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Learning How To Support National Online Youth Led Research

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📍 Penrith, ENG, GB   📁 Community-Based Participatory Initiatives   🏷 Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

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The authors are a group of co-researchers from across the UK. Eight young people from across the UK who had volunteered to join a young person's network at the National Youth Agency. They were

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Project Summary

This project was intended to a) support a group of young people from across the UK to complete their own youth-led research and b) pilot and co-design a suite of resources to enable any practitioner and any young person to complete youth-led research or YPAR with minimal expense and inconvenience.
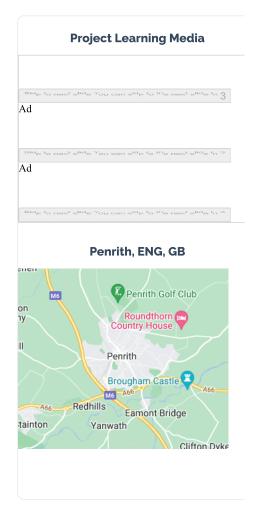
- **Phase one was recruitment**. Debbie Terras and Lydia Allen reached out through the National Youth Agency contacts in Regional Youth Work Units to invite young people to apply. Anyone aged 16-24 who was able to access the online sessions and materials was accepted onto the programme. Eleven young people applied, ten were accepted, and eight attended the sessions.
- **Phase two of the project was the pilot research**. The delivery team (Kaz, Debbie and Lydia) designed nine online sessions for the young people. These had to deliver some research training, support the young people's decision making and progress through the research process, and accredit their work. The outcomes of this were two youth-authored reports, one on young people's use of green space and the other on young people's experience of learning in lockdown.
- **Phase three of the project involved the young people in reviewing and re-designing the session plans and resources** to better support all young people in the light of their experiences.
- **Phase four was to develop a co-designed Young Researcher's network resource** and to make available, the materials, training and accreditation through the National Youth Agency, to practitioners and young people.

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We concluded that young people are able to not only conduct research, but also to design research training resources. We believe that youth-led research and design will enable more young people to become research active, contributing to a more socially just world for all.

Project Context

Professor Kaz Stuart from the Centre for Research in Health and Society at the University of Cumbria supports multiple youth led research and YPAR projects. Debbie Terras and Lydia Allen from the National Youth Work Agency support youth work across England. We were all keen that young people and practitioners should be able to access support and resources to become young researchers, so that more young people contribute to knowledge generation and mobilisation in England and beyond. We invited young people from across England to join a pilot project for a ten week youth led research project and a five week co-design process to test and redevelop resources to be accessible to all.

Kaz, Debbie and Lydia met with the eight young people (aged 16-23) who signed up in 'Zoom' meetings in order to provide training and support for them to plan, conduct, analyse and disseminate their own research, and then re-design the programme and associated resources. The young people and staff did not know one another, nor did we know what their previous experience of research, or research interests might be. In this respect, we had generated a particularly challenging context for ourselves in order to fully test out the project idea. Added to these unknowns, were the daily pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and control measures, including learning online rather than attending school/college.

Learning How To Support National Online Youth Led Research

Participatory research has existed since the 1970's in order to generate practical and applicable knowledge and has been reinforced by rights-based research movements in the 1980's and the drive for co-production in the 1990's (Schubotz, 2020:10-11). A central belief underpinning participatory research is that involvement of people who were typically the subject of research in research design would lead to more appropriately designed studies, questions, and knowledge. Also underpinning participatory methodologies is the tenet of emancipation, where people become (research) active in processes of social change (Aldridge, 2015). Schubotz (2020:23-40) summarises the theoretical framework underpinning participatory research as including; symbolic interactionism, social constructivism, feminism, Marxism, systems thinking and structural functionalism. These give rise to a set of principles such as:

- People do research rather than being the objects of research
- People themselves collect the data, and then process and analyse the information using methods easily understood by them
- The knowledge generated is used to promote actions for change locally
- The knowledge belongs to the people who created it
- Research, reflection and action are inseparable – they represent a unity
- The process is as important as the outcome.

These theoretical positions are enshrined in an equally wide range of participatory methodologies: user-led research, rights-based research, participatory action research, participatory evaluation, arts based research, community based research, participatory organisational research, citizen science and critical pedagogy (Schubotz, 2020: 55). The diversity of theories and methodologies perhaps hints at the difficulties a teacher, social worker, counselor, youth worker, family worker may have in working out how to support young people to do research, let alone the linguistic challenges it poses young people themselves. We hoped to simplify yet not reduce the richness of this terrain for practitioners and young people in this project.

Phase 1: Young People and the Recruitment Issue

Young people comprise a large segment of society. In 2019 there were 11.7 million 10-24 year olds, about 20% of the UK population (Association for Young People's Health, 2020), and yet they are often not included in decision making or consultations, let alone research design. Young people may be overlooked ideologically as they are viewed as incapable – beings on the journey to *becoming adult*, or for practical reasons, such as fear of consent and ethical processes. Young people are not homogenous, and all experience a wide intersection of other privileges and disadvantages. Some of these will make them more or less likely to be offered opportunity to have voice. Adults, practitioners, professionals although once young themselves, are not experienced in the current reality of 'youth' nor all its nuances. It is therefore vital, in our opinion, that young people are treated as capable beings with opinions and agency of their own, invited into decisions and consultations and enabled to conduct their own research. Only in this way, we believe, will services for young people truly meet their needs, and will the world become a better place for young people.

Youthprise (2020) describe youth participatory action research (YPAR) as: "a community-based social justice research framework that inclusively supports the leadership and knowledge of youth most impacted by disparities to develop solutions for social, cultural, and political transformation". It is just this agenda to which we wished to contribute with this research. If this is such a strong justification for youth research, why are there so few young researchers and YPAR projects? Lack of time is often cited as an issue – supporting young people to work together, to gain research skills and knowledge, and to undertake a project are all time intensive. Structural demands of the organisations supporting YPAR (often schools) can also be problematic in that power may not authentically be shared. Young people may also be juggling course work and assessments alongside the project (LPC Consulting, 2012). Making the programme accessible is another challenge – many of the young people we most hope to engage may not have high levels of literacy, focus or confidence due to wider life circumstances. The research agenda, therefore, has to be made accessible to all.

Another barrier we considered, and which motivated this programme, was the lack of research undertaken in youth work as a sector. In 2012 The House of Commons Education Committee concluded that there was insufficient evidence of the impact of youth work (2011:18). There are caveats to this, one being that many youth workers did not subscribe to the concept of 'evidence' used by the committee, and so the apparent 'lack of evidence' did not necessarily mean a lack of impact. From this we surmise that supporting youth workers to do research with young people is in keeping with the values and practice of youth work, and can also contribute to the evidence base for youth work, supporting both young people and youth work and a better society for all.

Phase 2: Pilot Research

And so our project was born, piloting and refining a set of materials which could be accessed by all young people and all youth workers, to support youth-led research into issues that concern young people. Eight young people volunteered to take part in the project from across England. None of them knew one another prior to the project. Due to the pandemic and the wide geographic spread of the young people, we had to work online. Some funding was secured to initiate the project by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and this was stretched further by staff contributing additional unfunded time into the project. We devised ten sessions, each two hours long in an online platform – Zoom. The sessions were informed by the minimum components of research training for young people as recommended by Save the Children (2000:9). Each session commenced with a reminder of the etiquette and safeguarding implications of working together online, icebreakers and familiarisation games, a short input on the research topic of the night, time for the young people to make research decisions, and a review and 'check out'. The two

hours raced by and the whole team agreed that more time was needed to be able to really explore research and the projects in more depth. Despite this sentiment, the youth volunteers completed two research projects, one on young people's use of green space and one on learning in lockdown. These had to be conducted via online surveys due to the pandemic control measures too.

Phase 3: Review and Re-Design by Young People

After the research phase, we moved into a review and redesign phase. In five sessions, each one a half hour long the young people looked at the session plans and resources and re-designed them to be more accessible and as supportive as possible when accessed remotely. Again, we were fighting time and only managed to review rather than completely rewrite the resources in this timeframe, meaning that additional time had to be added into the project to reach phase four. We used a collaborative platform called 'Padlet' to enable the group members to share ideas, documents and resources but did not use facebook or Whatsapp as these were outside the NYA safeguarding protocols. The project was successful in a number of respects but also encountered a range of challenges which were addressed in the re-design and which will be identified in order to guide future youth-led research projects. One success of the project was that all eight young people engaged throughout all phases of the project indicating that the pilots, whilst adult designed, were sufficiently engaging and rewarding for the young people. On a 1 to 10 Likert scale with 1 being below expectation and 10 being above expectation, the young people rated their experience as seven to nine out of ten as shown in Chart one (*see Slide #6*) in the PowerPoint presentation. The reasons for this high rating were:

- *"It was a very comprehensive and easy to understand while also managing to be enjoyable and fun."*
- *"It was a very comprehensive and easy to understand while also managing to be enjoyable and fun."*
- *"I've learnt a great deal about research in this sector, though the limited time and uneven workload did frustrate me a bit."*
- *"Really engaging, useful and insightful; the only thing I found frustrating was not being able to communicate with my group outside the call."*

All the young people said they gained greater skills through their participation in the project as shown in Chart two (*Slide #7*). The skills most young people felt they had gained were data analysis and communication skills. The young people did not identify they had gained any leadership skills or work initiative through the project. Perhaps this was because it was facilitated and so they did not see themselves leading, but this is rather ironic in a YPAR project where they led their own research projects. Although the choices they made were not reflected in the skills matrix, they were the focus of several comments such as this:

- *"I really enjoyed doing this, thought the research was really interesting – Especially the freedom to choose what we were interested in".*

Phase 4: Developing Young Researchers' Network, Materials, Training, and Accreditation

Indeed, leading the research projects was rated the 'best thing' about the projects as shown in Chart three (*Slide # 8*). We asked the young people how confident they now felt about seven different aspects of research on a 1 to 10 Likert scale. The answers were generally positive, with all rated above five out of ten as shown in Chart four (*Slide #9*). The area where they felt the most confidence was choosing a research method, and the area where they had comparatively less confidence was sending research to end users – this may be due to the delays in getting reports uploaded onto the web. Additionally, all eight gained a level two certificate of accreditation through the Young Researchers Programme. The young people also produced research reports which are valid outputs in their own right. One group of young

people researched young people's use of green space and found that 16 to 19 year-old young people spent between 1 to 5 hours in green space. 27% of the respondents said they had been involved in environmental organisations but would want further opportunities to engage. 88% of the respondents also wanted a voice in policy decisions on use of green spaces. This research therefore recommends that young people are involved in decisions made about green spaces and organisations managing green spaces in the future. As the authors state; "It is key that youth empowerment is a part of every organisation and that young people are taught how to use their voice, and that they have the power to create and influence change" (Clinton, Kinnersley and Lucioni, 2021:9). The second research group researched young people's experiences of online learning during lockdown. A total of 245 young people aged 16-21 participated in the survey. Key findings were that the majority of students (58%) do not want online learning to be a permanent feature in education as it had somewhat negatively impacted on their mental health and wellbeing due to lack of social interactions, disrupted focus and a lack of routine (Shaukat, Linehan, Merrington, Franklin, & Bateman, 2021:5). As a result, the team recommends; outreach mental health support throughout lockdown alongside online learning, more informal social time in online lessons, and more leniency in expectations and deadlines at this challenging time (Shaukat et al., 2021:17).

Despite the success of the pilot, the eight young people who participated had plenty of improvements to make to it, and have gone on to do so, co-re-designing the programme and materials to be a better fit for purpose. We asked the young people what they thought of the different aspects of the programme on a 1 to 10 Likert scale. The padlet online tool was considered to be the least appropriate with a range of 3 – 8 out of 10 as it was a static platform without a 'chat' function. The group felt padlet was useful for documents, but there was not an alert for updates on the padlet meaning individuals had to remember to keep checking and refreshing the page. The NYA online learning platform and assessment tasks also received relatively low scores both in a range of 5 – 10 out of ten. In contrast, the online Zoom platform sessions and practical tasks both scored well with 8 – 10 and 7 – 10 out of ten respectively. These scores are shown in Chart five (*Slide #10*). Although we had an icebreaker session and icebreaker activities at the start of every session, the young people would have preferred more social time. This is perhaps unsurprising as they had never met one another before. As with many participatory projects the timeline for the project put us under pressure to 'get on' with the work at the expense of the social domain:

- *"More time for data gathering and a more even workload across the programme would be helpful. A more effective method for communications between sessions e.g. Discord and more time for the group to get to know one another in the early sessions – for us the online learning and environment groups didn't really get to know one another's members."*

The young people really wanted a space to communicate with one another dynamically and felt this would have improved their ability to work together within and between sessions:

- *"More opportunity or a better platform to communicate outside of the sessions."*
- *"Allow outside communication between participants."*

We had worked hard to create some interactive learning and engagement activities online, as it was hard to replicate the games, activities and group work we would have done face to face. More could have been done though to make the programme more interactive. Shaw, Brady and Davey remind us of the importance of research training that meets a variety of learning styles in their guide (2011:41). This sentiment was reflected back to us by the group member who said:

- *"I think the delivery of the programme needs to be more interactive so offering a wide range of different activities and more opportunity to get to know the people you are working with better."*

Time again became an issue when the young people started having to progress their project, which correlates with the findings of Powers and Tiffany, evaluating three youth participatory research projects (2006:8). The two hour sessions were just not long enough when we factored in an icebreaker, mid-session screen break and check out. This was reflected in comments such as this:

- *"I think that lack of time to collect and process data and difficulties with getting the questionnaires out to a representative sample of young people are the biggest issues with the programme as it stands."*

The young people also felt it would be useful for the facilitators to be in the group discussions more than they were. We tended to 'leave them to it' in a respectful way, not wanting to intrude, whereas our support would have been welcomed. Another suggestion from the group was to have young research mentors to support group work activities, which seems an excellent way to improve the project in the future. We also asked the group whether they felt they had the appropriate level of involvement in the project. The answers were really varied ranging from five (just right) to ten (too much). No one indicated they had been involved too little, as shown in Chart six (*Slide #11*). This does suggest that some of the young people may have felt the tasks asked of them were too complex or time demands of the project too great with everything else they were dealing with. This is a useful reminder that young people are not a homogenous group, and a range of options for engagement should be provided within any project (Powers and Tiffany, 2006). Despite these reservations, the young people were very positive about their overall experience:

- *"Awesome course, really enjoyed it! Thank you"*
- *"Communication and time management may not be skills directly gained, but is always being improved and I think having an independent project does aid that".*

We asked the young people if they would have preferred to work face to face. A sophisticated answer came back: whilst face to face would have been fun, working online saved a lot of travel time and costs. It also enabled more diverse people to come together enriching the learning for everyone. Some face to face time, particularly in celebrating achievements would, however, have been valued. In time these materials, redesigned by the young researchers will be available through the National Youth Agency. We hope more teachers, counselors, social workers, family workers, youth workers and health workers will support young people to undertake youth-led research, or that young people will mobilize themselves to use the resources available. The resources, we hope, provide a flexible toolkit and roadmap for youth-led research, enabling greater engagement of young people and impact from their work, which can only serve to create a better world.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We conclude that whilst this was a successful project in terms of young people enjoying conducting their own research together and gaining skills and confidence, much could also be improved. Our top tips are written below for you to take on board for your own projects:

- YPAR takes time – ensure you have plenty of social and project time budgeted in
- Work face to face wherever possible – whilst online research development was possible it loaded additional issues and safeguarding protocols into the mix
- Use the right platforms for the group – this would be a good joint decision once the participants have gotten to know one another
- Give options for different ranges of engagement to individuals within the group, rather than a 'one size fits all' approach
- Use as wide a range of activities as possible to engage different learning styles
- Conduct regular review sessions so that you can address issues as the project progresses

- Provide time within the project for young people to complete any tasks needed for accreditation
- Utilise young research mentors to support the research of future young people.

We hope that as a result of this project you may feel motivated to run your own young researchers' project. We would also recommend you connect with other young researcher networks in your area or country to build a community of practice and critical mass of young researchers.

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