Research concerning young people, sexualities and education has highlighted that there is often a gulf between schools’ perception of student sexuality and young people’s lived realities (Allen, 2001, 2004). Although some research has been directed at collecting young people’s views of sexuality education effectiveness, how and whether young people’s suggestions are acted on remains largely an adult prerogative (Allen, 2011).

The data for this paper was generated as part of a two year Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project, conducted in a co-educational post-primary school with 32 students (15-18yrs). The purpose of the larger study is to understand and transform how sexuality education is designed and delivered in Irish post-primary education, with a specific focus on challenging aspects of heteronormativity.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects do not aim to speak about young people, rather to actively listen to, learn from and learn with them. From an educational perspective, YPAR challenges conventional roles in which students are passive recipients and consumers of knowledge, repositioning them as architects of their own learning (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). The young people in this study as co-researchers (Fielding, 2004) along with adult allies (Sexuality Education (RSE) teacher and University researcher) were involved in the negotiation, implementation and evaluation of their own sexuality education curriculum.

This paper explores the challenges and possibilities we faced as co-researchers in (re)negotiating roles, relationships and collaborative spaces in a school environment and the tensions that arose when exploring the boundaries of our personal and collective understandings and experiences of gender and sexuality.

Findings from this study indicate the importance, when working within a framework that values and centres young people’s, of extending beyond relevant and engaging sexuality education content towards the provision of opportunities for student/teacher/researcher alike to renegotiate roles and ‘read against the grain’ (Davies, 1993, p.138)