# The Ethics of involving young people directly in the Research Process

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## Abstract

This paper draws on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project carried out in the secondary school of an independent day and boarding school in the east of England. An adult researcher and five young researchers (R4U) worked together to explore bullying at the school. The PAR framework allowed for a close working relationship to develop between the adult and young people but the closeness associated with PAR can raise specific ethical issues. This paper explores two specific issues: insider and outsider knowledge and a shift in power dynamics, and discusses how these issues were ameliorated as the project evolved.

## Introduction

This paper focuses on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, conducted in an independent day and boarding school in the east of England (O'Brien, 2014; O'Brien et al., 2018a, 2018b). *The Olive Tree School* (pseudonym) has both primary and secondary provision and this study took place in the secondary school. Five self-selecting students worked with the first author (Niamh) to explore bullying in their school and together formed the research team. These students called themselves R4U (Research for You) with the caption, 'Researching for Life without Fear' and received training in research methods, analysis and dissemination. The team worked closely to develop the research methods aimed towards the whole school, including parents and teachers; and in co-analysing the data and presenting and disseminating the findings. The close working relationship associated with PAR can be viewed as a strength in generating new knowledge and making changes, but this closeness can also raise specific ethical and political concerns (Williamson and Prosser, 2002). This

paper highlights some of the ethical issues raised during the research process and critically reflects on how they were ameliorated as the project evolved.

We will begin by setting the methodological context and introducing the members of the research team. We will then focus on two specific ethical implications apparent in this project while drawing on relevant literature.

## Methodological Context

This study used a PAR framework rooted in the philosophy of social constructionism. Underscoring this design, was the notion that bullying is a social construct which can be best understood by exploring the context to which it takes place (Schott and Sondergaard, 2014), as well as listening to those at the centre of the experience (O'Brien et al., 2018a). Accordingly, the current research was carried out 'alongside' students of the school rather than the conventional approach of 'on' them (Kellett, 2010).

Traditionally, young people have been perceived as incompetent and unable to participate in making societal changes or actively participate in research, but this notion has been, and continues to be, challenged (Kellett, 2010; Percy-Smith, 2015). PAR has proved particularly successful as an approach to engaging young people in research and Ozer and Wright (2012) refer to Youth-led participatory research (YPAR). The underpinning ethos is that young people identify problems that they want to address, carry out research to find out more and subsequently advocate for change based on what is found. Our study was conducted within a similar framework. The research team carried out two PAR cycles through planning, acting, observing, reflecting (Lewin, 1946) while a third cycle focussed on the 'action' from the study: the development of a draft[1] anti-bullying policy. Although our first PAR cycle was initiated by Niamh, it provided the opportunity for the research team to identify the bullying concerns at the school and consequently address these concerns through PAR. Cycle one was therefore exploratory in nature where we explored the bullying definition in the school as well as how satisfied members of the school community (students and adults) were with how bullying was handled. Through the participatory process and

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[1] The strategy was always intended to be in draft format to allow for changes when necessary.

cycle one collaborative data analysis, two key concepts emerged for further investigation in cycle two: the 'snitch' (a negative connotation for the one who tells), and what constitutes 'serious bullying'. These findings are published elsewhere (O'Brien, 2014; O'Brien et al., 2018b). The research team then worked together to explore these concepts through collaborative data collection, analysis and dissemination methods in the second PAR cycle.

Central to PAR is the generation of knowledge through academic and local expertise (Veale, 2005), so a partnership is formed. Within YPAR, Ozer and Wright (2012) suggest that research is implemented by young people with *support* (emphasis added) from adults and the recommendations for change are based not only on the data but also on the lived experiences of the young researchers. Although the latter was true of our study, the former was viewed somewhat differently. Niamh did not play a 'support role', she was an active member of the research team rather than a facilitator of youth led research. It was important to understand what her 'adult' role was contributing to our new found knowledge. The role of the adult and all team members was critically explored in the study and we provide this critique elsewhere (O'Brien et al., 2018a)

A strength of PAR is that it provides oppressed people with the tools they need to make changes in their lives (Veale, 2005). Although young people can be considered 'oppressed' in terms of how their voices have been traditionally muted, the term 'oppressed' may not fully encapsulate PAR (Stoudt, 2009). In his study exploring bullying in a private school for boys using a PAR framework, Stoudt (2009) recognises that PAR has also been used to explore privilege and refers to the seminal work of Lewin (1946) who reflected that it is similarly important for the social sciences to engage with structural privilege. Reason and Bradbury (2008: 700) propose that although oppression and privilege are opposing experiences there is a need for both sets of work:

> "The pedagogy of the oppressed must be matched by a pedagogy of the privileged if we are to move our world toward justice and sustainability"

Stoudt (2009:10) goes onto say that Reason and Bradbury (2008), advocate for a "pedagogy of the privileged" to include:

> "…inquiry processes which engage those in positions of power, and those who are simply members of privileged groups—based on gender, class, profession, or nation."

As this study was located in an independent school, it was important to recognise the perceived privilege the students came from but it was paramount to acknowledge their 'oppression' as young people, with regards to having their voices heard on a wider societal level. To that end, R4U were recruited to the study as active members of the research team. They comprised three boys and two girls: Hanik, Taha, Patrick, Amy and Hope[2] and they worked with Niamh for two academic years. Through data collection methods including questionnaires, focus group and interviews across the two PAR cycles, the research team heard the views of 155 students from year 7 to year 13. Of these 155, 85 were girls (21 boarders, 64 day students) and 70 were boys (27 boarders, 43 day students). We also sought views from adults through online and paper questionnaires (135 parents and 12 members of school staff).

The underlying principle of this study was to challenge the traditional image of children as incompetent which denies them access to knowledge and power that in turn increases their vulnerability (Christensen and Prout, 2002). PAR provides this challenge but is not without ethical and political implications.

## Ethical considerations in the project

PAR generates close and collaborative relationships and consequently, political and ethical problems can arise for both researchers and participants (Williamson and Prosser, 2002). Meyer (1993) for example, argues that traditional aspects of informed consent are not adequate for this approach because participants are not only consenting to the research but equally consenting to and supporting the ideas made for change. She goes onto say that sometimes, cooperation in PAR is forced and therefore contradicts the ethos of willing participation. Further ethical issues are apparent when enabling children and young people to participate in research, around how the research is translated, interpreted and mediated (James, 2007). In other words, the role of children's voice and how it is being used to inform research, is a

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[2] I am using the real names of the young researchers as they requested I use them rather than pseudonyms.

question of importance as traditionally these perspectives have been presented through adult interpretations (Bragg and Fielding, 2005; James, 2007; Clark and Richards, 2017). However, Fitzgerald et al. (2009) suggest that adults must be prepared to act on what comes from children's involvement based on the invitation children are sent to participate in dialogue with them. Therefore by responding appropriately, adults send children the message that they respect what they have to say and trust the knowledge they have about their social world. Indeed Clark and Richards, (2017: 140) suggest

> "Upholding children's voices, particularly as experts, means listening even when such voices make us, as adults uncomfortable."

It was paramount that our study included the views of students from the outset. Subsequently, the study began when Niamh contacted the vice-principal of *The Olive Tree School.* She relayed the intention to work with students to explore bullying using a PAR framework. The vice principal was interested in this approach and agreed that presenting these ideas to a group of students would be the best way to gain support. Niamh presented the proposal to the student support group '*Blossom'* (pseudonym). This group comprised sixth form pupils dedicated to hearing the student voice and helping with the student experience. The students read the developed information sheets and suggested changes to language and presentation style to generate interest for the would-be co-researchers. They agreed together a presentation that Niamh delivered during anti-bullying week and following this, the five self-selecting young researchers came forward. Through the involvement of students from the outset a sense of ownership in the study emerged and strengthened as the project evolved.

During the study, the participatory process was evaluated at three points; at 6 months, 18 months and 36 months, to assess the perceived level of participation of each research team member and to address any potential issues before progressing with the project. Each evaluation fed into the next to provide an in-depth appraisal of how participation happened and the relationships that developed as a result (O'Brien et al., 2018a). These evaluations highlighted some ethical challenges pertinent to this project, two of which are addressed below:

- Insider and outsider knowledge
- Power dynamics

## Insider and Outsider Knowledge

Bragg and Fielding (2005) suggest that proposals for research which originate from students, should attempt to challenge adult assumptions and not merely reflect approved adult topics. Although the decision to begin this study by exploring the bullying definition was made by Niamh, as the study evolved the direction of the research was decided by the research team together. Consequently, exploring the concept of the 'snitch' and 'serious bullying' in the second PAR cycle, originated in the research findings and the participatory process during cycle one. Through the PAR process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Lewin, 1946) R4U were able to use their insider knowledge to shed light on the bullying issues at *The Olive Tree School*. It is unlikely that the focus of the study would have specifically been on 'the snitch' without this insider perspective. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the teachers of the school would have been made aware that 'snitching' about bullying is something the students worried about. Indeed Bland and Atweh (2007) and Ozer and Wright (2012), who both evaluated participatory research with young people, found that as a result of the participatory process, students were provided with opportunities to engage in dialogue with decision-makers and bring aspects of teaching and curriculum to their attention.  These authors advocate that such an opportunity was unlikely to have taken place without the active involvement of young people in the research process.

R4U were fully involved in the analysis process through coding and interpreting the data with Niamh. Drawing on their insider knowledge, they understood the data somewhat differently to Niamh as they appreciated the bullying situation in the school. This added a further layer to the analysis as Woodhead and Faulkner (2008) note, typically data including interview transcripts are analysed based on adult assumptions and ideologies. This process provided opportunities for questions to arise from the data whilst allowing the team to capture participants' collective and individual stories. Furthermore, through participatory data analysis, the recommendations from the research were based not only on the findings but also on the lived experiences of R4U as students with unique knowledge about the social interactions at the school. Previously, 'traditional' researchers devalued the experiences of research participants arguing that due to their distance from them, they themselves are better equipped to interpret these experiences (Beresford, 2006). However, Beresford (2006) suggests

that the shorter the distance between direct experience and interpretation, the less distorted and inaccurate the resulting knowledge is likely to be.

During data analysis, R4U were empowered to reflect on their contextual knowledge, either as day students or boarders of the school, to interpret what the data were telling us. In team discussions about why some students might feel fearful to report bullying for example, R4U had their own ideas as to why this might be the case which added to the nuances of the findings. This insider contextual knowledge, along with the research findings, fed into the development of the draft anti-bullying strategy. Additionally, R4U had insider knowledge about the immediate and long term problems in tackling bullying that the draft strategy could potentially address. An example can be seen in the lack of training for both *Blossom* members and the staff team. Training for *Blossom* members about how to deal with bullying and other sensitive issues was considered imperative by R4U. Hanik, as a *Blossom* representative, commented that the training on sensitive issues was not sufficient: *"about 30 seconds on child protection but that's it"* (Hanik). The team agreed that training for *Blossom* could build the confidence of members to feel more prepared to deal with sensitive incidents.

## A shift in power dynamics

Given that perspectives of young people are usually presented through an adult lense, Jones (2004) questions whether democratisation in research is possible and whether young researchers actually benefit from being involved. This focus on power dynamics is continuously debated in the research literature (O'Brien and Moules, 2007; Kellett, 2010). Ozer and Wright (2012) acknowledge that power relations in YPAR can be problematic, adults need to enable young people to take ownership over the project while at the same time providing the support structure to enable them to develop the skills necessary to conduct the research. Nonetheless, this power can be viewed as both negative; where adults hold all of the power over young people and hence little democratisation in decision-making, and as a positive where power becomes the ability, or indeed the capacity, to act. In this positive view, power derives not only from the position of the adult over the young person but also vice versa (O'Brien and Moules, 2007).  Thus, in the research process:

> "Power moves between different actors and different social positions, it is produced and negotiated in the social interactions of child to adult, child to

child and adult to adult in the local settings of the research." (Christensen, 2004:175).

In our project, power shifts took place not only between Niamh and R4U and back again, but also between R4U themselves. An example was evident in deciding the topic for cycle two. Patrick observed Hanik and Taha as having a greater input into this decision than Niamh or the young people as a collective. Patrick attributed these views to the fact that Hanik and Taha had attended more meetings than he had and had more input into the decision about what to explore. At this point it was important for the team to discuss our view of participation. We took the view of McIntyre (2008) who suggests that for participatory research to be successful the focus is on *quality* of the meetings attended rather than *quantity*. It was agreed that members of the research team needed to participate on their own terms and acknowledged that there would be times when not everybody could attend meetings, but most importantly each contribution was equally valid in arriving at overall group decisions. Through ongoing dialogue, R4U members provided examples of where they felt their input to a decision was taken seriously and all suggested their involvement provided them with personal gain.

Through constant evaluation, the research team observed the multi-dimensions of power in the project (O'Brien et al., 2018a). It was apparent that all of the power did not rest with Niamh, nor with R4U, but that power was shared between Niamh and young people depending on the context of the process. Unlike the linear models, which suggest participation is fully achieved once young people are leading the projects, evaluations from this project highlighted the fluidity of participation where a relational partnership can develop between adults and young people as they move through the participatory process (Moules and O'Brien, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2018a). In the context of writing up research, Clark and Richards (2017:137), draw our attention to the lack of acknowledgement of this relational process. They argue that as researchers we cleanse the findings:

> "…of that which reveals cooperation, collaboration, negotiation, and participation as epistemological evidence."

These authors suggest that children's agency, with regard to having the ability to make decisions and take control of their own lives, can develop as a result of the relationships they develop with adults in the research process. Indeed these authors

also recognise the multiple relationships children will develop as part of their wider networks which can equally impact their sense of agency.

Conversely, there were times when adults, external to our project, held the position of power and restricted progress. When seeking ethical approval from the university for cycle one, we argued that students of *The Olive Tree School* were competent to consent for themselves to take part without seeking parental consent. Coyne (2010) argues that once a child is deemed competent to consent, parental consent is not always necessary in social research. Certainly, Masson (2000) defines competence as the level of understanding needed to make choices. However the ethics committee did not recognise this notion of competence and required us to obtain *consent* from parents[3] and *assent* from students. We argued that assent does not apply and given the ages of these students, they were deemed competent to give their own consent unless it could be proven otherwise (Alderson, 2007). We reached a compromise that *permission* from parents of students wishing to participate would be sought, but that *consent* to actually take part would come from the students themselves. The ethics committee approved this method. The issue of consent was challenged again in cycle two based on findings from cycle one. In the focus group during cycle one, a number of students were unable to participate as adult permission could not be sought. We argued that the voices of these students were missing from the data and that the need to seek parental consent was not necessary for the research going forward. R4U also felt very strongly about this imposition:

> *"Students should be able to talk to us about bullying in school without having to ask their parents' permission. I wouldn't like to ask my mum if I could speak."* (Amy)

The ethics committee accepted our position and the research continued without seeking parental consent.

Adults acted as gatekeepers at other points during the project. In disseminating our findings, some of our presentations were cancelled due to (adult) timetable changes at the school. Publishing was impeded by adults who did not respond to our queries in taking the work forward. At other times the research team compromised with adults

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[3] 'Parents' refers to those with parental responsibility for students at the school

and school officials, evident in drafting the anti-bullying policy for example. Despite these barriers, adult-child relationships were an important aspect of this research. These circumstances strengthened our relationship with adults as we began to understand their position and vice-versa.

Adults also supported the project in many ways by providing lunch and a room to work from and subsequently working with the team to design the draft anti-bullying strategy. Consequently, the quality of the relationships between adults and young people and how they actively collaborate is the main component to youth participation (Percy-Smith, 2015; Clark and Richards, 2017)).

## Conclusion

This project enabled a group of young researchers to play an active role in implementing change at their school through reflection and action at each stage and in challenging the status quo. Without this active involvement it is unlikely that the findings would have reflected the student voice and the subsequent action (a whole school anti-bullying policy) generated from the project. This research supports the theoretical underpinnings of childhood studies, recognising that young people can, when empowered to, make valid contributions to knowledge which enable adults to theorise and understand the social world that they occupy.

The PAR process enabled R4U to play an active role in implementing change at their school. R4U were determined to rise to the challenges presented through this research and this was supported by the willingness of the adults involved to listen to the students and take their views, and indeed their findings, seriously in implementing the draft anti-bullying strategy. Importantly, the research has allowed for constructive dialogue between the students and teachers in terms of understanding what is important to students and the possible reasons why bullying remains unreported at the school. Without the active involvement of R4U throughout the project this realisation might not have been possible.

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