“If I’m brutally honest research has never appealed to me …”: The Problems and Successes of a Peer Research Project


Published in:
Educational Action Research

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Download date: 18. Jun. 2020
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Online Publication Date: 01 September 2007
To cite this Article: Kilpatrick, Rosemary, McCartan, Claire, McAlister, Siobhan and McKeown, Penny (2007) "If I am brutally honest, research has never appealed to me …’ The problems and successes of a peer research project’, Educational Action Research, 15:3, 351 - 369
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/09650790701514291
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09650790701514291
‘If I am brutally honest, research has never appealed to me …’ The problems and successes of a peer research project

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This paper describes the use of a peer research methodology to explore disaffected young people’s views on alternative education. This model was adopted in order to try to ensure an equilibrium of power between interviewer and interviewee, allow marginalised young people’s voices to be heard and help generate social action. The approach is examined from the perspective of both the peer research and adult research teams. An experiential and honest account is given including the problems and successes, as well as the lessons learned. The paper concludes by considering the value of the model, whether it helps to reach those alienated from education and any evidence that it provides an opportunity for them to have a stake in their future.

Keywords: Participatory research; Peer researchers; Disaffection; Alternative education

Introduction

Increasingly young people are being consulted in research both as participants and as designers and contributors to research studies. Much of this increase in youth participation has been attributed to the political climate generated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Additionally, research funders and children’s charities have played a pivotal role in driving the participation agenda forward in policy, practice and research. This is evidenced through the ESRC research programme on children aged 5–16 years, which encouraged the input of young people, as well as the significant contributions that organisations such as Barnardo’s and Save the Children have made to the participation debate (Curtis et al., 2004). We have also witnessed a

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governmental drive for active citizenship among children and young people as exemplified through the introduction of citizenship education in the National Curriculum. Thus, children and young people’s participation is now seen as key in different ways and to varying degrees of success in policy, practice and research today (see for example, Hill et al., 2004).

Involving young people in research

There has been much discussion of the inherent value of youth participation, with Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) establishing a number of reasons why this should be the case. They note that it can be a legitimate way of developing knowledge for social action, it can enable young people to exercise their political rights and allow them to share in the ‘democratisation of knowledge’ and, it can prepare them to be active citizens and strengthen their social development. Although exemplar models of participation exist (Arnstein, 1969; Brager & Specht, 1973), Hart (1992, 1997) argues that there are differences in the level of participation (and non-participation) that adults engage in with children and young people which he describes as a ladder of participation. Hart’s (1992) model constructs a range of participation which at its worst is ‘manipulation’, and moves through tokenism to ‘child-initiated and directed’ to ‘child-initiated, shared decisions with adults’. Those examples in the bottom rungs of the ladder become less recognisable or identifiable within the research context and in terms of the current political context of research strategies and funding. Additionally, Boyden and Ennew argue that there are inherent dilemmas of participatory research when they note that

No research is inherently participatory: it is largely through its application that research becomes participatory; even methods that are defined as participatory can be disempowering and excluding for respondents if used with the wrong group, in the wrong situation or the wrong way. (Boyden & Ennew, 1997, p. 83)

Whether it is engaging young people to gain access to a hard-to-reach population, meeting a funding requirement or responding to current trends in research, involving young people clearly creates the potential to exploit them for adult researcher ends (Elliott et al., 2001; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). In relation to this Edwards and Alldred (1999, p. 267) note that ‘empowerment is not simply a matter of transferring power from one group (researchers/adults) to another (research subjects/children), where the group with the power perceives this as beneficial’.

Despite the concerns and limitations that the practical research environment presents, there are still meaningful ways to engage and co-opt young people into research design, delivery and writing, and there have been many examples where this has been achieved effectively (see Wellard et al., 1997; France, 2000). Alderson (in Kirby, 1999) outlines three different types of involvement: young people applying research methods in formal education; young people contributing to adult-led research; or young people approaching research and findings from a youth perspective. Different levels of participation are at the heart of each. Within the last decade
or so we have also seen a growing literature base of personal and practical experiences of working with young people as researchers (Alderson, 1995; Kirby, 1999; Elliott et al., 2001). Less attention, however, has been paid to the complexities that the peer researcher role inevitably brings to research. This paper describes the experiences of a team of peer researchers involved in examining alternative education provision in Northern Ireland and discusses the complexities through examining the difficulties and rewards of participatory research from the perspective of academics and peer researchers.

Interpreting the concept and applying the peer research model

As already indicated, there are different ways and means of including children and young people in research and thus different degrees and levels of participation. In her writings on citizenship participation in the late 1960s, Arnstein (1969, p. 2) clearly points out that there is a difference between the ‘empty ritual of participation’ and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of a process. So while there can be various levels of participation in research or different forms of participatory research, participation can essentially be assessed upon the basis of who benefits from it. Children and young people, for example, have been the ‘objects’ of research for many years and it is questionable who has gained from that tradition. In light of this, Arnstein reminds us that participation is essentially about the redistribution of power that enables citizens, particularly the most excluded, to be a part of shaping and influencing the future.

Reflecting on Hart’s (1992) adaptation of Arnstein’s model, clearly participatory research should be aiming for the higher rungs of the ladder which denote the sharing or transferring of power and the peer research model, at least in theory, should allow for this to be achieved. For as Petrie et al. (2006, p. 34) remind us: ‘…participatory research is not a separate method but, rather, a methodological philosophy that reflects the desire of researchers to give more control to the research participants. It is a philosophy that aims to be “interactive” rather than “extractive”.’

One aspect of the participatory approach to research is the peer research model. This aims to reduce the inherent power imbalances within research by involving young people in the process and ensuring that the process of involvement is an empowering one. By involving peer researchers, they can have a stake in the creation of knowledge and the process of developing that knowledge is empowering, consciousness-raising and skills enhancing.

At a basic level, the fact that a young person is carrying out research with a peer should go some way to reducing the power imbalance between the researched and the researcher. It is also argued that the quality of data collected should be enhanced as peer researchers share commonalities with research participants in that there is some form of mutual understanding and shared language enabling them to communicate with research participants and bring their own understanding to the data.

Further, that the outcomes can be enhanced because they are more meaningful and for example, a young person being enabled to present research findings to those
funding, practitioners and policy makers, is likely to be much more hard hitting and effective than the information being presented by an academic.

Related to this, but beyond it, the whole process should be one which is consciousness-raising, whereby peer researchers not only learn new social and practical skills but also an awareness of the research issues (some of which impact upon them), and through this are empowered to action individual and social change. In theory, it sounds like a perfect philosophy, in practice however, there can be many difficulties along the way.

**Background to the study**

The paper draws on research carried out between April 2003–March 2006 by a team of peer researchers and academics at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), which examined three different types of provision for disengaged or disaffected 14–16 year olds in Northern Ireland. These schemes have been the focus of two recent reports in Northern Ireland by the Education and Training Inspectorate (Department of Education/Education and Training Inspectorate, 2002, 2003). Following these, the Department of Education (DE) in collaboration with the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) funded research designed to examine this provision which has come to be known as Alternative Education Provision (AEP). The primary aims of this research were to inform policy and practice, and advise on future developments in the provision. The study, which forms the basis of this discussion, tracked the educational, vocational and social experiences of two cohorts of young people (the first who were in their final year of compulsory education in 2002–03, the second in their final year 2003–04) over a period of two years. These young people were engaged in one of the following three different types of AEP.

Key Stage 4 Flexibility Initiative (KS4FI): the KS4 Flexibility Initiative in Northern Ireland was introduced in September 2000. Post-primary schools were enabled to increase flexibility and introduce work-related learning into the KS4 Curriculum with the aim of encouraging schools to explore more creative and imaginative approaches to teaching.

School/Training Organisation Partnership: two different types of projects were under consideration. One rural project offered vocational entry level and NVQ Level 1 qualifications for those unlikely to achieve GCSE qualifications or had a clear vocational interest. The second project was inner-city based and offered essential skills and GCSE Maths and English for young people who were at risk of school exclusion.

Community-based Provision: these projects were established by local communities to maintain an entitlement for those young people who are seriously disengaged from education.

All three projects considered for the research were based in inner-city Belfast, in areas with extremely high levels of deprivation, indicators of social exclusion and paramilitary activity. Without exception, each of the projects was housed in rundown premises, was poorly resourced and received little or no agency support for
the professional staff who delivered the education and personal development programmes. In each project there was an emphasis on essential and job-seeking skills.

**Research design**

The Department of Education nominated eight education providers (of which at least two were from each type of AEP), and a sample of 318 young people was drawn from the total school leaving population who attended these projects and were of school leaving age in the years 2002–03 and 2003–04 to participate in the study. A team of peer researchers was recruited to assist with the development of questionnaires and interview schedules, conduct field work, and contribute to both the steering group and the write up and dissemination of the findings. The sample of young people was telephone-interviewed by the peer researchers on four occasions over a two year period. These telephone interviews covered basic demographic information as well as details on family background, perceived value of the AEP scheme the young person had attended, what they were doing now, and their aspirations for the future. Additionally, a cohort sub-sample of six young people was identified from each type of provision (total of 18). This group was interviewed on a one-to-one basis by the peer researchers on two separate occasions throughout the duration of the project to allow for comprehensive and detailed tracking of their experiences. Eight peer researchers nominated themselves for this case study work. For the case studies, a topic guide was developed in collaboration with the peer researchers and this explored in greater depth the young person’s experiences since they had left their AEP scheme, how things were going for them now and what their hopes, dreams and fears for the future were.

**Rationale for peer researchers**

Disaffected young people may be difficult to engage in research studies. By co-opting a team of peer researchers it was hoped that this approach would encourage potential respondents to become involved in the study, ensure that the methods of data collection were appropriate and engaging, and that attrition rates might be reduced.

There were two additional considerations for the research team regarding the value of employing peer researchers on the project. Firstly, many of the teenagers in the sample were completely disengaged from formal education and previous experience indicated that it was often difficult for researchers from a university, a key site of formal education, to make a connection with marginalised young people and encourage their participation in research. Secondly, all the academic staff were Belfast-based but the nominated AEP centres were spread across Northern Ireland. It was felt important that researchers making contact with the sample could display some sense of affinity and belonging with their locality. This would also help to avoid the assumption and resentment that everything, including research, is led from Belfast (a criticism of some other ‘Northern Ireland based’ research).
The peer research team who were recruited reflected a much broader understanding of young people than the adult team. This included shared experience, similar demographic and socio-economic profile, regional identity, language, physical appearance and importantly the very recent experience of being a young person. The research team’s rationale for co-opting peer researchers was clear at many levels, yet the level of participation they were expected to have and what subsequently evolved was less evident.

Processes and procedures

Recruitment

The team of peer researchers (age range 15–27) were recruited through a variety of sources and a comprehensive training programme was developed to increase their understanding of research methods and the specific research aims of the AEP study. A detailed job description was drawn up for the recruitment process. In addition to the potential social benefits of involvement in the research, we also outlined the skills and experience we hoped the peer researchers would gain from their involvement. Due to time constraints no formal interview procedure was adopted.

A variety of different recruitment approaches was adopted, some with limited success. After initial telephone conversations with each of the AEP projects as well as to a variety of children and youth agencies and the University job shops, advertisements were circulated and respondents to the advertisements then received the job description. The agency approach proved the most effective, successfully securing recruits from predominantly voluntary sector organisations such as: the Volunteer Bureaux, Children’s Express, Opportunity Youth, Public Achievement, Prince’s Trust Volunteers and the Children’s Law Centre. While many of the young people were involved with these organisations on a voluntary basis, most were also involved in education of some form and part-time paid employment.

An additional number of researchers were recruited through the Youth and Community Work Diploma course at a local university and through local schools. Over the 30 month period of the research, some peer researchers dropped out due to school or work commitments and an additional five young people were recruited in a similar way.

Once recruited, peer researchers were required to sign a contract which included a three-month probationary period and a request that they try to commit to the full life of the project (two and a half years). Each peer researcher also consented to a criminal records check in line with standard child protection procedures.

Overall, the older peer researchers (i.e. 18 years plus) tended to be either employed in some form of youth work or engaged actively in their local community and/or volunteering. Therefore, many of this group, had direct experience of working with young people and some level of understanding of the potential difficulties attached to such work. The younger peer researchers were all school students and for the most part were considering a career in law, teaching or youth work.
Training

The initial training session was structured around two full day sessions dedicated to team building, developing an understanding of the research aims, discussing the interviews and exploring the techniques required for telephone interviews. In addition to the research team, an experienced youth worker was employed to co-ordinate the training and carry out sessions based on team building and developing a team dynamic. Training resources were drawn from Kirby (1999) and Save the Children (2000) publications. Role-play was an important element of the training which helped the peer researchers to refine the draft interview schedules appropriately, but also assisted them to develop the necessary skills and confidence to produce a successful interview which was rewarding for both participant and peer researcher. It was important from the outset to give the team every opportunity to shape and design the instruments of data collection to help create ownership and, hopefully, a more refined and communicative model which was more meaningful for all involved. The training aimed to achieve this.

Ethics training covered issues relating to responsibilities to the research participants (such as consent, monitoring the impact of the research on participants, privacy and confidentiality, and child protection procedures), the use and storage of data and researcher safety. The inclusion of child protection procedures into the training was carefully managed so as not to unnerve or frighten the peer researchers, but equip them with the skills and knowledge as to how best to manage a disclosure. Furthermore, it was essential to provide a clear reporting mechanism with professional support for them if an issue was raised by a participant during the course of research. With a number of the peer researchers also being under 18 years, the recognised protocols of interviewing and selecting appropriate locations were discussed. Finally, a range of materials was produced to act as a prop for each peer researcher, including introduction scripts, the rights of an interviewee, a checklist of items they needed before starting the interview, child protection guidelines and a peer researcher log/diary.

Four peer researchers were elected to represent their team on the Steering Committee for the research which consisted of government officials from various departments. Training and support was offered in relation to building confidence, effective communication and presenting information to a Steering Group—a group of adults who may be perceived as powerful and somewhat intimidating—as a consequence of their age as well as their social and professional positions.

Ongoing support and motivation

At the start of the project, it was assumed that the relationship between the peer research team and the adult research team would be relatively simple to manage, with agreement on the job description, probationary period, and the workload and deadlines expected along the way. As many of the young researchers were at particular transitional points in their lives (e.g. GCSE, ‘A’ level, undergraduate) it was
anticipated that some flexibility would be required regarding attendance at on-going training and support sessions as well as work deadlines. There also was an expectation that there would be a small level of attrition as the project developed over time. As the education projects included in the research were located throughout Northern Ireland, this led to the creation of four geographical pockets of both peer researchers and participants. The adult and peer researchers agreed at the initial training sessions that they would meet formally on a quarterly basis as a full team, as well as each geographical group keeping in touch informally for support. Each peer researcher was assigned a task list and given the supporting paperwork to conduct the interviews as well as a deadline for completion of interviews and the date of the next full team meeting.

**Being involved in a peer research project: reflections from the adult team**

Overall, the peer researchers were an animated, enthusiastic group with an energy and willingness to be involved. We also found them to be innovative, often generating impressive and thoughtful ideas as to how to improve some of the data collection techniques we had considered employing. It is important to recognise the true ‘peer’ dimension that some of the young people brought to the project. This was particularly in relation to their knowledge of the local area, local issues and shared experiences. A strong local identity, including a local accent helped to create a bond in the various geographical locations thus avoiding the fear and alienation of a capital-city centred approach. Ironically, however, the strength of geographic diversity also created problems in terms of trying to bond the group as a whole. It proved difficult, for example, to co-ordinate the full team meetings due to transport difficulties some of the peer researchers had at least 1 hour 30 minutes to 2 hours travel time to these meetings), inflexible school timetables and Saturday jobs.

**Maintaining contact and communication**

Deadlines and group meetings did not happen as planned. Convening full team meetings proved a challenge and because of difficulties associated with organising a central meeting location it was decided that each member of the adult team would take responsibility for a geographical area and provide mentoring support to one of the four peer researcher teams. Despite this organisation, it still proved difficult to co-ordinate these regional groupings. In light of the varying commitments of some young people (e.g. family, caring, study, employment, voluntary work, leisure) arranging meeting times convenient to all was near impossible. Indeed, many young people, from around their mid-teens onwards rely on part-time employment to supplement their income which makes increasing demands on their availability (McAlister et al., 2007).

We also found it incredibly difficult to develop a really effective means of communication with the peer researcher team. Meetings were organised by letter, telephone,
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e-mail and text, yet in most cases some or all of the peer researchers did not turn up, either cancelling at the last minute or not informing the team mentor at all. Letters were accompanied with detachable reply slips and freepost envelopes but still did not retrieve a great response. Telephone calls were made to home addresses, but there was often only a small window in which to contact the young people as they were frequently late home from school/college or at part-time work during ‘normal working hours’. In our experience, only those in full-time employment or higher education could be reliably and consistently contacted through e-mail. The younger peer researchers, although they had an e-mail address, did not use it regularly and it was not a reliable way to contact them. Text messaging was the most effective way of communicating, however, in some cases, this did not yield a response because telephone credits were too low to reply.

When meeting up with the peer researchers and talking to them by telephone, their enthusiasm and interest was always evident but the inconsistency in meeting deadlines led to some frustrations for the adult research team. Rather than a lack of commitment, it would appear that some of the peer researchers did not place importance on protocols or the need for effective communication in the workplace. In hindsight, this is something that we feel could have been built into their training more fully (and which could have been done very effectively through role-play scenarios), and which might have been better ascertained through an interview process. The most successful peer researcher-adult researcher relationship was invariably based on the young person being proactive and responding promptly to requests for meetings or information. It would appear that skills already gained through full-time employment and higher education in terms of independent working were transferable to the research project and aided in making it a more successful and enjoyable project for these young people, perhaps more so than others.

The experiences discussed here are not confined to this project, lessons learned from the ‘Real Deal Project’ identified that the nature of the client group meant group workers had to be flexible about people’s attendance, punctuality and level of commitment (Kirby et al., 2001). Young people tend to be in transition, be it through eviction, prison or moving onto work, education and/or independent living. Thus, roles within groups have to be flexible, giving young people the opportunity to decide for themselves how they want to participate (Kirby et al., 2001). Although being aware of such issues and going to great lengths to accommodate the varying needs of the peer researchers, coordinating and communicating with the team was, nonetheless, time-consuming and at times frustrating. Awareness of potential difficulties, therefore, does not necessarily make them any less difficult to deal with when they are experienced at first hand.

Ongoing training and support

A small number of the group lacked confidence and appeared, at times, demotivated particularly when dealing with the most ‘hard to reach’ young people. During some of the telephone interviews, for example, data collection could be
difficult and on occasions the peer researchers failed to probe issues and/or to clarify answers with participants. It was important, therefore, that the research team concentrated on encouraging and motivating the peer researchers and enabling them to develop the necessary skills to complete this task effectively. While recognising this need and making efforts to meet it, however, we were concerned about the quality and consistency of data being collected. Indeed an initial review of the data revealed that some of it was not detailed enough which in turn identified further training needs for the peer researchers. While time had been set aside for recruiting and training the peer researchers, the level of ongoing training, support and supervision required was underestimated. Elliott et al. (2000, p. 173) also discuss the problems they experienced in terms of their distance from the raw data that peer interviewers had collected. A suggestion they make and which we utilised, in light of similar problems, was to set up a debriefing session with each individual after every two to three interviews. This proved a useful mechanism for keeping in touch with peer researchers and helped to motivate them. By meeting regularly to discuss progress, a more effective working relationship and sense of a collective goal was established, which in turn also encouraged deadlines to be met on a regular basis and created an opportunity to discuss problems and concerns much more openly.

To accredit, or not to accredit?

Peer researchers were paid £10 per hour for their time. While the project was not labour intensive (about 45 hours work per year), the research team had hoped this level of pay would act as an adequate incentive. The rate of pay was competitive and coupled with an opportunity to gather real research experience it was considered an attractive option to gain new skills and earn some extra money. Accrediting the training programme and peer researcher role was given much consideration but initially was deemed unviable because of the substantial additional commitment required of the peer researchers. Towards the end of the project, however, the peer researchers requested that the team reconsider the options for accreditation and to this end a stand alone qualification was developed in partnership with the Institute of Lifelong Learning at QUB, ‘Becoming a peer researcher’ which attracts 20 UCATS points.

**Summary of the peer researcher model—roles and responsibilities**

Reflecting on Hart’s model, the peer research model we applied reached the higher levels of participation, namely, ‘adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people. Occurs when projects or programs are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people’.

Some examples of the type of involvement the peer researchers had helps to illustrate the level of participation achieved. At the initial training session, the peer researchers developed a name and logo for the project. The ‘Out of the Box’ brand
was then worked up and produced professionally, was used on all correspondence and indeed on the final report material.

At training sessions, the use of role-play allowed the peer researchers to appreciate difficulties that they might encounter in introducing the research. Building on this it was agreed that the peer researchers themselves should draw upon the wording for introducing the study and the issue of anonymity. Using role-play helped shape how introductions and interview schedules were developed. The peer researchers developed a script which was included in their interview pack and, after much debate and discussion, was finally agreed on as follows:

just to remind you that this is not a test, there are no right or wrong answers’ and, 'Your comments will be added to the report but no names will be used and it won’t be possible for anyone to find out who said what.

Other valuable comments and suggestions made by the peer researchers during the first training session were incorporated into the preliminary stages of the study. This included the idea that the peer researchers meet with the young people in a general setting before arranging to interview them and this was facilitated where possible. Other worries mentioned concerned, ‘What has to be talked about on the first telephone call. Skills to become confident on the phone. [Doing] Several role-plays i.e. young person/adult.’ Efforts to address these fears helped to structure very practical further training sessions. The peer researchers comments also demonstrated a sense of ownership of the project and that a team spirit was beginning to be developed, ‘For me I thought the most useful part of the training was answering the questions given to us. For example, the question “what do you hope to gain out of this and your expectations”. I believe that this helped us set our goal as a team.’ This commitment to the study was demonstrated by one peer researcher using his initiative to try and engage with the young people in the sample by organising a ‘get to know you’ session at the local cinema and had negotiated free tickets for all the young people involved.

For those eight peer researchers involved in the case study interviews, which lasted on average approximately one hour, the interviews were semi-structured thus the peer researchers had a greater degree of control over the direction and content of the interview, though they had to adhere to the topic guide. The peer researchers also had to negotiate the digital recording of interviews and transcribe them wherever possible. Once transcriptions of the recorded interviews and debriefing sessions had been conducted, they were then asked to reflect on the interview.

As noted above, in these case study interviews, youth and regional identity and understanding local colloquialisms played an important role in connecting with the young people being interviewed:

Jonny I didn’t like school cos you weren’t allowed to wear slippers (local slang for trainers).

Peer Researcher You weren’t allowed to wear trainers?

Feeling free to talk openly and honestly appeared to allow an easy rapport to be developed between a young person and peer researcher in language used
Great honesty and openness was also revealed demonstrating the significant trust and rapport developed over the hour long interviews. Sixteen-year-old Damien talks about his relationship with his father to a male peer researcher:

Peer Researcher: If I was going to give you a magic wand and say to you right, wave that wand now, what would your ideal situation be?

Damien: To take the pain, the hurt away that it caused me, it’s still there like it’s never goin’ to go away.

Peer Researcher: Tell us this here … does your father know how you feel?

Damien: I have had a chat to him, but I don’t think he catches on cos he’s never had the same experience to know how it feels like.

Gender also didn’t seem to create barriers as Ciara, aged 16, found talking about her dreams for her future career with a male peer researcher:

Ciara: Well, I always said that I’m going to be a fashion designer, as far as I can remember, I’ve always been saying that. I always put outfits together, you know, I can mix things… So I can make tops and things like that there.

Peer Researcher: Cool, that’s class.

Ciara: Or even I was out at the weekend, you know the sarong that you wear at the beach, I wore it as a top, I tied it and wore it as a top and everybody was going to me your top’s class where did you get it and I said it’s a sarong and I made it from you know … I’m always thinking about it, I’m even thinking about it down the line.

Peer Researcher: Are you a creative person like that?

Ciara: Aye, I am really have to say.

At one particular Steering Group meeting, the research team was asked to explain the high rate of attrition; two of the peer researchers were able to recount in detail obstacles they had experienced making contact with the sample, whether it was young people not wanting to be reminded of their negative experiences of school, leaving home or changing mobile phone numbers.

The peer researcher team was not involved in any statistical analysis and writing up of the findings; they were asked to and did contribute to a chapter about using peer researchers and were able to provide vignettes illustrating the level of their involvement and the impact the project had had on their lives. The report is now published (Kilpatrick et al., 2007), with the peer researchers contribution as an integral part. Additionally, as part of the accreditation process the peer researchers also prepared the report on the research for the young people themselves.

At the final presentation of the findings to the Steering Group, one peer researcher requested the opportunity to present the findings directly to the Minister which was agreed.
Final reflections

We considered a number of ways of overcoming the difficulties we faced including the appointment of team mentors to facilitate each geographical team; identifying peer researcher team leaders to co-ordinate group responsibilities; regular monthly meetings; and concentrating communication via text messaging as opposed to telephone calls, e-mail and letters. The three month probationary period we established at the outset was also invoked on two occasions. Maintaining interest and commitment over the two and a half years period was a challenge and accreditation may be used as a motivating factor. We also believe that it would also be useful to produce a monthly workplan and timetable where possible to outline the requirements and deadlines from the outset. In our opinion, two and a half years was perhaps too great a commitment for young people at this stage in their lives, yet despite this a small number of peer researchers did give their complete and full commitment for this considerable length of time.

We found the role a small number of peer researchers played in the Steering Group to be invaluable—for us as the coordinators of the research, the young people themselves as the driving force and the other members of the steering group who are often somewhat removed from the realities of the research process. Within these meetings the peer researchers displayed skill in their ability to reflect upon and represent their frustrations and explain experiences of setbacks more powerfully to the funders, with a general level of acceptance than perhaps the academics on the research team may have achieved. They were able to inject a sense of realism with their personal experiences of fieldwork, highlighting the considerations of working with ‘hard-to-reach’ groups. Importantly, they enjoyed being able to participate at this level of the research, discussing their views and opinions with decision-makers in the Departments. Where possible, within a peer research project or otherwise, we would suggest that when young people are the focus of research that they are represented on Research Steering Groups. Guidance, support and training are obviously important aspects of this in order that they do not become disempowered in a largely adult and professional forum.

While there were many positives to involving peer researchers in the research project, these did not come without their difficulties and valuable lessons were learned throughout the process. We now realise, for example, that in our haste to get the project underway and recruit a fairly large number of peer researchers early on, we did not give careful enough attention to the application process. The completion of an application form and an interview may have helped some of the peer researchers to consider their involvement more carefully and also help us to prepare more fully for the whole experience and make sure of quality not quantity. On a more positive note, other projects involving peer researchers have placed a high value on the involvement of a youth worker and their ability to motivate and encourage young people to maximise their involvement (Kirby et al., 2001). We, too, found this to be a valuable experience. Furthermore, as researchers we learned new skills in programme delivery, group facilitation, team building and communicating with young people, all of which are directly transferable to a research environment.
Being involved in a peer research project: experiences of the peer researcher team

Peer researchers were asked to keep a log of their experiences and along with regular opportunities to feedback to the research team (including anonymously), we were able to gather some data on their motivations to take part and their experiences of being a peer researcher.

Those motivated to take part in the project did so primarily in an attempt to gain an insight into the experiences of young people in alternative education. When asked to comment on their motivation and consider why they had been asked to participate, their responses go far to qualify their involvement and dispute the notion of exploitation for adult researchers ends. All of them understood why they were involved and felt that it was a reliable way of accessing the views and experiences of young people in AEP. As well as wanting to understand more about the educational context and experiences of other young people, most of the peer researchers clearly recorded it as a personal development opportunity. They listed a number of competencies which they hoped to develop through their involvement including: interpersonal skills, communication and time management and, ultimately, enhancing their employability. The value of meeting new people was also highlighted as important.

When feedback was requested one year on, many of the peer researchers reported that these initial expectations had been met. They noted that they had developed a deeper understanding of AEP and the issues facing young people engaged in alternative education, but were keen to share their personal learning opportunities, their enhanced communication skills and their recognition of the importance of team work. We also asked them to reflect on their involvement, one year on and consider again why they had been co-opted:

An attempt to increase the reliability & validity of the data, the interviewee will be more at ease with interviewer. (Gary)

Most young people find it much easier to talk to their peers than adults. They open up more. I would use peer researchers if I was designing research, just seeing how the young people in our group reacted to us. (Karen)

These views illustrate how seriously the peer researchers considered their involvement and the clarity with which they viewed their role in the research. Further, they demonstrate an experiential understanding of the value of peer research for communicating with young people and as an effective means of representing young peoples’ voices in research, in a way that adult-centred research may not. Beyond this understanding, they also felt that their involvement had made an impact on their own lives in terms of increasing their employability, their social skills and their social cognitive responses. The following extracts are illustrative of the views of a number of the peer researchers:

Allows me to act as a positive role model who listens and communicates effectively with my peers. (Jason)

This research has impacted on my attitude and thoughts. (Patrick)
Problems and successes of a peer research project

Through these accounts, among others, there are a number of points raised which highlight the potential for peer research to be an empowering experience for young people. These include the acquisition of knowledge, the development of social and personal skills, transferable skills, and the ability to communicate effectively with peers as well as those in more senior positions or positions of power (such as those who have a direct say in education policy and practice in Northern Ireland).

Despite the positive reports of enjoyment and skills development, the young people also noted negative aspects to their involvement in the research. What was interesting, and indeed worrying about these comments, however, was that they tended to be directed towards themselves rather than the adult research team or the research process. While adult researchers may have some knowledge of the difficulties and frustrations that may come with all research, particularly that which aims to seek the views and experiences of more ‘hard to reach’ groups, this understanding is not necessarily held by peer researchers. It was important, therefore, for us to take time to talk through these difficulties with the team in order that they did not necessarily view difficulties as ‘personal failures’. One area where the peer researchers were fairly critical of themselves or others in the group tallied with our own experiences—their commitment to the project. In the case of some a sense of personal guilt or general frustration over this issue was evident. Responding to a question on the negative aspects of the project, the following responses were not uncommon:

Not being able to fully commit [to] the research as I would like to as it isn’t my main priority at the moment. (Jason)

I’m also disappointed in the lack of a real sense of being in a group and feel that certain people should either make more of a commitment or get out. (Kathleen)

An important element to the peer researcher role was the opportunity for them to feedback on the management of the project and practical advice was offered as to how we could improve things. Almost all of their suggestions (and many of their frustrations) related to the need to increase the effectiveness of communication—something we previous noted which caused us much frustration also. For the peer researchers, however, the issue was a little different. While we were focused on the individual and wanting to keep track of individual progress they wanted to be kept updated of the activities of other group members. The importance of knowing how others were succeeding with their task was identified as important:

Provide an insight into how other peer researchers are contributing/or not to the research. (Sean)

We need further training and support, I feel we have all lost track of what we have been doing. I’d like more meetings with all researchers and more meetings with the local research group. (Rebecca)

These comments are reflective of the feelings of the adult research team and it is clear that some peer researchers experienced similar frustrations. In light of these comments we felt it important to inform the peer research team of the difficulties
we had in arranging group meetings, not as a means of putting pressure on some members but more as a means of ensuring that they remained informed of the entire process. This effectively meant that they participated in the ups and downs of the project and they had an understanding of our concerns, just as much as we had an understanding of theirs. That said, this was an issue that we found difficult to resolve and its impact on some members of the peer research team in terms of the isolation they experienced was clear. This was particularly true of those not used to working independently and attempts were made to meet up in small teams on a monthly basis in the absence of full team meetings, even when the number of attendees was small.

During these times of frustration among the peer researchers, however, overall enthusiasm and commitment was still evident. This commitment is illustrated in Gary’s comment where he notes that the overall value of the project outweighs some of the difficulties:

> I feel that we have a good thing going and that we should stick it out because we will succeed if everyone commits to it. (Gary)

Once the fieldwork was completed, regular contact with most of the peer researchers dwindled, other than that with those engaged with the Steering Group. Those involved at this level of the research were also invited to contribute to and comment upon the draft of the final report, which they did with great care and thought. This group were also committed to producing a young people’s version of the final report. Once again, we asked those involved right up until the end of the research process to reflect upon their involvement in the project.

Jason was one of the older peer researchers in the group. Having left school at an early age, he had developed a career in youth work, had worked for some time in an inner city area and was well acquainted with the profile and demography of the sample of young people he was assigned. Supported by his employer he became involved along with a group of his colleagues but he was the only one of the group to maintain involvement throughout the two and a half years.

Reflecting on his experience and what he found to be the most valuable part of the process, Jason noted the opportunity and ability to engage with a range of people:

> One of the high points for me was having the opportunity to meet so many different types of people from the ‘people in suits’, the trainers/facilitators, peer researchers and above all the young people, who shared their experiences with me about the AEP project which they attended (some of whom were hard to reach at times).

Jason clearly saw the valuable role that he had played in the research and that the research had subsequently played in his life.

Mia joined the project through her involvement as a volunteer in a children’s organisation. Her initial motivations for becoming involved were financially and skills motivated. Indeed, at first Mia was unconvinced about the value of research, stating: ‘If I am brutally honest research has never appealed to me’. Her subsequent involvement in the project, however, led to a re-evaluation of this position and by the end of the research she was of the firm opinion that:
without valuable research how can we accurately decide where money and resources are needed in the community and advise local and national government of the gaps in service provision?

Mia has continued to develop her interest in research and has been involved in a number of projects since her experience on this one.

While these latter two examples are perhaps not reflective of the level of participation and outcomes of all the peer researchers involved in the project, they do illustrate the potential value to those who are willing and able to commit to the full process. While all of the peer researchers did note the importance of skills development, Mia and Jason were now experiencing this first hand in their education and employment careers. Despite problems and some misgivings, all of the peer researchers outline the value of their role in the research for personal development, skills development and, importantly, in adding a dimension to a piece of research about the education experiences of young people which they understood may not have been captured without them.

**Conclusion**

This paper has offered an experiential account of the problems and processes of implementing a participatory peer research approach to the study of young people in alternative education provision. Despite the difficulties inherent in such an approach it has been possible to identify a distinct value to the adult research team, the peer researchers and the research project as a whole. Not only does the research benefit from the preferential access that peer researchers have to research samples of young people, particularly those who may be ‘hard to reach’, but the quality of information achieved by young people and the degree to which their voices are fully represented in research is increased through this method.

It is important, however, that the process is not unbalanced and that the adult team who gain the funding for such studies and, inevitably, the kudos and publications arising from them are not the only ones to reap the rewards. Here we have illustrated the various ways in which young peer researchers can be included in all aspects of the project and their participation recognised by more than financial remuneration. For those involved in this project, the development of personal and social skills and skills directly transferable to education and employment were highlighted as important. Paramount, however, was the value that the peer researchers themselves placed on being able to give voice to the experiences of other young people, particularly those whose voices may not always be included because of the very problems in engaging them in research.

The process is, however, far from straightforward and a commitment on all sides to enabling young people’s voices to be fully represented in the research remained the underlying driving force throughout. Furthermore it is only through experiencing difficulties that situations can be continually monitored, amended and lessons learned for future research involving peer researchers. We learned valuable lessons about the importance of age-appropriate communication with young peer researchers; adopting
an informal education approach to training and providing the option of accreditation; implementing clear and careful recruitment procedures; offering ongoing support; and monitoring and sharing the problems as well as the successes of the research with the peer research team. At another level, however, we learned much about participation and the meaning of this to young people. Despite our aims for the research to be as participatory as possible and for young people to take ownership and control, over the two and a half years period it became clear that for varying reasons, the nature and degree of participation that individuals were willing or able to offer varied greatly. While all young people should be supported to participate in research, it is important that adult researchers understand that the nature and level of participation peer researchers are willing and able to give is individual and susceptible to change. This is especially true when considered in light of the sometimes uncertain nature of young people’s lives around the period of transition from youth to adulthood.

In conclusion, while on some occasions we may have felt that it would have been so much easier not to involve peer researchers in the research process, it is vital that those young people who are keen to participate in society and to action change are enabled and empowered to do so. One way in which this can be achieved is by their involvement in the research process; in this instance and despite the problems, we believe that it has made the research a more meaningful and worthwhile experience for everyone.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the unique and determined contribution our team of peer researchers made to ensure that the stories of the young people were heard by those who can action change. We value the knowledge and learning that we gained from working with the team.

The Department of Education Northern Ireland and the Department of Employment and Learning funded the research, with special thanks to the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister who supported the peer researcher element of the study.

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