

17

Young people, participatory research and experiences of leaving care

Andrew West

• Introduction

This article is about a participatory research project, run by *Save the Children-UK (SCF-UK)*¹. The research examined the experiences of young people leaving care. It was done by young people who had themselves recently left care, and involved five projects across England. The process of developing the research is outlined below, with some indication of the findings and reflections emerging from this example of participatory research (Alderson, 1995; Dodson 1995).

Young people leaving care

Every year around 10,000 young people² who have been looked after by local authority social services in England, leave care to live independently. Care leavers are a particularly powerless and stigmatised group. Statistics focus on the fact that they form a significant part of the young homeless population, that they are over-represented in the prison population, and that they have low or no educational achievement. Such figures, whilst highlighting policy issues, serve to reinforce the stigma. They negate the depth and quality of the experience of leaving care, and are part of the process of marginalisation that reduces self-esteem.

¹ A full report is being written for publication in 1996 by SCF-UK. All SCF-UK publications are available from: 17 Grove Lane, London SE5 8RD, UK.

² Many are 16 years old: under-18s are officially defined as children in the UK, but in this article 15-18 year olds are referred to as young people, following their general wish.

• The participatory research process

In 1995 a research project on leaving care was developed by SCF and the funders of the project, Natwest Bank. It was decided that it would be 'participatory'. Care leavers were to be involved as far as possible; they were to make the decisions in the research process and carry out the interviews themselves³. Ten young people, mostly aged 16 or 17 years, were recruited from five SCF projects across England (Bolton, Kirklees, Leeds, London, Oxford).

Throughout the research process they were supported by staff from the five projects and myself. Overall responsibility for project administration lay with a youth worker. A video company filmed the process as it unfolded.

Residential meetings

Over the next four months the young researchers met with the two youth workers, a group facilitator and myself at five short residential meetings, each lasting two to three days. The meetings provided a forum for:

- sharing experiences, first of being in care and later of doing the research;
- providing peer support; and,

³ There were some areas where decisions were not made by the young researchers - largely due to time and geographical constraints. These included the selection of the location and premises for the residential meetings and the overall structure of the residential process. The creation of a summary of the report could have been an area where the young researchers had greater control over layout and content, but we ran out of time.

- making group decisions (on matters such as the methodology, the means of analysis, and how to promote the findings).

Discussions among the young researchers revealed that they thought of themselves as a particular social category (people who were or had been in care) and that there is something distinct and unifying in the experience. Despite already having this perception, they were keen to find out (or perhaps, check) whether their own regional/local experiences were replicated elsewhere. Their findings confirmed that this perception was shared and this reinforced their feeling of commonality.

Designing the methodology

The choice of method, face-to-face interviewing with questions and written recording by interviewers, emerged through group discussions and piloting. There was some discussion of the use of tape-recorders and video cameras in addition, but these fell by the wayside. The decision on method came from the young people, and was based on their experiences, and knowledge and, in particular, what constituted validity both for themselves and for others.

Firstly they discussed the key areas for investigation and who exactly to interview. It was felt that the most appropriate people to interview would be young people who had recently left care, preferably within the last two years, as well as staff who worked with young care leavers.

In groups, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview schedule and questionnaire for young people. This was then agreed by them all. They piloted this individually back in their regions and then revised the schedule at the next residential meeting, again working first in groups and then collectively. They conducted the interviews individually, and then jointly developed an initial analysis of their findings. While the interviews with recent care leavers were in progress, the researchers followed a similar procedure for developing and conducting the staff interviews, although the schedule and questions were formulated much more quickly. Each of the researchers hoped to interview 10 care leavers and five members of

staff. In the end, 77 care-leavers were interviewed, and 21 staff.

Recommendations were made as the project progressed. Using their material, I wrote a report, supplemented by additional statistical material drawn from their findings, and the records of all researchers' meetings. This was then approved at the fifth residential meeting where the conclusion was drafted and the format of the publication agreed. A summary of the results is shown in Box 1.

BOX 1

ISSUES ADDRESSED BY THE REPORT

The report and its recommendations focused on ten issues in all. In order of importance these were: income, housing, work, education, support, health (both psychological and physical), social life, police, public attitude, preparations for leaving care.

Concerns such as income and housing, often given less emphasis in other studies, were prominent. Issues such as those of health and support also arose. The other important categories were 'police' and 'public'. The former reflects the significant presence of the police in the lives of young people in and from care. This is due to a variety of reasons. For example, police are often called to deal with fights between peers in residential homes, even though they are not called to deal with comparable occasions that occur in domestic life.

The 'public attitude' category demonstrated the strength of the (usually negative) experiences that young people had when the general public, neighbours, acquaintances and so on, found out they had been in care.

There was an additional concern that was often discussed. This was the subject of the 'leaving care grant', monies paid (or, rather, frequently not paid), of vastly variable amounts, to enable care leavers to set up home independently.

Many of the young people participated in the promotion of the report and summary (West *et al.*, 1995) and video (SCF-UK, 1995) by taking a lead role at the press conference and giving interviews for television and radio. The type of publicity (to influence through media, rather than, say, a conference), was proposed by the young researchers at the start of the project.

The problems faced

Problems with staff who were reluctant to participate on various grounds arose during this work (West, forthcoming). However, enough were interviewed to indicate important differences in perception between the staff and the young people.

For example, staff agreed with both the researchers and the young people interviewed that a key area of leaving care was 'support'. However when the meaning of the word was explored, important differences in perception were highlighted. Young people sought a personal support system, modelled on that which they believe to exist in 'normal' families. They wanted support to be provided by a nominated individual with a long-term interest in them. Staff sought to enable care leavers to become independent, to support their use of 'normal services' for advice and so on. The difference is clearly important and seems to be part of a greater divide which reflects differences in a myriad of other issues and perceptions.

• Reflections on the research process

Many of the reflections that emerged are perennially present and concern power, professionalism, purpose and decision-making.

- For pragmatic reasons of timing, some decisions were made before young people were recruited: earlier recruitment would have allowed them to be more fully involved in structuring the research. Such decision-making, taken a stage further back, could have dealt with the research topic - which might then, of course, not have been young people leaving care!
- The timing of the project was set before the research began. Thus, it was always at issue because those involved had not participated in that part of the decision-making process. However, for me now there is some ambivalence. The young people (and others, including outsiders) said that it was too short. However, it did succeed in concentrating efforts and provided a focus. Also worth emphasising

is the need to maintain interest and momentum, which probably dictates against a lengthy process when working with young people.

- The length of the interview schedule, despite piloting, raised questions. Should adults have intervened to shorten it?
- When it came to the production of the report and the organisation of the press launch, the lack of time meant the young researchers could not be involved in as much detail as with their earlier work. However, to fulfil the ultimate goal of influencing policy-makers, politicians and other professionals (social workers, civil servants and so on), at some point the baton would have to be passed to professionals - that is, to those who know about, for example, design, layout, media, pacing events, etc.
- The problem (even though its existence may be denied by many staff) of interviewing staff demonstrated the divide, the 'us and them' under-currents, that clearly exist between staff and care leavers, adults and young people and reflected the power structures which exist.

On training and learning

Participatory research requires the development of new perceptions and learning on the parts of both the community and outsiders. This learning may be formal training and/or gained informally from involvement in the process. In this case there was potential for both parties. For example, the adult researchers could have introduced different research methodologies (diagrams, drawings etc.) and insisted on particular sampling techniques or statistical methods. However the young researchers defined their preferred method according to their own understanding of validity. They demonstrated the use of qualitative and some quantitative information and showed (and so taught) that they could undertake valid research.

There is a broader issue here concerning training and learning. Put quite simply it is that learning gained formally or experientially produces change. If part of the point of the

participatory research is to welcome the knowledge and ability of community members to establish questions and categories, then training, even with the best intentions, can alter those perceptions. 'Trainings' mould participants into the dominant and powerful system of beliefs and establishing proof - something which, paradoxically, it may be the aim of participation to challenge.

On the benefits of using the participatory approach with young people

- The young people brought fresh categories and perceptions to the research.
- The data gathered was of high quality and the findings compare well with research conducted by adult professionals.
- Their ongoing analysis gave a structure to the final report that emphasised the key experiences and issues and the ways in which they interrelated. These views are of a different order to those held by some other adult researchers in this area.
- The young interviewees enjoyed being interviewed by their peers.
- The young researchers were clearly able to raise issues and ask questions in a way adults could not.
- Individual learning, experience and development were also benefits.
- The power inherent in the conclusions is enhanced when the research has been done by those actually affected.

• Conclusions

Participatory research projects are multi-faceted as they are not merely about research findings and outcomes, but a broader engagement between those with and without power. Cultural differences between such groups, even within the same society, mean that the negotiation of the participation is important. What are the benefits for each party? And where do the priorities lie? But also, are the aims, processes and outcomes clear and understood? Continual negotiation is bound to occur where powerless groups are attempting to research not themselves, but those in power.

- **Andrew West**, Equal Chances Project, Save the Children Fund-UK, 373, Anlaby Road, Hull, HU3 6AB, UK.

REFERENCES

- Alderson, P. 1995. *Listening to Children: Children, ethics and social research*. Barnardos, Barkingside, UK.
- Dodson, J. 1995. *Time for Change: Local people becoming researchers*. SCF-UK, London.
- West, A. *et al.* 1995. *You're On Your Own: Young peoples research on leaving care*. SCF-UK, London.
- West, A. (forthcoming in 1996). *Participation and Attitude: Young people, research and dissemination*. Paper awaiting publication.
- Save the Children-UK, 1995. *VIDEO - Does Anybody Care?* SCF-UK, London.