



## Demonstrating the merits of the peer research process: A Northern Ireland case study

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# Demonstrating the Merits of the Peer Research Process: A Northern Ireland Case Study

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*This article discusses the benefits and challenges of involving peer researchers in social research projects. A research project on pupil participation in policy making on school bullying in Northern Ireland's schools was commissioned by the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and undertaken by the National Children's Bureau in conjunction with researchers from Queen's University Belfast in fourteen schools across Northern Ireland, utilizing a mixed methods approach. We trained and employed nine 15–18-year-old peer researchers to support them in this project. After the project's completion, we conducted interviews with six of the peer researchers to investigate how they experienced their involvement in the research. We discuss the findings from these interviews and contextualize in a review of literature on research involving children and young people.*

**Keywords:** *peer researcher; participatory research methods; Northern Ireland; children and young people*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, educational and social science research into children's issues has been peppered with the terms *participation* and *consultation*. There are now many examples from across the world that explicate how the views of the child have been sought to illuminate some aspects of children's lives—and not necessarily the views of their parents, guardians, or teachers (e.g., Freeman et al. 1996; Kaseniemi 2001; Griesel, Swart-Kruger, and Chawla 2002; Winton 2007). Children are increasingly recognized as social actors in their own right, capable of presenting valid opinions on the way their lives have been, and are, unfolding. Even more recent are the policy

and legal contexts that recognize the right of the child or young person to be listened to. Examples of this in Northern Ireland are the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 and the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland, 2006–2016.

According to Articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), children have the right to express their views and to seek and receive information of all kinds through any media of their choice. It is in response to these initiatives that a culture of participation with children and young people has been given the opportunity to flourish. However, a policy recognition in itself does “not necessarily bring about changes in practice” regarding children being consulted, as McAuley (1998:165) notices. Nevertheless, there is now a pragmatic interest among researchers to develop appropriate methods to access those voices (Greene and Hill 2005). Roberts (2000:238) warns that “listening to children, hearing children, and acting on what children say are three very different activities.” The questions remain: Under what circumstances can these research methods take full account of what children say, without exploiting them? Does the employment of peer researchers result in qualitatively better research? As Smith, Monaghan, and Broad (2002:194) state, the challenge for this type of research lies in demonstrating its merits effectively through its implementation rather than just proclaiming them.

In this article, we reflect on the experiences of conducting social research with peer researchers, using an example of a project on school bullying policies undertaken in Northern Ireland. The project was commissioned by NICCY (Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People) and was undertaken by researchers of the United Kingdom’s National Children’s Bureau (NCB) in conjunction with researchers from Queen’s University Belfast in 2004–2005. After completion of the actual research project, interviews were conducted with peer researchers who were involved in the project. They were asked to reflect on their role in the research process. This allows us to consider the benefits and difficulties of their involvement (as they saw it) as well as some methodological implications of this research approach.

## BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF INVOLVING PEER RESEARCHERS

Although adult society has moved some way from the adage “children should be seen and not heard,” children and young people today are still often faced with situations in which they are not consulted in matters

affecting them. Reflecting this, Borland et al. (2001) explore how research has been (1) “on” children, (2) “with” children, and more recently, how there have been (3) empowering approaches “to” children. These three approaches differ in the extent to which children’s opinions and participation are sought during the research process. An advanced level of participation can only be realized through research that encompasses “empowering approaches ‘to’ children” (Borland et al. 2001:6). These are carried out *by* children and young people, *for* children and young people—in other words, peer research projects.

Hart’s “ladder of participation” (Hart and U.I.C.D. Centre 1992) illustrates how peer researchers can meaningfully take part in research that is with or empowering to other children and young people. Alderson (2000:253) draws parallels of research involving children as researchers and research about women, which also “has become far more insightful because women are involved as researchers.”

Young researchers are more likely than adult researchers to share common experiences and a “common language” with young research participants, including local shared meanings and references associated with words, which is seen as one of the main benefits of peer research with children and young people (Kirby 1999). This, along with the fact that peer researchers are close in age to the research participants, can also help children and young people to feel comfortable enough to say what they really think and discuss “taboo topics” (Kirby 1999). Warren (2002) argues that bringing an “insider” perspective to the research process can help generate a fuller understanding of the topic—data collection methods are shaped by their closeness to and understanding of the issue.

For the peer researchers themselves, one of the main benefits is the potential emancipatory biographical effect that the project can have. This can be both on community and individual levels (Kirby, Laws, and Pettitt 2004). Children and young people may have the opportunity to be involved in local authorities’ decision-making processes or may be said to be participating more in civil society and becoming more critically aware of their community and its structure (Kirby 1999).

Young people can also benefit from becoming peer researchers in terms of their personal development. Their confidence and sense of self-worth may increase, and they can develop their analytical, communication, and teamwork skills as well as gain knowledge of research methodology, community issues, and policy processes, which can be transferred to other settings (McLaughlin 2005). The work experience can also be a stepping stone to future opportunities and career aspirations (Kirby 1999). Furthermore, young people can form new bonds and friendships that can challenge preexisting stereotypes (Fielding and Bragg 2003).

However, some researchers have also identified potential disadvantages and risks associated with involving peer researchers. Many of these center on issues of power. Kirby (1999) discusses the issues that arise when peer research projects involve young people interviewing *adults* as well as their peers. She cautions that both the peer researchers and adults may feel intimidated by the unusual power relations involved in such a scenario and quotes a study by West (n.d.), in which local authorities refused to let peer researchers, who were researching young care leavers' needs and who had previously been in care, interview care workers. In another publication, Kirby, Laws, and Pettitt (2004) warned that hierarchies can develop between peers because of gender or popularity. Although the similar age of peer researchers and research participants is seen as an advantage, aspects such as gender (McLaughlin 2005) and local accent (McCartan et al. 2004) can also be detrimental to the relationship between them. For France (2000:22), the fact that young people recognize these tensions and difficulties that may arise in the researcher/researched relationship shows how effective the peer research method is in "developing peer researchers capable of thinking and undertaking research."

Another challenge to undertaking participatory research is to find peer researchers who are close to the researched subject area but simultaneously distanced from the research field to enable reflective analysis. In her study with young researchers investigating the needs of black families with young carers, Jones (2004) found some peer researchers had such similar experiences to the young interviewees that they had difficulty separating out the issues.

Furthermore, outside factors such as time (both the estimated timescale for the project's completion and personal commitments) and the consent of parents, schools, youth groups, and so on may ultimately decide who can participate in a project (McCartan et al. 2004; Schubotz and Sinclair 2006). Training and supporting the peer researchers throughout the research process can also require substantial amounts of resources, and organizations or individuals must account for this if they wish to facilitate a successful peer research project (Kirby 1999). Costs accumulate through recruitment, paying salaries, incentives for peer researchers, hiring facilities, food, travel expenses, training and research equipment, and producing and disseminating the research reports (Kirby 1999:30). The time it takes to train peer researchers throughout the process must also be taken into account (McLaughlin 2005). It is only through quality training that peer research can be both cost-effective and worthwhile for the young people and other actors involved.

In conclusion, then, peer research, as an ethos and as a methodology, can offer many benefits to young people involved as peer researchers and as

participants, to the adults who support their work, and to the quality of the results. However, issues of power relations remain, acting as major obstacles to achieving the aims of peer research with children and young people—that is, their empowerment and right to self-expression.

## BACKGROUND TO THE NICCY PEER RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project this article is based on was commissioned by NICCY and was undertaken from September 2005 to March 2006. The need to gather evidence on the extent to which children and young people are involved in helping devise antibullying strategies in schools was identified by NICCY's research team based on a substantial consultation process (Davey et al. 2004) undertaken on behalf of the agency. This consultation itself was largely participatory even though young peer researchers were not employed. The selection panel for the research contract and advisory group to the research team both included members of the NICCY Youth Panel.

The research design proposed by NCB included the recruitment and training of ten peer researchers to help at all stages of the project, except for the literature review, which was entirely produced by the adult researchers. To become a peer researcher, pupils had to complete a brief application form. NCB's decision on whether they would be selected as peer researchers was made on the basis of this form and the completion of a 1-day research training course. This training included team-building activities as well as general research methods training, which included sessions on research ethics and confidentiality. Some researchers (Hill 1997; Alderson 2004; Williamson et al. 2005) warn of potential ethical risks and implications in undertaking research with peer researchers, particularly about sensitive subject areas. The peer researchers were made aware of child protection risks that could arise in the fieldwork if disclosures of ongoing bullying had been made. Peer researchers were also provided with some background information and statistics on school bullying, which sensitized them toward the subject area.

Ten young people aged 15–18 years (six males and four females) were contracted after the training day, but one pupil decided not to continue with his involvement soon afterward. Peer researchers came from two participating postprimary schools and one special educational needs school. Two peer researchers were also recruited through the NICCY Youth Panel. The peer researchers were paid a fee, and expenses were reimbursed. Peer researchers worked in pairs along with one or two adult researchers and undertook fieldwork in two schools each. Except for one all-male pair, one

male and one female peer researcher worked together to allow the team to respond to gender-sensitive issues should they emerge.

The fieldwork utilized a mixed methods approach, involving questionnaires, interactive group activities/discussions, and one-to-one interviews. The questionnaires replicated some questions from a module in the 2005 Northern Ireland Young Life and Times survey (ARK 2005) that asked questions on school bullying of a representative sample of 16 year olds. Fieldwork took place in fourteen schools (five primary, five special needs, and four postprimary, including one single-sex postprimary school for males). These were selected on a quota basis from each of the five local education and library boards.

During the fieldwork, the peer researchers were responsible for overseeing interactive group discussions, using the questions and visual exercises that were discussed on the training day. In the postprimary schools and special schools, they also conducted one-to-one interviews with students. In total, twenty-four students completed one-to-one interviews. If at all possible, interviewees were paired with interviewers of the same sex only. Approximately 200 pupils took part in the group discussions. The group size ranged from four (in one special school) to twenty in a number of primary and postprimary schools. Peer researchers were invited to carry out interviews with school principals and pastoral care teachers, but if they felt uncomfortable with this situation, interviews were conducted by senior researchers who could ask additional questions on any remaining issues that they felt needed to be addressed.

Peer researchers sent their field notes to the senior researchers after each data-collection day. The project utilized Worrall's (2000) suggestions for making the process of data recording easier for young people: working in pairs, including spaces or tick boxes on interview schedules after questions, and encouraging research participants to write on flip charts or using diagrams. Some interviews with teachers or principals were tape-recorded and professionally transcribed. By the time the fieldwork was completed, peer researchers had sent in over ninety typed pages of data, in addition to the transcriptions.

After their fieldwork, peer researchers met for a data analysis day. The meeting was arranged to discuss the preliminary results, to share findings and views, and to learn about each school's antibullying policy. They were also given the opportunity to provide written feedback on their involvement in the project. After the data analysis day, peer researchers received a draft report of the project and were invited to propose any amendments to the content.

A young person from the NICCY Youth Panel and advisory group of the project chaired the launch of the research report. Two dissemination seminars



were held by NICCY, for primary and postprimary schools. Results summaries were also produced for all schools that had participated in the research. Based on the research evidence, NICCY developed guidance on how children and young people should be involved in producing, reviewing, and monitoring bullying policies and produced a resource pack on pupil participation that was sent out to all schools in Northern Ireland and made available online.<sup>1</sup>

After the research ended, six of the nine peer researchers were interviewed about their experiences on this project. Three of the interviewees came from grammar schools<sup>2</sup> and were also members of the NICCY Youth panel. Two came from one planned integrated postprimary school<sup>3</sup> that had participated in this research project, and one came from a special educational needs school, which was also part of the school sample of this research. These interviews were conducted for an MRes dissertation undertaken by Burns (2006). The following sections summarize the views and experiences expressed by the young people, and we relate these to the previous theoretical reflections on the benefits of undertaking research with peer researchers.

## MOTIVATION OF THE PEER RESEARCHERS

Peer researchers were quite clear about their personal motivation for their involvement in this project. Most of the young people were in the process of applying to a university at the time of recruitment and felt that their involvement in the research project would be helpful for their applications. John (18), for example, said,

It was handy letting universities know that you were involved in stuff and even being linked to Queen's which is such a good university, and NICCY and NCB.

For Catherine, a 16-year-old peer researcher who attended a special educational needs school, however, the involvement in the project was not career driven but presented an opportunity to reflect on and deal with her personal experience:

I was bullied before. . . . I've been through it nearly all my life, so I would know how it feels. And I just wanted to learn the basics of bullying and stuff, and why we shouldn't bully and everything.

Interestingly, the interviews showed that payment was perhaps a lesser factor of motivation for the peer researchers than the adult researchers would

have anticipated. Only one young man expressed doubts about whether he would have participated in the project if there had not been payment for the work. The others stressed that this incentive and the certificate received on completion of the project were only added bonuses and not as important as the experience they were hoping to gain from their involvement:

I didn't know that payment was available, like I was hoping to get into it just for the experience, so the certificate was good but obviously the £120 was nice as well! (Paul, 18)

Furthermore, the realities of payment and the formal contract signed between NCB and the peer researchers undoubtedly emphasized the gravity and earnestness of this project. However, the peer researchers stressed that they took their jobs as seriously as any other "normal" job, not only because of the contractual agreements but also because of the serious subject matter discussed. Nicola (17), for example, said,

I did take it seriously because I thought it was a serious topic. It was easy to take it seriously. And having to sign the contract for NCB and read all the stuff about confidentiality and that at the beginning brought it home for us that they took it seriously.

The fact that most peer researchers were recruited through their schools and were given time off school to work on this project also contributed to the seriousness with which young people approached their role in this project. Three out of the six peer researchers interviewed actually mentioned that their schools influenced to some extent who would get the opportunity to apply to be included in the project:

Our head of year kind of came in to us and just asked four of us to fill in an application form, so they'd obviously talked about it before coming in—they'd decided already who they wanted to participate. (Emma, 18)

Although this selection process may be seen as a disadvantage, the school support for the peer researchers on the project assured them that they would be able to complete their research even when under pressure in school. Nicola (17) reported about her personal circumstances:

It involved taking two Thursdays off school, and it was kind of bad because Thursdays are my days were I have triple periods of my subjects. But I was able to catch up OK. Our teachers were fine with it though, because Dirk had contacted the vice-principal. [Our school] really encourage[s] you to go out and do things, certainly if you give them enough notice.

## POSITIONING THE PEER RESEARCHERS IN THE PROJECT

It is clear that this project was adult initiated, but young people were involved in every subsequent stage of the research project. Atweh and Burton (1995) found that if adults define the research topic originally, it can be difficult for peer researchers to obtain a full sense of ownership of the project, but as the following interview extracts exemplify, this was not the case here. The interviews showed that the peer researchers had a clear idea of where they felt they fit into the overall process, each constructing their identity in relation to both the role of the adult researchers and their relation to the informants.

### Peer Researcher–Adult Researcher Relationship

As Boyden and Ennew (1997:83) put it, “no research is inherently participatory.” Rather, positive and sincere attitudes to involving peer researchers on a research project and the avoidance of tokenism are linked to an acknowledgement that young people have a *different* expertise than the adults and that this must be reflected in the study’s outcome. According to Kirby (1999), there is no doubt that young people require substantial support from adults throughout the stages of the research process, and Fielding and Bragg (2003) argue that such appropriate support systems can only be achieved if a relationship of trust is built between them and their adult facilitators. In the project discussed here, the research training day aimed at building such positive relationships via icebreaking activities, establishing ground rules, explaining the purpose of the work, and exploring ethical issues around the subject area of school bullying. This helped the peer researchers feel confident about what they were doing. The fact that the project was a relatively short-term arrangement increased the likelihood that they stayed for the duration of the process:

I would have liked to have maybe gone to other schools. . . . But I know with the time constraints and getting it off [school] would have been difficult. Because we only had the two schools to go to, if it had been more prolonged it might have been different. (Nicola, 17)

The peer researchers involved in this project were aware of the need to have adult support. When peer researchers were asked if they could have been involved more, some felt that they would not have had the vision and experience to be involved in the planning stages of the project. Emma (18), for example, said,

That we weren't involved in the planning is possibly a good thing, because we don't have the experience and we don't have the knowledge of what it is exactly that you want the research to be about.

John (18) also talked about the importance of feeling comfortable with his level of involvement, emphasizing Jones's (2004) assertion that the research methods must "fit" the young person:

I mean, obviously there were points where we *could* have been more involved, but I didn't particularly *want* to be, like in the writing of the booklet. If it hadn't have been dictated to the point that it was, then I wouldn't have known what to do.

Paul (18) defined equality on the project in a more literal sense, in terms of the amount of work completed by each actor—not in terms of the type of knowledge they lent to the process:

I'm not an equal partner because I didn't do an equal amount of work, like [the adult researcher] did much more of the work, but it's still nice to say, yeah I was involved in that.

### Peer Researcher–Participant Relationship

The age of the participants and interviewees emerged as an important factor in how comfortable peer researchers felt with undertaking the fieldwork. Some felt more comfortable collecting data in primary schools or among younger students in postprimary schools because they were afraid that more senior pupils "wouldn't take you seriously." Younger pupils "would have seen us as just as much of a researcher as [the adult researchers] because we are a good bit older than them" (John, 18). In fact, John expressed his regret that he revealed to the younger pupils during fieldwork in one school that he was still at school. He felt that after that, the young people he spoke to did not accept his role as a peer researcher:

The focus just went right off the topic immediately and they felt like they could just talk over me . . . they didn't take me as seriously as they had before they found that out.

However, Paul (18) felt that the very idea of a peer researcher could only have been successful in a postprimary situation:

I think the balance of power was more equal between the peer researchers and the pupils in the post-primary school than the primary school, but that's necessary because you couldn't really have a six-year-old peer researcher.

As France (2000:22) states, the very act of recognizing these difficulties in power relations highlights the young person's ability to think critically about research. Our findings also show that the same factors—here, age—do not influence the relationship between peer researchers and participants in the same way but depend on individual situations, preferences, and circumstances. However, gender was an equally important aspect in how successfully peer researchers were able to communicate with participants in the research, but similar to age, the direction in which gender influenced the dynamic between peer researchers and participants in the research varied. In Catherine's case, shared gender helped the rapport that was established between her and the participants in a single-sex primary school:

All the girls wanted to be in my group instead of Dirk's group! [laughs] I don't know why. I just did it in a fun way, you know? It's just a way I find easier to do, because it's in a fun way, so they're more willing to talk to you.

However, sometimes opposite gender arrangements proved more advantageous. Emma reported, for example, that "the boys were more forthcoming" in the group discussion she conducted, whereas "the girls in my group just sat and stared at me, they didn't want to talk to me." John found in his group work that "all the fellas would be messing about a lot more."

The ability of the young people to balance their identity as a researcher with that of a peer remains crucial to the success of the research project and, in fact, to the value of involving peer researchers in the first place. Power politics between the peer researcher and participant and the setting up of professional boundaries, therefore, remain key challenges in the peer research process.

The interview extracts show that power relations between peer researchers and participants in our project varied, depending on circumstances and whether peer researchers were more or less comfortable with this. Catherine (16), who undertook her fieldwork in two primary schools, shared her personal experience of bullying with one group of pupils:

I told them I had been through it before and they took it really well, really seriously. Like they really bonded, you know, with me, and they kind of felt sorry it had happened—like one of the girls said to me, "I feel sorry for you."

This example illustrates how peer research can redress the concerns of power imbalances between a respondent and a researcher (Fielding and Bragg 2003). The quote shows that Catherine was predominantly a peer with regard to the issue of school bullying, which took priority over differences in age and academic ability between her as the young researcher and the participants.

Kirby (1999:48) states that facilitators need to be clear as to who constitutes a peer, so that they and the young people involved can plan for such challenges. In this project, the peer researchers were supported in trying to maintain this balance between sharing experiences and not projecting their own views onto participants by way of role plays during training and in the analysis of their role play experience. During their research methods training, peer researchers also discussed advantages and disadvantages of various research methodologies. It was during this time that the risk of “going native” and being influenced by one’s own views was raised as well as ethical implications of sharing personal experiences of being bullied.

### BENEFITS FOR PEER RESEARCHERS AND THEIR SCHOOLS

Some schools saw the project as an opportunity to review their own schools’ antibullying policies and practices. Two of the peer researchers were asked to write up their research findings for their school; one was asked for advice in relation to his school’s Stop Bullying campaign. Another peer researcher reported how the involvement of his school in the research project led to improvements in school policy making on bullying:

I thought our school was crap, even compared to some of the other schools. But most schools were crap, to be honest. Whenever [the researchers] came to our school, I think they [the senior staff] knew that they didn’t really have much to say about it. I think they got a kick up the backside and decided then that they needed to do stuff. It was after that that they started anti-bullying mentoring. (John, 18)

Another peer researcher reported that some of the experiences from the research project were applied in her school’s peer mentoring training, for which she was partially responsible. Thus, for some of the peer researchers, their involvement in this project had wider consequences in relation to the roles and responsibilities they were given in their school. The peer researcher from a special educational needs school reported,

The headmistress got the whole school together at an assembly and she really embarrassed me, so she did [laughs]. She got me up in front of everybody to talk about it and stuff, so it was kind of cool. She said to everyone, “If you have trouble with bullying, go to Catherine.” So they just come to see me now, to see what they can do! (Catherine, 16)

Overall, there was evidence of a general rise in confidence levels among the peer researchers, confirming Kirby’s (1999) claim regarding the personal

benefits of such involvement, including evidence of increased input and insight into the workings of their own school life. Emma (18) stated,

Getting the confidence and the experience of it is something that you can't miss . . . getting involved in something like this might change your mind about what sort of career you want to get into, it just gives you an insight into something else, particularly if you don't know what you what to do for a career.

The young people were aware that recognition of their work took place on several levels. Two peer researchers were genuinely surprised at the level to which their involvement was acknowledged by the senior researchers on the project:

Is my name on the report, really?! Not the school's name, no? (John, 18)

I was just *so* thankful that the research team had actually invited me over to take the speech [on the launch day] because I was really, emotionally really happy, because I didn't know that they trusted me that much . . . there was no one else there, just me, so I was like oh, well they trust me that much in the end it was great. (Vincent, 16)

Although recognition via the certificate and the fee from NCB were welcomed, there was an interest in seeing how widely their work would be disseminated. There was, therefore, an observable outcome of feeling valued:

Looking through [the report], I have seen results that we found and things we did on the analysis day, so you do realize then that you're [*sic*] involvement was like . . . valued. (Emma, 18)

Another peer researcher felt that more opportunities like that were needed in his school:

If you're trying to organize work experience, it's hard to get it for social sciences or psychology. I mean, if the school had a list of things that were coming up and read them out, I'm sure people would jump at the chance to get involved. (Paul, 18)

In a broader sense, being involved in a project like this, which directly influences social policy making, can be seen as encouraging active citizenship because it gives young people—whether involved as researchers or as participants—a sense that they can make a difference in the world around them. Peer research projects are not different from research conducted by adult researchers, in that essentially, it is the social policy makers who decide whether they will store the findings away or do anything about the issues

raised (McLaughlin 2005); however, because the present research on school bullying was commissioned by NICCY, there was almost a guarantee that the findings would be used and made available to policy makers and schools.

On a personal level, one young person expressed the view that the project expanded his horizons of knowledge and had also stimulated an interest in research:

During the project I would have been more aware of reading articles in newspapers relating to that issue in Northern Ireland. (Paul, 18)

Another peer researcher who had previously been bullied emphasized that as well as the personal therapeutic benefits the project afforded her, her parents were also very proud of her and recognized the effort she had given to the project:

It's really cool, I was really proud of myself, I was so happy when I did it. My parents said to me, "So how did it go?" And I said "Brilliant!" And they said, "After you do all this work we might have a wee surprise for you." . . . They gave me money and clothes . . . it was great. (Catherine, 16)

## DISCUSSION

Peer research, through its agenda of participation, respect, and empowerment and emancipation, carries a demand that children and young people can, with a legitimate voice, be seen as full members of society and included in citizenship (Roche 1999). In that sense, research with children can be said to have been inspired by feminist perspectives on research, which seek to value and empower research participants through encouraging a common language and acting in consciously political ways to change their communities (Gatenby and Humphries 2000). Does this mean that peer research could be defined as "democratic research" or "better" research? Alderson (2000) argues that when adults choose to work with child researchers, it does not automatically emancipate the children; indeed, in the wrong setting, peer research methods may exploit children and amplify problems at worst and give way to tokenism at best. In the project discussed in this article, there was no evidence for such tokenism, although the research was essentially adult initiated and adult led. Rather, the interviews conducted with peer researchers showed that they felt part and parcel of this project and that they personally benefited from it, as did their schools.

Although our findings certainly vindicate Kirby's (1999) view that one of the perceived benefits of working as a peer researcher is the fostering of young people's career aspirations, our evidence also suggests that young



people may have manifold reasons to become peer researchers. Concrete proof of their empowerment and the emancipatory biographical benefits of peer research projects (previously outlined by Kirby, Laws, and Pettitt 2004) was shown through the young people's willingness to actively engage as individuals and as a community in their schools and wider environment and in their demand to see how their efforts were utilized, both within the written report and on a policy development level. Not only did some of the peer researchers actively help improve antibullying policies in their own schools and others, they also talked about how they had gained insight into social research issues.

According to Roche (1999:486), "listening" properly to children "will involve significant change in many social and institutional practices," and this, in turn, requires new inputs from both young people and adults. With this project, it can certainly be argued that it was helpful that the two organizations commissioning (NICCY) and undertaking (NCB) the research have an ethos that is generally supportive of young people's participation. It was thus time and financial restrictions that prevented an even greater participation of peer researchers in this project. However, the relatively short period of time in which this project had to be completed explains both the focus and the dynamic in which it was completed as well as the difficulties that some peer researchers had in conducting group sessions with some pupils because of the lack of opportunities to practice and refine their research skills.

Interestingly, the peer researchers did not see the adult leadership in this research as a disadvantage but rather a necessity. They did this without underplaying the positive effect of their own role in the project, as the interviews show. Paul, for example, felt that participants were less likely to "sugar coat their answers" when talking to peer researchers. Nicola (17) thought that it would have been difficult for senior researchers on their own "to get what the pupils really felt because maybe the young people felt more confident talking to a peer researcher than an adult." This reiterates Kirby's (1999) view that a common language can help validate a project's results. Finally, the obvious logistical impact of having a larger research team was highlighted by Catherine (16):

I don't think they would have gotten any results back without us! Because it might have took longer to go around all the schools that they'd planned to get to.

We have shown here that the involvement of schools in this project can have both advantages and disadvantages. Robinson and Kellett (2004) expressed their concern about the school setting as a research environment because of the imbalance of power between adults and young people. However, our evidence suggests that most participating schools entered the research process with open minds and expected the peer researchers to make a

positive contribution to their own school's bullying policy and peer-mentoring training.

This article has shown how a group of peer researchers have achieved a greater sense of empowerment through their involvement in a peer research project. They were involved at a level with which they were comfortable, and they felt that their involvement added reliability to the results. Their empowerment was evident in their enhanced contribution to their own school's bullying policies, the sharing of information with their peers, and their feeling that their work and efforts have been valued and were actively informing Northern Ireland-wide policy recommendations—despite restrictions of time and concerns of power in terms of both conducting the research in a school setting and considerations about who could be seen as a “peer” in the given context of the research.

One of the most encouraging aspects of the research has been the illumination of the willingness that young people have to learn and their capacity to become involved in research projects that affect them. The young people whose voices are represented here have done a great service to themselves, their peers, and the wider community in showing how, with the investment of time and support on the part of adults, the inclusion of peer researchers on educational or social research projects can be worthwhile.

## NOTES

1. See <http://www.nicky.org/article.aspx?menuId=518> (accessed February 23, 2009).
2. Grammar schools are academically selective postprimary schools attended by approximately 30% of the Northern Ireland postprimary school population.
3. Planned integrated schools are a type of school set up in Northern Ireland to address the socioreligious and academic segregation in mainstream schooling. Currently, 7% of the Northern Irish school population attend these all-ability schools, which have a maximum intake of 60% of either main socioreligious group (Catholic or Protestant).

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