

Involving Young People as Co-Researchers: Facing up to the methodological issues

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to introduce and consider some of the issues which may arise in research projects seeking to engage young people as co-researchers. The article will focus on the methodological challenges faced by one research team in particular, in the design and implementation of a lottery funded project in England which is intended both to improve understanding of young people's health needs, and to develop better strategies for meeting these.

In developing the project design, the research team judged that a collaborative approach would be appropriate given the subject matter and the intended outcomes of the research. In order to achieve this, considerable thought was given to the implications of recruiting a team of young people to act as 'co-researchers.' As a result, a number of significant methodological issues were identified, grouped around several key themes:- practicalities; ethics; validity; and value.

The article develops these questions further, identifying a number of challenges in each area, and exploring the possible consequences for research projects which involve young people as co-researchers. Based on these observations, the article goes on to discuss some of the strategies adopted by the research team carrying out the study in question, in order to address the methodological and ethical concerns identified.

The article concludes that there are very real benefits to be gained by adopting participatory research methods, which clearly offset the additional demands involved in pursuing this kind of approach.

Key words: Participatory research, young people, methodological issues, insider perspective

The context: young people's health needs and participatory research

The issue of young people and social exclusion has recently become a subject of significant interest in England and the rest of the United Kingdom. As a consequence, there have been increasing demands for a better understanding of young people's needs, particularly those of young people who have been marginalized for one reason or another. In order to respond to this interest, De Montfort University and The Children's Society developed a joint proposal to research the health needs of socially excluded young people in 1998. This proposal was informed by a strong belief that young people's own views should be incorporated as far as possible, and that the subjective aspects of their needs should be properly identified (Broad, 1999). This, it was felt, would offer certain benefits in adding to the richness, validity and relevance of the research project itself (see, for example, Wilkins, 2000). It has also been argued that participatory research is beneficial both because of its implicit values (such as empowerment and inclusion), and also because it improves our level of understanding of the substantive subject area (see, for example, Lewis and Lindsay, 2000).

The detailed research proposal incorporated a commitment to recruit young people as co-researchers, and to involve them in the planning, implementation and dissemination of the project. This orientation to the project was, in part, a reflection of the values and beliefs of the two research partners, but it is also associated with a growing body of work which suggests that a participative approach to research enhances the quality and value of what is found.

Following the successful acquisition of funding from the National Lottery Charities Board, detailed work was undertaken to prepare for the involvement of young people as co-researchers, in order to give substance to the participative principles initially espoused. During the summer of 2000, the project researcher carried out an extensive programme of consultation, development and training with young people on Tyneside, in order to implement the first phase of the research. Thirty-eight young people were involved, in the varying roles of designers, interviewers and research subjects. They were encouraged to make choices about the ground rules for involvement, questionnaire design, practical arrangements, and the conduct of research interviews. For example, they over-ruled the 'professional' researcher on a number of matters, including the question of whether partners could legitimately interview each other. Such decisions have implications for conventional methodological questions about validity and reliability, so they are clearly not insignificant. Judgements about the overall merits of the research may be influenced by such factors, and this in turn suggests that these choices will need to be justified in methodological terms.

By Autumn 2000, the initial programme of interviews had been completed at the first site chosen for the research. The young people involved subsequently took part in analysing and reporting the findings, thus ensuring that participative principles permeated all stages of the process.

Subsequently, the project moved on to two further sites in the Manchester area of England, where a further 64 young people became involved in planning and carrying out additional phases of the research. Interestingly, at these later sites, the roles and level of involvement chosen by co-researchers were rather different, with an emphasis on participation as respondents, and involvement in interpretation and analysis, rather than the carrying out of fieldwork activities.

Some of the research findings have been quite startling, and it is arguable that their significance has only become apparent because of the participatory approach taken. Would we have realised, for example, the extent to which there appears to be a ‘peripatetic’ group of young people, who move around from ‘parents to grandparents to aunts and uncles to older siblings or family friends and neighbours and then on to partner’s parents’; and that, ‘no one or body appears to be taking responsibility for these vulnerable young people’?

Equally, without the trust that is built up through a participatory approach, would we have learnt about levels of routine heavy drinking and drug use which characterise nearly the entire sample?

The challenges for a growing movement

In addition to the present research study, an increasing number of research initiatives have attempted to develop approaches based on articulating the perspectives of young people and service users themselves (see, for example, Broad and Saunders, 1998; Allard, Brown and Smith, 1994; Willow and Dugdale, 1999). Others have taken this further, and involved young people as co-researchers. Save the Children Fund, for instance, has developed a programme of research led and carried out by young people (West, 1995; Broad, 1999). This kind of approach has been shown to have value for other interest groups as well (Beresford, 2000). The advantages of engaging young people and gaining their perspective ‘at first hand’ appear self-evident.

Nevertheless, despite the apparent advantages of research endeavours which involve their subjects directly as ‘co-researchers’, these should not necessarily be taken for granted. As well as the methodological questions already mentioned, there are a number of practical and ethical challenges which must be acknowledged. In this article, we will focus on these

questions in the context of research implementation, whilst acknowledging that there is an equally important question to be addressed elsewhere, which concerns the extent to which co-researchers recruited in this way can be said to be playing a full part in the research task, that is, in its control, design and planning as well as in its actual delivery and dissemination (Beresford and Allen, 1999).

It cannot be taken as self-evident that participatory research is ideologically purer, or inherently better in its conduct and delivery, than research conducted according to other methodological conventions. As Miles and Huberman put it in relation to the wider field of qualitative research:

‘Qualitative analyses can be evocative, illuminating, masterful – and wrong’.
(Miles and Huberman, 1994: 284)

In addition to such concerns, a number of authors have drawn attention to some of the potential pitfalls in conducting participatory research. Wilkins (2000), for instance, warns us of the risk of ‘frustration and confusion’ in attempting to surmount bureaucratic obstacles, concerning problems such as permissions, and payments to researchers – experiences which have become all too familiar during the course of the present study! Jones (2000) points out that issues of unequal power do not simply evaporate when young people become actively involved in planning and carrying out research investigations. Power relations between young people, perhaps based on gender or ethnic difference, may be as significant as power differentials between them as a group and statutory agencies. Packham (2000) draws attention to practical difficulties, as well as ethical dilemmas. Research processes will inevitably take longer, for example, where relatively inexperienced participants are involved in coding and analysis of findings. Packham suggests that professional researchers may find themselves under pressure to take short cuts. She, too, highlights concerns about collaborative research where participants may not be committed to an ‘anti-discriminatory approach...Often those who have the loudest voices are heard’ (Packham, 2000: 115)

Indeed, one of the emerging issues for research of this kind is that its merits are proclaimed by its proponents, rather than demonstrated effectively through its implementation. It is understandable that in seeking to promote acceptance of a relatively new and potentially controversial research paradigm that champions of participatory work with young people may have ‘glossed over’ some of the methodological and practical challenges involved. In accentuating the positives, researchers may have created an impression that these issues are unimportant, or capable of being resolved easily. Roberts (2000) discusses some of the risks

involved in involving children and young people in research, and suggests that proper preparation is of central importance. The intention here is not to direct unhelpful criticisms at those who have tried to develop a body of participatory research with young people, but to set out in more detail some of the ways in which very real methodological challenges can be addressed effectively.

In carrying out the present research study, a variety of issues have emerged as real challenges to the initial commitment to deliver a piece of participatory research that ‘works’. In exploring some of these issues, we will offer a brief account of some of the strategies undertaken by the De Montfort/Children’s Society research initiative to meet the challenges identified. We have, in effect, tried to address and provide answers to four key questions:

- Can we make participatory research with young people work?
- Will the results be accepted as legitimate findings?
- Should we undertake this kind of research?
- Is it worth the additional demands on time, resources and expertise?

These questions can be dealt with under four main headings:- practicalities; validity; ethics; and value.

Meeting the challenge of involving young people as co-researchers

1. The practicalities

Firstly, it will be helpful to consider some of the very real practical requirements involved in engaging a specific research population as active participants in the design and implementation of the research project. These will clearly have a significant bearing not only on the manner in which the research is conducted, but also on its initial feasibility. It is likely that constraints and compromises will be imposed by these concrete issues, from the start. As O’Kane (2000) observes, a substantial investment is required at this stage in order to prepare the ground properly. Some of the tasks involved include: recruitment and retention of co-researchers; training and skills development; meeting additional costs; sustaining involvement and commitment.

i) Recruitment and retention

Clearly, the task of recruitment is particularly challenging where the focus of the research project itself is on the needs of a transient and possibly alienated group, such as young people on the margins of society. Equally problematic will be the subsequent retention of those who do agree to participate, especially where the research itself may be conducted over a period of

time. Drawing on previous experience (Broad, 1999), the current initiative sought to make contact with groups of young people through a number of projects run by The Children's Society and other organisations, both for reasons of convenience, and also because of the likelihood that positive relationships with young people would already be in place at these sites. It was also possible to use this strategy to ensure that other key research objectives were addressed, such as the proper reflection of ethnic diversity in the study. In addition, giving young people a sense of involvement, and some control, as early as possible is also likely to help with this task of encouraging engagement and commitment. In the present study, for example, it was young people from the first research site who undertook and enthusiastically carried out the tasks of organising and facilitating training events. The spirit of partnership which was developed almost certainly helped with retention of young people's interest and commitment, too.

ii) Skills acquisition and training

In all situations where inexperienced researchers are recruited there will be training needs, and in this sense the present study was no exception. To make simplistic assumptions about participatory researchers 'knowing' their field in advance would have been unwise. This might, in any case, be seen as a dubious assumption from the perspective of the professional research community, whose own skills might thereby be called into question (although, see Christensen and James (2000) on the subject of 'drawing'!). Natural empathy, even if it exists, cannot be assumed to be a straightforward or appropriate substitute for training in interview techniques or analysis. Of course, the question of training and skills development also draws attention to the fundamental issue of the role of co-researchers in this context, which must surely be developed further than that of unpaid or poorly paid research assistant carrying out a limited number of tasks as directed. For the purposes of the De Montfort/Children's Society study, an extensive training programme was developed, involving a series of workshops, designed to generate interest, encourage the contribution of ideas about how to approach the research task, and introduce participants to research skills and methods. The training was very much a two-way process, as it should be, in which the professional researchers also gained significant insight to the context in which the research would be undertaken. The training programme also addressed a number of ethical issues which could reasonably be expected to arise (such as interviewer support, confidentiality, and use of personal data).

iii) Costs and time

Having introduced the subject of appropriate payment, it is important to recognise the additional costs, in money and time, of recruiting, training and working alongside young people as co-researchers. In the context of the De Montfort/Children's Society project, for example, travel and child care costs were built into the initial budget which formed the basis of the bid to the National Lottery Charities Board. For those who take on a more formal role as co-workers on the project, wages will also be payable. In addition to making allowances for extra costs, the study also incorporated additional periods into the project timetable, particularly for the preparatory tasks, at each site, needed to establish relationships, recruit, train and support young people who became involved in the research. In all, this might have extended the project by around six months in an overall two-year timespan. It must be observed that professional researchers and project managers must sometimes learn to curb their own impatience, as we had to, especially at the early stages of a participatory project where for long periods it appears that nothing much is happening. There is no doubt that the kind of participatory research described here does involve additional costs, and extended timescales, and it is to be hoped that potential funders will be prepared to recognise this, as the National Lottery Charities Board did in this case. On the basis of our own experience, we would estimate that project budgets must be inflated by around 10% to allow for the direct costs of involving young people as co-researchers. There will also be additional indirect costs in terms of extra time allocations for the research project as a whole.

iv) Sustaining involvement

Apart from recognising their contributions by way of payment, it will also be important to build in other forms of recognition and feedback, to which young people directly involved in the research will also be entitled, as suggested by O'Kane (2000). Given the subject matter, those who become actively involved will wish to know what becomes of the research output, and may want to be actively involved in disseminating its messages. Particularly for young people who may feel alienated or rejected because of their personal circumstances, these are important considerations. It has also been argued that involving participants in the presentation and dissemination of findings will ensure that these will be taken more seriously (not least, by their peers!) (Broad, 1999). In the present De Montfort/Children's Society study, the intention is for young people recruited as research partners to be involved in a range of dissemination events, including, most importantly for them, the opportunity to engage directly with local agencies.

2. Validity and reliability

Having considered some of the challenges to be met in actually carrying out participatory research, involving young people as co-researchers, we should also consider further questions about the quality, reliability and validity of the research findings generated from this kind of exercise. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that some of the methodological questions to be raised are perfectly legitimate. We are more likely to be concerned with ‘trade-offs’ here than with unqualified gains. Of course, questions of validity are directly linked to fundamental matters of concern for those involved in research. This is, without doubt, contested and controversial terrain.

For some participatory researchers, the question of validity goes right to the heart of the issue of what counts as knowledge. Warren (2000), for example, argues that conventional assumptions which separate ‘research process’ and ‘the reality we research’ are guilty of incorporating dominant and partial ideologies (in his case, ‘masculinism’). This, in turn, he suggests leaves open the claims to validity which are based on the ‘outsider’ relationship between the researcher and those being researched. He argues, instead, that the participant researcher, in being able to bring together ‘insider’ insights with ‘objective’ reflection generates a fuller understanding of the research subject.

In pursuing this line of argument, we can perhaps begin to sketch out some of the ways in which the distinctive claims to validity of participatory research can be operationalised.

i) Professionalism and research competence

Trained and experienced researchers bring a range of formal skills and experience to the field. It is unlikely that young people recruited as co-researchers will bring similar levels of formally-recognised research competence to the task. It is likely, on the other hand, that they will be able to bring to bear the kind of ‘insider’ perspective already mentioned, when the research touches on a subject of particular relevance to them, such as their health needs. In the context of the present study, for example, young people from one of the Manchester sites effectively determined the ‘foci’ of the investigation at that site – namely, pregnancy whilst in care, multiple pregnancies and young motherhood. Data collection was therefore shaped by their experience and understanding.

Using the participatory researcher simply to duplicate the work of established professionals will be wasteful, whereas value can be added to the research exercise in other ways. The important principle here is to seek to bring skills, knowledge and personal experience together in complementary fashion, rather than to deny the qualities and abilities of either the

professional researcher, or the young people recruited to the initiative. Young people's knowledge of the local context and 'service environment', for example, may be an important training resource from which professional researchers themselves can gain insights.

ii) Consistency

Given that young people acting as participants in the research programme will almost certainly not bring professional disciplines to the exercise, other issues are also raised, such as the need to ensure consistency of approach. In fact, it is likely that some inconsistencies will arise wherever research is carried out by 'teams'.

The problem is likely to be magnified somewhat where those recruited as participatory researchers are inexperienced. There may, indeed, appear to be a choice between imposing a degree of consistency by applying standardised instruments, or positively promoting a more open and sensitive, but also more uneven approach, which may build on the interactions between researcher and the subjects of research. On the other hand, checks and balances can be built in by developing a team approach, involving co-researchers in reflecting on findings, and incorporating their judgements on the reliability of what is reported. Unusual or unexpected findings are likely to be reviewed critically in this context. For example, in the present study, evidence concerning the extensive routine experience of violence (as victims and perpetrators) was validated by young people endorsing observations from other research sites in their own accounts.

Developing this kind of approach to validation is also important in ensuring that the spirit of participation extends beyond preparation and data-gathering into the stages of analysis and presentation.

iii) Making choices – seeking a good fit between subject and methods

The involvement of inexperienced recruits as co-researchers, as well as the sensitive nature of the subject matter, may combine to impose certain methodological challenges. Lewis and Lindsay (2000), for example, note a strong bias towards particular research methods (such as participant observation and interviews) amongst participatory projects. Nevertheless, children and young people acting as researchers have been observed to utilise a range of methods (Alderson, 2000). Despite this, the inclusion of statistical analyses, or sophisticated coding techniques, effectively excludes some participants from some aspects of the study. This in turn would appear to undermine the principles of empowerment and control implicit in the participatory research project. Here, too, there is a 'trade-off' between conformity with the expectations of methodological rigour and the encouragement of insight and creativity in the

research act. Nevertheless, the approaches developed in the De Montfort/Children's Society study, such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups and participant observation are all well-established qualitative methods, and facilitate the maintenance of a reasonable balance between the use of appropriate and recognised research techniques and the involvement of relatively inexperienced co-researchers. It should be added that allowing young people choices over the methods adopted also enabled them to retain a degree of control over the research process, as in Manchester, where focus groups were the preferred data-gathering method.

3. Ethics

As well as the practical difficulties in involving young people as co-researchers, and the methodological challenges of achieving valid and reliable findings, a series of ethical issues also arise. In short, can this kind of research be justified in moral as well as methodological terms? Whilst a number of resources are available to provide ethical guidance to researchers (see, for example, National Children's Bureau, 1997; British Sociological Association, undated), these may not necessarily address all the ethical questions likely to arise in the context of painful, complex and potentially damaging personal circumstances. Indeed, some have questioned the value of such attempts to develop formalised ethical codes, in any case (Humphries and Martin, 2000). Ethical concerns connected to power and status may be seen as common to the kind of challenges inherent in researching vulnerable groups of any kind, including children, individuals at risk, or those with mental health problems, for example. However, an additional level of complexity is incorporated where research is being conducted by peers of those who become research subjects.

i) Exploitation

There is a clear risk that co-researchers will only be assigned menial and unrewarding tasks, and in order to avoid exploitation, attention must be given to matters of power and control in the research process. In addition, as already noted, paying 'the rate for the job' is a mundane but important requirement, in order to signify that young people's contribution is being valued and their rights respected (see Masson, 2000). The budget for the De Montfort/Children's Society study explicitly included a figure for appropriate remuneration for young people taking part in the study as researchers. Expenses of research subjects were also built into the budget. Where young parents were involved, it was particularly important to establish

appropriate transport arrangements, and to provide crèche facilities. As the project newsletter notes:

‘These supports are vital in order to... demonstrate that young people’s involvement is highly valued.’ (De Montfort University, 2001b)

Exploitation is not simply about money. It was also important to build into our project a range of checks and safeguards to ensure that the active interest of young people was not abused in other ways, particularly for those whose personal circumstances made them vulnerable. Care was taken, for example at the study’s Manchester sites, to ensure that young people were able to exercise choices as to the nature of their involvement, and notably as to the identity of their interviewer.

ii) Use and valuing of work

It may not be entirely within the control of those responsible for the research, or their organisations, but for young people involved in participatory research, it is likely that the use and impact of their work will be of particular importance. Especially for those whose prior experience is of being devalued or ignored, this is likely to be a central concern, so it is important that the research process itself does not reproduce this experience of powerlessness. The research aims and objectives should be communicated clearly, and co-researchers should be actively involved in all stages, including analysis, dissemination and follow-up.

The present study incorporates a commitment to disseminate and promote the young people’s recommendations for change as widely as possible, and has budgeted for publications and dissemination events. However, it is probably this aspect of the project which has been most problematic, with young people’s concerns about the use of their work persisting.

iii). Child protection

Specifically in the context of work with marginalized young people, the potential personal risks should be addressed. Particular risks apply, and it will be essential that nothing is done which consciously puts researcher or researched in danger of harm. For example, ‘out of hours’ interviews conducted alone should be avoided, as should any encouragement of researchers to be ‘heroic’ in seeking out data. Equally, it is important to avoid putting researchers into a position in which the role could be misused in an invasive or potentially abusive way.

The present study has built in additional safeguards, such as that of providing potential interviewees with a choice of interviewer, including both peers and the professional researcher involved in the study. Interestingly, discussion of this issue led to a heated debate as to whether it would be appropriate or legitimate for ‘partners’ to interview each other. Despite the reservations of the professional researcher, the young people won the argument, and partner interviews were deemed to be acceptable.

Other, more formal arrangements need to be put in place, for instance to ensure that where there is a risk that young people might be distressed as a result of their involvement, appropriate referral mechanisms are available for continuing support. To some extent, this kind of concern has been addressed in the present study through detailed negotiation, recruitment and preparation undertaken with existing social work projects. However, this approach has other consequences, such as restricting involvement to those who are receiving services.

iv) Confidentiality

Certain research methods routinely pose questions relating to confidentiality, but this may be further complicated where the researcher and research subject are part of the same social network. This factor may, indeed, inhibit rather than enhance the quality of data obtained in some cases, but it also emphasises the importance of careful training and preparation for co-researchers. For those who are being researched, the principle of seeking informed and freely given consent should also apply, in order to ensure that an appropriate research relationship is maintained.

For the purposes of the present study, this issue was of particular concern for young women whose circumstances placed them at risk. This meant, for the research team, devising and carrying out an extensive preparatory exercise at one site in Manchester in order to assuage initial fears, to secure commitment, and to build in appropriate safeguards tailored to individual needs.

v) Unanticipated risks

Whilst it has always been recognised that certain types of research do carry degrees of risk, it is important to avoid tacit assumptions about the safety of young people recruited as co-researchers. They may appear, for example, to be ‘street-wise’, but this does not justify taking or encouraging any action which might expose them to any form of personal risk. The libertarian principle of promoting participation and empowerment must be set against the practical and professional challenges of appropriate management, control and protection. Past

experience (Broad, 1999) has demonstrated that the emotional risks for both researchers and researched should not be underestimated. This is an additional reason for pursuing links with established projects ‘on the ground’, in order to ensure that appropriate support mechanisms can be built into the operational framework for the research study itself.

4. Value

Finally, we turn to the question of whether research which promotes the participation of its subjects actually adds value. It is not, as we have already argued, simply a matter of taking for granted that participatory research is a ‘good thing’. The same challenges are faced as in any other form of research of demonstrating that it is professionally carried out, methodologically sound and adds to our understanding of the subject matter in question. As we have seen, there are a number of intrinsic obstacles facing those who wish to pursue this kind of research strategy, and we must therefore be ready to convince sceptics that the potential gains offset the apparent risks and possible shortcomings identified.

i) Empathy

It may be assumed, simplistically, that recruiting co-researchers from the subject population will lead to a greater degree of empathy with those being studied. This is not necessarily the case, given that external characteristics do not always reflect common subjective realities. Care must still be taken to consider the possibility of ‘researcher bias’, and findings will need to be interrogated carefully, perhaps by sharing them amongst the research team, as already outlined. Nevertheless, even in the early days of the De Montfort/Children’s Society study, it became apparent that young people’s involvement was enriching the quality of the research undertaken, at all stages, from ‘scoping’ the project, through design, to implementation. For instance, it is unlikely that the notion of ‘health’ would have been broadened to the extent that it was without the input of young co-researchers at the design stage (see also Broad, 1999). Equally, young people as researchers were, demonstrably, able to engage with their peers in a more relaxed way, drawing on shared language and mutual understandings; all of which, arguably, leads to improved data quality, since the risks of misinterpretation are reduced, at source. For example, young people repeatedly referred to the negative impact of ‘stress’ on their health, originating from a variety of sources, including poverty, ex-partners, relationships and parental responsibilities. Thus, the concept of ‘stress’ became operationalised in a way which made sense to them, but is also intelligible more widely.

ii) Relevance

If young people are fully engaged as co-researchers, it is reasonable to expect that the project will be oriented to their particular concerns. That is to say, both the subject matter and the investigative approach taken may be better attuned to the perceptions and priorities of the young people involved. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that our findings can be generalised any more readily. As in the case of feminist research, this will leave studies conducted in this way open to the accusation that they are 'partisan', or lack scientific objectivity. However, we do know that this criticism can be countered, given the enormous contribution of research conducted from this sort of committed perspective. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge the potential contribution of participatory approaches to enabling marginal groups and interests to have a 'voice' which would not otherwise be acknowledged (Alderson, 2000). Relevance is, in part, demonstrated by the enthusiastic commitment of young people themselves, who have clearly shown a degree of empathy with the purposes of the research, as well as the approach undertaken. In addition, they have utilised the experience to develop a number of practical ideas for change, such as proposals for support groups and peer education, based on their own experience as young mothers.

Rather less certain, however, is the extent to which agencies and policy-makers will also be willing to accept that participatory research is of value to them. 'Relevant to whom?' is perhaps an important question to ask in this context, drawing attention as it does to issues of power and legitimacy in planning, conducting and evaluating research.

iii) Richness

One of the contributions which participatory research can be expected to make is in the richness of its findings and analysis. This depends, of course on the assumption that researchers drawn from the subject population will be able to bring cultural awareness and familiarity with the local milieu to bear. Indeed, these strengths may be particularly valuable in the interpretation of data rather than in the initial collection of material. It is likely that they will bring both greater breadth of understanding (Broad, 1999), and depth of meaning to the final product.

Our experience during the course of the present study has led to a widening of our understanding of what constitutes a 'health issue' for young people. Very large proportions of all our samples have experienced 'victimising' behaviour (bullying, sexual abuse, rejection), which have inevitable consequences for their self-esteem and mental health; ironically, it is just this area of service provision which they feel to be lacking.

iv) Reality

Finally, it may be argued that the consequence of participatory research will be that the conclusions and insights produced will be more 'real' than those arising from other forms of investigation. Whilst this is not the place to get into abstract debates about what counts as objective knowledge, the more modest outcome suggested here is that participatory research might enable us to understand the subject area more fully than other approaches. It will perhaps inevitably give us a partial view, but one which is distinct and conveys a particular kind of meaning. Dispensing with formality and some (but not all) elements of scientific rigour may generate clear benefits in the quality of meaning achieved. As with a wide screen TV, we may achieve a more complete picture, bringing into vision aspects of the subject previously obscured from view. Our study, for example, has helped us to understand better the inter-connectedness between perceived 'health' problems, such as drug and alcohol misuse, the wider circumstances of vulnerability, disadvantage and routinised violence, and the lack of relevant and adequate services to address young people's needs. Young people are, in effect, telling us that these issues cannot be understood or responded to in isolation.

Alderson draws attention to the value of achieving a more comprehensive range of insights into the worlds of those with whom we are engaging in research:

'the evidence of child researchers' activities and achievements, as well as their research findings, are likely to promote more respectful and realistic appreciation of their abilities as social actors'. (Alderson, 2000: 254)

Research carried out in this way seeks to bridge the gap between the world as it is lived, and the world of scientific study and dispassionate explanation. Perhaps it does.

Conclusion: Involving young people as co-researchers – creating added value

As a member of our project advisory group reminded us, the strength of this study lies not in the rediscovery of already well-known facts about the health deficits of young people, but in considering from their perspective the ways in which health care is (or is not) made available and experienced. Their perspective, for example, on what they felt was professional arrogance is important, whether or not it is the intention of professionals to behave in such a way. Arguably, such insights can only be achieved effectively by putting young people at the centre of the research process.

At this point, it may be helpful to review the lessons learnt in the conduct of the present study, in order to underline what, for us, are the very real benefits to be gained by involving young people as co-researchers.

Firstly, we have been able to demonstrate, in partnership with the young people concerned, that many of the practical obstacles involved can be overcome, albeit at some financial cost. Indeed, once young people become engaged in the project and committed to its purposes, their involvement ensured that we improved on our initial plans. For example, their role in recruiting and supporting members of the research team gave us access to a much wider group of participants. In addition, they were able to help with the identification of training needs and the development of learning opportunities which were of mutual benefit. Further, the commitment of young people offered compensation for the project researcher's relative distance from the sites of study.

Secondly, by drawing attention to some of the ways in which the research brings together traditional techniques and the 'user perspective', we believe that we have been able to show that participatory research of this kind can be shown to improve the quality of the evidence obtained, and to enhance rather than compromise the validity and reliability of its findings. For example, the 'insider' view is consistently represented and provides a readily available resource for testing emerging assumptions and ideas.

Thirdly, we have demonstrated that many of the ethical challenges are similar to those found in other forms of research, and that appropriate preparation and safeguards can be put in place. Indeed, there is a sense in which participatory research may be able to claim the ethical high ground, by putting research subjects at the centre of the process, giving them a measure of control over what is investigated and how, and offering them a say in the dissemination and follow-up activity.

Finally, we would argue that participatory research conducted properly is capable of being both methodologically sound, and adding significantly to our body of knowledge in specific areas of study. For example, the policy recommendations of young people themselves emerging from the present study appear practical, realistic and relevant.

The aim of this article has been to ask, and hopefully, to answer, some of the serious methodological questions which arise in undertaking participatory research, without being idealistic. By considering both practical and ethical issues, as well as those pertaining to validity and value, the intention has been to draw out disadvantages and obstacles as well as potential benefits and strengths. In this way, we hope to have helped to fill a gap, by providing an account of how we have addressed some of the methodological issues facing

those who wish to carry out participatory research, with young people in particular. We believe that careful thought and preparation and a thoroughgoing commitment to participatory principles can deliver real dividends.

To conclude with an observation from the present study:

‘They (our co-researchers) saw the value of the research and felt they were helping to identify and improve services for young people, as well as raise the issue of young people and health.’ (De Montfort University, 2001a)

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Authors

Roger Smith, University of Leicester/The Children's Society
Maddie Monaghan, De Montfort University, Leicester
Bob Broad, De Montfort University, Leicester

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Biographical Details

Dr Roger Smith teaches and researches in social work at the University of Leicester, and has extensive experience of working with young people in research, policy and practice.

Maddy Monaghan is the researcher who carried out the two year project 'Improving the Health of Socially excluded Young People' funded by the Community Fund and managed by The Children's Society.

Dr Bob Broad is Professor of Children and Families Research, Children and Families Unit, De Montfort University, Leicester. He manages and undertakes research projects in the social care field. Previously he was a Lecturer in Social Work Studies at LSE.