop a dissemination *process* that would allow us to keep our promise of returning to the participants and their schools. Our findings thus accord with Pain *et al*.'s comments (2011) about the importance of valuing the *process* of impact as well as specific research *outputs*. However, this paper adds to such conclusions by illustrating the important role that specific dissemination *activities* can play within this process. In the case of our project, these activities provided us with the tools to engage non-academic audiences within and beyond Hull and, in so doing, they sustained the original dissemination process that gave birth to them. They also generated new activities and processes of their own (here, we think, for example, of the ways in which the suitcase workshops allowed us to work with the young people in Cumbria). Effective impact thus involves finding both the appropriate dissemination processes *and* activities (Cameron 2007; Cahill and Torre 2007), and simple, practical tools that educate and entertain may be a more effective means of engaging hearts and minds than the traditional end of project report. In terms of the value of impact more generally, our experiences show that, if we pay attention to the processes and activities of dissemination, the impact agenda can help foster a more radical form of research that is able to speak to wider audiences and political debates (Pain *et al*. 2011). The ability to do this is particularly important in children's geographies, which has been accused of 'fetishising the margins' (Hopkins and Pain 2007) and of having little to say about 'big contemporary issues' (Vanderbeck 2008). The new focus on impact, then, could provide a way for the voices of children and young people to transcend the immediate social and spatial context of the research in ways that will allow them to contribute to bigger debates – for example, about building an effective flood risk management policy and the need for better support for residents of all ages during the longer-term recovery process.

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Notes

1 Formerly Sims.
2 REF is the successor to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).
3 www.lec.lancs.ac.uk/cswm/hfp Accessed 15 April 2011
4 www.lec.lancs.ac.uk/cswm/hcfp Accessed 15 April 2011
5 All school and participant names are pseudonyms.
6 Shortly after we began writing this paper, we learned that we had won a university prize for our outreach and communication work on the project.
7 http://www.esrc.ac.uk/news-and-events/events/festival/ Accessed 15 July 2011
8 www.shanejohnstone.com

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