

2. Informing Policy Dialogue: The Youth as Researchers Programme

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Abstract

This chapter reflects on how youth, through the medium of youth led-research, can seek to influence public policy by bringing a more democratic and informed youth perspective into the policy-making arena. The chapter details the Youth as Researchers Programme Model. It outlines how the programme has supported youth, from Ireland and internationally, to undertake social research projects with their peers on issues of concern, to collectively inform policy dialogue. The chapter documents the development of the programme, including a case study of one of the early youth led-research projects set up in Ireland in response to Ireland's National Child and Family Agency seeking to better understand how young people facing adversity can be heard and helped. It traces the programme's development from its inception to the present day, where the programme is now central to UNESCO's global response to inform policy on supporting youth during Covid-19.

Introduction

Youth-led research is when youth are facilitated to take ownership of the research process. The definition offered by Kim (2015, p. 230) of child-led-research gets to the crux of it. It is about facilitating youth to be the "primary investigators" during the research process "from the initial identification of the research topic to the dissemination of the final results". When viewed as a form of participatory action research, this signifies an added commitment to facilitate the youth to use their research findings as a launching pad to take action and generate change (Camarota and Fine, 2008; Klocker, 2015). The process of adult facilitation is crucial to providing youth with research skills, technical support and safeguarding them from harm (Shier, 2015). It is a fine balance between ensuring experienced adults are there to support the youth researchers during each stage of the process and stepping back from managing the research (Kellett, 2011). There are many reasons as to why research, led by children and youth, is supported by experienced researchers. The focus of this chapter is on youth-led research as a mechanism for youth to influence policy dialogue and its value in bringing a democratic and informed

perspective into the policy-making arena. The learning is informed by the authors experience of developing and implementing the Youth as Researchers (YAR) programme for youth in Ireland and internationally. Following an overview of the reasons for the growth in child and youth-led research, the chapter documents the development of the YAR Programme. Supported by an illustrative case study, the chapter traces the programme inception in Ireland to the present-day collaboration with UNESCO leading the way in informing policy responses to Covid-19. The chapter concludes by documenting some of the challenges of youth-led research.

The Growth of Child and Youth-Led research: Theoretical, Methodological and Policy Developments

The literature captures an evolving trend from children and youth being subjects, as opposed to objects of research, to their active participation in the research process to more recently child and youth-led research (Kennan and Dolan, 2017). This trajectory towards children and youth being increasingly involved in the research process can be attributed to theoretical, methodological and policy developments, all of which have been significantly influenced by the children's rights movement. A growing emphasis on children's rights and the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, was part of a wider multi-disciplinary movement to respect children and young people's views and competencies.

Sociological theories have been instrumental in this regard. One of the central features of James and Prout (1997) sociology of childhood paradigm was the view that children have a valid role to play in the production of sociological data. The development of this paradigm was underpinned by, not only a desire to better understand children and young people's lives, but also by a desire to give a 'voice' to children and young people (Hill et al., 2004; Prout and James, 1997) and to acknowledge their evolving agency (Graham, 2011; Mayall, 2002). The growth in youth-led research is also grounded in the construct of empowerment (Kellet, 2010; Shier, 2015). Empowerment theory places the emphasis on agency over voice (Percy-Smith and Tomas, 2010), conceptualising empowerment as a process whereby youth are supported to gain a level of control of the issues directly affecting their lives. Youth-led research stems from this theoretical base that youth can play a valuable role in the production of sociological data and it is empowering for youth to drive the research agenda and to use the research findings to act on issues of importance to them (Kennan and Dolan, 2017). Positive youth development theories have also been influential (Kennan and Dolan, 2017; Malcome et al., 2020). Here the focus is on the potential to guide youth towards positive developmental outcomes. Lerner et al. (2005) has characterised these desired outcomes as the five Cs, which are, competence, confidence, character, connection and caring (or compassion).

From a methodological perspective, participatory approaches to research are increasingly becoming the norm. While caution is expressed against assuming un-critically that child and youth participation in research is a good thing (Fleming, 2011; McCarry, 2012), there is a

growing body of evidence documenting its value. Participatory approaches can generate reliable knowledge informed by the perspectives and lived experiences of children and youth (Kellet, 2011). It can create more vibrant research agendas (Caitlin, 2007), ensure that the methods of data collection and the research tools are suitable and relevant for their peers (Shaw et al., 2011) and improve access to hard to reach child and youth populations (Cuevas-Parra, 2020). The origins of action research can be traced back to Lewin (1946), who described it as “research leading to social action” (p.150). Participatory action research is when the research is conducted in collaboration with the research participants and/or stakeholders central to the issue under consideration. Bradbury and Reason’s (2008, p.1) often-cited definition of action research emphasises its participatory nature. They define action research as seeking ‘to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people’. Some of the key features of youth participatory action research, identified by Hart (1992, p. 16), are: the young people concerned carry out the research; the researcher is committed to the participants and their control of the analysis; the participants identify the problem from which the research stems and the research investigates the underlying causes of the problem so the participants can begin addressing the problem.

At a policy level, there is a growing demand for children and youth to have their voice heard in public policy debates (Forde et al., 2020). Structures and processes that are commonly viewed as supporting children and youth to have their voice heard in the public policy-making arena include youth parliaments, councils, conferences and youth advisory groups. Adult-led consultations with children and young people are also considered to be an important tool in accessing the views of children and young people on policy issues (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015; Horgan, 2017). The added value of youth led-research is that youth are setting the agenda and controlling the process from the outset. A report by Save the Children (Forde et al., 2020) highlights that children’s involvement in research can ensure that their perspectives inform in a meaningful way public policy decisions. This is evidenced, for example, in the work of Carroll et al. (2019) who supported a group of children (10-13) to research peer perceptions of Auckland city life to influence urban planning in New Zealand. However, with the exception of limited examples, the value from a public policy perspective of involving children and youth in youth led-research is not yet widely acknowledged.

The Youth as Researchers Programme Model

In 2014, the first and second author developed the YAR Programme. Initially through a research partnership with Foróige, Ireland’s largest National Youth Organisation, the authors became aware of youth interest in undertaking social research projects on issues of concern to them. Foróige delivers a Youth Leadership Programme to young people (14-18) in youth projects, clubs and schools nationwide. Many young people partaking in this programme were leading small-scale social research projects within their communities as part of the process of honing their leadership skills. The Youth as Researchers Programme was established to support

the young people on the Youth Leadership Programme to develop their research skills and to disseminate their research.

The aim of the YAR Programme is to build the capacity of youth to carry out research on issues of concern to their lives and their wider community and to enhance the dissemination of their research findings with a view to influencing change. To achieve this aim, the YAR Programme delivers research skills training to youth and supports them to disseminate the key messages from their research, primarily by producing short videos depicting their findings. The training, delivered via a one-day workshop, is a step-by-step guide for youth on how to conduct a social research project. The core training includes, selecting a research topic, planning for change, research design, research methods, data analysis, research ethics, report writing and dissemination. The training workshops are interactive in nature and over the course of the workshop, the youth working in small groups will identify or refine their ideas in terms of their research topic and design an ethically sound team research project. In the research implementation phase, the presence of an ongoing support person to mentor and support the youth in the implementation of their research is a critical component of the YAR Programme model. It is a pre-requisite to partaking in the training that the youth have access to a support person to provide ongoing guidance and facilitation in the implementation of their research. In our experience, the norm is for the young people's youth worker to take on this supportive and coordinating role. Once the research is complete, the youth document their findings in a research report.

In the final stage of the process, the YAR Programme steps back in to support the youth to produce a short video of their research findings, to maximise dissemination. These videos are produced in partnership with a small film production company and financed by the YAR Programme, with the youth playing a central role in the production process. Taking a storyboard approach, the youth along with the film-maker map their ideas for a short drama to depict their research findings. Based on the agreed storyboard, the film-maker drafts a script returning to the youth for sign off. The youth are given the opportunity to be part of the cast or crew, or both, on the day of the film shoot. To complete the process, the film-maker edits the production adding in the voice over, music and graphics as required, in consultation with the youth. To maximise their reach, the patron of the authors research centre, actor Cillian Murphy, provides the voice over. A story told in the form of a short drama captured on video, interspersed with a voice over and graphics depicting key findings and a concluding set of recommendations has been a powerful tool for communicating the research findings.

Informing Policy Dialogue

As the YAR Programme became well established, youth advisory groups contacted the Programme for research support. These were advisory groups funded by and attached to organisations and state bodies responsible for child and youth policy and service delivery in Ireland. In 2013, Tusla, Ireland's National Child and Family Agency, was mandated in its

founding legislation to hear the views of children and young people when engaged in service planning and review. In response, the Agency established local area youth advisory groups to inform service planning and review, such as the one detailed in the case study below. Ireland also has a system of youth councils, known as Comhairle Na nÓgs, attached to each local County Council. The role of these youth councils is to inform children and young people's service planning in each local area. In consultation with the youth, the adult facilitators of these advisory groups, contacted the YAR Programme for research support. The groups that contacted the Programme were interested in conducting research with their peers to bring a more diverse and informed youth perspective to the public decision-making arena. They were seeking to ground their advice in research evidence informed by the testimonies of their wider peers, as illustrated in the case study below.

Youth advisory groups generally comprise a small number of young people. While the goal of youth participatory structures is to strive for membership, which is representative of a cross-section of society, the challenge this poses is widely documented (Forde et al., 2020; Petrie et al., 2006). The risk is that youth participatory structures will comprise well-educated, articulate youth, with a limited slice of life experience. Many children and youth are excluded from youth participatory structures and, while the reasons for their exclusion are varied, it is recognised that children and youth from marginalised and disadvantaged groups face particular barriers (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Forde et al., (2020) reported that youth who are working, who live in remote areas with limited connectivity, who are not accessing services or, when the topic under focus is of a sensitive nature are some of the many reasons why some youth have less of an opportunity to participate. An increasing awareness of this challenge is leading to improvements in this area. Efforts are made to ensure youth councils and advisory structures are more representative of the general population of youth, with some going so far to establish a process for children and young people to be democratically elected by their peers (Parkes, 2008). However, this is a contested approach, with some evidence indicating that electoral approaches reinforce existing inequalities and are less likely to incorporate the voices of disadvantaged and socially excluded groups of young people (Whyness, 2009). Cognisant of the diversity of childhood, Wyness (2009) suggests that more effective ways of bringing children and young people's views to the fore, which is reflective of their diversity, needs to be explored.

The case study set out below, written by two youth researchers, documents their experience of being members of a Tusla youth advisory group who conducted research with their peers to better understand how young people in their locality can be heard and helped, when facing adversity. As illustrated in the case study, the findings from their research conducted with their school going peers informed their advice to Tusla.

Case Study: Mayo Tusla Youth Advisory Committee

Written by Ella Anderson and Kalem Garrett, two members of the Mayo Tusla Youth Advisory Committee.

In 2016, a Tusla Youth Advisory Committee in County Mayo was established with members, aged 13-17, from the Ballina Youth and Family Support Project and the local youth council, Comhairle na nÓg. The committee was established to advise Tusla on the delivery of youth-oriented welfare and protection services. At the beginning of our meetings, we spent some time discussing what Tusla did. We realised that a lot of young people were unsure of what services Tusla delivered. We were also asked to review a number of national brochures aimed at young people to inform them of their services. During these reviews, we had discussions about whether or not young people would read brochures. The feeling among our group was that young people would rather get information online. A subgroup of the advisory committee decided to carry out some research to investigate these two areas.

Our youth worker, appointed by Tusla to coordinate the committee, contacted the YAR Programme for research support. Members of the committee took part in the YAR one-day research skills training workshop in 2017. This training provided us with key skills necessary to carry out our research. To decide exactly what we were going to research, we all gave suggestions regarding issues we viewed as important. After building on each person's ideas, we decided to find out about young people's knowledge of Tusla services, how young people access support and how young people would like to receive information about welfare and protection services.

From here, we needed to decide how to gather the information we wanted. Using what we had learnt from our training, we knew that multiple sources of information would lead to results that are more robust. We decided that we should review previous literature in the area to compare this to our findings. We also knew that questionnaires and focus groups were efficient ways to gather information we needed. The review of the literature focused on two key studies previously published in Ireland. These were, a 2016 population survey (excluding the views of young people) on the public's awareness of parenting, prevention and family support services in Ireland (McGregor and Nic Gabhainn, 2016) and a report by the Irish Ombudsman for Children's Office, 'Tune In', on a consultation to establish young people's preferences for accessing information (The Office of the Ombudsman for Children, 2016).

The methods chosen to conduct the research were a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. We first decided to create an anonymous questionnaire to understand young people's knowledge of Tusla, how they access supports and how they would like to receive information about services available. Members of Comhairle na nÓg, who were attending secondary schools across the county, assisted in distributing the questionnaire throughout every secondary school in Mayo. The response rate was 248 young people aged 13-23. The

high turnout rate was assisted by providing stamped addressed envelopes to return the completed questionnaires.

Focus groups were then carried out across a number of primary and secondary schools in Mayo. Six were carried out with young people aged 10-16. The reason for conducting some of these focus groups in primary schools as well as secondary schools was to ensure that there was a good range of young voices heard, including young children as well as teenagers. Focus groups were also considered by the committee to be an appropriate method of investigation with younger children. The focus groups were centred around the suggestions and ideas young people had for professionals working with children and young people. The sessions covered similar questions to those in the questionnaire. However, the in-person interaction allowed for much more open-ended answers and the chance to further develop our understanding of young people's views on the issues discussed. Strict confidentiality was adhered to, which provided a safe environment for the young people to talk.

After gathering the information, we needed to compile it into something that was easy to understand and easily presented. We grouped the information based on different themes that reoccurred throughout the findings and selected the eight most common reoccurring messages that young people had for professionals working with children and young people and accompanied them with quotes from the focus groups. We believed the best way to present these messages would be on a poster titled "Eight Key Messages". We created a draft for a poster and sent it to a local design and printing agency along with our suggestions on how we would envisage the final product. The poster showcased eight things professionals can do to make a young person feel more comfortable (see Figure 2.1). As well as the poster, we created a research report and, with the support of the YAR Programme, a short video titled "How Young People are Heard and Helped" to communicate the additional research findings.¹ The video included statistical findings from our questionnaire, whilst also advertising where a young person could get help should they need to do so. Interestingly, the research found that accessing information from a trusted adult was the preferred choice, but a preference to source information online was also ranked highly.

Our research findings were launched at our own youth-led conference in our local town in 2018. The conference attendees included adults who work with young people - from Tusla management and front line workers (for example social workers and social care workers), to national school principals and teachers, and even the Ombudsman for Children. On the day, a young person from the committee was assigned to each table as a moderator. Each table completed creative activities, showcasing how to make meetings more engaging for children and young people. Young people spoke at the event, the research video was shown and the posters were distributed. Later this event was replicated at a national Tusla conference, during which the group hosted a workshop to showcase our findings. The research also attracted the attention of the local and national media.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact impact of our research, since the project finished the poster has been distributed to all Tusla offices and Tusla funded services in county Mayo and dissemination has continued at Tusla national conferences. Tusla are currently conducting a course to support staff to transition to online support sessions with young people and within this course training pack is the poster we created. The video created to disseminate the research findings has been shown in Universities across Ireland on social work and similar educational programmes.

<Figure 2.1: here>

What Young People Want Adults to Know Poster. Copyright: Tusla.

Upscaling the Youth as Researchers Programme

Each year, the Youth as Researchers Programme has supported on average four youth led-research projects in Ireland, aged between 14-18. Shortly after its establishment in 2014, the UNESCO Chair in Community, Leadership and Youth Development in Penn State University joined as partners and support youth-led research projects in the United States. The focus of these projects have been diverse. In addition to the case study set out above, projects included, young people on a crime diversion programme researching its effectiveness in preventing offending behaviour, young people exploring and communicating the mental health challenges of LGBT youth and young people investigating police perceptions of the community and community perceptions of the police in North Philadelphia in the United States. Recognising the value of the YAR Programme in bringing youth voice to the fore to inform policy and service provision responses, the Social and Human Sciences Division in UNESCO, in collaboration with the UNESCO Chair in Children, Youth and Civic Engagement (second author) and the UNESCO Chair in Community, Leadership and Youth Development, adopted the Programme model to establish the UNESCO Youth as Researchers global initiative on Covid-19.

This initiative is designed to connect and engage with youth, aged 18-35, globally on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth. Launched in October 2020, over 6,000 youth from more than 100 countries applied to be part of the programme. From the 300 youth selected to be part of the initiative, seven global teams, comprising youth from countries around the world, six regional research teams and a number of sub-regional and national teams were formed. Each team comprises on average five to ten members. Every team is mentored by a research coordinator and supported by the wider UNESCO Global Coordination Team and the UNESCO Youth as Researchers Ethics Committee. The research skills training was adapted to be delivered online and in English and French. UNESCO assigned the youth to their teams, based on their research interests identified at the point of application and, for the regional, sub-regional and national teams, also based on their geographic location. Once the youth researchers completed the online training and met with their team, they selected a team research

topic of their choosing. While the focus of the research must be on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on youth, the teams are examining this from a wide range of perspectives, including its impact from an education, human rights, well-being and civic engagement. Online communication enabled teams with geographically diverse memberships to plan and coordinate their research projects, underway at the time of writing. UNESCO is committed to publishing the research produced as a series of policy briefs and research reports to be widely circulated within the United Nations and among governments, academia and other actors, as well as their dissemination via social and mainstream media.

The Challenge of Youth-Led Research

Youth-led research is not without its challenges. It is a challenge to move beyond listening to young people's views to genuine policy dialogue. The extent to which the views of children and youth are successfully influencing policy-making is not always evident (Shier, 2014; Perry-Hazan, 2016; Horgan, 2017). Arguably, the YAR Programme model places youth in a strong position to influence change and the programme is beginning to build an evidence base in this regard. Shier (2014, p.12) draws a number of conclusions regarding the optimum conditions required to ensure children and young people are best placed to influence public policy. He concludes that children and young people need to be "well-prepared, trained and organised". They also need the belief that they are capable of effecting change and have the drive and commitment to advocate for the desired change. The support of committed adults who "understand the importance of promoting autonomy rather than dependency and are careful to avoid manipulation" is equally important (Shier 2014, p.12).

Each of these are core features of the YAR Programme. The Programme offers the youth training from professional researchers to provide them with the required skill set. Youth approach the Programme seeking research support. This is a clear indicator of their commitment to effect change and their belief that they are capable of doing so. To build this momentum, a core component of the training is on 'Planning for Change' with a focus on influencing change in the policy and practice context. We have found young participants on the Programme eager to use their research to inform a set of recommended actions to influence change and to bring those recommendations to the attention of decision-makers with the power to action that change. Lastly, for youth to engage with the Programme it is a prerequisite that they have the support of a committed adult or adults. In the youth-led-research projects completed in Ireland, this has been their youth worker. In the UNESCO projects, each research group is paired with a research coordinator.

Youth-led research projects are resource intensive from both a human and monetary perspective. Youth-led research requires the presence of a professional researcher to provide research skills training and a supportive adult to provide ongoing guidance and facilitation in the implementation and dissemination phase. As noted previously in this chapter and as found elsewhere (Kellet, 2011; Shier, 2015) these are critical components of any youth-led research initiative and they are important considerations in sourcing funding to support youth-led

research. The production of short videos, to maximise the dissemination of the research findings from the YAR Programme, adds significant cost. However, Figure 2.1 above is illustrative of alternative less expensive approaches to research dissemination. The issue of whether child and youth researchers should be remunerated is also debated (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). The need to provide payment to youth researchers can arise when youth are asked to conduct the research on behalf of an organisation, rather than self-selecting to conduct research on issues of importance to them.

The ethical complexities inherent in youth-led research are another important consideration. The adult facilitators have an ethical responsibility to protect the youth from harm. When the youth are under 18, parental consent is required in Ireland for the youth to lead the research, as well as obtaining consent from the research participants and their parents. Ensuring confidentiality protocols are adhered to is also fundamental, particularly when the researcher and the researched are part of the same social network (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). The use of anonymous questionnaires is a methodological approach preferred by many of the research teams the YAR Programme has worked with, as a means of safeguarding against some of these concerns. Importantly, a session on research ethics is a core component of the training and provides a space for the youth to engage with the trainer on the ethical issues and dilemmas arising in their research.

Conclusion

The Youth as Researchers Programme commenced as a small-scale initiative in Ireland to support young people to hone their leadership skills. However, its potential to bring a democratic and informed youth perspective into the policy making arena has swiftly emerged, leading to UNESCO spearheading the initiative globally to learn from young people's lived experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. To conclude, while the focus of this chapter has been on youth-led research informing policy dialogue, this approach to bringing youth voice to the fore equally has the potential to inform service planning, service reviews and even adult research agendas. It raises the question - when advisory groups are set up to hear the views of youth, are there opportunities for these advisory group members to engage in small-scale social research projects with their peers to bring well informed advice to the decision-making table?

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¹ These research outputs are available online. The research report is available at: https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/How_young_people_are_heard_and_helped.pdf (Accessed: 12 January 2021). The video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9TYBuOyWPo> (Accessed: 12 January 2021).