

## **Young People's participation in project Re:action - a youth led research project.**

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The levels of engagement and participation of young people (or any social group) in research can usefully be viewed as a continuum. Ladders (e.g. Hart in Badham and Wade 2005: 10) or continuums of involvement highlight that involvement can take different forms and that there can be varying degrees to which participants can truly 'participate' in research (Hanley et al. 2000; Kirby 2004; McLaughlin 2006). Hanley et al. (2000: 9) proposes a perspective that covers four points on the spectrum: tokenism, consultation, collaboration and finally, user-led research.

### ***Young people led research***

There are few research projects which adopt an approach which goes to this stage of the continuum of participation with young people. Kirkby suggests that this level of involvement, where young people actively control the research process, might be interpreted as:

“research where the locus of power, initiative and subsequent decision making is with ...young people, rather than older adult researchers. It does not mean young people undertake every stage of the research, or that 'professional' researchers are necessarily excluded from the process altogether.” (2004: 10)

Project Re:Action was a youth participative research project and a partnership between Youth Action Network and the Centre for Social Action (De Montfort University) funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The research aimed 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. A key feature of project *Re:action* was that young people

themselves were fully involved in planning, steering and carrying out the research process. As such it was an equal partnership that recognised the different skills of the young people, the researchers and workers from Youth Action Network. Eight young people also volunteered to be part of the *Re:action* steering group. This group worked very closely with the project workers over the three years, making an essential contribution to the running of the project. They met throughout the project to oversee the progress of the research, conducting focus groups, formulating the survey questions, taking part in the analysis of data, producing an evaluation toolkit and contribute to the dissemination of the findings.

From our experience we see that participative research might have different dimensions such as:

- Enhancing strengths and competences of young people
- Giving young people a voice
- Adding quality to the research

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 (Smith et al, 2002).

A key task of all those involved in the research was to establish a methodology reflecting young people's values, principles and understanding of volunteering. At the centre of our work were three primary values:

- The project was, as far as is possible, defined by the young people.
- All work carried out was based on equal partnership with the young people.
- Third, it has been important to recognise that everyone (young people and adults in this project) had unique skills, knowledge, experience and the

capacity to be creative. The project was based on that principle; therefore everybody was able to learn from everyone else.

## **Involving young people in research**

Social capital and community cohesion were key themes which were explored by project Re:Action. Social capital and community cohesion have gained increasing interest within policy debates and practice which have shaped research activity. However this interest does not stand in a political or ideological vacuum; it is embedded in agendas which tend to shape and put demands on the academic community. Thus, the debate and research on social capital is dominated by specific paradigms and discourses with their own values, questions and categories which are informed by political ideologies and policy agendas (Bourdieu 1977). Young people will be able to offer different perspectives. Some academics may be considered as 'experts' in their field, but that does not imply the ability to see all the perspectives on that area of interest. Young people can offer valuable insights that adults might not perceive or would otherwise misinterpret. In our project young people used their own experience in volunteering to analyse and interpret the data which lead to interesting debates which challenged views and perspectives of all the parties involved in the project.

The following quote from a member of the steering group highlights how young people who have been part of an academic research project grasp this and how the participative element of the research was crucial to achieve this understanding:

*This was a pleasant opportunity to take part in something which is recognised but also represents young people. It was an opportunity to contribute my opinion as somebody who has experienced volunteering with the members of the group. What I think I liked is the fact that I did make valuable contributions as a young person. For me, what I have got out of it was also to see the breakdown of the analysis and the different*

*ways to analyse the data and present it. Also to find out what quantitative and qualitative research means.*

*Taking part in that experience it is now in my mind and I can tell other young people what quantitative and qualitative is about and how it represents different schools of thought but also how to combine them. That's what I have got out of it: education and an eye opening experience.*

Young man from  
steering group

## **Young people's participation in the research process**

The research had three distinct phases in which young people were fully involved:

### ***First phase of our data collection***

Thirty five young volunteers were trained in conducting focus groups during a weekend residential training event. The young people also refined the research questions and research tools. The young volunteers from eight different organisations went on to conduct a total of eight discussion groups with young volunteers in different regions within England. These groups explored elements of social capital, participation and reasons for volunteering. The steering group also conducted two discussion groups with workers from different areas, focused on youth participation and the dynamics within organisations. After intensive work with the young people from the steering group and reflecting on our findings from the first research phase, we devised a survey questionnaire and further refined other group research tools.

### ***Second phase of our data collection***

This phase consisted of a survey with over 920 young people currently being supported by Youth Action Network membership organisations and a survey with 40 workers from the different organisations within the Network. These were completed both on and off-line. These were analysed by exploring frequencies, significant and meaningful differences, performing factor analysis and cluster

analysis using SPSS (a quantitative analysis computer package). Young people were involved in this process by giving them presentations and explaining to them the rationale behind the analysis and the decisions being made. It has to be noted that during this phase young people preferred to have a critical input rather than learning to conduct the analysis by themselves.

### ***Third phase of our data collection***

During the third phase, we looked closely at the qualitative data collected in order to build on the findings of the first and second phase. Young people (with the support of the project team) visited eight locations and conducted a total of:

- Eight discussion groups with young people
- Eight discussion groups with community members
- One discussion group with representative workers of each project.

The insights gained through phase one and two were further explored through the detailed analysis of the focus group data of the third part of our data collection.

When analysing data, as adult researchers, we need to be aware that we are interpreting young people's accounts of their worlds from our own perspective. The danger is that, as researchers, we fit our 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 researchers, and has contributed to the 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  
steering group

With this research we aimed not only understand the meanings and significance that the social world has for young people, but also to explore its properties with them. All of the information relating to this has been generated and verified by and with the young people involved in the project (Reason, 1990). Involving young people in all aspects of the research process enabled them to become active participants in defining and interpreting their actions collectively with the researcher and has enhanced their understanding about their own living environment (Abu-Samah, 1996).

*For me personally, I didn't know I'd be able to do these things, as a young person - for example, data analysis. I didn't know we'd be sitting in a room looking at questions that young people have answered and analysing it. We thought, oh we'll just do the focus groups and run the sessions, but the adults will do it [the analysis] after. So that's been a big step I think.*

young woman from  
steering group

### **Factors influencing levels of participation**

Seven young people from the *Re:action* steering group and/or research team were interviewed about their experience of participating in the project. The following factors appeared to be central to the level of participation achieved by the project:

- Agency and power
- Communication and resources

#### ***Agency and power***

Young people expressed a strong sense of agency as members of the project team. Knowing that they can determine their level of participation – from being hands-on researchers and involved in all decisions, to playing more of an advisory role – is important to them.

Being empowered to learn new skills, engage in discussion, make decisions and take responsibility for different aspects of the research has impacted on young

people's perceptions of their roles in the project. They described 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.*

young woman from  
steering group

There was also a strong sense that young people participating in *Project Re:action* felt respected and valued and that their participation is purposeful:

*I liked the look of it (Project Re:action) – it was actually trying to find something out. And we weren't just being asked questions, it was like, 'get your hands in there' and looking at it and learning about it – learning different skills. And the fact that it was all youth-led was really attractive. Often these projects are just adults saying 'ok, do this, do that'.*

young man from  
steering group

### **Communication and resources**

Young people felt that the research coordinators understood 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, cultural background, access to social and economic resources and gender. Young participants appreciated that the research coordinators shared documents and encouraged them to learn about theoretical and conceptual material underpinning the research. They felt more informed, as well as able to offer their subjective opinions and 'youth perspectives.'

Being given sufficient time to access, read over and consider the material was also seen as a respectful way to work with young people.

*Generally they send us out material as attachments ahead of time, so Thilo will send us something and just ask us to read it before our next meeting. So I have been busy with university work, but I generally look at it and jot down some thoughts for the next meeting.*

young woman from  
steering group

Feeling informed contributes to young people's belief that they are a part of the team, and not just recipients of a program or service:

*Cos they always keep us – what's the word? – keep us, informed. About everything that they're doing at the time and make us feel involved by always giving us things to do – not just telling us what they're doing, but asking if we want to be doing it too - 'do you want to help with this – do you want to do this'?*

young woman from  
steering group

Ensuring that young people are resourced appropriately in order to fully communicate and participate was a key success factor in this project. For example, utilising email has worked for most of the group and appeared to be a successful strategy – in part because peer researchers have been provided with a laptop and, where possible, a subsidised internet connection. Paying for travel and on-costs reduces barriers to participation and indicates to young people that they are a valuable and necessary part of the team.

## **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. When basic research training is done right, the collaborative participative approach enhances these qualities to mutual benefit of the young person and research. As such, project Re:action was an example of how youth led research was beneficial both because of its implicit values (such as empowerment and inclusion) but also because it enhanced the quality of the 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) Being empowered to learn new skills, engage in discussion, make decisions and take responsibility for different aspects of the research are core elements within this process.

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 partnership distancing itself from a 'deficit' model of youth. Young people should be involved in the whole research process, overseeing the progress of the research, conducting focus groups, formulating the survey questions, taking part in the analysis of data and contributing to the dissemination of the findings. 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 researchers, and has contributed to the quality of the research process.

For further information and to download the full report visit:

<http://www.youthactionnetwork.org.uk/index.php>

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