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Panel presentation

**Moving from research "on" or "about" to research "with" or "by" ...:
Exploring the roles of young people in educational research**

SPE02537 Paper 3

Peer research: Experiences, perceptions, issues

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the experiences of young people (including school students) who have been involved in peer research on a range of youth issues. Others who work in youth policy and youth advocacy will also share their experiences of facilitating the voices of young people in this way. These experiences will be contextualised by references to the literature on young people and students as researchers. As research on or about youth begins to embrace this approach, there are many issues that arise which need to be explored.

Introduction

The theme of this conference is *Problematic Futures: Educational Research in an Era of ... Uncertainty*, a theme which invites us, even challenges us to rethink what we do under the rubric of educational research. This third paper in the panel *Exploring the roles of young people in educational research* will suggest options for future research approaches, referring to a number of research projects where young people have played varying roles and drawing on the experiences of both young people and facilitators of relevant research projects.

The presenters are a collaboration of individuals passionate about the wellbeing of young people. They include young people, youth workers and government researchers, and only one, a Year 12 student, is directly involved in schooling. The existence of this team of presenters reflects a certain value base, one which sees young people in holistic ways and not able to be neatly compartmentalised into disciplines, and one which believes that projects involving young people must, in the end, be for their benefit. A view of young people as active agents, competent and authoritative individuals, and a belief in "honouring" their voices has led to the inclusion of students in this panel and as co-writers of this paper.

Young people as researchers

Searching through the usual databases using the term 'peer research' is not encouraging, with very little information identified. However, a careful search of recent social science material reveals an increasing number of examples of young people being involved in a variety of ways in research projects - but not necessarily through schools. It seems that organisations with a human rights focus and services who work with young people, especially with marginalised young people, have been those most enthusiastic about embracing this approach. In the UK, for example, a handbook on *Involving young researchers*, subtitled *How to enable young people to design and conduct research* draws on 25 research studies involving young researchers supported by Save the Children. Many of the Australian examples we identified were carried out by youth workers, including the three projects which will be discussed later in this paper.

However, there has been very little theorising of this at this stage. Atweh (u.d.) identifies "a handful of funded research projects that employed young people as researchers" and identifies "one of the few books that attempt to theorise students' involvement in research activities: *Students as Researchers: Creating classrooms that matter*. The focus of this paper, however, is not on classrooms, but on research activities initiated and supported by individuals outside of schools yet involving school-aged young people, and it presents more an invitation or challenge to theorise such approaches than an attempt to do so.

When young people work with trained researchers, they can take differing levels of responsibility for the research, ranging from involvement as subjects to actually undertaking the entire research as partners with experienced researchers.

This paper, however, will focus on that type of research which is seen to be a political act, emancipatory in intent and transformative in nature. Employing or engaging young people as researchers can be seen as a political form of action (Alder & Sandor, 1990). This method of research challenges the dominant orientations to social research, but is becoming more widely accepted (Alder & Sandor, 1990; Hetzel, Watson and Sampson, 1992; Wilkins & Bryan, 1993; Atweh & Burton, 1995; Oldfather, 1995; France, 2000; McLeod & Malone, 2000; Phillips, Stacey and Milner, 2001; Calvert, Zeldin and Weisenbach., 2002).

Such research involving young people can best be seen within the sociological discourse as opposed to psychological, behavioural or medical discourses. It is argued that this provides a more useful and emancipatory discourse for understanding and conceptualising young people as researchers (Morrow & Richards, 1996). However, this involves the need to move to a sociology where young people are taken seriously in how they experience their lives in the here and now as young people.

We acknowledge the problematic nature of terms like "empowerment" and refer to the arguments of Troyna (1994) who points out that the word "empower" has been appropriated and misused. Whatever term we might use, the aim of such research is *"to change social and political relations in a society characterised by the unequal distribution of power"* (Troyna, 1994, p.15), - a political act.

We refer now to a paper presented by John Smyth at the 1999 AARE conference. Smyth (1999) argued that the concept of "voiced research" has been identified as being epistemologically committed to a democratic research agenda and so needs to be constructed in such a way that it provides opportunity for participants to be able to reveal what is real for them. Using this methodology, what is decided to be important enough to research can only really come from the person being researched. Research questions can only emerge out of "purposeful conversation" (Burgess, 1988), not interviews. The question thus emerges as to who has the power to determine what is a worthwhile research question, and young people are vulnerable in this equation (Smyth, 1999).

This approach is a reversal of how power relations have tended to operate in research projects involving young people. That is, the researcher knows and the young people are expected to willingly participate, as objects or subjects of the research. In voiced research, the reverse of these power dynamics is sought (Smyth, 1999). This process does not sit well with traditional research methods, particularly positivist framed ones (Smyth, 1999).

Results of voiced research are often multiple, idiosyncratic and discordant. Voiced research is seen to have a high degree of credibility by young people in particular. This is because the research is about the lives, experiences and aspirations of those whose lives are being portrayed (Smyth, 1999).

Theories arising from the research are predicated on the sense-making in situ by the participants. Also, the research process provides a give and take approach which can result in identity formation which has previously not been possible.

Researchers like Atweh (e.g. Atweh, Christensen and Dornan, 1998) take this further in their advocacy for participatory research. Throughout the process of participatory research, young people can begin to transform some circumstances relating to their lives, and educate themselves about their situation, thereby empowering themselves for future action. The

research process, however, should include discussions by the researcher on his or her ideas about social change, so that the participants are aware of some of the concealed and unyielding forces that can underpin social change. This can be a significant challenge for researchers. Such an approach is consistent with the principles of critical theory which discuss concepts of empowerment, emancipation and transformation from dominant forces of oppression (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Oppression continues to be propagated when those who are not privileged accept that their subordinate position is natural, necessary or inevitable and mainstream research practices often continue the cycle of oppression through their assumptions (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000).

Young people working as researchers in partnership or using action research are ways of attempting to address the unequal power issues seen to be inherent in traditional research which relies on researched as object (Atweh & Burton, 1995).

Participatory Action Research has been frequently used with adults but in recent years has grown as a methodology used with young people. In this approach, the emphasis is on 'participation', 'action' and 'research' being carried out by the young people. The adult researcher becomes a democratic participant. Hart (1992, p.19) summarises the main features of this approach as follows:

- o the research is carried out by or with the people concerned;
- o the researcher feels a commitment to the people and to their control of the analysis;
- o the research begins with a concrete problem identified by the participants themselves;
- o it proceeds to investigate the underlying causes of the problem so that the participants can themselves go about addressing these causes.

Throughout the research project, the professional researcher's role is primarily technical assistance and engagement in democratic dialogue with participants about the wider causes influencing the problem (Hart, 1992). Projects can be designed to enable different degrees and types of involvement by different people and at various stages in the research process.

Peer research

The term 'peer research' is just starting to emerge in the literature. It refers to research involving young people, where young people as researchers explore questions of relevance to them which usually involves working with other young people to enrich understandings of an issue. A peer researcher can be defined as a young person taking on the specific role of researcher in certain youth-related projects (Phillips, Stacey and Milner, 2001).

Some examples from the literature

An interesting example of children undertaking participatory research is described by Hart (1992). Children conducted research for the Nottingdale Urban Studies Centre, a multicultural area of West London. To investigate existing housing conditions as a basis for a housing proposal, children interviewed residents, housing experts, builders and government officials using tape recorders and taking photos. Adults and children worked together, sifting through, discussing and interpreting the material. A newspaper was published by children to

circulate at their school. The children contributed significantly over time to the Centre, helping it become a valuable community resource.

Another example is provided by the University of Nebraska, where a team of researchers successfully undertook a collaborative multi-site qualitative study with high school students as co-researchers to investigate perceptions of tobacco use among high school students in four Midwestern high schools (Miller et al., 2001). Building on Ginsburg's (1996) "teen-centred methodology" which involved ninth grade students participating in focus group interviews to have a "naturalistic forum for expressing their views", the University of Nebraska researchers chose to engage students as co-researchers.

The students were recruited, selected, and trained to collect data by conducting audio-taped focus group interviews with school personnel including administrators, teachers, support staff and students. Once the data was collected, they were then trained in how to analyse narrative data, receiving feedback as they did so. Finally the student co-researchers from two of the high schools were involved in writing up the results.

The benefits of this collaborative research project for the students were numerous (Miller et al., 2001). Aside from the opportunity of collaborating with a university faculty on a qualitative project, the students developed new skills such as

"facilitating interviews, framing open-ended questions, probing for depth, listening, analysing and interpreting data...through active participation in real-life research projects. Successful collaborative experiences may also increase high school students' self-efficacy and give them confidence that they have something to contribute to their peer group and the adult community" (Miller et al., 2001, p.23).

The authors concluded that qualitative projects that explore issues relevant to adolescents, and using a teen-centred methodology, may empower students to engage with issues affecting their lives in more proactive ways (Miller et al., 2001).

There have been many benefits attributed to participatory research (Alder & Sandler 1990, Atweh & Burton, 1995, Calvert et al. 2002, Johnston & Nicholls, 1995, Oldfather 1995, ICHYDNC 2001). These relate to the quality of the research, outcomes for the professional researchers, for the organisation and for the young people themselves. We will not be addressing these in any further detail in this paper.

The next section of this paper will briefly discuss two research projects carried out in Brisbane in recent times and one which is just starting. Our approach reflects a key concept arising from the research: honoured voice (Oldfather 1995, p.135). In these projects, the voices of young people were invited, recognised, responded to and acted upon and honoured, and this has extended through to this paper and this presentation here today.

What's the Story" - an example of peer research

The following is an extract from the report of the 'What's the Story?' project, written by K. Beavis and Youth Advocacy Centre Incorporated. This was a project that utilised a youth participation process based on principles of empowerment, inclusion, participation, access, equity and respect.

From April to July 2002 a group of eight young people participated in a fifteen-week project designed to provide the opportunity to:

- conceive, research, devise, manage and deliver a short film about crime (to be used as a useful and relevant resource in crime prevention activities in schools and community youth centres throughout Queensland);
- develop skills in video production, including the entire process from conception through to completion;
- articulate their experiences, views and recommendations relating to 'criminogenic' factors determined by young people to be significant in their lives (i.e. peer relationships, family, police and the law, drugs and public spaces);
- work with a young, professional film-maker;
- be involved in a consultative, collaborative process that facilitates their full creative and imaginative capacities; and
- participate in an arts-based project within their own communities.

What's the Story? comprised four key stages.

· Stage One: Context Building

Workshops contextualised the issues (why crime? why not crime? why are indigenous people over-represented in detention centres?) and established the project direction/ framework.

· Stage Two: Skilling Up or Training

A series of hands-on, practical film-making skills including research processes and interview techniques was held.

· Stage Three: Practical Application

This involved the practical application of the skills developed during stage two. Young people researched, shot, interviewed, wrote, and starred in the video.

· Stage Four: Post Production

In the final stage of the process, participants edited raw footage into a 10 -15 minute video.

Participants engaged simultaneously in two processes: a creative process (i.e. developing an idea from concept through to creative outcome, including developing skills in film-making), and an investigative process (researching and developing knowledge in subject matter).

As part of the project, participants:

- interviewed lawyers, social workers and youth workers currently working with young offenders;
- devised interview questions, and interviewed random people in the Fortitude Valley mall, about public perceptions of youth crime;
- visited the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre and spoke directly with young people who were detained; and
- researched and examined the representation of young people and youth crime in the mainstream media.

The project worker (Kara Beavis) and video artist (Scott Collins) utilised a multi-modal workshop program, using language and activities to engage the creative, intellectual, physical and social faculties of the participants. The process acknowledged:

1. Young people come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse interests, life experiences and views, and the importance of recognising the validity of these experiences and views;
2. Young people are inspiring, capable and intelligent, and express this intelligence in a myriad of different ways: all of these modes of expression need to be valued and respected within the creative process;
3. Young people are active in their own communities, and make a positive, sustained contribution to our cultural life.

From the first workshop, the group began to explore key questions/ issues pertaining to youth crime. These included: How many young people in Queensland come into contact with the criminal justice system? What are the key crimes committed? Why are young people likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system? What do the young people who have come into contact with the law say? How are young people represented through the mainstream media? What are the broader social/ community concerns? Whose issue is it? What do the youth workers say? What could be done to address the problem? How can young people access those services/ activities?

This process was underpinned by a philosophy of privileging the voices of the project participants as part of a broader discussion that includes, but is not limited to, young people's participation in the juvenile justice system. Support became pertinent to this conversation: infrastructural and cultural (community, familial, peer, and mentor). Participants acknowledged that young people have the potential to make sustainable and positive decisions in their own lives, and to contribute to the life of their communities. Participants were frequently frustrated by the perceived undervaluing of young people's voices, even by young people themselves, especially given this potential. Linking in with the conversation on support, project participants described positive encouragement and confidence as pivotal factors in their own experiences. As one participant said, "It's the difference between someone telling you you're good, or telling you you're not."

Participants were also able to benefit from the stories, experiences and expertise of the workshop guests. This was an enriching experience for the participants on their learning journeys.

The visits to the Brisbane Youth Detention Centre were, for the project participants, by far the most impacting experiences of the entire project. Project participants learnt experientially about life in Detention, via the views and opinions of young people detained at the Centre. Connecting one-on-one or in small groups with other young people about common and differing experiences was a recipe for profound learning at a very human level. Initially, the video group were all very scared, but by the end of the second visit, the proof of openness, honesty and a good connection was evident: participants from both groups were throwing around the basketball, and hanging out like friends.

Video is an important medium; it is easily transportable, inexpensive and is congruent with many young people's 'culture reading' skills. Unlike live performance (i.e. music, drama, dance etc), it can be viewed more often than once, and can reach a potential audience larger than any auditorium maximum capacity. It was important that the medium for this project was video, given that it is a relevant cultural medium for the participants and for the intended audience.

One of the extraordinary successes of the project was the camaraderie or positive relationships that developed between participants, especially considering a tenuous start between ideologically and experientially opposed young people.

It is equally difficult to try to explain exactly *how* the high level of camaraderie and trust developed, but contributing factors may have been:

- establishing a set of agreements early in the process about core group values, including respect, inclusion and empathy;
- a discussion about issues as they arose, rather than allowing them to develop into bigger issues; and
- a practice framework designed to: provide a space and facilitate a process wherein all voices are privileged.

In the words of one participant:

"I just want to say that participating in the video project was one of the best things I have ever done. I have gained heaps of experience and a better understanding of myself, youth and society. It has really opened my eyes to the career pathways I might choose in the future." (Project participant Hayley, 16 years)

There are always multiple perspectives on any event. What follows are the words of Sharna Maltmann, one of the young researchers in the above project.

Sharna's story

We went to the detention centre as a group of young people not knowing what to expect. Because we didn't know the young people that we would be talking to, it was quite formal at the start. We were young people from two different worlds and we didn't know how to approach that, but after a while that didn't really matter. After we started talking we broke down a lot of those barriers. We started talking about not only the issues that we needed to discuss for the purpose of our film, but other things in general. We ended up just hanging out with the young people in the detention centre and talking with them as peers not interview subjects. That was really effective in getting them to open up to us, although we didn't realise this until later on.

When we started the formal interviews with the young people, we decided as a group not to plan any set questions. We knew what we would want for the film, but we decided it would work best if we did as if we were just having a conversation with the young person, which is what we were doing anyway. It ended up being a conversation between two young people, which worked really well. Maybe the responses we got from the young people would be different and less open if we were older people asking the questions. We as young people just had things to talk about regardless of our crime topic and often the conversation went off track. We genuinely became interested in the young people we talked to and wanted to get to know them better and I think that feeling was felt by both sides.

Another part of the process for the video involved us interviewing other young people on the street which we all felt quite comfortable doing. Generally we got a better response from other young people to our questions, and we felt that other young people were more open to us and willing to help out. We felt a little discriminated against by some of the older people, who didn't really seem to want to be a part of the film. Generally young people are more trusting of other young people and that was reflected the day we did the street interviews. Young people are on the same level as one another and straight away you can feel more

comfortable with another young person. Often young people feel that they have to be more respectful and extra polite to the older generations, which can make opening up to someone a little harder.

The next part of the process involved us looking at newspapers and magazines. We didn't have anyone there directing us through this process which we thought was the best way to do it. We didn't feel restricted by anyone, which allowed us to be led only by one another. We were doing research on media that was popular to our own generation which made it quite a fun process as we could all discuss the contents easily because it was familiar to us already. We had conversations about bands and popstars that we were all aware of which then would spark up conversation within the group and I don't know if that could have happened if an older person had controlled the process. We all loved being given the freedom to research in a way that was interesting to us.

We all weren't prepared for the information that we would get after our detention centre interviews, but with the interviews on the street we already had an idea of the answers we would get. This was simply because they were the answers that we ourselves would have given to those questions before we had been informed. The answers didn't shock us as we all had similar opinions to the young people on the street and we knew what our friends thought as well, so we predicted a lot of the information that we were given by people. But the interviews with the people in the detention centre had quite an effect on all of us as we had no idea what to expect there. We were all affected in different ways and after only being there on two occasions we all felt a sense of knowing the young people there on quite a personal level. Which is why it was quite sad to leave.

As a group we all reflected on our detention centre visits and everyone had been affected positively in some way. We all felt really grateful that they had opened up to us so quickly, as we hadn't expected that to happen. It was hard not to feel sympathy towards the young people in there and we were often saddened by some of their answers. These people were the same age as us and looking at our lives compared to theirs was hard. At first we saw them as only criminals as it's hard to see them as anything else when you're walking into a space with a guard and all the security. But by the time we left our views on that had changed. We thought of them as just young people who had lost status.

We didn't know what we were walking into so it was just easier to go with the stereotype. While doing the interviews we weren't thinking 'oh this would be great for the film'. We were thinking more about how sad the story was or how hard that must have been for that person. We just wanted to get to know the young people and it wasn't until we began to edit that we realised how much good stuff we actually got. At first we were there for the video only, but that soon changed. I think that if we had been there just for the video that we wouldn't have got the stories that we did. The thing that really worked for us with these interviews was the fact that it wasn't formal and we were able to just have conversations with the young people.

What's the Story worked really well because of the freedom we the young people were given. That freedom allowed us to let the video go in whatever direction it wanted to. We didn't try to direct into a certain way and in many ways the young people that we interviewed directed it for us. We didn't know how it would turn out and that was half the fun. With it being not so formal we got a chance to really get to know each other and to be ourselves. We weren't afraid to voice opinions to each other and that's why we have a good film. We were given the chance as young people to voice our opinions in a way were we could do it freely without being told how to do it. We all enjoyed the experience and were sad when it finished, although we took with us everything that we learned during the process of the film.

What follows is an example of another local project involving young people as researchers.

The Nundah Youth Project

From March to September 2000, Brisbane City Council's Life in the Suburbs (LIS) program approached Queensland University of Technology Carseldine's (QUT) School of Humanities and Human Services to undertake a project relating to young people living and working in Nundah.

The aim of the project was to identify ways Nundah could become a more youth-friendly place, in light of the many physical and economic changes affecting Nundah, as well as the expected targeting of Nundah for a Suburban Centre Improvement Program (SCIP).

Historically, young people between the ages of 12-25 have not been heavily or well involved in local area planning and development activities in Brisbane. For this reason, and given the nature of Nundah's community and human services, many of which focus on young people, Life In the Suburbs decided to fund a pilot for how to develop successful ways in which young people and their interests could be involved in future planning, development and management activities, along with other existing, and more formalised and acknowledged groups of interests (e.g. Chamber of Commerce, Police, Service Networks etc).

A specific project brief provided parameters for the project, and these directions were reinforced by good practice knowledge regarding working with young people, local and state governments, businesses, and local residents in terms of participative decision making and collaborative problem solving.

The goals of the project were:

- Facilitating the needs and issues of young people being included in Nundah re-development and revitalisation activities undertaken by Council
- Identifying partnerships within the Nundah community that could enhance responses to the needs of young people. These may include Local Government, local residents (including young people), community organisations and local businesses.

The main outcomes outlined in the project brief included:

- Identify opportunities for youth inclusion in the Life in the Suburbs project for Nundah
- Present recommendations that may be implemented as part of either the Life in the Suburbs project or possible future Suburban Centre Improvement Program.

Council's project brief proposed that an appropriate methodology for the project be developed by the project team.

A developmental approach to the research and the project was seen as appropriate. This involved developing initial relationships in the community and using an approach which became increasingly owned by the local community and young people within it.

Following an initial briefing meeting with Council, early contact was made with the Nundah Community Centre. From this contact it was agreed that the project would work out of the Nundah Community Centre each Friday afternoon for the duration of the project. The Centre's Community Development and Education Worker became the key contact person for the project at the Centre, with the goal that the Centre could play an ongoing role in supporting relations established during the project. From its outset the project was keen to become part of the community's own processes rather than separate and independently managed. The local Community Centre's interests and support allowed this to be possible.

A core coordinating group of people met on Friday afternoons with other people attending for meetings and specific planning processes. This comprised staff from QUT, students of QUT and Yeronga TAFE, staff of the Community Centre, and a number of young people, including the youth representative of the Community Centre management committee.

A common criticism of community based work is that it can replicate and reproduce insights and issues that have emerged from previous work. The goal of this project was to facilitate improved relations and enhance the capacity for 'youth friendly' and young people inclusive action. It was not intended simply as a research study. To this extent it falls broadly within the scope of 'action research' though it has not had the opportunity within itself to undertake multiple cycles of action and reflection.

A search was done for previous relevant reports and work through talking to key people in Council and the community. It was clear that many of the issues highlighted by young people in the Nundah project were raised in one form or another previously. This confirmation added robustness to the issues identified during this project.

To initiate engagement with local young people, the Nundah Youth Project ran a stall at the Nundah youth festival 'Frenzy'. Conducted in early April 2000, this one-day festival attracted significant numbers of local young people and residents. At Frenzy the project workers handed out brochures on the project and conducted surveys of individuals on the issues facing young people in Nundah and what they would like to see happen. Altogether 49 individual surveys were completed with almost half of these done at Frenzy (young employees in the area were also targeted).

In order to capture as broad a range of young people as possible, a Graffiti Wall workshop was also conducted in the afternoon of Frenzy at the Nundah Community Centre. The Wall invited young people to express their feelings about the Nundah area using drawing and graffiti.

A contact list was generated at Frenzy and was added to over the life of the project. A series of project information sheets was produced, which detailed the progress of the project and invited young people to be a part of a youth reference group, and these were distributed to the list by email or post. This process of individual contact was followed by a series of focus groups (workshops) conducted at the local bike shop, high schools (x3), Community Centre and a local disability employment support service. The nature of these focus groups was also developmental, in that they provided a way of developing relationships between young people and the project, transmitted information, knowledge, and ideas together with the invitation for the young people to become involved in the project on an ongoing basis in a growing 'youth reference group'.

From the beginning of the project, the intention was to build a representative group of young people (youth reference group) who could prioritise and carry forward the issues and ideas for a more youth friendly Nundah to key stakeholders in the community, and to Council to inform the proposed Suburban Centre Improvement Program. The initial purpose of the youth reference group was to form a group of young people who could prioritise and present the issues and ideas for a more youth friendly Nundah to community stakeholders, in a format of their choosing. The youth reference group had all decision making control in relation to the prioritisation and presentation of the data and they decided to present the data they had prioritised in two formats; a mini report to be handed out at the Community Forum, with the main component of the presentation to be a video - planned, shot, and edited by the youth reference group. The video had two basic parts:

- Footage of areas in Nundah which were significant to young people in terms of safety, hanging out, or spaces that required revitalisation
- A peer research component which included footage of the youth reference group members interviewing a significant number of students in a high school environment on the question of 'What could be done to make Nundah more youth friendly?'

The youth reference group members, some of whom were local high school students, gained permission from their respective schools to do interviews both in the grounds of the schools, and within class room settings. A video camera was lent to the reference group by the Nundah Community Centre, and when time came to edit the video, QUT volunteered their Audio Visual resources to the group.

The youth reference group presented the video of their peer research at two community forums. These included an initial community forum organised by the Nundah Youth Project (including representatives from Brisbane City Council's Community Development Team and Suburban Centre Improvement Program (SCIP), local community service providers, local business owners, and local community groups) to share the insights generated through the project research and begin to engage the community in the generation of ideas for responding to these issues and interests; and a presentation to and discussion with NOTION, the local resident group about the issues and ideas raised. The youth reference group also attended a SCIP general community meeting to talk about the data to come out of the Nundah Youth Project and to provide a voice for young people in the SCIP consultation process.

From the outset of the youth reference group it was envisaged by the young people involved, that the proposed SCIP would not be the answer to all of the problems of Nundah, and so the boundaries of this project did not limit the group's issues, interests and ideas. The reference group saw that the Life in the Suburbs program, the ongoing community development program of Council, the Community Centre's future projects, and the various other business and resident activities all presented opportunities for them to be involved in making Nundah a better place for everyone to live.

At the formal conclusion of the project in September 2001, the reference group, by consensus, changed its title to the Frenzy Youth Association to better reflect the future direction the group will be taking. With Nundah Community Centre support the Frenzy Youth Association is seeking formal incorporation and is currently pursuing the goals of:

- Establishing a youth space in Nundah;
- Being involved in other processes such as SCIP; and
- Developing and coordinating the annual Frenzy Youth Arts Festival.

The Stafford Youth Project

The Stafford Youth Project is a very new (formally beginning November 2002) Brisbane City Council funded program which has a number of different elements:

- Employment of 11 young people as peer researchers
- Survey development by the peer researchers
- Data collection by the peer researchers within high school environments
- Holiday program development for young people (informed by data)
- End of year event for young people (informed by data)
- Implementation of peer research findings into 2003.

The Stafford Youth Project is an initiative of the Stafford Youth Committee. The Committee consists of a number of community agencies (with the support of Brisbane City Council) who are eager to develop links and projects with young people in the Stafford area. The group was formed at the beginning of 2002. Since then it has been engaged in a number of activities:

- Identifying what already is happening in the local area
- Identifying facilities which exist in the Stafford area which may provide "safe space" for young people to access and
- Developing a project plan to work with young people in the local area (which includes the project elements initially outlined).

The Stafford Youth Committee outlined a peer research process for engaging with local young people in the area. The aim of this process is to gain insight into the types of activities young people local to the Stafford area would like to participate in (and associated information such as appropriate costs for activities, transport issues, and interest in being part of a mailing list to find out about things happening for high school aged young people in the local community). To implement this process, the Committee outlined the need to employ a worker.

A Youth Development Officer position, funded by the Brisbane City Council, was created to support a number of the above initiatives, including the employment of the peer researchers, facilitating and supporting the peer researchers in survey development; assisting the peer researchers to decide on and assist in the organisation of an end of year event; identifying and organising holiday activities for January 2003; and developing processes to provide safe spaces for young people based on the consultation data collected by the peer researchers.

It was decided that a school based peer research process would be implemented. To initiate this process Council negotiated with a number of local high schools to advertise the peer researching positions within the school environment, and to gain permission for the employed peer researchers to then survey their peers with these school environments.

The eleven young people subsequently employed as peer researchers have been meeting weekly (paid) as part of the research process, at their local Community Centre with the Council Youth Development Officer and local community worker. These meetings initially involved tasks such as survey development and general support for the researchers during data collection, and have now progressed to planning and implementing an end of year event and a holiday program for January 2003, based on the data they collected.

The peer research process within the Stafford Youth Project has been a successful one. The peer researchers have collected over 250 surveys and have gained a sense of esteem and confidence amongst their peers. A sense of group ownership of the material and the process is also apparent. Given the project is in its initial stages, it is difficult to theorise on the overall outcomes in terms of the collated data, however a holiday program will be one of the outcomes in the short term, and Council plans to use the data to inform its youth strategy and community development planning in the medium to long term.

The next section discusses what those who have worked in participatory research projects with young people identify as key aspects to ensure the project is successful - what we have called the Principles for such work.

Principles for working with young people as researchers

1. Commitment

A commitment on the part of adult partners to what the young people can offer is critical to this type of research. It has been argued that this commitment can help break down issues of power inequality (Hetzl et al., 1992, p.35). However, it is important to recognise that this will not eliminate the power differential.

2. Participation

Any partnership relationship between young people and adult researchers needs to exist in an environment that supports principles of participation, including the value of children and young people's input (Hetzl et al., 1992, p.34). 'Triumph of Success' a two year research project undertaken by young people in collaboration with youth workers, professional researchers and volunteers found that a system needs to be in place where the young people are consulted on all key decisions (France, 2000).

3. Recruitment strategy

The recruitment strategy at the outset needs to be well defined, systematic and provide details of the project and responsibilities (France, 2000). It is argued that the involvement by young people can become meaningless if this is not clearly defined (Calvert et al., 2002). Involving the young people at the outset of the project can enhance their participation, sense of ownership and input (France, 2000).

It has been suggested that specific targeted approaches need to be developed to focus on 'hard to reach' young people in order to ensure their participation (France, 2000). A sense of 'fun' has also been identified as an important motivator for young people to participate and stay involved in the research (France, 2000).

4. Choice

The importance of giving young people the choice to be involved was identified as a key lesson in best engaging and keeping young people involved in research projects (France, 2000). The participation structure needs to also allow young people to enter and leave the project when and as they feel ready (France, 2000). Such an exit strategy can minimise tensions or difficulties at the conclusion of the project in terms of closure from the project for the young people (France 2000).

5. Role clarification

Structure and clarity about roles has been identified as an essential element for young people to be able to positively participate as researchers (ICHYDNC, 2001). Research and evaluation needs to differentiate young people's involvement from other development practices for young people, for example, mentorship, formal education (Calvert et al., 2002) and peer support (Phillips et al., 2001). Professional co-researchers or youth workers acting as researchers still have responsibility to ensure that any limitations, inconsistencies or pitfalls in the research process are pointed out and addressed in order to avoid setting the young people up to fail (Hetzl et al., 1992, p.35). The research methods used need to recognise that young people do not have to be involved in all research tasks as key players.

6. Support

Developing support networks within the group including a youth support structure that is responsive and includes debriefing has been found to be important (France, 2000, ICHYDNC, 2001). Settings that provide an appropriate balance of choice, safety, support and challenge have been found to be most successful in engaging adolescents (Calvert et al., 2002). Moreover, the types of support and opportunities necessary for the experience to be a successful and positive one vary between younger and older adolescents and young adults (Calvert et al., 2002).

It has been argued that a diversely experienced advisory group can better provide formal and informal support to the young people (France, 2000). Building youth work support via central project co-ordination and volunteer staff has been found to help keep the young people involved (France, 2000). Further, a youth work team core to the project can assist the professional researchers in developing ways to engage the peer researchers in the tasks (France, 2000).

7. Role of research co-ordinator

The role of the research co-ordinator needs to be motivating, supportive and focussed (France, 2000). As stated earlier, the co-ordinator also needs to ensure that young people are informed and equipped with the necessary research knowledge and skills in order to avoid setting them up to fail and to prevent any kind of harm or distress coming to them (Hetzl et al., 1992).

8. Negotiating common ground

The importance of negotiating the extent of the common ground in any partnership is highlighted. This relates to the different agendas of the parties, and resources brought to the partnership (Hetzl et al., 1992, p.35). Establishing common ground at the outset creates an opportunity for both parties to use the differences that invariably exist as a means of learning from each other (Hetzl et al., 1992, p.35).

9. Training

The process needs to educate and inform young people about research methodology (Phillips et al., 2001) and issues and tensions, for example, around confidentiality (France, 2000). Training needs to also cover how personal values can influence our work (Phillips et al., 2001). Many young people may not have been previously involved in decision making processes and so any training needs to incorporate this (ICHYDNC, 2001). The project outcomes from the 'Triumph of Success' project suggested including young people and peer support when undertaking field work and using training methods that are interactive and engaging (France, 2000).

A key role of peer researchers is helping other young people gain access to the appropriate services, resources etc. Whilst it is not the researcher's role to be a source of this information, they need to have access to this information and be informed regarding the subject being studied (Phillips et al., 2001).

10. Confidentiality

This is a critical and non-negotiable principle in any form of research and requires a clear articulation of the principles underpinning this with the young people involved as researchers (Phillips et al., 2001, Kirby, 1999).

11. Information flow

The role of good research involves offering something back to the participants that is meaningful (Phillips et al., 2001). Accordingly, this needs to be considered at the outset.

Issues involved in participatory research with young people

A number of issues in relation to young people participating as researchers have been identified in the literature. These include:

1. Power

The notion of partnership in research with young people involves acknowledging issues of power. Further, it requires taking the risk to share power and where possible to do this from the outset (Hetzl, et al., 1992). Partnerships involve negotiation, honesty, searching for common ground and acknowledging differences. Accordingly, the challenge for adults partnering with young people is addressing the adult/youth power issue at the outset. It also involves recognising the power that young people have in relating to other young people, to know about themselves and in being young (Hetzl, et al., 1992).

2. Closure

Issues of closure have been raised in terms of debriefing the young people at the end of the research. The nature of the work of peer researchers can be emotional and so the need for debriefing is recognised as being important (Phillips et al., 2001). In fact, it has been argued that all researchers, whether this is a young person or adult, need to be debriefed to ensure there is no carry over of issues (Angwin, 2000). This would also be true of the young people being researched in many instances.

3. Scepticism

Scepticism that their voices will be listened to and count in any kind of meaningful way may deter young people from becoming involved in research. This can result from previous experiences of tokenistic involvement (Howard, 1994) or the fact that they have not been invited to participate in the past (ICHYDNC, 2001).

4. Unique needs of the young person

Financial, transportation and scheduling needs of the young person must be considered by organisations for successful participation to occur (ICHYDNC, 2001).

5. Lack of knowledge or skills

Another issue relates to the skills possessed by the young researcher, in that an unskilled person could use inappropriate or invalid questions in data collection or carry out flawed analysis. The lack of knowledge and skills also impacts on their effectiveness as interviewers. In situations such as this, it is the responsibility of the 'professional' researchers to ensure that the young people are trained and develop the appropriate skills and knowledge in order to be able to ethically carry out research (Kirby, 1999).

6. Personal Sharing

Peer researchers are often used because of their knowledge and experiences of the particular area being researched. As such, this type of research is about obtaining rich, detailed information and this, it is argued, requires the need for the participant to feel comfortable with the researcher (Phillips et al., 2001). Accordingly, the researcher needs to be able to share their similar experiences, in this way demonstrating their personal understanding of the issues. The role of personal sharing should be facilitative, not the major focus of the interviews (Phillips et al., 2001). In this type of research, it is important that the young people as researchers receive training, ongoing support and supervision in order to address and pre-empt issues that can arise, such as where there is a blurring of the role of the researcher with that of a support person for their peers (Phillips et al., 2001).

Disclosure of sensitive information is possible during the course of some types of research. This means that young researchers are made aware of this possibility and must be provided with the tools and knowledge to be able to deal with this. This involves training young researchers to understand that they are not 'counsellors' and that as with other researchers, they should refer the respondents on to appropriate services if issues arise. The use of debriefing sessions with both the respondents and also the young researcher is one way of addressing this (Kirby, 1999, pp.116-7).

7. Payment of children and young people as researchers

The notion of paying young people as researchers raises a number of issues which must be addressed at the outset of any research project (Wilkins & Bryans, 1993; Kirby, 1999). Kirby (1999) identifies some advantages and disadvantages of this:

Advantages include:

- Recognition of contribution;
- Values the young person;
- Promotes professionals taking the young person seriously;
- Can increase the motivation and interest in the project;
- Can provide motivation to complete tasks;
- Provides the means of bring the young person into the internal decision making structure of the organisation, hence increasing their influence (Kirby, 1999, p.55).

Disadvantages include:

- Payment can be seen or used as a form of control where the young person is told how to participate;
- The dynamics between the adult and young person change, with relationships then becoming one of manager and worker;
- For some young people, participation may be purely motivated by the money, not genuine interest in the project at hand;
- The legal issues associated with paying young people, particularly those under 16, can be problematic (Kirby, 1999, pp.55-6).

8. Ethical issues

In any research involving people, the protection of the rights and welfare of the individual participants is of primary importance (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2002). It is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that issues of integrity, beneficence, justice

and respect for the individual participants are fulfilled (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2002). With regards to qualitative research, ethics is a major issue.

"Because qualitative methods are highly personal and interpersonal, because naturalistic inquiry takes the researcher into the real world where people live and work, and because in-depth interviewing opens up what is inside people - qualitative inquiry may be more intrusive and involve greater reactivity than surveys, tests, and other quantitative approaches" (Patton, 1990, p. 356).

Morrow and Richards (1996) discuss ethical issues, exploring the extent to which children and young people should be regarded as similar to, or different from adults in social research and how they are positioned as vulnerable, incompetent, and relatively powerless in society in general. They highlight the dilemma we face in contemporary western society where children and young people's views and opinions tend not to be respected (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

The underlying assumptions surrounding the issue of informed consent are centred on the notion of the 'incompetence' of the young person to make decisions about their participation in any research. So, any discussion about competence to give consent usually centres on the age of the individual (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Moreover, the current paradigm involves seeing children and young people as largely belonging to their parents with no rights or ability of their own to be able to refuse, or accept participation in research (Morrow & Richards, 1996). The corresponding research practice thus involves the researcher obtaining consent from adult gatekeepers, whether these be parents, teachers, and so on, prior to being able to approach anyone under 18 years of age to be involved in a research project.

This whole notion of incompetence has been challenged (Morrow & Richards, 1996). The legal distinction of "'Gillick-competence' states that a competent child is one who "achieves a sufficient understanding and intelligence to enable him or her to understand fully what is proposed" and that the competent child has "sufficient discretion to enable him or her to make a wise choice in his or her own interests" (Nicholson, 1986, p. 235). This is important as it highlights that chronological age does not determine competence on its own. Further, that a young person's competence to consent to participate in research is also dependent upon the context and what it is that they are consenting to undertake (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

An ethical way of researchers working with young people is to respect their competencies. As adults working with youth, researchers need to ensure that they fulfil their responsibilities as adults of ensuring that the young people do not suffer from harm during any stage of the research process (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

Safety is also identified as an ethical issue in relation to children and young people, although some of the broader issues can be seen as relevant to all research. Where young people have access to children under the age of 16, the question of whether they have a police check is raised. Regardless, the young researcher needs to be professionally supervised which can help protect their safety and that of their respondents. Pair work is one way of maximising the safety of young researchers. Fieldwork location includes issues such as young researchers not interviewing unknown respondents in their own home (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

9. The demands on the project and the professional researchers

Working in participatory ways is demanding on the researchers (Alder et al, 1990). It takes time, effort, patience and commitment, as well as an ability to be flexible, live with uncertainty and to genuinely share decision-making.

Conclusion

These are serious issues that have arisen out of reflection on practice as well as from the literature. We offer them here, along with the examples we have given, in the hope that they will engender discussion about the roles young people can take in research. In uncertain times, we must continually question the work we do and the values and beliefs which underlie the choices we make. We believe that it is timely for all of us who are involved in researching youth issues to ask ourselves: *Peer research - why not?*

To end this paper, in thinking about research and young people, we ask you to consider the words of Paulo Freire:

It is not only a matter of asking the child; we must question ourselves. (Paulo Freire, 1987, Paulo Freire and the street educators, Bogota, UNICEF, p.29 quoted in Boyden, J. and Ennew, J. (Eds) (1997) Children in Focus: A manual for participatory research with children. Stockholm, Grafisk Press p.83).

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