

# ‘Participatory’ research with young people: opportunities and challenges

## Summary

This briefing paper is based on REAP’s experience of doing research involving young people. We draw on a recent project funded by Hello Future (CCOP - Cumbria Collaborative Outreach Programme). Three issues are discussed relating to participatory research (power, process, and pragmatics). The paper aims to be a stimulus for discussion amongst other researchers working with young people.

## Background context

REAP were commissioned by CCOP, the Cumbrian partnership of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), to deliver an activity to a small group of young people during a short residential at an outdoor education centre. REAP provided guidance in how to conduct research and supported the young people to collect their own data by interviewing members of their family to find out about their educational experiences.

## Participatory research

There is increasing pressure on researchers to allow participants an active role in factors such as the research design and data collection. However, carrying out such ‘participatory’ research is not straightforward; here we discuss three issues we encountered relating to:

- power
- process
- pragmatics.

The discussion contributes to other critiques to unsettle the assumption that participatory research is necessarily superior (e.g. Holland et al, 2010).

## 1. Power: responsibility, ethics and control.

While ‘giving agency’ to young people sounds desirable, on closer examination it may raise some uncomfortable ethical issues. One such issue concerns responsibility. Ultimately researchers are responsible for the project and ensuring it is carried out ethically.

Asking young people to do some of their own research (in our case, to interview family members) added another layer which meant the process had to be carefully guided such that the young researchers were also following ethical procedures (e.g. obtaining consent from their interviewees and preserving their anonymity).

Secondly, we need to remember that research participants may be under numerous pressures (particularly young people who may have exams looming). To impose expectations and pressure in this context may not be ethical. In other words, researchers cannot assume that participants actually *want* to take a full active role in a project.

Thirdly, researchers need to recognise the limitations of their own power in the project. We may design, carry out and disseminate findings but from the beginning it is arguably funders and the wider context that play a role in shaping what we do. For example, the remit of a project and its content is often shaped by the funder.

## 2. Process: emergence and flexibility

The ‘outputs’ and methods of our project had been planned at the beginning but opportunities emerged as the project progressed and the young people’s confidence grew.

One example was how a short task – to think about advice to give their peers and teachers regarding educational decision-making – gathered momentum. The young people’s enthusiasm was such that we pursued the task and asked them to compile two ‘manifestos’ for action. These manifestos were subsequently presented to an audience of practitioners, academics, peers and family members.

If we had ‘stuck to the script’ this opportunity – which gave the young learners a ‘voice’ and allowed them to develop their skills (e.g. in public speaking and team work) – would have been missed. Projects may unfold in ways that are unpredictable. If researchers are flexible and reflexive these twists and turns can be turned into opportunities.

### 3. Pragmatics: resources, delivery and influence.

Doing research that is ‘fully’ participatory is challenging practically (see Starkey et al 2014). Projects are increasingly expected to be delivered within a short time period and with relatively small budgets. These factors limit what is possible.

The Hello Future project was as participatory as possible given its parameters; to involve the young people from the start in the proposal, in terms of its design, would have needed a longer time frame for planning, training, and discussion.

### References and further reading

Holland, J. et al (2010) ‘Power, agency and participatory agendas: A critical exploration of young people’s engagement in participative qualitative research’, *Childhood*, 17(3): 360-375.

Starkey, H. et al (2014) ‘Power, pedagogy and participation: ethics and pragmatics in research with young people’, *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 9(4): 426-440.



We are a team of researchers based in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University. For more information, please go to our [website](#).

Researchers also need to complete their projects in a way that delivers ‘outputs’ and hopefully influence through dissemination of findings. Meeting such requirements means that scope for participation may be constrained. We thus propose an approach of ‘facilitated’ participation. In this process, control varies over time as the pendulum swings at times over to young people, as they become more confident and more likely to voice their views..., and back, as the researchers steer the project to meet the requirements of, for instance, a given timeframe.

### Questions to consider

Based on our experience of working with young people we urge other researchers embarking on such projects to ask the following questions:

- To what extent is your research going to be participatory? How are you defining participation?
- What ethical issues are raised by your research and how are you addressing these (e.g. transparency in your research aims and objectives)?
- Is your project design pragmatic in terms of what is possible within time and budget?
- Who is controlling the research agenda and how far is this transparent to all involved?
- Does your project allow for emergent issues – opportunities and challenges- or is it fixed?

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