

## CHAPTER 4

# Children and Young People's Participation in Research

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### INTRODUCTION

Children and young people's participation in research can mean anything from taking part in adults' research projects, to working in partnership with adults to plan and conduct research, to carrying out their own research projects with support from adults. This chapter focuses on the second and third of these.

Children and young people's participation in research is an area of practice that has developed significantly in the past decade, throwing up both practical challenges in terms of how to make children and young people's participation real and theoretical/methodological questions about the value of their research and how it differs from research by adults. This chapter will focus mainly on the practical challenges but in the process will also consider some of the theoretical and methodological questions. It begins with a brief review of recent developments in the field and key texts before moving into a presentation and deeper exploration of two projects that I conducted with colleagues. The first was a university-based project to support a small group of children in two primary schools to plan and carry out their own research projects. The second was a partnership project, the original idea for which came from a group of young people in public care, who were supported by university researchers to submit a funding bid and conduct a research project together. In what follows I review the factors that contributed to the success of the two projects, reflect on the shortfalls and disappointments, and consider what these experiences can tell us about the limitations of current practice in including children as active participants in research. I argue that this is partly a question of researcher skills and knowledge but is also related to a wider context in which children's participation rights are seen as problematic.

## BACKGROUND

Recent innovations in research involving children and young people are mainly a product of three factors: a greater emphasis in the social sciences on children and young people's agency; an increasingly powerful global discourse of children's rights; and a wider concern to bring service user perspectives into research and evaluation (Alderson, 2001; Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, & Waterson, 2009; Grover, 2004; Kellett, 2010). The innovations to which I refer include not only bringing children's voices into adult research by using more "participatory" methods but also enabling children and young people to take an active part in research themselves (Boeck & Sharpe, 2009; Kirby, 1999, 2001; Liebel, 2008). This may mean (i) contributing to adult projects, for example by helping to gather data; (ii) directing their own research with support from adults; or (iii) working together with adults on joint research. The two research projects discussed in this chapter fall into the second and third categories, but we should also consider the wider context.

Since the earliest research where young people took an active role (for example West, 1995), a growing number of projects have been led or co-led by young people. Many have focused on particular issues and problems in schools, communities, or service settings. Frequently these problems are identified by adults, and the research is initiated as part of a strategy to improve service provision.

Petrie, Fiorelli, and O'Donnell (2006) report on a qualitative study on teenage pregnancy and young parenthood in northern England that included young people as research participants. Young people (aged 16–20) advised on the project, conducted most of the interviews, and contributed to data analysis and to dissemination—two of them co-authored the article. The authors conclude that involving young people in research in a meaningful way is possible and enhances the research process, but that it carries risks for the young people (in this case, media exposure in the community).

It would not have been possible for the researcher to understand the culture and socio-economic context of young people without the help of the Young People's Advisory Group. Also, the group interviews in and outside the school setting would have been more difficult without their contributions at the pilot stage. (2006, p. 44)

Kilpatrick, McCartan, McAlister, and McKeown (2007) describe the use of a peer research methodology to explore disaffected young people's views on alternative education. The aim was "to ensure an equilibrium of power between interviewer and interviewee, allow marginalised young people's voices to be heard and help generate social action" (p. 351). A team of peer researchers (age range 15–27) were formally employed on the project, a government-funded study of provision for disengaged or disaffected 14- to 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland. Although the team experienced significant difficulties in communication and

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commitment (the project lasted thirty months), both adult and young researchers concluded that their involvement had real value for themselves and for the research.

The peer research team who were recruited reflected a much broader understanding of young people than the adult team. This included shared experience, similar demographic and socio-economic profile, regional identity, language, physical appearance and importantly the very recent experience of being a young person. (2007, p. 356)

A related conclusion is drawn by Thomson and Gunter (2007) regarding student-led research in schools, where under the umbrella of “pupil voice” students are involved in research into teaching and learning, curriculum, and school policies and practices. The authors suggest that this may be seen as “standpoint research,” exemplified through a project in which photo-elicitation and verbal scenarios based in students’ understandings of their school produced not a homogenous “voice” but multiple perspectives on the school and the classroom.

Burns and Schubotz (2009) also consider the benefits and challenges of involving peer researchers in social research projects, again in Northern Ireland. A study of pupil participation in policymaking on school bullying was commissioned by the Commissioner for Children and Young People. The research used a mixed methods approach, including questionnaires, focus group discussions, and one-to-one interviews. The team trained and employed nine 15- to 18-year-old peer researchers. Six peer researchers were interviewed after the project about their experiences, which appear to have been largely positive: They were involved at a level where they were comfortable; their involvement added reliability to the results; they were able to contribute to antibullying policies in their own school and more widely; they felt that their work and efforts were valued; and they achieved a sense of empowerment.

Fleming, Goodman Chong, and Skinner (2009) were commissioned by Leicester City Council to evaluate its Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Strategy. The team recruited, trained, and supported young people as peer researchers. They conclude that

the experience of being a peer evaluator was valuable and beneficial to those who took part. It allowed young participants in the evaluation to talk with young people that they could relate to. The peer evaluators described the extent to which they had personally gained from the experience . . . Their involvement strengthened the research in terms of the development of information collection tools, their rapport with young participants and the insights they gave to the data analysis. All this contributed to a high quality report for the commissioner which she reports is likely to have a far-reaching impact on the funding and strategic development of teenage sexual health services in the city. (2009, pp. 288–289)

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On occasion similar projects have involved younger children; for example, Butler (2005) worked with 6- to 11-year-olds in a Welsh primary school to explore ways in which they could have more influence in their school and neighborhood. Another strand has been where children and young people have been encouraged to identify themselves as potential researchers and choose topics based on their own interests, for example through the work of the Children's Research Centre at the Open University (Aoslin, Baines, Clancy, Jewiss-Hayden, Singh, & Strudwick, 2008; Bucknall, 2010; Frost, 2007; Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004).

The types of research that children and young people can undertake range from projects such as these, whose primary purpose is to articulate young people's views or to make a particular case, or fact-finding, evaluative, exploratory, or interpretive research, to participatory action research (PAR), where change is not merely an outcome but intentionally part of the process. Clark (2005) focuses on the involvement of children and young people in PAR, including issues of power alongside the methodological, practical, and ethical considerations in involving young participants (particularly school pupils) as researchers. Projects and case studies are used to highlight the potential benefits. Clark concludes that

Previous research indicates that it is important to go beyond the tokenistic involvement of young people, to as full a model of participation as possible, whilst not compromising the quality of the data collected, nor the experiences of the young people concerned. The role of the young person as researcher should not be an abusive, exploitative one, nor should it be regarded as collecting data "on the cheap." Participatory research involving children and young people should be ethically sound, training and development should be offered and provided, alongside continual support throughout the process, as by engaging young people as researchers of other young people, we will change their role from "peer" to researcher. (2005, p. 14)

Bland and Atweh (2007, p. 337) evaluated a students-as-researchers project in Brisbane (Student Action Research for University Access [SARUA]) and found that PAR "offers a means by which marginalised students, teachers, and university researchers can work collaboratively towards positive outcomes for the participants and their schools." They conclude that

Students as researchers projects, such as SARUA, provide a means for marginalised students to re-engage with their education. Through involvement in the PAR process, students can find ways of contributing their voices to the educational issues affecting their own lives and opportunities and those of their peers. The SARUA project scaffolds student voice through, firstly, positioning the students as the principal researchers in the PAR collaboration and creating an environment in which they feel comfortable expressing their ideas and opinions. Secondly, the project presents challenges to the student researchers, such as presenting and discussing their findings at

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conferences and through publication. The increased confidence experienced by the students helps to re-engage them with their own education and expand their educational opportunities. Further, where schools are open to the voices of such students, they have access to insider knowledge that can assist the schools to improve student retention and to provide more relevant and engaging curriculum. (2007, p. 346)

A more radical approach is taken by Cahill (2007), who offers a broad overview of the principles of participatory research and reflects on her own experience of doing a PAR project with young people. She discusses a “collective praxis approach” (a set of rituals and practices for sharing power within the research process), the role of the facilitator, and the processes of collective data analysis. She concludes that

Committed to bringing new and underrepresented voices into the academy, PAR acknowledges the intellectual power of what Gramsci identifies as “organic intellectuals” whose critical perspectives are developed from everyday experiences. Starting with the understanding that all people, including young people, develop social theory in their course of their life experiences, PAR foregrounds the perspectives of marginalized groups, opens up critique and troubles the status quo. While certainly not all young people are marginalized, as a group their voices are not often taken seriously and they are excluded from many decisions that affect their lives. (2007, p. 308)

Lind (2007) describes a PAR project undertaken as a partnership between student, teacher, and nurse co-researchers at an “alternative” high school in western Canada. Students ranged in age from 14 to 19 years. The research design was “hermeneutically-inspired PAR with an appreciative inquiry lens” (p. 373). The research question was: What is the meaning of adolescent involvement in mental health promotion through their participation as partners in, rather than solely as objects of, a project? The student researchers were encouraged to take part in interpretation and analysis and found this to be a transformative experience.

O'Brien and Moules (2007) reflect on a research project commissioned by the Children's Fund in England, investigating use and nonuse of services within a local area. The involvement of children was a key element of the project, and nine young researchers aged 7 to 13 were recruited. The article focuses on two cycles of PAR involving recruiting the researcher and training young researchers. The authors conclude that “without children's perspectives there cannot be a complete account as to why services are not being used, therefore involving them as co-researchers has helped us as adult researchers to understand this problem from children's perspectives” (p. 399).

The contributions young people can make to projects may include data collection, planning and design, data analysis and final presentation, or combinations of these. Data analysis has often been seen as a particularly challenging aspect for

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young people, although there have been interesting attempts to overcome this (Coad & Coad, 2008; Coad & Evans, 2008).

Some of the issues and challenges that have arisen for children and young people as active researchers and for adults supporting them include perceptions of competence, particularly in relation to younger children; the reception given to research that has been designed and/or led by children and young people; ethical concerns and governance problems; and the sustainability of young people's involvement. My own research with the Children's Commissioner for Wales was unusual in that it continued for three years with substantially the same group of young people involved (Thomas, 2012; Thomas, Cook, Cook, France, Hillman, Jenkins, Pearson, Pugh-Dungey, Sawyers, Taylor, & Crowley, 2010). In terms of the categories outlined above, it was evaluative research where practical outcomes were intended to follow on completion of the research. The research was commissioned by Peter Clarke, the first Children's Commissioner in the United Kingdom, who was eager for young people to participate as much as possible in the evaluation of his office. The research was largely planned and conducted by a group of young people, working together with two professional researchers. The young people were involved from the outset of the project, and the majority remained involved throughout the three years of the evaluation. They were recruited from young people's networks across South Wales and included care leavers (young people with personal experience of out-of-home care) and members of local youth councils. At the start of the research there were fifteen young researchers aged 12 to 20 (average age 16), ten of whom remained with the project at the end of the three years. The young researchers took an active part in every stage from design to dissemination, including analysis and interpretation.

The new Commissioner took office as we were completing the evaluation and asked us to provide a set of recommendations from our research. All these recommendations were accepted in principle by the Commissioner, the majority for immediate action and others for consideration in the future. In a newspaper column on New Year's Day 2009, largely devoted to the impact of the evaluation on his work, the Commissioner suggested that our report had enabled him to "hit the deck running" by highlighting the office's strengths and indicating areas that need development. Our research demonstrated that it is possible to involve children and young people directly in evaluating the effectiveness of such a public office. Working together as a group with a wide range of skills, knowledge, and life experience, we were able to sustain our inquiry over a period of three years and to examine different aspects of the Commissioner's work using a range of methods. Because it was important to make sure that all members of the group fully understood what we were doing, we had to use methods that were relatively simple and straightforward but that in combination gave us a well-grounded and rounded view of the Commissioner's Office, from the perspective of the young people whom the Commissioner is there to serve.

## THE “YOUNG RESEARCHERS” PROJECT

This project supported children in primary school to design and carry out their own research studies. It was conceived as a pilot project, initially inspired by the experience of the Open University Children's Research Centre (Kellett 2005a, 2005b; Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward, 2004). Personal contacts were used to recruit two local primary schools in disadvantaged areas of the city, where the head teachers had experience of research and were willing to be innovative. An initial planning meeting with the two head teachers clarified the objectives of the project, which were (a) to offer a challenging and positive experience for children and (b) to produce research of real value. It was agreed to offer the opportunity to Year 5 pupils (aged 9 and 10) in the first instance, four in each school.

The local education authority were briefed on the project and were fully in support. The two schools identified the eight children for the pilot project. The head teachers approached individuals who they thought would enjoy the project and benefit from it, and two boys and two girls in each school agreed to take part. Although the university researchers encouraged the schools to select less advantaged children rather than the most academically successful, only one of the two schools really followed this advice.

The project began in November, two months into the new school year, with an initial meeting at one of the schools for the children, their two class teachers, the head teachers, and the two academic staff who would lead the project (Nigel Thomas and Alex Morgan). This meeting started with a couple of introductory exercises, which led to a discussion of research. Alex and Nigel described the work of the Open University Children's Research Centre and talked about their own enthusiasm to do something similar. They explained that they needed the children's help to learn how this could work, about the sort of research that it is practical to do in terms of time and resources, and how social research is different from other types of research. Four Digital Blue video cameras had been bought for the project, and the children had a chance to play with them and begin to think about how they might use them in doing research. The children then divided into four pairs (same-sex, same-school pairs, by their own choice) to explore issues that they might find interesting to research. Each group came up with a list of possible topics. It was agreed that next time we would be meeting at the university, where they would meet other academic colleagues and carry out a short piece of research in real time to find out more about the process. The children all confirmed that they wanted to continue with the project, and the teachers confirmed that consent had been obtained from their parents.

There followed a series of three sessions with the children in the university. This provided an introduction to principles and methods of social research and gave the children an opportunity to choose their own research projects. The learning process was an interactive rather than a didactic one; there was a minimal amount of formal instruction, and the emphasis was on exploring the

topic together through conversation and games and “learning through doing.” For example, the children were invited to learn something about what it was like to do research by planning and conducting a mini-research project where they interviewed members of academic staff about their experience of research. The aim was to introduce a few basic concepts: quantitative and qualitative methods, open and closed questions, and the guiding principle that research should be “systematic, sceptical and ethical” (Kellett, 2005a). The aim was then to build on this learning through supported work on the children’s individual projects.

The second phase of the research involved the young researchers in engaging with their own research projects. They were offered the option to work individually but chose to work in pairs and grouped naturally into their same-sex, same-school pairs. A member of staff was allocated to support each pair (Alex Morgan, Nigel Thomas, Tim Waller, and Jane Waters). The pattern was for the academic supporter to meet the young researchers every two or three weeks in their school to offer guidance and assistance in the detailed planning and execution of their projects.

The projects selected by the children were

- “Golden time”—pupil and teacher perceptions of a school good behavior scheme
- “Star of the week”—ditto
- Learning and enjoyment—do pupils learn more from lessons they enjoy?
- Healthy eating—children’s beliefs and attitudes

The projects were largely complete by the following Easter or shortly afterward, and in June the young researchers spent a day in the university sharing their findings with each other and working with academic staff on polishing their presentations. In the following autumn term, when the young researchers had commenced their final year of primary school, a further session in the university was held where the children presented their work to the class and head teachers, and discussion took place about the future direction of the project. Everyone agreed that it had been worthwhile and everyone wanted to continue with the project if possible, although this was dependent on academic staff time and funding.

During the project the young researchers were regularly invited to reflect on how they thought the project was going. In addition they were asked to complete feedback questionnaires at the conclusion of each phase of the project (i.e., in December and again in June/July). The December evaluations were extremely positive, especially about the interviewing practice and the use of video cameras. A couple of children commented that more examples would have been helpful. The June evaluations elicited the following comments from children:

“I liked the part when we went to the university and interviewing Tim, Trisha and Jane.”



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"I liked making the PowerPoint presentations."

"I have learned the three words ethical, scepticle (sic) and systematic."

In June the teachers were also invited to give feedback:

"The children were given a lot of responsibility during the project. They dealt with this with great maturity at times and demonstrated they were capable of things beyond my imagination."

"They were motivated all times and seemed to enjoy the challenge of being stretched in their thinking."

When asked what could have been done better, teachers responded

"More time for the university staff to work with the children. The children were not used to working independently."

"Opportunities to publish their work on the Web would give the children an extended audience."

Children responded

"More time to do our work . . . More time to sort out the data"

It was clear that the young researchers enjoyed the project and believed they had learned useful skills. Some of them indicated that they had gained confidence in themselves and their abilities as a result of their participation in the research. Head teachers and class teachers valued the opportunity given to the individual children and also noticed an impact on other pupils of the approach to learning that the young researchers brought back with them.

For their part, the academic staff began to learn about how to support children in undertaking research. A number of issues were identified during the project:

1. Practical issues in enabling young researchers to have easy access to various kinds of resources. For example, although the schools were well provided with computers, which the children used relatively freely, websites and email accounts were restricted, as was the use of devices to transfer files between school and home. Time and space that had been booked for research support might be commandeered at the last minute by a teacher for some other purpose.
2. Arrangements for contact—the way these were set up left the initiative with the academic staff, not with the children. Although we gave them our business cards with email addresses, they did not use these to contact us and we could not contact them directly, only through school staff.

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3. Internalized models of learning and perceptions of appropriate teacher–pupil interaction were an issue; children had to adjust to different expectations of how they might relate to adults. A good example was the use of first names. The children quickly learned to use our first names but were then unsure how to address the teachers who accompanied them. Throughout the project we could see them trying to make sense of the different relationships that were possible under the general heading of “teaching and learning” and “child and adult.”

To the academic staff the following questions were also relevant:

1. How far are these children really in charge of their own research? On the one hand, they chose their own projects, and in supporting them we made every effort to let them take the lead. On the other hand, they were dependent on us for the tools to carry it out, and on the school to make the time available to them. The school setting is a very powerful structuring and may have influenced both what research they chose and how they were able to carry it out.
2. Do they have the knowledge and skills to decide what they want to research? It was the task of the academic staff to make their specialist knowledge and skills available to the children to the extent that they could benefit from this. On the other hand, the children had their own expert knowledge of the school setting and the people who inhabit it. As Kellett, Forrest, Dent, & Ward (2004) point out, what is distinctive in child-led research is precisely that children have their own particular angle, based on standpoint and experience.
3. Do they have the access to resources they need? As indicated above, this was at times a significant drawback in doing school-based research.
4. Do they feel sufficiently in control? Only they could answer this, and we did not ask directly. It is possible that if the project had been repeated then the children would have been more assertive in this respect.

More broadly, the project raised questions about children’s agency in research: What is the scope for agency, and what are the factors that affect their agency? Key factors here appeared to be

1. Context—what kind of project and how it is set up. Who takes the initiative, and on whose “territory” is it initiated? How are children selected, and to what extent are they truly volunteers? What is the overall purpose, from the perspective of the various “players”—children, teachers, academic researchers?
2. Time and space—is there enough of both for the research to be done properly? How much control do children have over their use of time and space?
3. Curriculum in school—does this allow space for independent research? Is the research seen to “fit” with the standard curriculum, or is it an “optional extra”?
4. Resources available to children and young people—see above.

5. Commitment of adult researchers—this project was able to proceed because staff were able and willing to make time for it. It did not continue into a second phase because that no longer applied.
6. Skills of adult researchers—we were learning “on the job,” but all had experience of teaching various age groups, including young children, and of doing research with children. We also shared a bias toward interactive and child-led approaches to learning, which were congruent with the objectives of the project.
7. Skills of young researchers—the children were all bright and interested. Although they had no direct experience of this kind of research, they were able to pick things up quickly. Others have worked with groups who are challenged in various ways, or on the other hand with groups already experienced in research, and this must make a difference.
8. Level of interest of young researchers—the project could not have worked if the young researchers had not been genuinely interested, curious, and willing to make time in school—including giving up breaks on more than one occasion.

This whole question of agency can also be looked at in terms of *dispositions*—how disposed adults are to cede power to children, and how disposed children are to take it when offered. In reflecting on the experience of the research (Waller, Morgan, Thomas, & Waters, 2006), we drew on the related concept of “affordances” (Greeno, 1994) to ask questions about the sort of space (e.g., geographic, interactive) available for the research to develop in, what affordances the space offers for particular kinds of activity, and what constraints the space imposes on that activity. In some respects the space in the university offered affordances—in terms of physical resources, but also in terms of ways of being in the space and relating to each other and to adults—that the school setting did not offer. At the university the academic staff had access to and control over classrooms, equipment, and materials and were able to extend this to the child researchers in ways that enabled them to extend their thinking and behavior beyond what they would have done in the school. When the project work continued in the school, meetings often took place in confined or unsuitable spaces because of the need to fit in with timetables and other requirements of the setting, and computer access was often difficult too. The fact that the children felt comfortable in being on first-name terms with the academic staff also gave a different flavor to the interaction.

In terms of the value of the research, it is not claimed that the children’s individual research projects made a significant contribution to academic knowledge. That may be the case with other child-led research, but these projects were too basic to add anything of substance. They did, however, add to situated knowledge and understanding in the school, among pupils and teachers, in relation to disciplinary regimes, learning styles, and healthy eating. However, the principal value

of this research was in what the children learned about their own capacities, the consequential effects of that learning in the school community, and what we as academic researchers learned about supporting child-led research.

### “HOW’S MY WORKER DOING?” THE YOUNG PEOPLE’S APPRAISAL AND ASSESSMENT PROJECT

The Centre for Children and Young People’s Participation was created in 2008 to research and promote participation of children and young people. One of the principal aims is to support children and young people to do their own research. In the early stages of establishing The Centre, young people in care supported by Lancashire Children’s Rights Service (a service commissioned by the local authority from The Children’s Society), together with members of local Youth Councils, attended meetings with academic staff and discussed aspects of their lives and interests where they might like to do some research. The young people in care talked about their dissatisfaction with some social workers who, for example, didn’t visit them when they promised to, or didn’t return calls. They thought this was sometimes due to lack of understanding of the situation of children and young people in care, and sometimes to lack of motivation. They had some experience of being involved in training but wondered if there were also ways in which they could be involved in assessment of students and regular appraisal of staff, to help ensure that those employed to work with children and young people understood and followed certain basic standards.

The Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) was at the time advertising for the second round of its Participation Fund projects, with one project in each region of England, so we decided to apply for the regional project in the North-West, as a combined team of adult and young researchers. The main aims of the project would be to find out how children and young people could be involved in staff appraisal and student assessment, and to produce materials that would help organizations to implement this. We wrote the application together: All the content was discussed systematically with the young people, and then the academic researchers completed the forms.

We asked for £30,000, which was the amount allocated by CWDC for each project; £5,000 of this was to be set aside for dissemination. Most of the money was budgeted to pay for the time spent on the project, both by the academic researchers and by the young people. It was agreed from the start that the young people would work on every part of the project, leading it as much as possible, and would be paid a proper wage for their time. This was done through a scheme called LACES operated by Lancashire Children’s Rights. We submitted the application in July 2008, and in September we heard that we had been successful. Work started in October.

The project had six steps:

1. Recruit and train researchers and design the research.
2. Carry out research into staff appraisal and student assessment.
3. Produce materials for involving young people in appraisal and assessment.
4. Pilot use of the materials.
5. Redraft the materials to reflect learning from pilots.
6. Wider circulation of the materials.

Young people were invited to apply to work on the project and were selected by a panel that included young people. We worked together to develop the skills and knowledge we needed to do the project and to plan the research in more detail. Some of this happened at a series of evening meetings, and it was completed at a residential meeting in the Lake District at the end of October. The first day included workshops on research methods and on ethics and safety, and people's rights in research. The second day was mainly devoted to planning how we would do the research, in particular the focus groups. Between these formal sessions, we played a lot of games and had a Halloween walkabout.

Afterwards the academic researchers used the work done at the residential session to produce information sheets and consent forms for research participants and submitted an application for ethical approval to the Faculty of Health Ethics Committee.

We decided to do a survey to find out what, if anything, was happening currently to involve young people in assessment and appraisal. We sent a questionnaire to all twenty-three local authorities delivering social services in the North-West (via the Regional Government office). Seven local authorities replied. None of them was currently involving children and young people in staff appraisal or student assessment. We also circulated social work courses in the region, and the response to this was also negative.

We ran focus groups with young people (six), students (six), and staff (nine). All the focus groups were led by the young researchers, with adults helping for example with note-taking. The key questions for all the focus groups were

- What do you know about staff appraisals and student assessment?
- What would help involve children and young people in appraisals and assessment?
- Do you know of any examples of good practice?
- Are there any problems in involving children and young people?
- What safeguards are needed?

We analyzed the records of the focus groups together, reading through the notes of the three groups carefully and discussing the messages that came out of them. One of the key points that came out of the groups was the view that children and young people ought to have a choice of different ways to participate, for example attending a meeting or completing a form online. Another point was that

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safeguards were needed to ensure that staff and students did not feel threatened by the process, because their willingness to cooperate would be very important.

We used the results of our analysis to produce detailed guidance on how best to involve children and young people in appraisals and assessment. We also drafted a questionnaire that children and young people could use to give their views on their social or children's worker.

We sent the draft materials to nine agencies, including the local authorities that had responded to our survey, and asked them to try them out for a short period. Four agencies replied. Because the time was so short they had little opportunity to use the materials in "live" appraisal, but they had discussed them with groups of young people, and some young people had completed the questionnaire and commented on it. Following this we made minor changes to the materials.

We uploaded all the materials onto our project website at <http://www.the-centre.org.uk/appraisal>. We also sent the materials to all Directors of Children's Services in North-West England and to The Children's Society, NCH Action for Children, and the CWDC. We used the dissemination allocation in the budget to hold a free conference for agencies in the region; forty-three people attended. Here the young people talked about why and how we had done the research and presented the results.

Ten young people worked on the research, at different stages. Some took part in the initial planning and others in actually carrying out the research; only two were involved throughout. This was a reflection of the unstable lives of many children in care, with placement moves and other changes, often unexpected, making it difficult to achieve continuity. Although levels of commitment varied, all those who took part indicated that they found it a valuable and enjoyable experience, and the four young people who were involved in the final conference were extremely enthusiastic and appreciative of the opportunity. Ages ranged from 15 to 20.

From the point of view of the academic researchers, there was no doubt that it was as much the young people's project as ours. Not only was it their own idea in the first place, but they took an active part in every stage, from the initial planning and training through the reporting and dissemination.

The project was labor-intensive, as agency policies and transport logistics required that the young people were accompanied by agency workers in pretty much a one-to-one ratio. Although the agency was strongly committed to the research and to working collaboratively with The Centre, and relationships among the academic researchers, the agency workers, and the young people were extremely positive, the written and unwritten rules under which agency workers operated were experienced as an inhibiting factor on young people's full and free engagement with the research. On the other hand, the fact that young people were paid properly for their time was an important factor in ensuring their commitment to the work and in creating relationships of relative equality in the research team as a whole.

## DISCUSSION

In their own terms both projects were successful. All participants—children and young people, teachers and agency workers, academic staff—expressed satisfaction and pleasure both with the processes and with the outcomes. In the school project, each pair of child researchers produced a final report, which they were able to present at a seminar and to take home to their families. I met three of the children three years later and they still had very positive memories of the project, and the research itself was of value. It is not known whether the school built on the children's research, although in the absence of continued input from the university it appears unlikely. In the second project, the materials were presented at a large conference and distributed to social work agencies and courses, as well as being available on a continuing basis on the Internet. Again, I have since been in contact with two members of the group as well as with agency workers, and all have continued to talk very positively about the experience. They were eager to continue with similar work, and the same team worked together to submit another bid to CWDC the following year, but this was unsuccessful. (After that the program was discontinued.)

One set of questions that can be asked about research conducted by children and young people has to do with the quality of the research and how it differs from research conducted by adult professional researchers. The first thing to be said, based on the experience of these and other projects, is that the questions asked are often different when they are partly or wholly framed by children or young people. Partly this is a matter of methodological naïveté (not necessarily a bad thing), but largely it is a matter of perspective and standpoint. Children literally see the world differently, from a different angle or angles. In my experience it is not a question of research questions and approaches being better or worse, but different. As for competence, children's capacity to learn, and to move into new territory with guidance and scaffolding from others, is well established. The fact that professional researchers have years of training does not mean that nothing of value can be done by beginners and is not a reason for denying beginners the opportunity to try things out for themselves, with those others' years of training as a resource supporting them.

Another, perhaps related, problem that often arises with research led by children and young people is a tendency for it not to be taken seriously—for example by adult policymakers. This was the experience of Glenn Miles working with children to present research outcomes to government in Cambodia, and of Vicky Johnson doing similar work with health service providers in southern England (Johnson, 2009; Miles & Thomas, 2007). It was not the experience of the Young People's Appraisal and Assessment Project described above, where we found social work agencies to be highly receptive to learning from work carried out by young people with relevant life expertise. However, there is no doubt a tendency

in many parts of society to regard research done by children as inherently being of limited value.

There is a wider problem to do with children and young people's ability—or lack of ability—to operate as free agents. In Western or minority world societies, this tends to be constrained by their lack of physical freedom of movement in a car-dominated environment, and even more by the expectation that they will be accompanied, supervised, and chaperoned every step of the way, so that even when a child is very eager and committed to a project, her or his effective participation is limited to the extent to which adults and their organizations are able or willing to contribute the necessary time and resources.

Finally, there are issues of ethics and more particularly of ethical governance, when children and young people are involved as researchers rather than research participants. In each of these two projects, the relevant ethics committee was persuaded that its scrutiny was only required at the point when the research team (including children and young people) was ready to seek approval for a research plan. The initial planning with the children and young people was not regarded as research with them as participants but as research planning with them as researchers; although appropriate safeguards had to be in place, this was not managed under a heading of research ethics but rather of professional practice. However, there remains ambiguity here, and some would argue that because the adult researchers are learning from the experience of working with the young people, this does constitute research with them as participants. The argument that the young people are researchers, and not participants requiring ethical protection, is perhaps more convincing in projects such as the second one reported here, where the main objective was to make an impact on social work knowledge and practice, than in the first project, where the more important findings were those relating to the process itself rather than those emerging from the individual pieces of research.

## CONCLUSION

Fleming and Hudson (2009), quoted in Fleming and Boeck (2012), distinguish between tokenism, consultation, collaboration, and control in young people's involvement in research projects. Boeck & Sharpe (2009), also quoted in Fleming and Boeck (2012), propose the following criteria for participatory research practice: the project is as far as possible defined by the young people; all work is carried out in equal partnership; everyone has a unique contribution to make; and everyone is able to learn from everyone else. In the conclusion to their recent edited collection, Boeck and Fleming (2012) consider the gains from children and young people's research projects in terms of (i) working with and enhancing the critical and creative capacities of young people in the research process; (ii) enhancing power and control; and (iii) research leading to change. These two



examples—of projects that, I would suggest, involve a mixture of collaboration and control—may serve to illustrate some of the changes, for themselves and in the wider world, that can be achieved by children and young people participating through the medium of research, and also some of the obstacles that lie in the way of such outcomes.

The two projects may be taken to illustrate two different directions in work with children and young people as researchers. In the first case, learning was a central consideration, because of the school setting (and the orientation of some of the academic researchers). There was a focus throughout the project on learning styles and skills, and methods of working with the children to support them in taking initiative. The benefits were read by all participants in terms of the impact on learning and relationships in the school—although the children were also extremely proud of their individual project reports. In the second case, the main focus for all was on the value of the research in itself, and on strategies for maximizing its impact on practice. In comparing such diverse projects it is important to be clear about the objectives in each case, and to recognize that these may be very different. In both cases, however, the aim was also to explore the possibilities for working with children and young people as researchers, and that exploration continues.

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