Viewpoint Article

Young people's involvement in policy research

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Over the last thirteen years I have had the opportunity to be at the centre of the young researchers' movement in the UK and Europe, involved in the commissioning, training and undertaking of research with children and young people to help shape and influence childhood and youth policy and practice. My work started in the 1990s a period of high public spending and interest in user involvement in policy research. Now in uncertain economic times in Europe, the efforts to effectively build-on methodologies to involve marginalised and disadvantaged groups of children and young people in the policy research process is undermined by public cuts which, in my opinion, provides the ideal space for researchers and youth practitioners to focus on ways to innovate and still uphold the rights of young people to engage in participatory politics. Involving children and young people in research can focus on issues about children and young people or about other people's issues. They can be involved as peer researchers or co-researchers; they can engage in research projects led by children and young people; or those led by adults involving children and young people. This Viewpoint articles reviews the rich legacy of young people's involvement in policy research in the UK and presents an approach of working with young people as co-inquirers that might prove useful elsewhere.

Specifically, this article critiques why the sociocultural and socioeconomic context to young people's involvement in research counts and I use the Young Researcher Network (YRN) experience as a case study. The YRN is a project of the National Youth Agency (NYA). The NYA is the national expert and developmental organisation for supporting those who work with young people in England. It is a registered charity and aims to advance youth work in order to promote young people's personal and social development, alongside their voices,

influence and place in society. The YRN was first established in 2007 and involved a network of organisations that support and encourage young people's active involvement in research in order to influence and shape youth policy and practice. Between 2008 and 2010 the YRN supported, to completion, over twenty-five research projects led by young people through providing a grants programme, research skills training, seminars, conferences, and capacity building. My role was to develop and coordinate the network as a Young People's Participation Development Officer for the NYA. The idea of the network arose from the new requirement for local authorities to go beyond merely 'consulting' young people. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act (2007) contains reference to the 'duty to involve', requiring that public bodies inform, consult and involve people in decisions on the design and delivery of local services. Impetus also came from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the form of guidelines for the proper conduct of research involving children and young people (Beazley et al, 2009), as well as a plethora of other government acts. The NYA wanted groups of young people involved in participation activities and organisations supporting children and young people's participation to join the network in an attempt to have their voice heard in the decisions that affected their lived-lives and for them to exercise their rights and duties as citizens by using research as a tool for change.

From the YRN experience of doing policy research we were able to capture some of the challenges and solutions of young people's involvement in the policy research process. To paraphrase Graham and Fitzgerald (2010), in order to work with the power practices within and around participation, networks of power need to be identified and understood. In policy research we found that power and decision-making are intertwined and exist in a grey area mostly influenced by the distribution of power shared between peers and across generations. In view of that, the article does not recognise only the pleasurable parts of young people's involvement in the policy research process but questions some well-established suppositions. For instance: that young people can do research without any prior

research skills training; that the overarching objective should be about youth-initiated, directed and controlled research; and finally, that policy officers and decision makers should not judge what young people have to say in research by using the same scientific standards and criteria used to determine the credibility and trustworthiness of professional research. These are contentious issues that matter to different camps inside and outside the youth participation world.

The work of the YRN and the global economic crisis 2007-08 developed in parallel but in those early days there was less external pressure on local governments to cut public spending. Nonetheless, young people still had to compete with other public stakeholder groups to have their voice heard by councillors in order to have their needs prioritised in an attempt to secure limited public resources. For example, young people lobbied for cheaper public bus fares, bus routes to connect them to youth centres, improved recreational parks, and to have youth workers based in hospitals etc. The liberal agenda of political pluralisation started in the 1990s by the Blair and Brown Labour governments served as a platform for young people's inclusion in the democratic process. The convergence in publicly funded youth participation programmes was effective in establishing specific named collectives of young people focusing on areas such as: Scrutiny Groups (e.g. a collaboration of young people who work with government Departments and Ministers to examine specific issues); School Councils (e.g. a school council is a group of pupils elected by their fellow pupils to represent their opinions and raise issues with their head teacher and governors in the school); Children in Care Councils (e.g. The council is made up of children and young people who live in care and it helps young people in care to have their say on issues that matter to them); Youth Councils and Youth Parliaments (e.g. youth councils are a form of youth voice engaged in community decision-making. They exist on local, state, provincial, regional, national, and international levels and such groups were often supported in their work by youth research groups). For a period, research looked to be an enabling tool and gateway

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into the democratic process for a new generation of active young citizens. Through this approach young people's engagement in participatory politics arguably flourished and positively impacted on the improvement of childhood and youth policy and practice in fields as diverse as social care, health, and education. From this progressive backdrop the idea of the children and young people (CYP) research ecosystem approach first emerged. In essence, the CYP research ecosystem approach (detailed later) was conceived as a framework or way of doing policy research with young people that is weighted against the demands of the policy communities and to empower young people to raise their voice and influence on matters that affect their lives. A special issue of Children Geographies (2009, 7, 4) examined 'the right to be properly researched' and Alderson's (2012) editorial extends the argument made in the edition to emphasise 'rights-respecting research'. The CYP research ecosystem approach sought to put into practice the entitlement of rights-respecting research in our conscious efforts to work together with young people to achieve:

- the development of credible evidence;

- the co-production of knowledge;

- the development of an empirical voice ;

- the persuasion of decision makers; and

- influence and shape policy and practice.

In fostering this participatory approach we aimed not to water down the rigour behind the research process in what Alderson (2012) rightly calls the 'subtracting [of] vital matters' (Alderson, 2012, p.237), nor to promote so-called participation rights at the expense of producing credible and trustworthy findings for the policy communities.

Decision-making in research

Rights, responsibilities and competencies in children's and young people's participation in decision-making is a recurring theme in Children's Geographies (see Skelton 2007, Beazley et al 2009, and Alderson, 2012) and was a central concern at the Network. Young people's decision-making is commonly conceptualised using Roger Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation or Harry Shier's (2001) Pathways to Participation. Hart's Ladder of Participation is criticized in the main for fostering a linear and hierarchal path from 'degrees of tokenism' to 'citizen power'. In contrast, Shier's Pathways to Participation presents different levels in which children and young people can take part in decision-making processes and so addresses the complaint that by engaging children in public affairs, we are robbing them of their childhood. Both models overlook the micro systems and spaces children and young people inhabit (such as the family or classroom). Both models weigh young people's contribution to decision-making wholly within organisational structures and systems without paying due recognition to young people's biographies or current set of circumstances. Young researcher's ability (or inability) to engage in adult forums and participate in decision-making processes can be a cause, effect or catalyst of the coming together of the micro and macro systems. For instance, I worked with a group of young ex-offenders who were recruited as co-inquirers on a study investigating housing for young people leaving custody. The YRN provided the research skills training component. In presenting the preliminary findings to a group of senior managers on a country retreat the young researchers became incensed by the amount of public money they realised had been spent on bringing together professionals to talk about social inequality. Their outburst in front of the delegation resulted in them being asked to leave the study. The Network had to learn quickly how best to support young researchers with participating effectively in decision-making as part of the policy research process. We needed to investigate and more comprehensively understand the issues beyond the known imbalance of power in the adult-child dichotomy. Therefore a framework was needed at the YRN to help guide our thinking

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and plan for the complexities in building shared understanding around a single issue and to establish desired (anticipated) outcomes in the policy research process. A spin-off to the young offenders project was the development of training in networking and lobbying skills to accompany the research skills training programme.

Having trained and supported young researchers over the last thirteen years, I have observed that young co-inquirers terminated their engagement in a process when they felt that they were not being taken seriously and their voices marginalised. This echoes Hart's description of tokenism in the ladder of participation. This is the challenge all researchers experience in doing research so we had to balance our enthusiasm with caution to avoid the disappointment that comes with having research findings ignored.

Generally speaking, young researcher's at the Network were motivated by a growing sense of their 'youth rights' conceptualised sociologically as 'social justice' (Rawls, 2005) and the enactment of 'youth voice' conceptualised in the political sciences as 'participatory politics' (see Beck, 1992 & Giddens, 1998). These two principles formed the pillars by which young people claimed a space to actively engage in the democratic decision-making process and they used the YRN as a vehicle to achieve this end. With that said how social justice and participatory politics actually interplayed in the policy research process is far messier and multifaceted than it appears on the surface. Messiness is something we cannot avoid in research or in policy development. The best we can hope to do in research with young people is to find our way through the messiness to a place that is grounded in science and also reflects the realities of young people's daily lives. In our experience, policy research has successfully worked as a platform for the co-creation of knowledge deemed important to children and young people as well as for the agencies they hope to influence. There are however challenges in how the power to determine what counts as knowledge is navigated and negotiated across generations and among peers. For instance, at the YRN, 'power' in knowledge production was not solely in the hands of adults by virtue of their age or

attributable to their status but rather power circulated to different individuals and at different times in the research policy processes as part of a chain, to paraphrase Foucault (1994). Power was haphazardly negotiated between different actors and given life through the interplay of structures and systems (i.e. decision-making boards, panels, committees, and assemblies). Strikingly, this is not so much an intergenerational issues as a societal one. I will explain this more in the next section.

Power dynamics in research

Power mediates all research production and youth research is no exception (see Hill et al, 2004 & Spyrou, 2011). For instance, in planning for research Franks (2011) notes how the power of the research process itself can inadvertently create a barrier and exclude young people from taking part through its highly structured language and the complexity of research procedure. Not only are budget holders responsible for this, but Morrow (2008) notes how the fault also lies with the adult researchers as they often make the crucial decision of which theoretical framework to use in research which the young researcher will consciously or unconsciously have to foster. In the same vein, Kellett (2010) agrees that 'knowledge is power' and the lack of knowledge and research skills can be a barrier for children and young people. However, this would be the same for any adult undertaking research without some form of training. Skelton (2008) highlights the oppressive power relations in society - age difference being a marker of power - that can be reproduced in the research environment. An exemplifier of this is the power differences even amongst children in the different groupings ascribed to them (e.g. such as social class, age group, ethnicity, linguistic skill, physical ability or popularity). Take for example, William Golding's 1954 book, Lord of the Flies, where he depicts the struggle that ensues over individual welfare versus the common good amongst a group of English school boys trapped on a deserted island. The struggle for control of the island follows among a group of middleclass privately educated

school boys and a group of publicly educated working class school boys. The story illustrates how children learn and exercise power based on class (see John, 2003).

In the implementation of research, the power of gatekeepers to give access and/or assent to young people's participation in research is a critical issue taken-up by theorists who highlight power differentials (i.e. peer group-to-peer group and adult-child) that can result in particularly vulnerable groups of children and young people from being invited to participate in research (Munford & Sanders, 2004, Coad & Shaw, 2008, Carter, 2009, Spyrou, 2011, and Powell & Smith, 2009). The key concern is whether children are elected to participate, are self-selected or selected by adults. Carter (2009) notes that those children who tend to be included in research studies could best be described as adult-like children. Although not mutually exclusive, Komulainen (2007) suggests that the voice of the disabled child is being aired more often now. But McLaughlin (2007) warns us that inclusivity and matters such as age, gender; ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability need to be actively considered, as it would be ironic and unjust if empowerment of some children was at the expense of other children.

On a macro level (the larger socio-cultural context), Bjerke (2011) considers young people's competencies and responsibilities to make decisions in research. Bjerke considers the differences in the ways various national contexts possess distinct historical, political, cultural and economic conditions that influence children's understandings and practices of responsibility. Take for instance, Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani girl shot in the head by the Taliban for demanding rights for girls to education. She received massive national and global media atttention but the media are often less willing to listen and engage with young people on more generic and everyday issues (see Skelton 2013). The need to speak out is noticeably different cross-culturally and we cannot afford to presume that young people's rights are culturally upheld even if they are endorsed politically and that all young people wish to take part in decision-making at all levels. This brings us back to Malala's story which also exposes

the risks associated with participation and speaking up (see Evans, 2009). This also links to the case of the young offenders. While they were supposed to speak up about their research when they spoke up about something else they were silenced. Despite the fact that the very experience of real decision-making and taking responsibility inherently carries with it certain risks it can also heal elements of 'low self-esteem' and 'feelings of powerlessness' (Stoneman, 2002) and bring about the feeling of 'dignity'. To summarise, young people's competencies and responsibilities for decision-making in research reveals the challenges on one level for achieving rights-respecting research (see Alderson, 2012) and on another level the sociocultural and socioeconomic conditions to enable active participation.

The eco-system approach to Children and Young People (CYP)-led research

The YRN was located in what Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes as the exosystem[1] which served as a bridge between the mircosystems and the macrosystem. Prior to the development of the YRN very little was actually captured and shared about the work of young researchers in the UK relating to the challenges of doing applied social research (see Brownlie 2009). Throughout the UK, groups belonging to local and national charities, as well as those that are a part of local authorities, had been busy doing CYP-led research on a range of interconnected issues but to differing levels of quality, with varying degrees of impact, and largely in isolation from each other. The YRN linked emerging, established and advanced CYP-led research groups and produced a critical mass of young researchers. This

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[1] There are some settings or events that influence the child's socialization even though the child has no direct role in them. Bronfenbrenner calls these ecological contexts the Exosystem. The Exosystem has an indirect effect on the child, because the influence from the Exosystem usually impacts the child as it "trickles" down through other people in the child's life. New laws, government reform, environmental regulation, social unrest, financial upheaval, business and industry are a few examples of contexts that can dramatically effect a child's life and experiences even though the child may know nothing about them.

was a crucial moment in the expansion of research led by young people in the UK. In this sense, the YRN was a disruptive innovation in the research and policy communities, and guided by a CYP research ecosystem approach, supported young people to research and campaign for improvements in services for children and young people. The approach enabled meaningful dialogue and exchange of ideas between all stakeholders involved in the policy research process. This meant developing a balanced culture where CYP researchers were not only expected to be in the room with decision makers from the outset but were also sufficiently trained to network and share information with a view to building meaningful relationships with adult stakeholders. This is where we depart from Hart's model since participatory politics inevitably promotes shared ownership and avoids a redudant struggle to have sole responsibility to determine the direction of policy research. Thus, the ecosystem approach is more of a way to doing co-produced policy making with young people rather than a research methodology. It is a way to support young people to collaboratively marshal evidence and establish a point of view.

What is different about this approach? Like all bio-diversity systems, each component of an eco-system, whether a town pond or a Council Chamber, is governed by its own set of rules and tensions. However, while each component functions independently of each other they are all locked into an encompassing system and are interdependent for their survival on each other. The same dynamic process also applies to CYP research. Take the different household codes regulating curfews, family holidays and the observing of religious festivals such as Christmas or Ramadan that all impact on individual young researchers in a parallel manner to the way in which councillors, policy makers and chief executives work within their own sets of protocols, timeframes and reporting procedures. Adult decision-makers welcome detailed information to support new youth initiatives or policy, but they need it to fit into current policy or legislative frameworks. This reflects Shier's model where decision-making involving young people might fluctuate based on their availability and

willingness to get involved resulting from factors occurring within their own microsystems. The benefit of the ecological approach is that it reveals the mechanics of what is occurring across the different public and private worlds of those involved in research; it places equal emphasis on process, outcome and values conversation. The approach acknowledges how research is formed and where it fits into an organisation, and addresses both the needs and ambitions of young people, whilst working together with the organisation they hope to influence.

Figure 1. The diagram is from Innovations in Youth Research (2012) and illustrates the flow in communication and decision-making experienced by members of the YRN when designing and developing policy research. The main audience for young researchers were commissioners, senior managers, policy officers and legislators. Therefore, they needed an approach to help frame their thinking and measure their progression whilst acknowledging the different views of stakeholders. The eco-system approach takes into account the views of young people, parents, support workers and decision makers and values differences in opinion. The basic principles of the eco-system approach are not straightforward because young researchers' lives are seldom straightforward, neither are the ways youth participation groups work. The approach therefore values and encourages dynamism, utilitarianism and realism in how CYP research methodologies are designed and implemented, as the following examples demonstrate.

Figure 1. CYP-led ecosystem framework of influence

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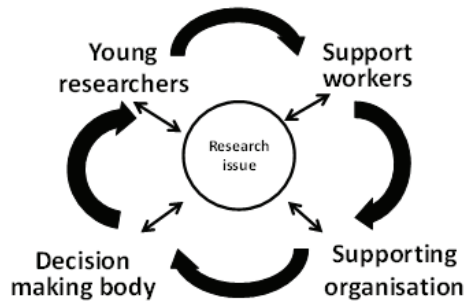
For instance, the Barnardo's Kirklees Khandaani Dhek Bhal Service research group, based in Kirklees, West Yorkshire, comprised five young researchers and three support workers and demonstrated real dynamism in how they went about building their research question. Over several intensive workshops and rewordings the group arrived at a consensus and produced an answerable research question. The mission of the group was to turn the lens on to their own ethnic community and/or faith identity. They investigated the experience of living with a 'double identity' at home, at school and in their broader community so that the specific needs of South Asian young people could be better understood and therefore met by professionals. They were as critical of their home lives as they were of their schooling and other aspects of their lives. Another example is 'Investing In Children', based in Durham, which brought together an advanced group of young researchers (e.g. experienced peer researchers) with one support worker. Their work provides an exemplar of utility in research. Concerned for the health needs of young people in their district, they teamed up with their local Primary Care Trust (PCT)[2] to tackle a recommendation from an earlier study that they had been commissioned to undertake by the PCT. They were able to present their findings on the efficacy and cost effectiveness of health liaison officers for young people in different health authorities from across the UK with the condition that the PCT would seriously consider adopting best practice. Lastly, an

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[2] NHS primary care trust (PCT) was a type of NHS trust, part of the National Health Service in England. PCTs were largely administrative bodies, responsible for commissioning primary, community and secondary health services from providers.

exemplar of realism in research is evidenced in the work of an emerging research group called 'Have Your Say', based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The group comprised four young researchers, each with experience of the social care system, and two support workers. Their mission was to examine the involvement of children and young people in the care review process and to make practical recommendations to ensure reviews are more young people friendly. Following the study the group was commissioned by the local authority to produce a DVD detailing their key findings so that all children and young people entering the care system in Newcastle would know their rights in a case review.

Conclusion

To conclude, the central argument of this article has been on why the sociocultural and socioeconomic counts in doing policy research with children and young people. Although the cases referred to here have been drawn from the UK the lessons learned I feel apply to young people wherever you find them engaged in the policy research process. A major strength of the YRN was in the fact that we dedicated time and effort to analyse the potential barriers and drivers structuring the relationships of young people and organisations as they worked together to improve policy. In so doing, the approach advocated in this article succeeded to connect young people to the policy environment in a meaningful way. The Office for the Children's Commissioner in England, the National Institute for Health Research, and other leading youth advocacy organisations in the UK have embedded this approach in their research which looks set to increase the number of young people directly involved policy research. The pendulum has arguably swung from ad-hoc local pieces of youth involved research towards a co-option of youth research groups within a managerialist framework at a local and national level. They each use variations of the CYP research ecosystem approach to embed young researchers within their own organisations.

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