

The value of young people doing research: where do young people's voices count?

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Abstract

This paper is a synopsis of the workshop presented at the SSRG 2009 Manchester annual conference. All the information detailed has been captured from our initial experience in piloting the Young Researcher Network (YRN), a project of the National Youth Agency. The paper is structured around questions of why, who, how, and where to involve children and young people in research. This paper provides public authorities and interested parties with sound guidance and useful practical tips on how to work with established, emerging, and advanced groups of young researchers. This paper aims to help you think through more complex questions of where children and young people's voices count and add value to your organization.

Keywords: Young researcher. YRN, participation, children's rights, young people's voices

This paper came out of a workshop presented at the Social Service Research Group Annual Conference held in Manchester in 2009. The workshop was facilitated by Dr. Darren Sharpe and co-facilitated by Daniel Crawford and Elizabeth Goldsbrough. The paper provides a synopsis of the workshop. It spells out the reasons why the Young Researcher Network came into existence and its guiding principles, and provides the legislative and policy framework that gives impetus to children's and young people's active involvement in research. Implicitly, the paper argues for a combination of different ways in which research can be undertaken 'with' and 'by' children.

Research is more than 'consultation', a process of dialogue with children and young people. Research is a well thought-out and methodical process of defining the topic or theme; specifying a research question; undertaking a literature review (thoroughly knowing the subject area); selecting appropriate research methods (building a research strategy); undertaking the field work (collecting information); carrying out

the data analysis or interpretation, ahead of completing the write-up and dissemination (communication of key messages from the research). To paraphrase Mary Kellett (2005), research is about asking questions, exploring issues and reflecting on findings. It is concerned with pursuing what is often a complex 'truth' and must always be ethical. So, before involving children and young people in research you should have fully thought through the process. It requires an enormous amount of time and effort to ensure that young researchers go on to produce high quality research.

The National Youth Agency

The National Youth Agency (NYA) is the national expert and developmental organisation for supporting those who work with young people in England. It is a registered charity, a company limited by guarantee and a specified body under section 78(1) of the Local Government Finance Act 1988.

The NYA aims to advance youth work to promote young people's personal and social development, and their voice, influence and place in society. Key to this is the participation of young people in influencing, interpreting and implementing emerging youth policy and practice for central and local government and national and local providers of youth work.

The Young Researcher Network (YRN) is a project of the National Youth Agency involving a network of organisations that encourage young people's active participation in research to influence policy and practice. Between 2007/8 the YRN supported fifteen research projects led by young people. The idea behind the network originated from what is now a wide range of statutory requirements placed upon local authorities and their partners to consult with young people over the services they receive and decisions made which affect their lives. We wanted to support local authorities in their duties to empower young people to influence local and national decisions. We also wanted to build stronger partnerships with local organisations and increase our capacity to carry out quality research. But, more fundamentally, the YRN was committed to fulfilling the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to properly conducted research.

The Young Researcher Network (YRN) offer

Our Network has now an impressive track-record in empowering groups of young people from across England to raise their voices and influence issues that matter to them and affect their lives. We have also added value to organisations that partnered the YRN. The YRN partners have been an interesting blend of national charities, local authorities and community groups who have had different levels of capacity, expertise and reasons to involve young people in research.

Working together with our first cohort of fifteen research groups we were able to provide access to generic and group-centred training and residential conferences at no cost to participants; a dedicated website; regular e-newsletters; ready access to expert advice when needed; access to funding to support young researcher-led projects; capacity-building; and we brokered larger research commissions. Our online web strategy had two distinct features. Firstly, we provided static pages full of relevant and downloadable information and, secondly, an interactive/new social media platform which enabled discussion across the network for support workers and young researchers. Other elements included Del.icio.us social bookmarking and Facebook (see <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?sid=0&gid=17734080331>).

From early successes we soon moved on to provide specialist support in all aspects of peer led and participatory research and began to offer innovative services in consultancy and training to organisations wishing to establish or embed groups of young researchers within their own organisation. We have since worked with parties and organisations in local and central government, academy, health and social care, education, the media, the voluntary and the private sector. Through this experience of supporting young people-led research, the YRN has produced a toolkit and a 'How to...' guide for involving young people in research. Both these resources are free to download:

YRN toolkit:

<http://www.nya.org.uk/information/118654/yrnonlineresearchtoolkit/>

'How to...' guide:

<http://www.participationworks.org.uk/resources/how-to-involve-children-and-young-people-in-research>

Getting it right for young people!

Listening to what young people have to say is an integral part of our work. Involving young people in research is an extension of this, part of the participation agenda. Dithering and doing nothing in this area fails young people in our commitment to ensure that they have protection, can be heard, can have choice, are valued, have privacy, and are socially included and not discriminated against. However, many bodies and organisations underspend (or do not spend) their participation budgets in this area, perhaps uncertain or maybe just not convinced of the value of research 'by' or 'with' young people.

Involving children and young people in research can be on issues about children and young people or about other people's issues. They can be involved as peer researchers or co-researchers; they can engage in research projects led by children and young people; or led by adults involving children and young people.

It is not just NYA that feels there is value in involving young people in research. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) is a major investor in research and evaluation around children's and young people's lives. The DCSF had a central research budget of £12 million in 2008-9. However, research and evaluation is budgeted at around £140 million over 2007-17. DCSF is committed to putting young people at the centre of what they do, including research. This is in spite of (and, indeed, to help re-address) an increasingly negative portrayal of some young people as the new 'social evil'. We now turn to look at the law and policy for involving children and young people in research.

A rights agenda for involving young people in research

Since the mid 1990s we have seen a political drive to modernize public services

and a concerted effort to embed children's and young people's participation in public authorities. It has meant new platforms have been created in which children and young people are welcomed and their voices increasingly recognized as part of a chorus of public stakeholders. This has meant that practitioners have had to be more innovative in the ways they consult, work and listen to children and young people and demonstrate how their contributions have been meaningfully incorporated into service delivery or design. Many of the methods and methodologies used with children and young people have had to be innovative to include children who have limited speech, who may have varying learning needs, have challenging behaviour, and come from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Barker & Renold, 2000; Shemmings, 2000; Devine, 2002; Lightfoot & Sloper, 2002; Sloper & Lightfoot, 2003; Curtis *et al.*, 2004). In research terms, this has been reflected in a linguistic shift from talking about 'research on' to 'research with' and now, increasingly, to 'research by' children and young people (Oakley, 1994; Darbyshire *et al.*, 2005).

There are important legal as well as moral reasons why children and young people should be involved in doing research. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989 and ratified by the UK in 1991, is the main driver for increasing children and young people's participation. Frequently endorsed through specific domestic laws and guidance it affects most aspects of children and young people's lives such as health, safety, education and well-being. Article 13 gives children and young people the right to receive and give information through speaking, writing, printing, art or any other form. Combined with Article 17, the Convention gives the child and young person the right to information, especially information that helps build his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. Both Articles

(13 and 17) are underpinned by Article 12 of the Convention that gives every child and young person the right to express and have their views given due weight in everything that affects them. There is not the space here to discuss how far children's rights in the Convention have permeated all aspects of relevant policy in England. However, much policy and guidance is now routinely 'proofed' for compliance with CRC and its participation agenda. This is a far cry from when children's and young people's views did not count as legitimate knowledge of the social world. Nonetheless, academic researchers and public authorities have for long neglected to seek the views of children and young people as active agents and 'key informants'. Children and young people have often been viewed as unsophisticated or 'silly', as mini or 'incomplete adults' (Scott, 2000, p.98), and seen as 'presocial' and thus incapable of being taken seriously in discussions about their own needs (Oakley, 1994, p.419), or being unable to articulate a set of coherent political views (Sear & Valentino, 1997, Scott, 2000, Kulynych, 2001, Mayall, 2002).

This is in contrast to children and young people being viewed as 'knowledgeable consumers' yet they are not expected to vote, lobby, organize or campaign and thus have what Mayall (2002, p.154) calls 'non-citizen statuses'. The apolitical nature of children and young people is often associated with their exclusion from what we might call the public sphere. In other words, children and young people are seen to have no power, status, or political 'clout' in the public world of adults. The marginalisation of the voices of children and young people from political culture in the public sphere is commonplace (Kulynych, 2001, p.259) and also reinforced in much research practice.

The YRN challenges this conceptualisation of childhood and youth as a stage of 'becoming' as opposed to 'being', and engages with the 'New Sociology of

Childhood' (Wyness, 2006). The Sociology of Childhood "take(s) it as read that children can be understood as competent social actors [and] as fully constituted social subjects..." (Wyness, 2006, pp.236-7). We now turn to look at two studies undertaken with support from the YRN.

The young researcher groups

YRN research projects have addressed a broad range of issues that affect young people's lives across England and have provided a sound evidence base from which to make clear recommendations for change in policy and practice. Young people-led research produces new insights which may otherwise be missed. For example, a group of young people from North Tyneside, *Have Your Say*, carried out research investigating the barriers to young people in care participating in their statutory reviews (www.haveyoursaynt.org.uk). They produced a set of recommendations that focus on making reviews more young people friendly, and which were adopted (in part) by the North Tyneside Parenting Board. Furthermore, each child or young person now entering the care system in this authority will be given the group's DVD report to raise awareness of their rights when it comes to reviews.

Another group of young people looked-after from Bradford Youth Service, *Get the Life U Want* (GLUW), carried out research into the experiences of education, support and counselling for young people in care. Using evidence collected through surveys and qualitative interviews, GLUW presented their findings (for example, the end to inappropriate separation of siblings when entering care) to the Children Services directors, elected members, senior managers and youth work practitioners at a special event organised at Bradford Film Museum. Delegates on the day praised their work and were able to identify where policy already existed to deal with specific recommendations but also acknowledged

where policy was not being turned into practice. GLUW are still using their research to advocate for change to positively improve the educational experience and support services for young people looked after in Bradford. A full list of the 14 research reports from 2008 is available at <http://www.nya.org.uk/information/127849/researchreports/>. The DVD is available on request.

The barriers and drivers to children and young people's involvement in research

This paper argues for a combination of different ways of involving children and young people in research. Research projects are seldom child or young person directed and their involvement is situated - arguably - alongside the lower ladders of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation¹. The success and failure of a research project is often wrongly thought of as hinging upon the high level involvement of the adult worker. As adult workers you will inevitably have to account for the money and time spent in the life of any research project. But do not overestimate your role. You will move between being a critical friend, enabler and the lead person, dependent upon the nature and the stage of the project. This is discussed in more depth in a later section.

Involving children and young people in research will be tricky if you are not being supported at all levels of your organisation. You need to know where in your organisation young people's voices will count. That said, young people doing research need not be arduous. Keep it simple but with an eye on mainstreaming their involvement in everyday practice. To reiterate, engage children and young people in matters that you know interest them or which affects their lives.

How and where children and young people participate should not be fixed and overly-determined thereby denying young

researchers ownership. A collaborative participative approach allows you - along with the young researchers - to develop a feasible, flexible and adult facilitated research plan to accomplish the research ends. Young researchers will have different types of personal and cultural histories that will need to be addressed in the research process (i.e. physical immobility, health concerns, being in the closet, fear of crime and exploitation, family trauma) at different stages.

Where must you involve children and young people in research? In research terms, participants (e.g. young co-researchers) quite often opt for medium levels of involvement. High level involvement often implies involvement in the research design, data collection, interpretation, analysis, write-up and dissemination. Low level involvement can simply mean 'dipping in and out', or only being involved in one stage of the process. Possible stages of involvement include:

- group formation;
- deciding on research theme/topic;
- designing a research strategy;
- doing the field work;
- data interpretation and analysis;
- communicating key messages and acting on findings.

Two key stages where it is important to have children and young people contribute are in the development of the research question and in the data interpretation. Knowing how to involve children and young people in research will be dependent upon what research approach you take (e.g. exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory). As adult workers, the approach you take should be influenced by the purpose of the enquiry along with the age and competency of the children and young people involved. A lot of children and young people's research takes place within their own communities or in services that they frequently use, and in

this sense they should be viewed as the experts.

They will be familiar with the geography and risk factors that will limit the scope of the project and provide answers to ways of working with or involving other children and young people. No matter what the circumstances you should always try to provide appropriate training in basic research skills to help them formulate their ideas into a do-able research project. Research skills training is outlined later in the paper. Avoid falling into the trap of sticking to one way of doing research. Just because it worked in the past does not mean that it will work to address a *new* research question. The methods you decide to use should not determine the research question. Key points to consider:

- Develop an answerable research question or hypothesis;
- Research methods are selected after the research question is defined and can appropriately address the question;
- Using a combination of different methods will strengthen the research findings by drawing on a number of different sources.

But, by its very nature, participatory research involves risk taking. Working with an inexperienced team of young researchers carries with it even greater risk. When done right the collaborative participatory approach is mutually beneficial and will inform all aspects of the research process and build into a richer project because it improves our level of understanding of the substantive subject area (see Lewis & Lindsay, 2000, p.192). A participative approach to research enhances the quality and value of what is found (Lewis & Lindsay, 2000, p.192).

Selecting methods

Drawing on our experience at the YRN, creative multi-media techniques are the

most popular methods among young researchers. We have supported groups of young researchers who have designed and carried out research using a creative range of tools involving visual methods, interviews, diaries, collages, timelines, walkabout interviews, video diaries, and on/offline surveys. The popularity of these methods rests in their underlining principle of inclusivity, with versatility to be used in or between school, home and leisure environments, giving young researchers freedom to capture data in reliable and creative ways. Children with a range of learning capacities can use these techniques to describe their environments, life situations, preferences and past histories. Other methods commonly used include mapping, weekly timetables, charts, drawing scenarios, card game, voxpop, and the 'big brother' style diary rooms. There are a range of techniques for listening to young children which shift the balance away from the written or spoken word to approaches which have focused on visual or multi-sensory methods (Clark *et al.*, 2003, p80). These new approaches have incorporated the use of different media, for example cameras for young children to record their own experiences of caring for parents with mental health needs (Sharpe & Aldridge, 2007). Our experience at the YRN demonstrates how young researchers are keen on using and mixing multi-media methods to generate and present data.

The implications for young people involved in research

The YRN research skills training package supports young people to develop critical thinking, active listening and problem solving skills and how to engage with the democratic process. We have found it important to work with groups of young researchers and help them to contextualise what is being investigated beyond their own vantage point and to consider the implications of their own experiences *vis-à-vis* their peers. The move from individual to

collective interest lies at the centre of the YRN work.

Building basic research skills

Begin by building upon what children and young people already know about 'research'. As practitioners, do not underestimate the competencies young people bring to the research process. Provide opportunities early on for the research group to share their values, their knowledge of research, and their knowledge of the subject area under investigation. Consider:

- **Undertaking a skills and needs audit** - it will help you set priorities in training and the level(s) at which training should be pitched.
- **Demystifying research terms and concepts** - is the first barrier to overcome. When children and young people see how research techniques and terminology can bring into sharp focus aspects of their own lives - to reveal new insights - it will provide a stable reference point for them to build on. For instance, planning a trip to the local cinema (desk top research), learning about their own family history (genealogy), or visiting a new sixth form college or university (participant observation).
- **Matching children and young people appropriately to research activities** - this is likely to mean research activities are discussed thoroughly and roles are properly negotiated.
- Also, young researchers should be encouraged to **stretch themselves** - when basic research skills training is done correctly the children and young people will acquire new capacities that are transferable to other areas of their lives. For instance, problem solving skills, critical thinking, IT skills, interview and observation skills, report writing, and presentation skills

all enhance their school and post-school performance.

We learnt at the YRN that basic research training (and closely related discussions on ethics and safety) cannot always be delivered in a uniform way. Some young people were placed at a disadvantage and communicated this as such. A balance needs to be struck between theory and practice, with the emphasis being placed firmly on practice. That is, designing training that is workshop-based and pitched at different levels. Otherwise, children and young people will signal their lack of enthusiasm and quickly be turned-off from doing research.

Similarly, do not expect children and young people to function as postgraduate researchers after a weekend's basic research skills training. This is when you jeopardize the self-esteem and confidence of the child or young person involved. In our experience, most, if not all young people, will come to the research project with resilience in negotiating and managing relationships, altruistic in their actions and prepared for, and go on to, successfully manage their research responsibilities. When basic research skills training is done properly - combined with a collaborative participative approach - the above qualities will be enhanced to the mutual benefit of the child/young person and the research project.

Accreditation is one way of validating the efforts and work of children and young people. Accreditation can be done in a number of different ways (e.g. ASDAN, OCN, and Certificate of Attendance), by the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN <http://www.asdan.co.uk>) or with the National Open College Network (<http://www.nocn.org.uk>) though children must be aged 14 and over to gain an OCN qualification. What is the cost? That will depend on which accreditation route you decide to use and whether you are an

accrediting centre. Accreditation requires a time commitment to oversee the completion of portfolios (internal assessor) and the cost for an external assessor. All these efforts are worthwhile if the children and young people decide that this is what they want. Bear in mind that accrediting training will require additional time and effort on the part of young researchers and the internal assessor.

The role of the support worker

The practitioner (or support worker) is the adult supporting the involvement of young people in the research. There are different types of individuals with different skill sets that will want to work with young researchers. As support workers your experience and knowledge of research will vary but will in the first instance influence how young people take-up the offer and treat the research project. Workers may need to consider their own knowledge and experience of research and any bias that may unwittingly steer or influence the young people. Different approaches must be used with young people that stretch but do not panic them. This might mean that the worker is also stretched by different ways of working. At one end of the continuum you will have workers who will intentionally or unintentionally dominate the research process and at the other end workers that will facilitate reflective learning and be a stable guide. Whether or not you have experience in doing research you will be required to act as a critical friend and enabler.

A lot of children and young people experience research as a one-off-event. Most young researchers will not progress onto another research project. The few that do will be joined by less experienced young researchers, consequently you will need to start at a common point. You may be an existing group of young people; you may be a sub-section of a young persons reference group; you may come together solely for the project. Either way, do not assume the basis

of team working has been done (see Act by Right Unit. 1). All research groups should aim for a common understanding of all aspects of the research project. Again, all research projects are new projects and will need to be designed based upon new questions. As a result, new methods will need to be learnt that will best address the questions posed and all the group will need to be trained-up pretty much from scratch.

However a note of caution: research is not for everyone however easy you try and make it. Just like being an artist, poet, musician, architect, and teacher, etc some children and young people will have a flare and others will not. Some young people will not know this until they are involved in the research process and may become uncertain about the research itself or how to leave. Some young people will shy away from high level involvement; however their behaviour should not be misinterpreted as meaning that they do not want to be involved. What's more, there will be the intellectual puzzle for the young person to grapple with, alongside time constraints, and the emotional demands of meeting others' expectations. The role of the worker is to buffer all of those concerns and assist in reflective learning, as much as it is to lead when required. What we have learnt through the projects is that the relationships formed are as complex and rewarding as when working with an adult team of researchers. As support workers you should offer assistance not control through:

- interpreting and representing young peoples' views (where appropriate);
- approaching young people;
- creating exit points that do not lower self-esteem;
- co-ordinating research groups;
- making sure that time, money, human and organizational resources are available at the start of the project;
- bringing in researchers and senior managers from your own organisations to help guide you and

the young research group in your thinking and planning;

- helping with negotiating access to key people and agencies, recruiting subjects, transport, and finally making sense of and producing information about the research project;
- celebrating the role of young researchers in your organization;
- self-awareness of how you approach 'research' because it will inevitably determine the experience and expectations of young researchers;
- acknowledging the power relations that exist between you (support worker) and the young researcher;
- breaking free from traditional ways of working.

Conclusion

Becoming actively involved in research through the YRN as subjects and as participants but overwhelmingly as a young researcher has meant children and young people are positively improving outcomes for other children and young people in England. Hopefully this paper has demonstrated what can be achieved by involving young people in research and the emerging opportunities available to young research groups to influence change. Undoubtedly, the YRN is adding quality to research by advancing standards in participatory and young people led research; by framing young people's voices and most importantly, by responding to the CRC agenda for the right of children and young people to properly conducted research. Young researchers are working tirelessly to get their voices heard and make change happen. They are aiming high and imagining new places to go and things to do. We should make every effort to engage with what they are saying and involve children and young people as agents of change through research.

Footnote

¹ Participatory research sits on a continuum and is not hierarchical. Arnstein's ladder of participation provides an illustrative account of how participation can easily be conceptualised as fixed in its direction and outcome.

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