Young People and the World of What Matters: Implications for Health Education and Intervention Programmes

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Abstract
This paper reports on some of the implications for health education and intervention programmes of data from a large scale study which explored anxiety in young people. A total of 387 young people aged between 14 to 15 years in the East Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire area took part. The study used grounded theory methodology for analysis. The core category was identified as concerns about what other people think. These concerns were related to self-consciousness and self-presentation. Further analysis demonstrated the significance of these concerns: other people's opinions can have real personal, social and behavioural consequences.

Advocated within this paper is the use of research methods that promote empowerment, in particular self-selected friendship groups, which reduce self-presentational concerns and increase self-disclosure in research situations. The findings lead to a number of suggestions on ways of improving the impact that health education messages have on young people. If such messages and intervention programmes are to be effective, they must connect with the lived experiences of young people.

Introduction

This paper reports on some of the methodological and educational implications drawn from a large-scale qualitative study which explored things which cause anxiety in young people. It sets out to address two related aims. The first focuses on the identification of methods which either suit particular groups or which could access different types of information. The second is to discuss the lessons from this research for both researchers and policy makers in consulting young people about their problems, concerns and needs. These aims are addressed, in part, by a focus on the representation of young people's voices, and their own perspectives, and include verbatim accounts from some of the young people who took part in this research.

The driving force behind this study was a dissatisfaction within Psychology with existing models and representations of young people and their problems. In particular the sense that academic texts rarely include young people's voices, often leaving the impression that adults in universities are the main mediators when it comes to describing, explaining and understanding young people. Griffin (1993), for example, noted that the voices of participants in youth research are frequently '*pathologised, criminalised, muted, or silenced altogether*' (p. 2). Wyn and White (1997) discussed this issue in depth and highlighted the lack of realism in the psychological study of adolescence. They argued that such models fall short of addressing young people's views and often

impose highly ethnocentric and masculine models of human development, which ultimately reveal more about the practices of professionals and experts than they do about young people whose lives they are supposed to be addressing.

Arguing for an understanding of young people's views also stems from the recognition of recent and rapid shifts in social, economic and political climates. So the world in which young people grow up today may be very different to the experience of previous generations. According to Galambos (2000), it is common to find researchers discussing the importance of social change and context for development, but much less common to find them actually studying it. Hypothesising that dramatic change will result in different experiences for young people opens questions about how the phenomenology of teenage experience changes from one cohort to the next, and how the process of growing up is viewed by the people experiencing it themselves. Yet in spite of this, with few recent exceptions (e.g. Denscombe, 2001; Denscombe and Drucquer, 1999), remarkably little research has been aimed at actually exploring the perspectives of young people themselves and how they feel about growing up.

Shucksmith and Hendry (1998) similarly argued that traditional research methods have tended to present young people as a homogeneous group, with little feel for the variety of their views and experiences. Such research tends to be dominated by 'adultist' ideas about the problems faced by young people, with an implicit assumption that

young people's opinions and feelings are peripheral to the understanding of issues which fundamentally affect them.

One particularly important study by Arnett (1997) investigated young people's own conceptions of the transition to adulthood in the US. The findings from this study indicated a deep disparity between the way transitional events are *conceptualised* by theorists and researchers in the field, and the way they are *perceived* by young people themselves. Such findings demonstrate the dangers of uncritically accepting pre-conceived 'adultist' notions and assumptions, and show how far academic research is at times removed from the real world of young people.

One main concern that adults have about young people is related to health and healthy behaviours. This concern can be seen, for example, in the recent attention to the notion of 'risky behaviours' and young people, including in particular 'undesirable' behaviours such as teenage pregnancy, and drug and alcohol misuse (e.g. Hockaday *et al*., 2000; Denscombe, 2001). The notion of risky behaviour and risk taking is also central to the discourses of developmental models where such behaviours are often attributed to *peer pressure*. This rhetoric has spawned widespread research attention on the development of educational programmes and health promotional messages aimed at reducing the levels of engagement in these 'risky' behaviours (Jessor, 1998). However, whilst the broader aims of these are auspicious, the success of these programmes is often less evident (Silbereisen, 1998; Moore and Parsons, 2000).

We know much more about what adults think of young people, and how that has changed over time, than we do about how they think we adults are doing. Yet, as Roberts (2000) points out, without asking young people for their views directly, it is all too easy to fall into imputing views to them and stereotyping young people on the basis of small samples or anecdotes. Hendry *et al.* (1993) advocated the development of approaches that seek to understand the complexity of adolescents' lived experiences and place young people at the centre of analysis. Moreover, they pointed out that some of the rationale for this new interest in listening to

young people's views lies in the recognition that existing health education messages and intervention programmes aimed at young people are increasingly shown to have little impact on large segments of the population. This is hardly surprising if such programmes are centred on issues that are no longer relevant for young people. A significant aspect of this type of approach then, lies in the suggestion that professionals who work with young people may be more effective if they can understand the 'world of what matters' from *their* point of view.

If researchers are to be concerned with finding ways of improving the impact that health education messages and intervention programmes have on young people, then there is a need for a better understanding of the realities of young people's lives. Added to this is the need to develop new methods for studying the lived experiences of young people's worlds, in the present day and from *their* point of view.

The next section describes some of the methods utilised in this study which explored how young people themselves think and feel about growing up and how they perceive the social world around them. This is followed by a critical examination of the notion of peer pressure, which includes insights of how it is understood by young people themselves. The final section returns to the concept of *risky behaviour*, outlined above, to discuss some of the lessons learnt from this study, which include suggestions on ways of improving the impact that health education messages have on young people.

Implications for Methodologies

In understanding the realities of young people's lives then, there is a fundamental question about the perspective, which requires the researcher to take an approach that moves beyond the boundaries imposed by traditional disciplines. It is suggested that in shifting the method of investigation from the perspective of the researcher and existing theory, to the perspective of young people themselves, a different view of related issues can be offered as well as a different perspective on how to theorise and understand young people. A significant body of work has

begun to do this (for example Griffin, 1993; Roberts, 2000). As such, the present study is located within this framework.

Starting this study required a search for new insights into how best to consult young people and understand the world of what matters in the eyes of the participants. Thus the methodology employed a wide range of data gathering techniques, all of which were designed to allow participants to freely express their perceptions of the world around them. The question posed was 'What do young people worry about?' and participants were informed that the focus was about how *you* think and feel about growing up. This section describes in detail some of the techniques used. It describes how the rationale for each method took into account the need to access different types of information in different ways to suit particular groups.

Methods for Consulting Young People

The first phase of data collection included a sample of 15 pupils (12 females, 3 males) aged between 14-15 years ages, drawn from a large comprehensive school in East Yorkshire. Their participation was voluntary, although all received individual credits as partial fulfilment of the 'Communication Skills' unit of the GNVQ programme on which they were studying. Completion of this unit required that pupils talk to an adult, who is outside of their school environment, about things that are unrelated to the course. Parental consent was endorsed prior to onset.

Pupils took part in two ninety-minute classes over two consecutive weeks. A series of activities were planned for the classes to allow for the utilisation of a variety of informal methods and materials. The main aim of these activities was to introduce participants to the topic in an informal way and to empower them to think and express themselves freely in different ways. They were assured at all times that there were no right or wrong answers and that they simply had to describe how they think and feel.

Firstly, participants were given large sheets of flip chart paper and coloured marker pens and asked to work on the question 'What do you think young people worry about?' They worked in small self-selected groups and the researcher spoke with each group individually about their responses and ideas. Groups were then encouraged to engage in more detailed discussion with each other on the issues raised, in order to stimulate thinking further. This process simultaneously allowed for the development of a rapport between the researcher and participants.

The second activity was designed to encourage participants to think critically about 'adult' perceptions of what young people worry about. Cards were presented, each of which detailed some 'adult' perceptions of young people's concerns. Examples of these included: *acne, bullying, finding a job, money problems* and *weight*. They were asked to rank them in order of importance and decide which ones, if any, they agreed with and to explain why. Following this, participants were then asked to generate their own list of cards detailing their own perceptions of young people's main concerns.

Another activity included pupils being asked to assume the role of an agony aunt / uncle and to answer problems which were taken from magazines aimed at teenage girls. The aim of this activity was in keeping with the previous aim of encouraging participants to think critically about 'adult' perceptions about young people's concerns. Pupils were asked to assess whether or not the magazine problems were typical of the real lives of young people and whether they would respond differently in the role of advisor.

A two-part questionnaire was subsequently developed from the list of items generated by respondents. The first part asked respondents to indicate 'Never', Sometimes', 'Often' or 'A lot/ Always' to questions relating to how much they worried about particular topics. The second part asked respondents to choose three topics from the list that young people worry about the most and list three possible reasons *why* young people worry about these things. Pupils completed the questionnaire individually or in self-selected groups.

All participants were provided with instructions regarding written autobiographical accounts of the

things that they worry about along with pre-paid addressed envelopes, blank paper and an evaluation questionnaire, which asked participants how they felt about the activities. Pupils were asked to write a detailed personal account of the types of things that they worry about and why. Due to the potentially personal nature of this task, it was considered important that this was done individually and in private. Hence, to minimise any possible anxiety over the disclosure of personal information, pupils were instructed to do this at home and return written statements by post. A self-report evaluation form, which included open-ended questions about participants' experiences of taking part in the research was also included for respondents to return by post.

As the aim of the research was to access participants' personal experiences, feelings and attitudes, it was important to gain their confidence and to reinforce the confidentiality of any information disclosed throughout the activities. Participants were assured of anonymity throughout.

For the second phase of data collection, the two-part questionnaire developed from the first phase was administered to a total of 346 pupils (173 females, 173 males) of the same age range at five different secondary schools in the East Yorkshire and North Lincolnshire area. The primary aim here, in addition to gathering more data on the meanings attached to categorised concerns, was to check that concerns were shared across demographic and socio-economic groups.

The third phase of data collection was carried out approximately 18 months later at another large comprehensive school in East Yorkshire. A total of 26 pupils (11 females, 15 males) aged between 14 to 15 years took part. The same variety of methods employed in phase one were utilised here. In addition to further questionnaires, friendship group interviews, and activities, sentence completion tasks were introduced. These items were developed from data excerpts generated from participants in the first phase and consisted of open-ended questions or unfinished sentences which participants were required to complete. For example, pupils were asked to complete or respond to the following statements:

'I do think that people should accept you for what you are and who you are because....'

'Not many young people like to be thought of as different because…'

'People judge you by your appearance because…'

Although these sentences were extremely leading, the aim here was to use participants' own words to elicit the underlying values and attitudes behind these statements of opinion. Assuming that these are the sort of things that any young person might say, asking 'why?' about such things would reveal the fundamental values, moral standpoints and practical expectations of this group. As these were completed while the researcher was present, it also provided an opportunity for the researcher to question participants about their responses and allow for further discussion around the issues.

One of the methodological considerations of this study concerns the specific phrasing of questions and participants' comprehension and interpretation of these questions. Although pupils in sample 1 were made aware that the focus of the study was about how *you* think and feel about growing up, questions were also phrased so that respondents could depersonalise what they were talking about. In other words, pupils were therefore given the option of either referring to self and actual experience in their accounts or taking the role of others and referring to what could or might be.

The problem is that this opens up the confusion between responses that are based on 'real' experiences and those based on social representations, a problem discussed by Michell and West (1996). Their research was concerned with the processes of peer pressure in relation to smoking amongst young people. In this study different methods elicited different accounts of initial smoking situations from the same participants. They hypothesised that asking respondents to take the role of others and focus on what might or could be was likely to capture expectations and beliefs, or social representations rather than actual experience.

Thus in terms of the study reported here, it could

be that the question 'what do *you think* young people worry about' produced stereotypical responses which were based on expectations about the answers that pupils think teachers want. Michell and West's (1996) study highlighted the problem of the mismatch between accounts elicited in different research contexts using different research questions and methods. They argued that their conflicting results demonstrate just how easy it is to misinterpret data when only a single method is used and noted how using a single method to understand complex processes becomes problematic.

For example, data in their study revealed a mismatch between participants who had reported personal experiences of peer pressure to smoke and participants who had drawn upon existing social representations about peer pressure to smoke from popular media sources, such as the BBC children's television programme 'Grange Hill'. Accounts drawn from the latter sources may reveal more about adult views and perspectives of young people than they do about the actual processes involved in the up-take and meaning of smoking in the day-to-day lives of young people.

Because the study reported here used a variety of methods and asked different questions in different ways, it provided the researcher with the opportunity to check for consistencies and inconsistencies in responses to different types of questions. As the researcher worked with the pupils closely, there was a chance to elicit additional and unprompted information. Also, if accounts from the same pupils were obtained that conflicted with responses previously given these could be questioned and clarified directly. It was during informal class discussions and particularly during friendship group discussions that the researcher was able to probe participants about the differences between their own experienced reality and their understanding of social representations. Simply asking *why* can be seen as challenging in that it urges respondents to contemplate their responses.

Mitchell and West's (1996) point about the mismatch between experience and expectation is demonstrated in data from this study. For example, when the friendship group participants in

this study were first asked about their understanding of peer pressure, their responses reflected accepted stereotypical knowledge and expectations about coercive pressure as the following quotations illustrate:

'When people around you put pressure on you to do something' (female).

'Telling you what to do' (female).

Although not prompted, these respondents spontaneously equated peer pressure with smoking, demonstrating a clear awareness and understanding of the accepted and expected links between the two:

'Like smoking, say all my mates are smoking, I'll think I'd better start smoking or all my mates will think I'm a geek' (female).

One group discussion went as follows:

'Like some people in our class smoke because they think it will make them more popular don't they'.

'Well they got pressured into it to do it so that they can be like in a gang or something'.

'So they don't feel like left out and on their own so they join in by smoking'.

'They could be forced into doing it'.

'Yeah because their friends might be all smoking and they might be the only one left and they'll feel left out'.

'Like they might ask you if you want a drag, you've got to decide then haven't you. Even if you say no they still say, 'oh are you sure?', they keep it going on you' (friendship group: 2 females, 1 male).

However, when they were questioned in a more probing way about the meaning of peer pressure and asked to what extent they believed in it from the perspective of their own experience, their responses were dismissive of popular notions:

'I think they've [adults] *got it totally wrong'.*

'I think they [adults] *just want to blame someone'* (friendship group: 5 females).

The following female participant perceptively recognised the complexity of processes involved in peer influence. For her, the notion of peer pressure was a convenient and oversimplified way for adults to explain anti-social behaviour in young people, but one that evades and misrepresents the truth:

'I think there is some peer pressure but a lot of the time when they [adults] *say it's peer pressure they're just looking for a scapegoat, cos they don't really get down to the truth of what actually is going on inside these people's minds'* (friendship group: 4 females).

Rather than accepting the supposition of peers exerting inevitable demands on individuals to conform, what was implicit in the accounts of these participants was a belief in individual choice in friendship selection and group affiliation and personal responsibility for behaviour:

'If you get forced into something you have a choice. You have a choice of losing those friends or you have a choice of going along with them and smoking and then join their gang. So it's up to you'.

'All life is about choices' (friendship group: 2 females, 1 male).

For some, this belief was based on actual experience rather than expectation:

'I'm with people who like they do their own thing, to me you can do what you want but if I don't want it I don't have to have it. If they smoke or they smoke dope they can do it. Like everybody who I hang about with they all smoke and I don't' (female).

These female participants expressed an insightful understanding of the dynamics of group formation and affiliation. Again, the emphasis was on individual choice and responsibility:

'They [adults] *always say it's the wrong group but **they** make up that group'.*

'They [adults] *don't understand that **they** make up the bad group. They* [adults] *say like.. 'Oh they got in a bad group and that's why **they** started doing things wrong', but **they** make up that bad group so **they** might be the one pulling people in to it. They* [adults] *don't understand that people have to make up that group, it's not just there and people walk into it'* (friendship group: 5 females).

The extracts below emphasise the same for smoking behaviours:

'All the adults always like, if say on a documentary they always blame it on peer pressure immediately. They don't think that maybe she wanted to actually do that. Like they'll say 'oh she used to be a real nice girl until she got into the wrong group', but she got herself into that group didn't she. She didn't have to do it. They'll say 'oh she never used to smoke dope' and that, but I'm sure they didn't force it in her mouth. It's like they're not listening to you' (female).

It was noticeable that some participants here felt indignant about the negative way in which they were perceived and stereotyped by adults, recognising that they were being demeaned and problemetised. Adults were criticised for not recognising young people's individuality:

'You only do what you want to do, don't you. But no one understands that you've got your own mind'.

'I think we're all just like robots to them [adults]*'.*

'Because we all wear the same things they [adults] *think we're all sheep and we'll do what everybody tells us to do. They think that everybody is the same, they don't think we've got our own minds'* (friendship group: 5 females).

In these extracts, adults were further criticised for judging young people according to prevailing stereotypes:

'They [adults] *don't listen to you I think. If someone comes to question you they don't listen they just make their own judgement on what you look like before they even listen.*

'Definitely'

'It's like old people, they think we're all going to mug them and we're all the same as the person that did mug them and it's wrong because we're all individuals and people don't understand that'.

'We have our own minds'.

'But to them we're all 14; we're gullible, we're daft, we'll do anything anybody tells us but we're not' (friendship group: 5 females).

The dominant stereotype held by adults of teenagers as slaves to peer pressure can make it difficult for young people to demonstrate that they are not as the following discussion highlights:

'I think they [adults] *only see what they want to see really'.*

'So do I'.

'It's like they know what they know. They way everything is today…'

'All these scientists and people who think they can give all the answers on adolescence and children should actually come and take time with us for a bit to see what we actually do'.

'They don't listen to us'.

'They don't think we've got respect' (friendship group: 5 females).

This final extract underscores the pervasive power of labelling and stereotyping. Stereotypes can be encapsulating in that once a label has been applied, a cycle begins where behaviour is interpreted in terms of what '*they*' (adults) themselves expect to see, thereby reinforcing the categorisation. It is interesting that one participant seemed to be suggesting a way of breaking this cycle by an invitation to '*come and take time with us for a bit*

to see what we actually do'. Such requisitions illustrate that a great deal can be learnt from *listening* to young people.

These results support the suggestion that the role of peer pressure has been oversimplified and overestimated in previous research (e.g. Cogans and McKellar, 1994; Michell, 1997). This data shows how culturally accessible attributions about peer pressure are made under certain research conditions. Whilst these young people shared social representations of peer pressure, when questioned in a more probing way they did not necessarily attribute their own behaviour to it.

The data also support Michell and West's (1996) argument that peer pressure has different meanings and realities for different pupils, which may help to explain why many health education programmes have failed. Moreover, certain health promotion initiatives may continue to be ineffective for substantial numbers of young people if based on assumptions about the vulnerability and social incompetence of young people and the pervasive and powerful nature of peer pressure. The data from this study showed that young people themselves were dismissive of popular notions of peer pressure. The ways in which young people are influenced by their peers varies enormously, thus we need to be cautious that such processes are not oversimplified and constructed negatively.

Lessons for Researchers and Policy Makers: Finding Out What Matters

The previous section showed that when stereotypical 'adult' perceptions and representations of young people are contrasted with young people's own representations of themselves, inconsistencies emerge which challenge many accepted and taken-for granted assumptions about young people. These findings also demonstrate the dangers of uncritically accepting pre-conceived 'adultist' notions and assumptions about teenage behaviour. Young people can have very different understandings of peer pressure, based on very different experienced realities. The following section builds on this and deals with young people's self-presentational motives and concerns about what other people think. Lessons for researchers and policy makers

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involved in initiatives for health promotion in young people are highlighted using examples of data on health behaviour issues, including teenage pregnancy, smoking and taking drugs.

For example, as pointed out earlier, one main concern that adults have about young people is related to health and healthy behaviours. However, the data from this study indicated that young people do not necessarily worry about their health *per se*. This may not be surprising if we take into consideration that young people are statistically among the healthiest in the population.

Concerns about physical health were, however, constructed around concerns about physical appearance. Thus physical healthiness was perceived largely by the young people in this study in terms of physical attractiveness. For example, when asked why they worry about their physical health, these young people spoke about the desire to look good:

> '*To stay in shape'* (male).

> '*Good appearance*' (male).

> '*To stay good looking'* (male).

Interestingly, data in response to this question did not reveal any gender differences. What was also interesting here was the ways in which the concept of physical health was equated with physical appearance. Understanding and perceiving the importance of physical health in terms of appearance and body image implied that self-presentational concerns and fears about the negative consequences of *what other people think* would follow. In answer to the same question, these young people replied:

> '*Don't want to be called names if they aren't healthy*' (female).

> '*People making fun if you're fat or thin*' (male).

These young people appeared to more concerned about what other people think about their appearance than they were about their health. Thus this data suggests that when behaviours have

consequences for both health and physical appearance, young people may be more likely to be persuaded to change unhealthy behaviours when risks to appearance are emphasised.

On the issue of smoking and using drugs / illegal substances, these young people did not express that they worried about the health consequences of engaging in such behaviours, rather their concerns were about getting caught. Again, data did not reveal any gender differences:

> '*I get worried about getting caught smoking, drinking or smoking dope, as I do these things a lot, I worry as my parents are really against them'* (female).

> '*People always worry about getting caught as it would disappoint their family and you just sometimes do things you don't want parents to know'* (female).

> '*People know that older members of the community will think badly of them'* (female).

> '*Young people know it is wrong, if others find out, they feel ashamed'* (female).

Similarly, in the context of teenage pregnancy, this young female did not express concerns about being pregnant *per se*, rather she was concerned about the social consequences of other people's negative opinions and reactions:

> '*What I worry about most is getting pregnant because I am frightened I lose my friends and would my family stick by me and what will my relations think of me. They would probably call me a 'slag' or a 'slapper''* (female).

This data parallels research by Lees (1993) who pointed to the extent to which young girls are aware of how they are seen and treated by others in terms of their sexual reputation. Concerns about other people's negative opinions and reactions in relation to pregnancy were also reiterated by other young people. When asked to explain why they worry about pregnancy, these participants answered:

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'Very worried about opinions of parents' (male).

'What will parents say' (male and female)

'What other people would think' (female).

'Rejection from family and friends' (female).

This data suggests that when behaviours have consequences for both health and other people's opinions, young people may be more persuaded to change unhealthy behaviours when other people's negative attitudes towards them are emphasised.

Leary *et al.* (1999) reviewed research which indicated that teenagers, in particular, are also deterred from obtaining condoms and other forms of contraception by concerns about others' perceptions of them. Research by Holland *et al.* (1998) also highlighted the powerful social messages carried by condoms in terms of how they affect the sexual reputations and identities of young women in particular. Their research revealed that young men as well as young women can be just as embarrassed about acquiring condoms and producing them in sexual encounters.

These findings demonstrate that self-presentational motives play an important role in many health behaviours and the self-presentational perspective has implications for understanding, preventing, and treating a diverse array of health problems. Leary *et al's.* (1999) review suggested that interpersonal motives, which have been largely neglected by health researchers and practitioners, deserve greater attention. In relation to intervention, these findings would imply that finding out what specific groups of young people worry about (from their own perspective) and developing health programmes that target those concerns may prove to be more effective than traditional social psychological models, which have tended to focus on individually held beliefs, motives and attitudes without consideration of dynamic play. Self-presentational motives as well as prevailing images and cultural meanings associated with particular behaviours should be targeted in the development of health promotion messages for young people.

Lessons for Researchers and Policy Makers: Gathering Data and Information

The first main section in this paper detailed the different methods of data gathering techniques used in this study to access different types of information from young people. The following looks at young people's own feelings about taking part in this research. Their responses here reveal underlying concerns with self-presentation and self-consciousness. They show how individuals vary in terms of their preferences for different methods and stress the need for a range of techniques to capture a more comprehensive range of responses. Such techniques should allow young people to engage freely with the research question through a range of different mediums.

In relation to the second aim of this paper regarding methods for gathering different types of data and information, it is important that researchers are aware of participants' self-presentational concerns and feelings of self-consciousness. Young people expressed that their own self-presentational concerns made them feel uncomfortable about discussing personal issues in front of other people. When asked to report individually by post on which activities they had enjoyed the least, the following responses illustrate:

'Writing down on paper about the things we thought about in front of everyone as you couldn't put down what you really thought as other people would of started commenting' (female).

'I didn't really enjoy speaking about my problems but there was only one reason for that, it was the people in my class as they are the types to laugh at you' (female).

'I didn't like talking in front of the group' (female).

These comments reveal that they were most comfortable about talking openly and honestly when in the presence of selected and trusted friends. An individual who is experiencing self-consciousness and is worried about the reactions of others may well be reluctant to divulge his or her

own true feelings or thoughts. In the presence of the wider peer group they became self-conscious and felt vulnerable. These disclosures point to the importance of employing techniques which engender empowerment in research participants, such as small self-selected friendship groups, where participants have control and choice over membership.

However, when asked to comment on what they had enjoyed most about the sessions and activities the following respondents said:

'I enjoyed the talking and the openness the most. There should be more things like this offered to people around the school' (female).

'The questionnaire as they were your own answers and the group wasn't involved with it, it was just you and your opinions' (female).

'I enjoyed being the agony aunt on the problems' (female).

'I enjoyed the whole class' (female).

'I enjoyed it all' (female).

These comments show how participants enjoyed different aspects. They stress the importance of offering a range of different choices for expressing feelings as individuals can differ greatly in their preference. Some participants preferred to engage with individual tasks; others expressed preferences for participating in wider group activities. Others still expressed preferences of choice between tasks. Providing different methods for consulting with young people helps to maximise the opportunity for participants to engage with the research at different levels.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the 'world of what matters' for young people and to embrace a 'grounded' approach that values, enables and empowers young people. The data revealed that what matters is *what other people think*. It has been argued that is important to have an understanding of the different experiences young people have of growing up that draws on their perspectives because only they can talk about how

they feel or identify concerns they may have. Young people themselves are best placed to provide us with expert information on the reality of adolescent development.

To this end, a qualitative methodology has provided a useful and insightful framework for studying young people's experiences and concerns. The transferability of these findings will ultimately depend on the similarities between this research and those involved in it and other young people. Although people and situations are unique, researchers, policy makers and others who work with young people can make use of these findings in their settings and practices providing that they continue to speak specifically for the populations from which they were derived and apply back to them. Thus health educational messages must speak to the population sample for whom they are intended. That means finding out what specific groups of young people think and understanding their concerns from their perspective. Only then can we hope to ensure that messages speak specifically for the populations from which they were derived and apply back to them.

When we take into account that experiences within youth are shaped by specific cultural contexts, within historical time, it becomes clear that research findings validated in one era may not necessarily be applicable to the real world of the next. For theory, research and future policy to be applicable and realistic, research findings and methodologies must be continually re-examined as societies change and individuals are exposed to new cultural frameworks. Research must be able to appreciate voices from different perspectives, both giving attention to young people's agency and using methods which suit particular groups and / or individuals and access different types of information. Data from this study serves as a reminder of how fundamental misconceptions can arise from the passive acceptance of taken for granted assumptions and popular conceptions of young people. Finally, it emphasises the need for researchers to continuously subject their own categorisations and conceptions to critical analysis.

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