

Youth led research as an advocacy tool

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This paper outlines a recent peer research project conducted through a partnership between the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic) and Youthlaw. It explores the effectiveness of peer research as a tool for campaigning for the rights of young people and providing an avenue through which their voices can be heard on issues that are important to them. It will not go into detail around the advantages of including young people in research, or the benefits of participatory forms of research, such accounts can be found elsewhere (e.g. Kellett, 2005, Murray 2006, Coad 2011). Instead it will provide an honest reflection on the practical components of the peer research process exploring the challenges and providing insights about how they may be overcome.

What is participatory research?

Participatory research methodologies are based on the premise that the quality of insight the researcher can expect to gain, is contingent on participant engagement with the research process (Coad 2011). This method has gained particular attention in the youth research field as an alternative to conventional methodologies, which filter young people's perspective through adult interpretations.

There is no one formula when conducting participatory research with young people – the level of participation can (and should) vary based on the desired outcome. There needs to be considerations for the population being researched, and questions should be asked about the resources at the researcher's disposal. Holland et.al (2010) describes four commonly used models which engage young people to various degrees

1. Research which is described as participatory, purely by virtue of the fact that young people or children are invited to be participants.
2. Research in which children and young people express their views via 'child centred' forms of communication such as play, art or drama.
3. Research that involves a strong role for young people in shaping the direction, methodology,

and the interpretation of the findings, however the research itself is carried out by a professional.

4. Research that involves young people being trained in research methods and supported to carry out their own research on a topic of interest to them. This type of research is commonly referred to as peer research and involves children or young people collecting data from other children or young people (NCFCYP, 2005).

Holland et al (2010) noted that these methods are not performed in isolation and will at times overlap depending on the nature of the research, specific goals and the young people involved. The project outlined in this paper utilised a combination of Model 3 and Model 4. Young people were responsible for determining the direction of the research, they were trained in research methods, and they carried out the research themselves. They also utilised the skills of the professionals involved as they saw fit.

Overview of project and participants

The project was initiated by a group of young Victorians volunteering with YACVic as members of its Youth Reference Group (YRG). The YRG meet once a month in a three hour block. The group

were interested in the relationship between young people and law enforcement officers, in the context of the introduction of 950 new Protective Service Officers to be stationed on train platforms around Metropolitan Melbourne. While they had an interest in doing advocacy work around this topic, few had direct experience with law enforcement and most of their knowledge in the area was based on second or third hand accounts obtained in an ad-hoc manner from friends or acquaintances.

As a result a partnership was formed with Youthlaw with the aim of consulting a broad range of young people about their perceptions of and experiences with law enforcement officers. Seventeen young people were involved in the project over the 18 months between its inception and the publication of the final report. The youngest participant was 16 and the oldest was 22 with the majority of participants aged between 18 and 20. All young people who took part volunteered their time and the project formed part of the wider goals of the YRG. Several participants left the group part way through the project resulting in the recruitment of new members who took over this work. All participants were asked to provide feedback on the process.

The remainder of this paper is based on the reflections of the two professionals who oversaw the project and includes responses from seven young people who provided detailed feedback on their involvement. It is presented in four sections. Firstly, it highlights the importance of grounding peer research within an organisation or institution who have the capacity to support young people to create meaningful change in the nominated area of inquiry. Secondly, it discusses the importance of training and development in ensuring young people have the skills they need to reach the goals of the project. Thirdly, it considers the complex nature of the power dynamic between young people and professionals. Finally, the fourth section incorporates the learning in each of the other areas and lays out a potential model for organisations or young people wishing to undertake a peer research project.

A solid foundation

The importance of tangible outcomes for young people who take part in youth participation projects has been well documented. While this can be framed in terms of outcomes for young people themselves, it also includes outcomes relating to broader social change. Writing from the Centre for Social Action at De Montfort University in the United Kingdom, Fleming (2010) noted that the most common reason young people gave for wanting to be involved in research was the opportunity to contribute to improving the lives of children and young people.

Young people who took part in this project reported similar motivation. When asked why they got involved in the project the two most common responses were 'I thought this was an important issue worthy of attention' and 'I wanted to give young people a chance to have a say on this issue'. These responses suggest that it was the advocacy/social action component that provided the incentive to get involved, rather than a motivation to learn about research methods. Expectations of the project were similar including ideas about influencing Government policy and improving relationships between young people and the law. Given this, it was important that the project had outcomes beyond the skill development and achievements of participants themselves.

A key factor in realising these broader goals was the role played by the two organisations that supported the work of young people on this project – YACVic and Youthlaw. Both organisations have a long history of work in this area which lent credibility to the work, a factor that was described as critical in the evaluations.

I think that [peer research] is really important, but I think that it is also important to have organisations behind this kind of research to ensure credibility.

- Peer researcher

Professionals from YACVic and Youthlaw provided support to young people in a range of ways. In the preliminary stages they provided young people with a political, social and academic context for the work – including connecting them with opportunities to attend public forums and professional networks about the issue (e.g. Smart Justice for Young People¹). This was helpful in

ensuring that the project was relevant and made a meaningful contribution to the work that was already occurring in this area. While the research itself was taking place the partners supported participants to develop the skills necessary to carry out the research (this is discussed in more detail below).

In the dissemination of results, the existing relationships of both YACVic and Youthlaw provided young people with access to Government Ministers, and other stakeholders and decision-makers. Both organisations were also able to utilise the final report in their ongoing, advocacy work. This did not preclude a continuing role for young people in the dissemination of the results. It did however ensure that young people who remained interested in the work had access to, and were supported in their engagement with the relevant stakeholders. It also ensured that the project had ongoing significance, regardless of whether or not young people chose to remain involved following the completion of the research itself.

Training and skill development

Providing appropriate training and support is vital to ensure young people feel confident to carry out the research, are clear about what they want to achieve, and are practical about what they have capacity to do. The scope of this project, and the fact that none of the young people had conducted research before, meant that a significant developmental component was necessary. To facilitate this skill development, a program was devised which took the group through the fundamentals of conducting research. This included two sessions as a large group and then further sessions in smaller groups. The two large group sessions included:

1. 'Research 101' a one hour session which provided a basic overview of the different research methods and discussed strategies for generating research question/s.

¹ Smart Justice for Young People is led by the Federation of Community Legal Centres (Victoria) Inc and is a coalition of organisations devoted to the legal and justice issues affecting young people aged between 12 and 25.

2. A brainstorming session during which participants were supported to develop three research questions for their project and determine the best research method/s through which to answer these questions.

Based on these sessions, the group decided that a mixed methods study would be most appropriate to answer their questions. They then split into three groups, each with a particular focus. Group 1, would conduct a literature review; Group 2 would conduct focus groups with targeted groups of young people; and Group 3 would conduct an online survey with a broad cross section of young people. Training sessions were run with each small group about the specific method they would be using and each group worked collaboratively in between their regular meeting time to fulfil the commitments of their portion of the project. This meant that different groups gained different skills in areas which were of interest to them and helped to alleviate time pressures on the larger group.

As facilitators, we felt that it was important to equip young people with the skills necessary to execute each element of the project. While this was achieved effectively, it did present challenges with relation to project timeframes. The limited time that the group had to spend together (3 hours per month) meant that this stage of the project happened over a period of three or four months. During this time, the development of research skills became a more central focus of the project than the issue itself. This was cited as a frustration by some participants and resulted in a tension for the facilitators. On the one hand, we wanted to properly equip participants with the skills and knowledge they required to conduct a methodologically sound piece of research that would be taken seriously within the field. On the other, it was important that young people remained connected to the issue that had sparked their interest in the first place.

Despite this tension, the value of the training and development provided was clearly evident in retrospect. All of the young people involved in the project were clearly incredibly proud of the finished product and in many cases attributed its quality to the time and energy that was invested. Although learning about research was not necessarily the primary motivator for getting involved, participants described this as a positive

outcome of their participation. They described feeling more confident in their skills and having a clearer understanding of both research and the policy making process. The areas in which they reported learning the most were 'working as a team', 'formulating recommendations' and 'reading and summarising information from other sources'. To a lesser degree, participants reported learning about 'working to a time limit', 'analysing data', 'research design' and 'report writing'. One participant suggested that they would like to have learned more about conducting focus groups

Responses also suggested a broader individual benefit, with the majority of participants (86%) reporting that participating in the project would change the way they do things or think about things in the future. Those who elaborated on this described having more confidence in what the group could achieve and being more critical of Government policy.

I found [taking part in the project] to be a largely positive experience as I had the opportunity to learn a variety of skills and gained a clearer understanding of the process of policy making.

– Project participant

Fostering partnerships between young people and professionals

The nature of the relationship between the young people who took part in the research and professionals from YACVic and Youthlaw operated in a manner consistent with Bolstad's (2011) description of youth-adult partnerships in school based peer-led research. Bolstad (2011) advocated for a model in which '[a]dults and young people are partners with different expertise. All partners are not equal as in identical, but everyone has something to contribute' (p.13). Acknowledgement of the unequal nature of the partnership between young people and professionals is crucial. In this project, the difference in age and expertise was well managed through acknowledging and respecting the unique knowledge that each party brought to the project.

Although the symbolic tension between 'professional' and 'young person' was not overly problematic, the more practical consideration of 'paid employees for whom the work was a primary

focus' and 'volunteers with a multitude of other priorities' was challenging. Although this more practical problem has received far less attention in the literature, our experiences suggest that it is an important consideration. As noted above, young people at times struggled to find time for the project and became frustrated by its slow progress. During this time it was important that professionals kept the project on track while avoiding 'taking over'.

This challenge was managed as it arose through frank discussion between young people and professionals. The result was a situation whereby professionals took on the more mundane, and in many cases time consuming, tasks (e.g. sorting of data, locating sources, editing of text) in order to free young people up for an active role in tasks more pivotal to the overall direction of the project (e.g. design of research tools, interpretation of results, development of recommendations). Feedback suggests that this method was effective, with participants reporting that overall the support they received throughout the project was 'awesome'. In retrospect however, it would perhaps have been better to negotiate clear roles for young people and for professionals from the beginning of the project.

The large amount of self reflection evident in the feedback collected through the evaluation also suggested that young people saw themselves as partners in the project. Where participants described the amount of time the project took as a shortcoming they did not necessarily see this as entirely our responsibility. For example one participant commented: 'I didn't like how slow things seemed at times (but this could have been partially the responsibility of us)'. The genuine ownership participants took for the project was a key factor in its success. Had participants not been as committed to goals we set out to achieve, it is doubtful that the momentum would have lasted the duration of the project.

Summary of key learning

The learning from this project suggests that peer led research has the potential to be effective as an advocacy tool. Feedback from participants also suggests that taking on the role of 'peer researcher' can be an enriching experience that

fosters teamwork, creativity and critical thinking. An enormous amount of work went in to this project, both from the young people involved and the professionals who supported them. The following considerations were found to be important in ensuring that the outcomes of the project warranted this significant investment:

- The partnership between YACVic and Youthlaw ensured that the project had a solid foundation within organisations that could provide a political, social and academic context for the work; support young people's skill development; facilitate access to Government Ministers and other stakeholders; and play an ongoing role in the promotion and dissemination of the research.
- A significant investment of time and energy ensured that young people were clear about what they wanted to achieve, had opportunities to develop the skills required to complete the project, and felt confident to carry out the research. Greater clarity around timeframes and capacity would have been helpful.
- Clearly defined relationships between professionals and youth researchers allowed for the development of respectful and productive relationships in which the unique knowledge of each party was acknowledged and utilised.

Overall, the experience of being involved in the project was described by participants in an extremely positive way. They enjoyed learning new skills, working as a team and gaining a greater understanding of research and the policy making process. Perhaps the most affirming part of the evaluation was the responses to the question 'Would you want to be involved in another peer research project?' All participants responded 'Definitely!'

Tips for organisations undertaking peer research

Step 1 – Clarify expectations

Determine the level of commitment you are expecting from the group and provide a time frame for the project to take place. This will help establish realistic aims for the group and will increase the likelihood of the project being completed. Peer research programs can run for 6-8 weeks or as long as a year. Make sure the scale of the project is consistent with your organisation's capacity to support it as well as the level of commitment the young people would like to give.

Step 2 – Develop clear aims and objectives

Young people may like to spend a session brainstorming topics of interest. It could also be helpful to get in a guest speaker who can provide more detailed information around the area young people are interested in. Don't force a project! – young people will be more committed to the project if the area of inquiry is something they are passionate about and if they instigate the work.

Step 3 – Set timelines and goals

The group should be working towards an ultimate goal. This could be presenting at a conference, holding an event to raise awareness or handing out pamphlets. The group should be working towards something that is meaningful to them that will help them to show off their hard work. It is also important to have a clear timeline that helps you stay on track to this goal.

Step 4 – Maintain momentum

This is the hard part! It can be difficult balancing the training required for the project and actually getting it off the ground. Make explicit links between each session and the overall goals of the project. This will help the project build momentum and keep motivation levels high. Throughout the project you should continuously reflect on the timeline as well as the aims and ultimate goal of the project.

Step 5 – Celebrating success

It is incredibly important that you celebrate successes both throughout and at the completion of the project. A big launch of the final research report, providing participants with a certificate or thank-you of some sort or a graduation ceremony are all good strategies for achieving this.

Step 6 – Dissemination of results

An ongoing commitment to promoting the work is a great way for your organisation to demonstrate that you take peer research seriously. This will help your group see that they are genuine partners capable of providing a unique perspective and providing a genuine contribution to a body of knowledge.

	<i>Activities</i>
<i>Session 1</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team building activities• Brainstorming topics of interest• Narrowing focus to one or two topics.
<i>Session 2</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This week focuses on research method training and discussing ethical considerations• This is also the time to decide upon an aim/goal they wish to achieve.• Draw up a timeline• Finalise one key research question.
<i>Session 3</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This is where the group will decide how they wish to achieve their aim. So for example which research method will they choose?• Groups may decide to delegate work to individual members or smaller groups at this point.
<i>Session 4-6</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This where the action component of the project will take place (collecting the results or producing pamphlets)• The group should look at what they have done and what the final steps will include to finalise the project• This is a good opportunity for the group to finalise their action component For example complete any pamphlets, advertise an event or analyse any results.
<i>Session 7</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This is the time where any presentations should be made or the findings taken to the community for discussion• It is always a great way to end a project with a graduation and the organisation acknowledging the hard work. This is where any evaluations/ reflection/debriefing should occur• Your group may also like to consider how else they may want to promote their findings.

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