



by Thilo Boeck



& Darren Sharpe

R e s e a r c h  
R e s e a r c h  
R e s e a r c h  
R e s e a r c h  
R e s e a r c h  
R e s e a r c h  
R e s e a r c h

# An exploration of participatory research with young people

In Britain over the last decade the political climate and growth in consultation with children and young people as stakeholders of public services has flourished . The political drive to modernise public service has meant new platforms have been created, in which children and young people are listened to and their voices recognized as part of a chorus of public stakeholders. This has meant that practitioners have had to be more innovative in the way they consult and listen to children and young people and demonstrate how their contributions have been incorporated into service plans. Many of the consultation exercises used with children and young people have had to be innovative to include children who have limited speech, who are semi-literate, have challenging behaviour, and are from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Lightfoot et al, 2002, Shemmings, 2000, Sloper et al, 2003, Curtis et al, 2004).

## ► Why starting a participative research project?

As researchers we have to ask ourselves very carefully if our own approaches to researching young people’s experiences are grounded in ‘research on’, ‘research for’ or ‘research with’ young people (Derbyshire, 2005, Oakley, 1994). If we ‘research with’ young people we need to perceive them as active agents. We have to depart from a ‘deficit’ model, where children and young people are viewed as unsophisticated or ‘silly’, as mini or ‘incomplete adults’; as ‘presocial’, and thus incapable of being taken seriously in discussions about their needs (Oakley, 1994, p. 419) or being unable to articulate a set of coherent political views (Scott, 2000, Mayall, 2002).

Youth participation in research challenges the conceptualisation of childhood 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 just at the point where late modernity pulls the ontological ground from under the individual’ (Wyness, 2006, pp. 236-37). As researchers we need to know why we engage in participative research and have an open dialogue about this with

young people. In our research we have found that sometimes young people feel that participation can be a policy agenda or an adult agenda imposed on them. This could work against the overall goals of empowering young people to take part in research. From our experience we see that participative research might have different dimensions such as:

- Enhancing strengths and competences of young people
- Framing young people’s voices
- Adding quality to the research

By reflecting on our own practice, and experiences we hope that in this article we can disentangle some of the complexities within participative research and give some pointers for meaningful participatory research.

## ► Our Projects

The authors have worked with a number of separate participative research projects in the United Kingdom and hence feel in a position to make a contribution to the debate. A large number of young people have taken part in the projects that have ranged from quantitative surveys with samples of up to 800 people to small group discussions, and qualitative approaches using pho-

to-elicitation with families and the wider community, peer interviews and case studies. This paper is based on these experiences but will draw on three projects:

- Project Re:action
- Young Carer's project
- Young people's research network

### ▶ Young People's Participation in Project Re:Action

Project Re:Action is a participative research project by the Youth Action Network and the Centre for Social Action (De Montfort University) funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The research aims to learn more about young people's volunteering experience, the impact it has on their lives and their communities and how much difference full participation makes to that experience. Through residential and further training, 35 young people were involved in planning, and carrying out the research. In order to establish a strong partnership between young people, researchers and the organisations, the project has also a steering group of seven young people. The project used a mixed methods approach and, pushing the participative agenda forward, we analysed the data with the young people using computer assisted data analysis packages for the quantitative and qualitative data.

### ▶ Picturing Young Carers

Picturing Young Carers is a photographic participation and elicitation study with children and young people who care for parents with severe mental health problems completed in 2007. The study was sponsored and approved by the Economic and Social Research Council and completed by the Young Carers Research Group at Loughborough University. The aim of the study was to test the usefulness of photographic participation and elicitation research methods among a group of young carers. The study used photographs taken by young carers as the basis for a study into the effectiveness of 'visual diaries', as a specific research tool, to use with these vulnerable groups of children/young people. A further aim of the study was to provide deeper insight into the young caring experience and the nature of caring and parent-child relationships when parents have serious mental health problems.

### ▶ Young Researcher Network (YRN)

The YRN works with fifteen groups across England who are doing young people-led research. The research projects were sponsored by The National Youth Agency. Each group will be using their own research findings – published in November 2008 - to push for change on matters that affect the lived lives of young people. Through the network the young people-led projects receive tailored and generic research training, small research grants, and access to research toolkit and expert advice and guidance in order to successfully complete their research projects.

## 1. Enhancing strengths and competences of young people

Learning new skills, engaging in discussion, making decisions and taking responsibility for different aspects of the research has impacted on young people's perceptions of their roles in our projects. They describe their roles (as members of the steering group and as peer researchers) as being of equal or greater importance than adult researchers.

The adults listen to what we have to say. If we've got something to say then we sit down and listen to what each other has to say and respect what each other has to say. We've all got individual opinions and there's no right or wrong answer, there are just different points of view and they try to bring all of that together.

*The adults listen to what we have to say. If we've got something to say then we sit down and listen to what each other has to say and respect what each other has to say. We've all got individual opinions and there's no right or wrong answer, there are just different points of view and they try to bring all of that together.*

*Young man from Project Re:Action*

A fine balance has to be reached in focusing on the research process and the contribution to the individual's overall well being. For this to happen it needs investment (monetary, time, resources, and training) and ensuring that young people are resourced appropriately in order to fully participate. For instance, paying for travel and food reduced barriers to participation; having knowledge and control (in parts) of the research budget promoted ownership; giving access to and support in the use of computers/internet aided high levels of communication and accessibility to the adult researcher(s).

For instance, the initial inspiration behind the YRN came from the shortfall in good quality research training for young people, in England, who are involved in youth-led projects. All the groups are using participative approaches as a tool for change. The young people who comprised these groups range considerably in their experience and knowledge of research. This is amplified by their different backgrounds and circumstances. Although the training has been designed to be inclusive and build on young people's mixed abilities, we soon realised that basic research training (and closely related discussions on ethics and safety) cannot always be delivered in a generic way. Training needed to be pitched at different levels and support given to individual groups in their organisations.

## 2. Framing Young People's Voices

The importance of 'finding a voice' and 'telling one's story' has been well recognised as essential to participatory research (Plummer, 2001). Participatory research works to empower young people in building competencies, confidence, and deepen their understanding of their own set of circumstances.

So for example, the participative approach fostered with the group of young carers did not degrade or control their voices. Quite often the young carers' situation is pathologised or they



are turned into victims with little control over their lives. Our work was focused on their capacities and empowering the group of young carers to have a voice. Thus the participative research encouraged young people to (1) tell their own stories prioritising what is important to them, (2) create spaces for their stories to be told, and (3) feed their views and experiences into policy development and practice.

Giving due recognition to how voices of young people are silenced, we believe that within a participative research project the team should consider different spheres where young people's voices need to be heard:

- within the research project
- within the organisation/school/youth group
- in the outside world (i.e. policy arena)

### 3. Adding Quality to the Research

As we have argued in the previous section participatory research is beneficial both because of its implicit values (such as empowerment and inclusion) but also because it improves our levels of understanding of the substantive subject area. For those reasons a participative approach to research enhances the quality of the research and value of what is found (see Lewis and Lindsay 2000, Smith et al, 2002).

So for example when analysing data, as adult researchers, we need to be aware of our interpretation of young people's accounts of their worlds. The danger is that the researcher fits his/her findings into a conceptual frame which is not an adequate reflection of young people's experience. Having young people as equal partners on our steering group and participating in data analysis has not only made a difference to young people but also to the adult researcher and has contributed to the whole quality of the research process.

*At these data analysis sessions, when Thilo and Jonathan say something, sometimes we think 'no, that's not what they [young people] mean'...We can feed that back. I know Thilo says that this has really changed his view of young people. So I know it's having an impact on them and hopefully when this project gets out it'll affect other people too.*

*Young woman from Project Re:Action*

As such we don't only aim to understand meanings and significance the social world has for young people, but also explore its properties with them. These are generated and verified by and with the young people themselves (Reason, 1990). Involving young people in the whole research process enables them to become active participants in defining and interpreting their actions collectively with the researcher and can enhance their understanding about their own living environment (Abu-Samah, 1996).

### ► Empowering Young People and levels of participation

Central to 'participatory research' is the principle of inclusion and the recognition that the power relations embedded in the research process can often disproportionately be placed in the hands of the adult researcher. As mentioned earlier, capacity building first needs to take place, along with the acknowledgement that not all participants will want to participate at all levels or stages of the research process. A balance needs to be struck between safeguarding against making the act of participation tokenistic and paying lip service to the politics of inclusion.

*Our project on paper is a youth-led project but it is at a point where it has evolved now where Jonathon and Thilo can't do the work on their own but there is absolutely no way we could do this work on our own. It is at a point where I look at it and think we are all kind of colleagues in a way, we all dip in and we all feed in where we can. Thilo learns from us and we learn just as much back. I think youth-led is a misleading term.»*

*Member of steering group, Project Re:action*

Turning the commendable goal of a 'youth-led' participative approach into reality is not always straight forward or without its difficulties. Participants quite often take on a medium level of involvement. High level involvement often implies involvement in the research design, data collection, interpretation, analysis, write-up and dissemination. Low level involvements can simply mean 'dipping in and out' or only being involved in one stage of the research.

A participative approach needs to be flexible enough to include different voices and a range of abilities. Participants within all our projects had different experiences that needed to be addressed in the research process (i.e. physical immobility, health concerns, being 'in the closet', fear of crime and exploitation abroad, family trauma, etc). Participatory research is appropriate because it lends itself to accommodate the complexity of experiences.

### ► Role of worker

Researchers looking to work with young people, ought to create circumstances for young people to develop critical thinking, active listening and problem-posing skills; it also involves starting with young people's perceptions of their world and facilitating their participation and ownership of the actions and decisions they take (Arches and Fleming 2007:43).

Throughout our projects we have perceived that workers take different roles within participative research. We need to ask ourselves if we impose our own perspectives and methods or if we create the space for young people to explore their own topics, questions and develop innovative methods.

However, a note of caution: participative research is not for all young people. Some young people will not know this until they are involved in the research process and become uncertain about the research itself or how to leave. Some young people will shy away from high level involvement. Their behaviour should not be misinterpreted that they do not wish 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 and 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. Our emphasis on reciprocity and mutual trust reinforced the importance of young people taking something positive from the research experience; but 'intent is no guarantee of outcome'. Young people need to feel that adults understand and build into the research process the general demands on young people's lives (work, study, friends, family), as well as the individual needs arising from complex experiences related to mental health needs, disability, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, gender, sexuality and access to social and economic resources.

## ▶ Conclusion

As adult researchers, we must not underestimate the competencies young people bring to the research process. Equally, we should not expect young people to operate as postgraduate researchers after a weekend's basic research training. This is when you jeopardize the self esteem and confidence of the young person. In our experience, most, if not all young people, will come to the research project with different expectations but overall with a willingness to participate in different aspects of the project. Within an overall awareness of the power relationship and in the right environment of support they go on, to successfully manage their research responsibilities. When basic research training is done right, the collaborative participative approach enhances these qualities to mutual benefit of the young person and research.

We see that, a key task of a researcher is to establish a research process which is in tune with the diverse needs, values and understandings of the young people involved in the projects. (Ward & Boeck, 2000) Participatory research occurs through 'doing together' rather than consultations or tokenistic involvement of young people: it is more likely to occur when young people and workers work in a partnership distancing itself from a 'deficit' model of youth. It has to be based on a commitment to young people having the right to be heard, to define the issues facing them, to negotiate the agenda for action and, importantly, to take action on their own behalf. ■

### For further information visit:

<http://dmu.ac.uk/dmucsa>  
[www.youthactionnetwork.org.uk/index.php](http://www.youthactionnetwork.org.uk/index.php)  
[www.nya.org.uk/information/100585/youngresearchernetwork/](http://www.nya.org.uk/information/100585/youngresearchernetwork/)  
[www.ycrg.org.uk](http://www.ycrg.org.uk)

The Children Act 1989 provides the legislative backdrop to children's rights. The right to be protected: to be heard; to have choice; to be valued; to have privacy; to social inclusion; and not to be discriminated against. Children and young people's human rights are also upheld in the Human Rights Act

## References :



- Abu-Samah, A. (1996), 'Empowering Research Process: Using Groups in Research to Empower People', *Groupwork*, 9, 2, 221-252.
- Arches J and Fleming J (2007) 'Building our own monument': A social action group revisited', *Practice*, 19:1, 33 - 45
- Ward, D., Boeck, T. (2000) Addressing Social Exclusion, *The Social Action Research Contribution to Local Development*, in Matthies, A., Järvelä, M, and Ward, D (2000). *From Social Exclusion to Participation*, JUPH, Jyväskylä
- Curtis, L. Liabo, K. Roberts, H. and Baker, M. (2004) 'Consulted but Not Heard: A Qualitative Study of Young people's Views of Their Local Health Service', *Health Expectations*, Vol. 7 (2), pp. 149-56.
- Derbyshire, P. MacDougall, C. & Schiller, W. (2005) Multiple methods in qualitative research with children: more insight or just more? in *Qualitative Research*, London, Sage, Vol. 5 (4) pp. 417-436
- Lightfoot, J. & Sloper, P. (2002) *Involving Young People in Health Service Development*, Research Works, 2002-01, York, Social Policy Unit, University of York, Vol.4.
- Mayall, B. (2002) *Towards a Sociology of Childhood: Thinking from Children's Lives*, Buckingham: Open University
- Plummer, K. (2001) *Documents of life: An invitation to a critical humanism*, London, Sage
- Reason, P. (1990), *Human Inquiry in Action: Developments in New Paradigm Research*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Scott, J. (2000) Children as Respondents: The Challenge for Quantitative Methods, in P. Christensen and A. James (eds) *Research with children: Perspectives and Practice*, London, Falmer
- Shemmings, D. (2000) 'Professionals' Attitudes to children's Participation in Decision-Making: Dichotomous Accounts and Doctrinal Contests', *Child and Family Social Work*, Vol. 5, pp. 235-43
- Smith, R. Monaghan, M. & Broad, B. (2002) *Involving Young people as Co-Researchers: Facing up to the Methodological Issues*, in *Qualitative Social Work*, Vol. 1 (2) pp. 191-207
- Sloper, P. & Lightfoot, J. (2003) 'Involving Disabled and Chronically ill Children and Young people in Health Service development', *Child Care, Health Development*, Vol. 29 (1), pp. 15-20
- Wyness, M. (2006) *Childhood and Society: An introduction to the Sociology of Childhood*, Hampshire, Macmillan

## Contact :



[tgboeck@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:tgboeck@dmu.ac.uk)

