

Chapter 6

Co-producing Better Mental Health Research with Young Researchers in Educational Establishments

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Abstract

This chapter explores the learning experience of a teacher who returned to his previous school to conduct research. The research aim was to investigate the efficacy of a recently introduced mental health school strategy from the students' viewpoint. Initial research concepts were to collect student data and draw conclusions. However, due to issues of power and trust, the study evolved into a collaborative exercise, which saw the researcher work with young people as partners. The research became a voyage of discovery as the working partnership between the researcher and young people matured into a transformational process for both parties. Young people's lived experience became a central tenant of the research methodology and process. What transpired was a better community research project that demonstrated benefits for both the individuals involved and the community. Whilst the focus of this work was school-based, there are lessons to learn for studies aiming for collaboration within communities.

Keywords: Schools; young researchers; youth participative action research; critical communicative methodology; community involvement

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Introduction

As a school teacher with over 30 years' experience, I have developed a focus on student welfare and the pastoral aspects of education. My career trajectory saw me transition from classroom teacher to Head of Year and then an Assistant Headteacher before leaving education to take up my PhD. My research journey for the purpose of this chapter is best described as a voyage of self-discovery where I learnt how 'me' the person contributed to 'me' the teacher and how both these identities helped me become a more inclusive and reflexive researcher. Transitioning from teacher to researcher was a steep learning curve, realising that, at times, my inclusive principles as a researcher were compromised as I had to navigate school systems, government initiatives and a neoliberal education system as a relative outsider. Neoliberalism here refers to how school performance and individual performance are prioritised over the needs and involvement of young people (Dunn, 2020). The four years I spent conducting research was a time for reflection, a time to ensure inclusive principles were front and centre of the research, which meant investing in young people as research partners as they have the ability and a right to contribute to the public involvement and community engagement (PICE) agenda in the context of schools.

Schools can be places of physical, practical, and emotional safety (McGovern et al., 2022); I recognise this, but in this chapter, I also recognise that schools can be places where children are marginalised. Children often live in and are expected to function in an adult world where their voice is rarely heard; even when professionals are well-intended and inclusive, it can often end with tokenistic and counterproductive practices (Kilkelly, 2004; Pleasance, 2016). Schools are also known as places of inclusion and social and psychological safety in some literature, but they are also traditional hierarchical structures of governance, where the power of adults remains largely unquestioned. As my research progressed and I became aware, I was forced to acknowledge my identity as a researcher coming from a career of 35 years of teaching who, through following the norms of an oppressive societal structure, had not always afforded young people their rights to:

- Express their views in all matters relating to them.
- Their views being given due weight, taking account of age and maturity.
- Be heard in administrative proceedings.
(UNCRC, 2019).

Context

I started my doctoral studies in 2019, and in doing so, I returned as a researcher to my school of 30 plus years. Returning to the places where you once worked (or similar) will always be difficult for those who choose this route to doctoral study. I was concerned that my previous powerful position could negatively influence the research. Being the behaviour and attendance lead for the school for over 12 years had, on occasion, brought me into conflict with young people and families, and I was apprehensive that my previous position might obstruct the research. I wanted to draw on young people's experiences of the whole

school mental health strategy (WSMHS), and to do this; I would need (as others have written in this collection, see Adams and Ramsey) them to trust me, something not straightforward for someone who used to be the pastoral lead in the school. Concerned about this, I arranged a series of consultation exercises with groups of young people from the school. As I had suspected, the younger students suggested I was unlikely to gain their trust. But they also started to inform the research design and strategy for my doctoral study, as it was they who came up with the idea of me partnering with sixth-formers who could then act as advocates and brokers in talking to the younger pupils who would become my participants.

The beginnings of a plan to take this research forward started to crystallise. The inclusive nature of youth participatory action research (YPAR) attracted me to it as my methodology. Now, I needed to develop a way of conducting this research with co-researchers from the sixth form as my partners. My recruitment strategy was purposeful and opportunistic (Dunning et al., 2021). I began the process by addressing a sixth-form assembly, explaining the project and recruiting 13 volunteers aged between 16 and 18. Initial discussions with my new young research team (YRT) made me realise they were all different and had varying needs. Some were more confident working with younger students, whilst others developed their analytical skills more quickly. Recognising the differentiated ability and attributes of the young people made it clearer to me that not every child needed to be involved or to support every aspect of the research design and implementation. To create a process that supported them as individuals and as a team, we jointly agreed that they could choose to work individually, in pairs or in small groups to collect data from their participants. The participants we identified for the study were then divided between the YRT, and a cycle of weekly meetings was devised to enable the research. This is explored more fully in the methodology section below.

Theory

Action research (AR) assumes correctly that those closest to a given issue are experts in understanding the root of the problem and are in the best position to help find solutions to such matters (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021). AR can be utilised as a methodology to explore real-life issues impacting people's lives through a systematic cyclical investigation incorporating observation, reflection, and action (Stringer & Ortiz Aragon, 2021). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative approach to AR where the research team includes community members with lived experience of the research topic. At times, it is criticised as a 'non-scientific' and a subjective form of research which is unreliable when used to generalise results more broadly (Lindhult, 2019). Furthermore, critics suggest this research can exploit those people it aims to support by 'using' them for their own research needs (Jacobs, 2016). However, I aimed to use AR to glean greater depth and insight into the subject area, whilst involve the lived experience of young people and the reconstruction of knowledge through understanding and empowerment. The aim is to try and ensure social change is informed by the voice of such groups.

Whilst I was convinced AR was the most appropriate methodology, I was also searching for something more than this. This research enabled me to return to my principles of inclusivity by drawing on young people as the source of new knowledge. In my search for something more than AR, I turned to critical communicative methodology (CCM), which followed a dialogic approach (Latorre et al., 2005). CCM is based on the premise that everyone has the critical competency to analyse their own lived experience. It is influenced by the thinking of Habermas and three of his seven postulates (see here for further reading, Habermas, 1987). Everyone can interact and communicate; this is the ‘universality of language and action’. The second postulate of relevance is the ‘absence of interpretative hierarchy’ that all interpretations coming from the research process are equally valid (see Jackson et al. in this collection), regardless of the position of the person putting them forward. The final postulate is where the researcher and researched work on an ‘equal epistemological level’, each an expert in their area, be that academic or lived experience (Puigverta et al., 2012). Whilst this methodology and approach had been developed and utilised more within economically disadvantaged rural communities, I was convinced these principles could be applied to the YRT. Understanding your positionality, values and beliefs about research and different research traditions and approaches is essential. In my research, I believed that if I was going to be true to my word and collaborate with young people in the search for new knowledge, I had to trust them and empower them to become decision-makers in the research process. I therefore blended CCM with YPAR to develop a novel methodology I named youth participative dialogic action research (YPDAR). The dialogic element became central to this work as we embarked on a series of weekly AR cycles over four months.

Methodology

The dialogic aspect of YPDAR was founded on developing two key sets of relationships, as shown in [Fig. 6.1](#).

The AR cycle took a stepped approach:

Stage 1. I met with the YRT team, where they identified a research issue, discussed how it would be investigated, and then planned the YRT/participant meetings.

Stage 2. The YRT members ran separate meetings with their participants.

Stage 3. Meetings were held between individual YRT members and me immediately after their participant meetings. These meetings fulfilled several purposes: They allowed me to capture and transcribe the information from the Stage 2 meeting and enabled us to discuss the research meeting, exploring its challenges and successes. This was a time for reflexive and reflective thinking as we considered the processes and the data collected.

Stage 4. The YRT met as a group to explore further how the week’s meetings and data collection had progressed. The process ensured that the team learnt from each other to improve practice. This was also the time that the team planned forward for the following week’s meetings (McPartlan, 2023).

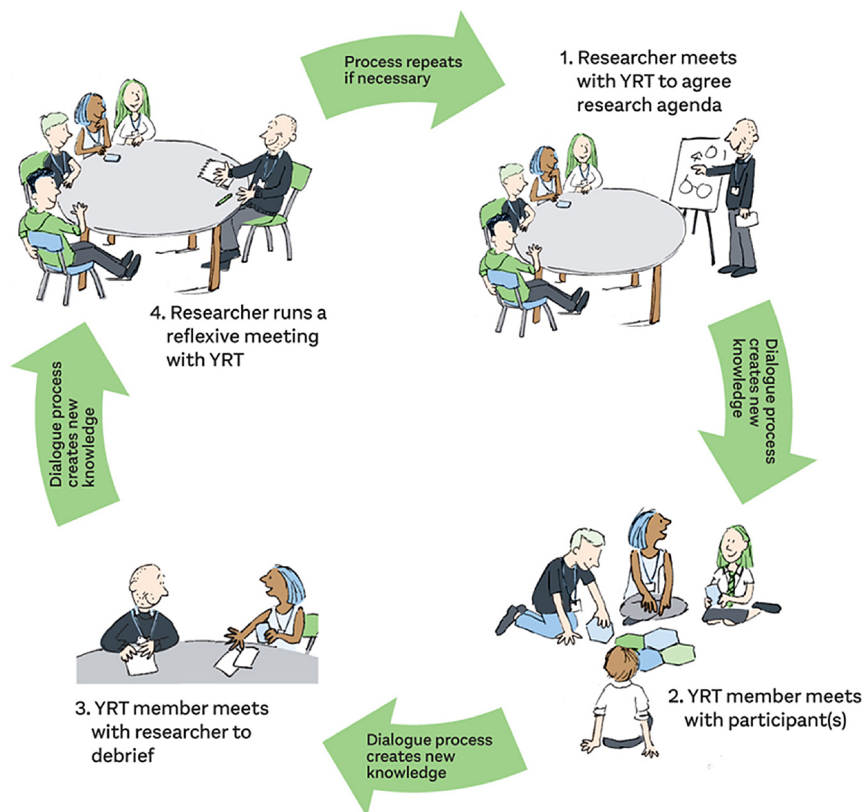


Fig. 6.1 Action Research Cycle (McPartlan, 2023).

Over time, Stages 1 and 4 merged into a single weekly meeting.

The central tenant of this research cycle was the two sets of relationships developing as part of the process: the researcher/YRT and the YRT/participant relationships. These relationships aligned closely with my values and ontological position as a social constructivist. Researching with people is about being reflective and reflexive: listening to and recognising/responding to. As a largely qualitative researcher, research is about building relationships, mutual understanding, and exploring issues whilst solving fieldwork and subject area-specific problems together. To do this, there needs to be a clear insight into oneself, one's core values and how these can impact research design and processes (Gilgun, 2006). My values were central to the research and fed into my decision to conduct YPAR and search to enhance this further with a stronger dialogic stance. By committing to collaborate with young people, I was morally invested in their well-being and welfare, further enhanced by the research process (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2022). The way in which the two sets of relationships developed was influenced by my decision to empower the YRT. This started during the recruitment process, where

I was open and honest with the sixth-formers about needing their help to ensure authenticity during the data collection phase.

Whose Analysis Is It Anyway?

As the research progressed, I began to recognise these processes' impact on us all. My initial thinking was around 'using' the YRT to collect the data for ME to analyse. The intention of the Stage 3 meetings was for me to 'harvest' the data from the YRT by audio recording and transposing the conversations to extract the themes from them. As my relationship with the individual YRT members grew and we became an effective and cohesive team, I was torn by a conflict. This was my PhD, so I needed to complete the analysis to create the findings for my research. However, the more I worked with the YRT, the more I came to recognise them as an integral part of the research process; this was their research as much as it was mine. The whole process of collaborating with the YRT to analyse the data was, however, challenging in a number of ways. To begin, I had to consider the following dilemma: do I present my opinions to the group, impose my power to force these on the YRT (researcher analysis), or do I step back and allow the group to decide (participatory analysis)? There was also a compromise position whereby I offered my opinion and suggested it as just one voice within the group, and we analysed the work together. I found this a challenging time, and this is reflected in an extract from a reflexive diary I kept at the time.

The tension I have is that I do not want to impose myself or my opinion, but I also question the validity of what the YRT may decide. The echoes of adultism are reverberating in my head as I ponder the correct decision for myself, the YRT and the research outcomes. If I am to be true to my values, then the YRT needs autonomy to make their own findings within a supportive structure, something I need to develop. Just because the YRT is made up of young people does not give me the right to disempower them and impose my will. I believe that by taking a 'middle road', I will offer opinions without imposing my will.

Keeping a reflective and reflexive diary and notes to self is a meaningful part of the research process. These types of diary entries become artefacts for progressing ideas over time, as the research progresses. The end approach was only possible because of the effort we had all made to develop our relationships during the research design and implementation. We had taken time, and reciprocal trust was developed through our relationship, which helped deepen truthfulness, morality and authenticity (van Lieshout & Cardiff, 2011). This was multi-voiced research and required multi-voice analysis. At every meeting, I built on my experiences of managing discussions. I would openly encourage the YRT to ask questions, reflect, challenge me and put counterarguments to my points to provoke debate within the team. This was pivotal as in research contexts, children and young people will enquire and challenge to try to

make sense of a situation if they feel safe enough to do so. I aimed for inter-subjective consensus (van Lieshoul & Cardiff, 2011) or mutual adequacy (Boog, 2007), a critical validity check in participatory AR. Ultimately, I was responsible for telling a story and reporting the findings as I saw them. Reflecting back now I would urge YOU the reader to recognise that investment in hard thinking about, the study population, the methodology and balancing your needs against those being researched needs to be done. At the outset of my research, my thoughts had been about completing a classic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012). My initial view that this was my research, which I needed to analyse. My thinking around the analysis developed as the research progressed and my relationship with the YRT matured. I realised that the young people had to be central to the analysis, which soon led to a collaborative effort involving the YRT and myself. At the outset of my research, I had also not considered that the YRT would be involved in the analysis, and it meant that I had to ask for more from my participants and ask them to engage in more technical aspects and usually less enjoyable areas of research. I was open with the young researchers; we discussed the data and how it should be analysed. I explained how my thinking had developed during the research period, and we made a joint decision that the analysis would be a collaborative effort. What transpired was a thematic analysis approach informed by the dialogic processes between the three parties within the research, which led us to an interpretative rather than an objectivist standpoint (Ellingson, 2008).

The search for authenticity was less about triangulation and its objective overtones and more about the intuitive flexibility of crystallisation (McPartlan, 2023). This brought another aspect into consideration in relation to the YRT. I had to lead them through the analysis. I introduced them to the intuitive data platform Quirkos. I input the data collected at Stage 3 meetings, and together, we worked through a cyclical process of identifying themes, discussing them, and testing them with the participants. In addition to this, I developed support sheets for the YRT to help their understanding of data analysis. I ran tutorials on data analysis, and we used a collaborative self-reflection tool to support the process. The YRT benefitted from their involvement; they were also encouraged to develop their self-reflective writing, contributing to a paper we published as part of the dissemination process (McPartlan et al., 2021). I was equally challenged about who should own the research findings regarding the WSMHS. However, having already worked through the arguments concerning the analysis, I quickly concluded that I could not compromise the research principles and that the YRT should write up these findings.

YRT Findings

The ethos of PICE is to guarantee that the community informs the research design, implementation, data, findings, and what is produced. PICE can potentially empower communities and develop lasting policy change (Kim et al., 2014). By working with the community and recognising their expertise, there is an opportunity to create long-term relationships and build trust (Schiavo, 2021).

It was incumbent on me to ensure that this work was authentic; it was essential the young people's lived-experience informed the findings. If I were to conduct an analysis and write up the findings by myself, there is a good chance I may misinterpret information, and my work would be informed from my 60-year-old 'self' rather than from the YRT lived experience. This was brought home to me whilst we were analysing a research section. I introduced a card-sorting activity to help us synthesise the data and themes. Whilst we discussed the data, the YRT arranged the cards according to their preferences; I wanted this writing up, but none of the team had time due to exam pressure. Therefore, I asked permission to write it up and get their feedback. What I got back both shocked and pleasantly surprised me. Two of the team took my write-up and rewrote it with a different focus. I was surprised, and I must admit, slightly affronted they did this (even though I had asked them to sense check my work) but also moving beyond 'ego' delighted they had! This justified my approach and reassured me we were getting genuine community feedback. Having decided that the YRT would write up the findings, we continued our cyclical meeting process, defining and refining our findings. Over weeks, we arrived at a series of findings that the YRT returned to the participants. They sense-checked these with their younger peers to ensure the validity of the findings. Alongside our weekly research team meetings, I also paid attention to individual YRT members to ensure that all were comfortable with the final validity check. I quickly realised that the YRT had all grown through the process and had become adept communicators and researchers who had built strong and mature relationships with their younger peers.

The process I described above was about how dialogue and relationships became central to the research and how the principles of CCM enabled a collaborative process that encouraged egalitarian relationships. It diffused and shared power whilst also challenging neoliberal processes. This, in turn, countered negative societal and school power relationships where adults dominate and make decisions impacting young people. The dialogic process between the three parties in my research ensured robust data collection and analysis. It then enabled us to produce findings and recommendations to present to the headteacher, with whom we had further dialogue before agreeing on an implementation strategy.

Writing Up and Dissemination

After the writing-up period, the most important work was relaying the findings and recommendations back to the school. The YRT and I met with the headteacher and senior school leaders. The school accepted most of the findings and recommendations, and adjustments were made to implement what could reasonably be. I had prepared and explored expectations with the YRT at the start of the research that whilst the school had promised to engage with the research, there may be aspects that could not be addressed due to circumstances beyond our control, such as budget.

As the research progressed, my ambition for the YRT and the research in general grew. As an ex-teacher and one who believed in young people's abilities, the research demonstrated to me there was a societal 'glass ceiling' in terms of what

young people are capable of when trusted by adults. I had also become a victim of this, and the research instilled in me a determination to showcase the YRT's abilities. I was now clearly in the camp of this being 'our research', so we should disseminate this together. Moving beyond the research, we wrote and published papers and attended conferences where we presented our findings. I believe this was essential to the spirit of PICE. This was not just about harvesting information from the public and including them in the process; it was about creating capacity and opportunities for allowing children and their voices to be heard in a way which benefitted them and others.

Conclusion

This research applied approaches developed within a health context to an educational setting. During my journey, I learned that research is more than academics collecting information to further their agenda. It is about understanding positionality, values and then developing partnerships with communities and individuals within them to learn with and from them. Hierarchical structures such as schools and health organisations are dominated by power, and the need to utilise and adapt methodologies to redefine research relationships by empowering participants is more significant than ever.

In bringing my two identities together teacher/researcher I have always championed young people and their abilities, and this research emphasised their true capabilities. Children in research have ability, and their ability to adapt to situations, create resources, and synthesise information is apparent, as this chapter has described. During my 18-month project, I observed young people developing their self-awareness, self-concept, self-identity, and epistemic agency. I listened to them as they reported, and I observed increased confidence in decision-making. Children may often be overlooked or not heard within schools, but it is important to recognise that if they are supported and given opportunities, they will stand up and be involved.

I believe that approaches like mine offer innovation and then the potential to 'flatten' the hierarchical school power structures dominated by adults (McPartlan, 2023). In this context, staff can also recognise and appreciate the young people's work, and so do not feel threatened by them.

Community engagement should be about developing relationships and ensuring a dialogic approach. Reflecting on my overall research processes, I now realise I was informed but also naive. As a person interested in children, I did not realise the importance of time and relationship development at the conception of the research. Whilst I was focussed on transferring power to the YRT and the younger participants, I was not fully cognisant of precisely what this involved. Community involvement is about the investment of time with people talking and listening to each other and working together to solve problems. Trust between the researcher and YRT developed due to both sides' investment of time and effort. A symbiotic process developed.

The research process involved developing relationships within the school and between myself, the researcher, and the YRT. Their sense of self was enhanced

as they grew into the research. They knew they were doing an important job and started feeling valued, knowing they were being taken seriously. The school would adopt their findings, and as a result, their confidence in the school and themselves started to grow. This, in turn, empowered them and their agency to act also flourished.

The skills the YRT built throughout the research also influenced their development and growth. They learnt about research, what it is, how types of research may differ, and how to conduct rigorous qualitative enquiry. Their communication skills were enhanced as they practised reflective and reflexive writing. They also had the opportunity to present findings at conferences and mix with professionals and academics from various fields; their social and cultural capital was enriched. The work they completed with the younger participants contributed to improved socio-emotional skills as they learnt how to build and manage meaningful relationships. The participants were almost unanimous in believing this was the best thing about the research.

There were also lessons related to the relationship between the YRT and the school. As the research developed, there was a two-way process whereby the YRT started to trust the institution and staff within the school began to recognise the abilities and insight of young people. The short-term nature of this project meant that the duration of the research was not extensive enough to draw material conclusions about the impact this type of research may have on an institution. Whilst further research is required to explore this, research of this nature can contribute to improved school climate and culture.

When this research started, I was an experienced educator but a naive and inexperienced researcher. I was unaware of how public health and community research would be central to my work; my research, therefore, took learning from the public health and community sectors. The PPI consultations with young people prior to the research commencing helped me shape a new methodology centred around a YRT.

YPDAR is an example of PICE in an educational setting but can be developed further into the broader community. The principle of fully involving community members in the research process can, I believe, be expanded. As highlighted above, the benefits to the individuals involved are clear to see, and there is potential for these to impact the community. During my journey, I learned that research is more than academics collecting information to further their agenda. However, it is about developing partnerships with communities and individuals within them to learn with and from them. Societal structures such as schools and health organisations are dominated by hierarchy. This work has the potential to break these traditional and sometimes archaic structures down for the betterment of our communities.

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