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Youth Centred Research Brief Report 1

Co-collaborating with youth as active stakeholders in research

AUTHORS

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YOUTH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Abhi Kariamal (14yo)

Leila Mcmillian (15yo)

Nikith Udayakumar (14yo)

Sahnly Phan Chan (16yo)

Rithvika Senthilkumar (14yo)

Shekiba Fuladi (16yo)

Liz Solly (14yo)

Ishika Thakur (17yo)

Tamika Nguyen (15yo)

Edison Vong (17yo)

Group photo: Louisa (researcher), youth participants: Liz, Leila, Sahnly, Tamika, Edison, Shekiba, Christine (researcher), youth participants: Ishika, Abhi, Rithvika, Nikith.

PROJECT MENTORS AND ADVISORS

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Professor Umesh Sharma is the Academic Head of the Educational Psychology and Inclusive Education Community in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia. His research programs in the area of disability and inclusive education span India, Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Samoa as well as Australia, Canada, USA and New Zealand. He has conducted several award winning national and international projects on topics like Funding of education for students with disability for the Commonwealth of Australia, the Development of Personalised and Support Guidelines for Victorian Government, and the development of the National Policy on Inclusive Education for Solomon Islands. He has authored over 150 academic articles, book chapters and edited books that focus on various aspects of inclusive education. He was recently named as Australia's Research Field Leader in Special Education (a top rating for a researcher in his/her respective field) by the Australian Chief Scientist **specialreports.theaustralian.com.au/1540291/**

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Overview of Brief Research Reports 1-5

Given the scarcity of youth participatory research, and that young people are rarely consulted about the issues that impact on them (Langhout & Thomas, 2010), the following brief research reports hope to share knowledge gained in using collaborative and engaging research methods with young people. The brief research reports are an open-access series offering 5 brief research reports about collaborating with youth as active stakeholders in research.

The series includes the following reports, each building on the previous:

- **Brief Report 1:** Co-collaborating with youth as active stakeholders in research

- **Brief Report 2:** Establishing an active Youth Reference Group

- **Brief Report 3:** Assent process, group partnership building and visual ethics

- **Brief Report 4:** Participatory workshops in action

- **Brief Report 5:** Joint Dissemination and Communication: Youth informed stakeholder exhibition

The research briefs include the strengths, challenges and lessons learned about co-collaborating and engaging with youth participation in this research project. The research briefs provide an overview on the theoretical underpinnings, ethical considerations, ways to establish a Youth Reference Group, implementing participatory workshops themselves and dissemination and communication of key research findings.

The overall aim of the report series is to share the steps taken in the youth centred pilot research project. We used a qualitative, visual methodology of participatory video, art (drawing, painting) and photovoice to explore youth educational experiences. Methods that originated and used widely in humanitarian situations and with vulnerable communities due to their 'bottom-up' approach. Key themes were co-constructed from conversations triggered by the visual data and disseminated through a youth-led exhibition.

The pilot project and the creation of Youth Reference Group took place at Monash University, Faculty of Education, Educational Psychology and Inclusive Education Academic Community in Victoria, Australia.

Brief Research Report 1:

Co-collaborating with Youth as Active Stakeholders in research

Rationale: why research with youth as key stakeholders?

Young people represent 20% of our community, and they have unique knowledge, experience, and opinions on projects and initiatives (Government of Western Australia, 2016). Including youth in research provides researchers with an understanding of this large, diverse section of the community. Young people are best placed to propose solutions about the issues that affect them, and have a range of ideas that can lead to more relevant community decisions, programs and policies (Government of South Australia, n.d.). Involving young people can also increase the likelihood that initiatives and research methods that are created will be relevant, effective and taken up by this group (Government of Western Australia, 2016). The active participation of young people in research about them has the potential to strengthen research findings, interventions, and generate social action (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). Participatory approaches can build on young people's strengths and actively involve them in addressing the issues that they identify – encouraging youth empowerment (Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010). When young people play the role of co-researchers, it can help in validating the research data, checking power-relations, avoiding erroneous interpretations regarding the lives of young

people, and ensuring respectful reporting of the findings (Kellett, 2010; Harcourt & Sargeant, 2011).

This central idea is represented in multiple national frameworks, but often is not seen in action. When it comes to research, work has begun to give young people a greater voice and agency. Essentially, young people become research collaborators, and the approach is considered to be participatory, collaborative and inclusive. Researchers have called for an urgent shift in the field to authentically address the barriers and harm that youth experience from exclusion. School exclusion is on the rise, costing Australia about $23.2 billion a year. It's never been more important to include young people in their education, and our research, policies and programming. They're key stakeholders, and their voices and ideas need to be heard and acted upon.

While there is a growing pool of participatory research, the roles that youth tend to take are consultative and it is less common for them to have an active influence on the design and execution of the research itself (Todd, 2012; Groundwater-Smith, 2011). Previous research exploring youth educational experiences have mostly used survey methods (Schwab et al., 2018). This pilot research project builds on these works of leading researchers (Alerby & Kostenius, 2011; Schwab et al.,

2018) by incorporating an interdisciplinary participatory qualitative research processes. While participatory research processes are not in themselves new, using them to develop and understand constructs in this manner is an innovation. In this way, the piloted project embraces and extends the call for researchers to conduct inquiry in a thoughtful and respectful manner that attempts to move students beyond tokenistic participation (Hart, 1992; 2006; Shier 2001) to roles that have a genuine influence in shaping the study such as research design and data analysis (Todd, 2012). The pilot project ultimately addresses the pressing challenge of "how can researchers and educators include the voices of youth?"

Another reason to include youth as key stakeholders is that young people have rights inscribed in law and policy to have their say in educational matters that pertain to them. For example, under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1990) to which Australia is a signatory, articles 12 and 13 articulate young people's rights to express their views when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have these opinions taken into account. Further, the year 2020 marks 26 years since the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (1994), laid the foundation for global efforts towards achieving Inclusive Education.

It's never been more important to include young people in their education, and our research, policies and programming.

Despite the proliferation of international policies and frameworks to achieve Education for All, by the end of 2015 there were more than 264 million children and youth estimated to be out of school globally (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). With the advent of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (UN SDG), there has been a renewed thrust towards achieving not only Education for All but also lifelong learning and equitable access to education. International developmental agencies (IDAs) such as the United Nations, UNESCO, and the World Bank have been instrumental in advocating 'inclusion' as one of the core principles of schooling and education (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou, 2010). The pursuit of inclusion in schools is not only a political goal with measurable outcomes but, more importantly, it is also about putting youth at the centre where they are valued and their school agency is encouraged (Grove, 2020; Reindal, 2016).

Theoretical Underpinnings of Research Approach

The pilot project draws on the conceptual models of Shier's 'pathways to participation' (2001) and Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' (1992). Hart (1992) developed the 'Ladder of Participation' to serve as a beginning typology for thinking about youth participation in projects, and it has been influential in the field of youth-led participatory research. Hart's model (1992) illustrates participation across eight ascending levels, with higher levels or 'rungs' representing a higher degree of youth participation. The levels include 'manipulation' (1), 'decoration' (2) and 'tokenism' (3), which represent non-participation, followed by assigned but 'informed' (4), 'consulted and informed' (5), 'adult-initiated - shared decisions with children' (6), 'child-initiated and directed' (7), and 'child-initiated - shared decisions with adults' (8). Hart advises that the ladder of participation should be used to guide and assist with the design of youth participation (Hart, 1992). Treseder (1997) built on this model, by arranging the top five levels of Hart's ladder in a non-hierarchical order, and recognising that one's choice of participatory methods should take into consideration context, tasks and individuals involved. Treseder (1997) identified five degrees of participation: 'assigned but informed' (1), 'consulted and informed' (2), 'adult-initiated, shared decisions with children' (3), 'child initiated, shared decisions with adults' (4) and 'child initiated and directed' (5). This model suggests that different levels of participation can be justified in different situations and contexts.

Shier (2001) offers an alternative model to Hart's 'ladder of participation', which was intended to serve as an additional tool for practitioners, to help them to explore different aspects of the participation process.

Shier's model includes five participatory levels: 'children are listened to' (1), 'children are supported in expressing their views' (2), 'children's views are taken into account' (3), 'children are involved in decision-making processes' (4) and 'children share power and responsibility for decision-making' (5). Shier (2001) describes three stages of commitment at each level:

1) an opening, which involves the practitioner making a personal commitment or intent to work a certain way,

2) an opportunity, when the needs are met that will enable the worker or organisation to operate at this skill level in practice (e.g. resources, skills and knowledge) and finally,

3) an obligation, when it becomes the agreed policy of the organisation or setting that staff should operate at this level, and the level of youth participation becomes built-in to the system.

Both Hart (1992) and Shier's (2001) models understand youth participation to exist in a hierarchy or continuum from tokenistic to authentic or student centred/focused collaborations. The models underpin the theoretical standing of student agency and engagement in the research, and how the quality of student participation is conceptualised. The methodology employed here supports this standing: that youth have valuable and unique insight into their own education and wellbeing and have meaningful ideas about their quality of schooling. Such an approach acknowledges youth not only as beneficiaries of research developed by adults, but also (or instead) as competent agents that can be engaged with via participatory and inclusionary practices (Sinclair, 2004).

In order to achieve youth empowerment, they emphasise a democratic value orientation approach that supports participatory co-learning between youth and adults.

Wong, Zimmerman and Parker (2010) offer a typology, the 'TYPE Pyramid' for degrees of youth participation, with five types of participation: vessel, symbolic, pluralistic, independent, and autonomous. This typology suggests that the concept of youth participation can be observed on a continuum, and forms a pyramid structure which demonstrates different configurations of youth-adult control that reflects optimal participation types for youth empowerment (Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010). The 'TYPE Pyramid' uses an empowerment framework and suggests that adults share in the responsibility to empower youth and their communities. In order to achieve youth empowerment, they emphasise a democratic value orientation approach that supports participatory co-learning between youth and adults. Adults can serve as resources and collaborators by facilitating critical dialogue, awareness, and building skills to work in partnership with young people (Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010). The researchers suggest that adults possess the authority to create safe environments and youth-centred conditions where young people feel welcomed, and are therefore willing to share, hear and respond to their views. They suggest that empowerment implies a shared co-learning relationship between young people and adults. By voicing their perspectives, young people have the opportunity to practice critical thinking by formulating opinions about problems and solutions, which encourages the development of competence, self-efficacy and mastery (Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010).

Building upon this research, Cahill and Dadvand (2018) put forth the 'P7' model, which brings together seven interacting domains: purpose, positioning, perspective, power relations, protection, place, and process. They propose a 'machine-like' image to capture the ongoing interaction

between these domains, to represent the dynamic and fluid nature of the production of participation within programs. Cahill and Dadvand (2018) suggest that when considering youth participation, researchers need to ask themselves questions relating to each domains, such as "What contribution do you aim to make?", "How will young people get to contribute?", "How will you embrace diversity and difference?", "How will you build inclusion and respect?", "How will you ensure safety?", "How will you respond to context and culture?", and "What methods will you use to foster interaction?".

Framework for the present study

The present study aligns to the sixth rung of Hart's ladder of participation model (1992), namely: 'child initiated', 'shared decisions with adults', which are considered 'true participation'. Although projects such as this were initiated by adults, the decision-making was shared with young people as equal and active participants (Hart, 1992). The pilot study adopted a design in line with this level of participation, with adult researchers initiating the 'Youth Reference Group' and recruiting young people with the aim of sharing the decision making with participants, with regards to group values, research methods, design, data analysis, and dissemination of information.

This study also attempts to align with the fourth level of participation in Shier's model (2001), which involves being ready for youth to join in the decision-making process, putting in place a procedure that enables young people to join in decision-making processes, and making it a policy requirement that youth must be included in decision-making processes. This level is seen as making the transition from consultation to active participation in decision-making, providing young people with real decision-making power. Some aspects of the decision-making process were adult-led, for example logistical decisions such as setting for the group, times and dates that the group met up, where the exhibition would be held. Where possible, young people were encouraged to take part in decision-making regarding the method of collecting data (photos, poems, artwork), deciding on group values, and the way in which findings would be disseminated (brief reports, a website and booklets), also the name for the exhibition, and what should be included in the exhibition catalogue.

Feedback was regularly sought from the young people through anonymous surveys as well as creating an open collaborative atmosphere where youth were encouraged and supported to have their say and provide ideas. These processes relate to 'pluralistic participation' suggested by Wong, Zimmerman and Parker (2010), which describes the process of youth and adults working together, which can provide optimal conditions for youth empowerment and positive youth development. 'Pluralistic participation' recognises the strengths of both young people and adults working in partnership, where planning and decision-making responsibilities are shared to achieve goals. Wong, Zimmerman and Parker (2010) suggest that the shared control between youth and adults provides a social arrangement that is ideal for positive youth development and empowerment.

How to keep youth engagement authentic

In order to empower participants voice in research, we aimed to have a dynamic and fluid nature in the production of participation (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018) to encourage youth engagement. This allows young people to see that their actions have positive outcomes and provides them with the opportunity to learn skills that may contribute to supporting the community (Government of Western Australia, 2016). The aim of the Youth Reference Group is to actively involve young people in decision making and to give them the tools to generate and express their ideas about this research project and future ones.

Youth participation involved giving young people the opportunity to be actively involved in decision-making. In their description of 'pluralistic participation' (youth-adult shared control), Wong, Zimmerman and Parker (2010) suggest that adults create an empowering environment by providing a welcoming climate and enabling youth, and that youth engage with others, and participate in decision-making and subsequent constructive change. For example, youth brainstormed new ideas in our workshops (Research Brief 4) and as adults we recommend a timeline and procedure for carrying out the ideas, strategies for implementation and the resources. The group facilitators outlined the collaborative nature of the project to the young people in the first workshop using UN Convention Article 12: Participation Principle. We worked to create a welcoming and safe environment in which young people felt comfortable to share their opinions, and in which criticisms and feedback from young people was welcomed and encouraged.

Multiple means of representation

This research project has engaged in multiple methods for collaborating with youth to understand which methods support rapport-building, which methods youth identify as creating space for their own active participation, and to ascertain which methods yield rich and valuable insights into youth experiences. The youth involved in this project were encouraged to represent their ideas and insights using methods they chose to use such as photos, painting, creative writing, and drawing.

Snapshot of studies using participatory approaches

There is a plethora of literature on using participatory approaches with children and young people. In this section we highlight three selected studies, from different regions of the world that employed participatory research to include young people as co-researchers in order to meaningfully augment their voices. The first study we consider is a research project that was commissioned by Children's Fund in the UK.

The study sought to understand why young people and their families might not use services designed to create pathways for children and young people (aged 5-13) to participate in society, particularly those at risk of social exclusion (O'Brien & Moule, 2007). In order to gain more traction with respect to the impact of the research, the adult researchers of the study decided to use a reflective participatory research approach by engaging young people in 'democratic dialogue as co-researchers' (O'Brien & Moule, 2007). This meant that the young people would be actively involved in identifying

The youth involved in this project were encouraged to represent their ideas and insights using methods they chose to use such as photos, painting, creative writing, and drawing.

The young co-researchers collected data by conducting short interviews, administering questionnaires, using a graffiti wall, placing a comments box and offering a diary room.

ways of collecting and analysing data, and disseminating the findings. The nine young co-researchers (aged 7-13) of this particular study were actively involved in recruiting a research officer based upon a criteria that they had prepared by conducting interviews of three potential candidates (O'Brien & Moule, 2007). The young co-researchers even named their group R.TYP or Research Team of Young People and learned to conduct and record interviews of their peers (O'Brien & Moule, 2007). The manner in which they decided they would collect data was by organising a 'fun day' or a mini event at their schools where they organised a range of activities including, face painting, designing t-shirts and bags, and art work. The young co-researchers collected data by conducting short interviews, administering questionnaires, using a graffiti wall, placing a comments box and offering a diary room. The adult researchers used cycles of action and reflection during several stages of the project in order to enable their young co-researchers to take active roles and also work through the issues of power between the adults and the young people. O'Brien and Moule (2007) concluded that by taking a positive view of power they could understand the lives of young people more authentically by changing adult perceptions and the relationship between the adults and the young people while doing research together.

Another interesting paper which highlights two participatory research projects in India and Sri Lanka, presents the advantages, benefits, and practical issues of using participatory methods to include the voices of disabled children in the global South (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). The first study which was conducted in Southern India involved a total of 37 participants (aged 11-18) with physical impairments. The methods used were focus groups, interviews and group activities through the key visual method of photography over a

period of 10 months. The young participants were provided with disposable cameras to take pictures of four main themes: things that made them happy, sad and angry, and what they would like to change (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). The second study the paper by Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) identifies is a pilot study exploring 12 to 24 disabled young people's (aged 8-18) views of inclusion and well-being in India and Sri Lanka over a period of 9-12 months. In this pilot study, a range of methods were used including, using art and activity based discussions, use of story vignettes to facilitate group discussions, and a review of discussions using visual aids. Both aforementioned studies were conducted in collaboration with local universities and NGOs. Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) in their paper discuss certain common themes concerning their participatory research projects: selection of disabled children, informed consent processes, an inclusive data collection methods (i.e., using a variety of tools of data collection that can be adapted to each young participant's skills; examples include, visual and tactile aids, use of drawings, photos and videos), young people's school experience, their styles of interaction, and the skills and attitudes that adult researchers bring with them to the projects. The authors in particular talk about how carefully participatory research needs to be planned and adapted so that disabled young people can participate. Wickenden and Kembhavi-Tam (2014) advocate the use of practically adapted tools of data collection in order to make research inclusive for all young people.

Finally, a third study we have selected for a brief discussion is by Canosa, Graham and Wilson (2018) based in Australia. This study drew on a doctoral research project which employed ethnographic fieldwork over a period of 12 months as a method of data collection.

A range of tools of data collection were used such as, secondary data analysis, in-depth interviews, and two participatory projects. For the first project, the participatory process that the researchers used was collaborative film-making which involved initial consultations with a local youth council and subsequent recruitment of 14 young participants (aged 10-16). The group of young people created stop motion animations and met once a week over a period of 6 weeks to discuss their opinions and perceptions of tourism as well as their experiences of growing up in a tourist destination. Interestingly, the group along with the adult researchers used a technique called 'clay-motion' in which plasticine figures were developed and moved. The motions of these plasticine figures were then photographed to create a sequence through the illusion of movement. The young participants were able to learn this technique and develop films through collaborations with a local film-maker and a not-for-profit youth organisation. The films that the young participants produced thus became a creative expression of their opinions and experiences.

The second participatory project to reflect upon, by Canosa, Graham and Wilson (2018), involved six young co-researchers (aged 15-16) who independently carried out peer interviews following an initial mentoring and training stage. The adult researchers and young co-researchers used reflexivity as an important ethical strategy in both the participatory projects. The findings from the two projects revealed that young people found participating as co-researchers to be an educational experience as well as a highly beneficial approach to data collection in which young people found it easier to open up about their negative experiences related to growing up in a tourist destination (Canosa, Graham & Wilson, 2018). A further crucial aspect of doing participatory research that Canosa,

Graham and Wilson (2018) stress on is the 'messiness' of the approach, particularly with respect to ethical challenges. They say that there is an added ethical responsibility when it comes to democratising the research process and conclude that doing participatory research is highly beneficial but also quite complex. Participatory research requires greater reflexivity and a serious engagement with ethical considerations particularly when it comes to working with young people (Canosa, Graham & Wilson, 2018).

Ethical considerations

Working with young people in research offers both opportunities and potential ethical challenges. There is considerable literature that not only highlights how young people can share their expertise and develop new understandings, but also significant challenges that can be faced with respect to ethical implications of research that engages with young people's views (Morrow, 2005; Harcourt & Sargeant, 2011). One of the more important aspects of ethics in research with young people is the opinion researchers hold of young people's competence to equally participate in various research processes including the planning, developing, designing, execution, and dissemination of research (Kellett, 2010; Harcourt & Sargeant, 2011). Researchers need to hold the belief that young people can actively engage with the research process equal to that of adults, and that they have important contributions.

A further crucial ethical consideration in engaging with young people as co-researchers is the aspect of informed consent and assent. Every participant has the right to decide whether it is in their own best interest to participate and collaborate, including young people. There is an ongoing debate in the research community regarding the competence of young people to consent for their participation and collaboration in research (Waligora, Dranseika & Piasecki, 2014). For example, legally, young people below the age of 18-years are not considered to be competent enough to be able to truly give an informed consent. Researchers are required to seek parental or guardian's consent and some may follow with young people's assent. However, some researchers have argued that using the term 'assent' for young people may weaken their position in making decisions in the research process (Waligora, Dranseika & Piasecki, 2014). In finding ways to overcome the dilemma of consent and assent, some researchers have argued for the focus to be rather on the ways in which young people are engaged in the process of assent, to actually also provide assent themselves for involvement and how personalised assent can be made in order to be tailored to their specific needs and contexts (Harcourt & Sargeant, 2011; Waligora, Dranseika & Piasecki 2014). The concept behind the assent process is in empowering young people to engage in co-constructing of understandings through the establishing of a relationship of trust and security between adults and young people working together on the research in question (Harcourt & Sargeant, 2011). Ultimately, attempting to remove the power imbalance between adult and youth and research and participant to then encourage authentic interaction.

Additional Resources about co-collaborating with youth as active stakeholders in research

- **Better Together:** A practical guide to effective engagement with young people by the Government of South Australia

- **Youth Participation Kit** by the Government of Western Australia

- **Mannay, D.** 2019. Revisualizing data: engagement, impact and multimodal dissemination. In: Pauwels, L. and Mannay, D. eds. The Sage Handbook of Visual Research Methods (2nd Edition). London: SAGE Publications

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- **DeJonckheere, Vaughn & Bruck** (2017) Youth-Led Participatory Action Research: A Collaborative Methodology for Health, Education, and Social Change DOI: https://dx.doi. rg/10.4135/9781473956032

- **Reindal, S. M.** (2016). Discussing inclusive education: an inquiry into different interpretations and a search for ethical aspects of inclusion using the capabilities approach. European Journal of Special Needs Education, 31(1), 1-12.

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