

Reflecting on Community Development Research: how peer researchers influence and shape community action projects.

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Abstract

This paper explores how the selection of peer researchers influences and shapes peer research projects. It draws on two empirical studies formed from two community action projects in England. Peer research is a method for involving young people as co-researchers within their community or in specific settings such as educational environments and the two projects recruited school children of different ages and ethnic backgrounds; in both cases they were representative of the potential participant population. One project (Community House) was based in a junior school setting and concentrated on evaluating a community centre project. The second project (Knife Angel: Hear My Voice) was a youth work setting and brought together a group of young people to explore an intervention aimed at impacting crime and violence in the local community.

This paper discusses how the demographic characteristics of the peer researchers shaped, influenced and impacted the success of both community action projects. We discuss how children and young people bring their unique skills to preparing the questionnaire and dissemination. Using researcher reflexivity, we consider the methodological implications of

¹ This paper has been consulted on with those involved in the two community action research case studies and based on their preference the names and geographical areas of the case studies are not anonymised.

the findings and contribute to theory building about community action and the impact of participatory research.

Keywords: Peer research, community development, community action, researcher reflexivity, young people, children

Introduction

Involving children and young people in decision making 'on issues that affect their lives' is a direct influence from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UK in 1991. It is also a core principle of community development practice (Budapest Declaration, 2004). At a policy level, engaging young people in participatory projects has gained popularity, particularly after the publication of 'Working Together, Achieving More' (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, 2009), which encouraged civil society to 'increase opportunities for children's meaningful participation' (DCSF, 2009: 17) in schools and community settings. Peer research is one method, involving young people as co-researchers within their community, home or in settings such as educational environments (Forde et al, 2018; Horgan, 2017; McVicar et al, 2004; Arnull, 2003).

Our paper takes a reflexive, case study approach to the two community development projects important to theory building (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). We theorise about the relevance of the structure and methods of community development projects, their role in community action and the impact of participatory research. Our empirical findings highlight how the lived reality of the peer researchers bring a distinct perspective (Greenaway and McDowell 2019). In the two case studies we explore how the demographic characteristics of the children and young people drove and impacted the projects and the ways in which they utilised their specific characteristics and knowledge. In doing so, the knowledge and skills they

utilised directly impacted the research methods and those methods impacted the outcomes of the research and its' dissemination. The paper addresses a gap in the literature around the influence and impact of peer researchers' demographic characteristics. Researchers such as Murray, (2006); Kalpatrick et al. (2007); Coppock, (2011), Fleming (2013), Horgan et al (2015) and Forde et al (2018) explored work with similar age groups, but the impact of age on the peer research process has been under-explored. Similarly, the ethnicity of peer researchers and its' relevance to participatory research within the community or specific setting is under-explored (see Rayan et al as an exception 2011).

Our case studies are therefore two interventions using one method. Bringing together two distinct studies post-fact to consider reflexively the methods, approaches, findings, and feedback we utilise the case study method as a method of reflexive research practice (Ebneyamini and Moghadam 2018) and inductive theory development (see, Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). We purposefully selected two cases that would allow for inductive theory development because those cases contained rich, descriptive, empirical data so we could examine patterns of relationships between the demographic characteristics of the peer researchers and the ways in which this did (or did not) drive the projects and the ways in which the peer researchers utilised their specific characteristics. We selected the data relevant from those cases and drew on case study analytical approaches regarding patterns in the data, building explanations and utilising a comparative approach (Yin 1994). It is the results of that process we present here and which we used to build theory regarding participatory research as a method of community development.

Community development '...aims at participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality, and social justice, through the

organisation, education, and empowerment of people within their communities' (International Association for Community Development, 2021). Promoting community action can be understood as building community capacity and resilience (The Local Government Association, 2021) with active engagement in decision-making, including co-design, defining the issues and priorities; community action research is one method by which this can be achieved.

Greenaway and McDowell (2019) say community-led and community-based research requires roles and levels of participation to be negotiated and agreed with the community and researchers able to be flexible and negotiate complex relationships. Then community-led research can reach parts of the community standard approaches cannot and may influence strategic priority setting in a way 'not illuminated by statistics' (Greenaway and McDowell, 2019:404). For Eversole (2010:34) lived experience brings knowledge able to cross disciplinary boundaries and '...bridge localities, communities, and landscapes, potentially providing a rich source of interchange among different "local" knowledge'.

Sesan (2014:615) argues participatory or action research should maintain its focus on challenging existing power structures, whilst Forde et al (2018) question how much children's perspectives are valued, though sought. Hlela (2016) argues participation provides an opportunity to seek socially just solutions in which human dignity and agency are key features and Burns and Schubotz (2009) study with peer researchers aged 15-18 is an example of this approach.

Hlela (2016) reflects on the importance of the professional researcher acknowledging their own positionality and being reflexive during and after the research process. The looked-for outcomes being that both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives emerge to bring

a more informed understanding and we pick this up in our consideration of our case studies, peer researcher demographic characteristics and theory building.

Young peer researcher recruitment and retention requires time and effort as young people will still be in either education or employment. Prioritising research is not always easy for community action researchers, especially as young people will be at a point of transitioning towards, or into, adulthood which may include competing priorities and opportunities. This can lead to young people dropping out from the research process, especially after training, and this has been found relevant to the success of peer research projects (Lushey and Munro 2015). Recruiting peer researchers through other children and youth agencies has been shown to be the most effective method for research teams (Kalpatrick *et al.*, 2007); other successful recruitment strategies have included recruitment adverts and the use of social media networks (Dowling. 2016; Curran *et al*, 2020) and access to academic researchers (Gomez and Ryan, 2016).

The lack of focus in the literature on the demographic characteristics of peer researchers is surprising. An exception is Rayan, Kofman and Aaron (2011), who recruited ethnicity specific peer researchers to understand the positionality of peer researchers in their study. This brought to the fore the emic and etic factors associated with peer researchers and reminds us it is not solely the positionality of the professional researcher which comes into play in community focussed research.

Method

This paper draws on learning from two English community action peer research studies one in Uxbridge, a London Borough and another in Telford a town in the Midlands. The authors worked collaboratively with Yeading Junior School and its' pupils in the first study and in the second, with the Young People's Forum (YPF) and Community Development Team in Telford and Wrekin.

The empirical data and findings from both studies were published in research reports (Arnull and Kanjilal 2020; Arnull, Kanjilal and Mwadia, 2015). Both involved young people undergoing peer researcher training, which is described in each case study and was responsive to the project and peer researchers. In each study the peer researchers were involved in deciding the scope of the project, questionnaire design, undertaking the research supported by experienced researchers and staff from the community / educational setting. In one project they were involved in the analysis and in the second (due to COVID) consultation was undertaken on the analysis. In both projects peer researchers were involved in the write-up and dissemination of findings.

Both community action peer research projects were co-created with the peer researchers and the broader community within which they sat, for example Yeading Junior School in one case study and the Community Development Team, Telford and Wrekin Council and West Mercia Police in the other. They were community development orientated, looking to build community capacity, social justice and share knowledge, ideas, and skills (IACD 2021). Both projects incorporated aims of prevention (LGA 2021), for the CHR project around mental health and social support and for the KAR around violence and knife crime. Additionally, they aimed at promoting resilience within their communities (IACD 2021).

This paper is focussed not on the findings of the studies per se but considers reflexively from the professional researchers' positionality the nature of peer research in community development settings and how the recruitment and characteristics of the peer researchers shape and influence research studies. In the two studies the peer researchers are drawn from the age and ethnic groups of the community from which they are drawn and those they seek to reach. Using our researcher reflexivity (Hlela, 2016) we consider how this empirical knowledge contributes to theory building (Rivard, 2020; Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) about community development and participatory research.

Case Study One: Community House Research, Yeading Junior School and Pupils

The first study was entitled, 'Perception of Social Work Support: a peer evaluation' and took place during a school term in (2015). In this paper the first case study will be termed, Community House research (CHR). At the school 97% of the children had English as an Additional Language and an above average number of children received free school meals. Yeading Junior School had invested in developing a Community House to meet a range of social needs and provide language courses and other support to the school community. For example, many parents lacked familiarity with the English educational system as first generation or recent immigrants.

The Community House was well used and considered a success with mothers, many of whom took language and other educational courses. People from the community gained more information about life in the UK, met with other professional services to learn about them and received social information that helped them feel supported and familiar with English culture and systems. The school held regular feedback sessions and the community,

particularly mothers, were actively involved in organising events and activities of the Community House and guiding its programme. In addition, some mothers went on to gain work as a result of education undertaken via the Community House or as the result of cultural capital (Morrow, 2005) and networks built. They also received support and help for health and social needs. Student social workers had placements in the Community House and the school employed a full-time social worker.

What was not known was what children made of, or understood about the Community House, many of whom had family members who attended, but few children went inside. The peer research study was devised to enable and facilitate the perceptions of pupils about the Community House to be understood. A peer research methodology was chosen so children could co-construct and frame the research within a child's understanding from the outset.

Peer researchers for CHR were recruited with support from school staff. Ten students who were recipients of free school meals and identified as 'intellectually gifted' by schoolteachers were recruited. Boys and girls were recruited in equal distribution and the ethnic distribution represented the school community. Eight peer researchers were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background and two from the White British ethnic group. All the BAME peer researchers were first generation immigrants being educated in the British education system and expressed their struggle with parental language barriers which meant they could not necessarily be supported by parents with the research at home.

The ten students who volunteered to become peer researchers were aged 10-11 in years 5 and 6. Working with such young children to undertake research training and research meant re-thinking peer researcher training models already designed and utilised by the authors (McVicar et al, 2004; Arnall , 2003). Working with educators used to working with

this age group we redesigned the training tools and devised the training to take place over four days. The training was also adapted as we went along, for example based on the realisation that young children like to write out by hand much of what they learn and that this is time consuming and slower. We also learnt the children were highly reflective and proactive and would work at home on ideas for the project (unasked and untasked) and come back to the next session with colour coded questionnaires, ideas for questions and many ideas for how the research could best engage the attention of their fellow pupils. Thus, the research questionnaire was drafted as part of the training and the peer researchers took an active part. Their suggestion of making the questionnaire colourful and the use of images such as 'Boy/Girls' supported a question: 'Are you a boy or girl?' Similarly, the use of emojis for Likert scale questions, the use of an image of a door on the question of number of Community house visits, etc. In the study all were proven to be effective with research participants who were from school year 3 to 6, hence aged between 8-11 years old and showed the importance of insider perspectives (Hlela 2016; Greenaway and McDowell 2019). The active participation of the children during training meant they played the role of active and engaged co-designers of research tools critical to implementation.

The peer researchers then worked as interviewers supported by an adult researcher who sat slightly back from the interview session and intervened if asked for support or advice by the peer researcher. The children also worked as co-analysers and the study was designed to be quantitative and divisible by 10 (e.g., number of participants being multiple of ten (100); 10 questions on the questionnaire) to maximise the children's opportunity to play a role in the analysis.

A hundred students from year 3 to year 6 took part in the study and peer researchers successfully collected data from ten interviewees each. The peer researchers also worked as co-disseminators of the study presenting the research to a whole school assembly with invited guests from the wider community, such as Councillors and a seminar at Bucks New University where they were awarded certificates evidencing their work and training. The research was also later presented by one of the professional researchers, on behalf of all the researchers, as part of a Borough wide review of young people and mental health projects. It was identified as a good practice example of how to engage young people and understand their perspectives.

Case Study Two: Young People's Participation in Understanding the Public Experience of the Knife Angel.

The second peer research study took place in the Midlands in 2020. 'Hearing Our Voices: Young People's Participation in Understanding the Public Experience of the Knife Angel', was a collaborative project between the Young People's Forum (YPF), University of Wolverhampton (UoW), Telford and Wrekin Council and West Mercia Police. This second study is termed the Knife Angel research (KAR).

The Knife Angel is a statue made from 10,000 confiscated knives, conceived by Alfie Bradley, and made at the Ironworks in Oswestry, Shropshire. The Knife Angel exhibition travels to many towns and cities and was exhibited in Telford from 29th February 2020 to 29th March 2020.

The 'Hearing Our Voices' peer research was considered a way of exploring the public's experiences of the Knife Angel, with an attempt specifically to frame the research within the

experience of young people and attract respondents from the younger generation. Given that young people are often connected in the media and public consciousness with the use of violence, and specifically knife crime, the aim was to co-construct a piece of research with young people to reflect on the Knife Angel as a tool for communities to discuss violence and knife crime.

Peer researchers for KAR were recruited from the YPF. Community workers from the council who facilitate YPF were crucial for engaging young people to volunteer for the project. The YPF describe themselves as a 'participatory action group' who want to voice their opinion about local services and facilitate change. Research evidence suggests young people's forums are effective at engaging members in participatory projects (Jupp, 2007; University of Gloucester, 2016).

Six members from this group volunteered to become peer researchers. They were aged between 16 and 17 and in full time education at the time of the peer research project, so training and survey days were planned to avoid school hours. All the peer researchers were White British; four female and two males. The Black and Minority Ethnic population in all age groups in Telford and Wrekin is lower than England, although school age children from BAME backgrounds are increasing in this area (JSNA, 2019). The recruitment of the peer researchers was from YPF in which all the members are from the majority ethnic group. They were used to working as a group alongside the community development team, comfortable working with one another, engaging in debate and accommodating discussion and differences of opinion.

Like the previous study, the young people undertook peer research training, but over a much shorter period, both as a reflection of their age and related to the external timescales for the project (i.e., the Knife Angel display was a pre-set date); thus, training took place over

one day. The peer researchers played a role in co-designing the research tools and how data collection would take place. Because of external timescales we began with a 'suggested' set of questions indicating what a questionnaire might look like and how questions might be constructed; this formed the basis of training regarding how questions can be formed and asked in a way that allows them to be answered and analysed. Suggested questions included the public understanding of describing violence as a public health issue. Peer researchers were not sure about the importance of the question, but the debate it provoked about what this term meant amongst the peer researchers, community development workers and researchers led them to include it.

Peer researchers collected the data by standing in front of, or near to the Knife Angel. Adult community development workers, staff, and students from the UoW provided support and safeguard for young people undertaking research in a public space and approaching members of the community to take part in the research. Data collection in March 2020 was impacted by Coronavirus fears which were just beginning, and lockdown measures came in place before the final data collection day of 28th March 2020.

The arrival of COVID-19 and resultant public health measures impacted how the peer researchers could be involved in the data analysis. Research staff therefore undertook initial analysis and shared that, alongside the raw data, digitally with the young people. The researchers, community development workers and peer researchers then discussed the analysed data and raw data virtually. Young people responded particularly strongly to certain findings and as part of the co-designed dissemination strategy drew out themes and used social media to disseminate certain research outcomes. They designed a different more colourful format to present findings and put each out by social media – one finding at a time.

From 28th October to 9th November 2020, six posts on Telford and Wrekin YPF Facebook page highlighted the main findings reaching more than 1,500 people. They invited comment and significantly increased public engagement (Hearing Our Voices, 2020).

Discussion

We focus our discussion on the methodological implications of the findings and consider how this new knowledge contributes to theory building about community action and the impact of participatory research. We discuss the relevance of the structure and methods used in participatory community development research projects and draw out how the lived reality and demographic characteristics of the peer researchers impact the potential for socially just community development opportunities that promote the building of community capacity and resilience and challenge power differentials.

Successful engagement with the research participants: The Insider Effect

The age specific recruitment of peer researchers plays a significant role in engaging research participants from the community intended to be recruited as evidenced by the peer research recruitment for the CHR study. Ten peer researchers interviewed a hundred pupils from year 3 to 6, who had no prior experience of participating in research. Familiarity with the peer researchers reduced any fear children felt in taking part in an unknown activity and bolstered the confidence of the peer researchers who, although a confident group of children assured of their own abilities, were nervous of acting in the unknown capacity of researcher. Observation by research staff provided additional support and gave both the peer researcher

and research respondent confidence in the research process; it did not negatively impact their ability to interact as peers.

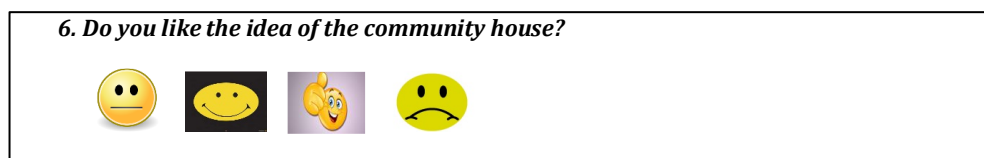
The ways in which the peer researchers designed and modified the questionnaire in the CHR study with the addition of images proved to be a great tool for collecting data. This evidenced how the peer researchers had more insight about the participants' abilities and preferences on approaching a research question. This insight was shaped by their own age specific expectation and preferences and evidenced how emic effects are applied and impact community action peer research projects (Hlela 2016).

In the KAR study peer researchers conducted a survey based on a convenience sample made up of people who visited the Knife Angel sculpture on the day. Hence there was no way of stipulating an age similarity between the peer researchers and research respondents. However, while approaching people and requesting them to take part, peer researchers tended to approach people of a similar age. Their preference for talking to young people was also noticed while they met a family with different age groups. This is significantly different from many community safety type studies and highlights how community action peer research projects bring to the fore different perspectives than those commonly found (Greenaway and McDowell 2019). It reinforces the findings from the CHR case study showing the importance of emic, or insider perspectives in shaping the research process (Hlela 2016). Further by peer researchers seeking out others like them, it indicates the importance of peer researchers reflecting their community in other demographic aspects such as ethnicity.

Peer research community action projects and skills building

Community action research projects play a role in skills building and the dissemination of research skills and knowledge within communities (Greenaway and McDowell 2019; International Association for Community Development, 2021). Peer researchers in both studies collected data manually while in conversation with the research participant. CHR questionnaire consisted of 10 questions of which 6 were closed and 4 open. Peer researchers used images (Fig 1) for closed questions and the answer was recorded by circling the image. This method was easily adoptable for all the young peer researchers aged 10 and 11 from CHR study and they recorded closed answers clearly without any duplication and omission:

Fig 1. Peer research designed question from CHR study



Open questions were not treated similarly, and peer researchers had to write sentences to capture the views of participants. Some sentences were incomplete, and the data recorded with few words while capturing the view of participant. There were some exceptions but still this limited the amount of information gathered. In cases where participants were hesitant, peer researchers offered options from their experience of quantitative questions, and this could have influenced the overall data collection process. Recording interview data requires experience and training and as noted the peer researchers of CHR study were very young and did not have the required expertise to record qualitative data quickly and efficiently.

Distinct types of data were explained by the research team during peer research training, still it was evidenced that peer researchers did not fully understand the nature, quality, and usage of quantitative and qualitative data. CHR peer researchers were more comfortable with quantitative data methods and their underlying ontological orientation towards 'evidence' was a positivist one; overall they liked certainty in their method, questions, analysing the answers, and presenting the findings.

For the KAR study the design was of a survey questionnaire, decided upon during the peer research training session. Peer researchers amended draft questions and the professional researchers thereafter sent a series of drafts until the final questionnaire was agreed. This included the number of questions, format, and wording of the questions and thus the focus - what exactly was important to the community regarding violence and knife crime. This questionnaire included 11 closed and 12 open questions. The peer researchers (aged 16 and 17) conducted the survey with a total of 48 participants in one day. They successfully recorded participants' answers for closed questions and were able to follow the case sensitive questions.

On the other hand, qualitative data evidenced some lack of data collection expertise amongst peer researchers. While recording data for open ended questions, they were not always successful in capturing full, meaningful sentences. Some examples of this were, 'because it's knives,' 'daily thing about it,' 'Busy place' – these data are difficult to interpret and, in this process, relevant data loss became an issue. Confidence, knowledge, and expertise build up over time and are of course elements in this learning process. For future community development projects, it is important for the professional research team to consider the viability of including qualitative questions with peer researchers. The recording

of qualitative answers is more difficult with specific issues focussed on speed, accuracy, and literacy (the latter not an issue in these two projects). Qualitative data entry methods and their challenges is perhaps hard for peer researchers to anticipate, and we propose this should be emphasised in peer research training. This may mean that peer researchers spend a longer developing the knowledge and importance of qualitative data recording techniques. It is important because it impacts the ability of peer researchers to engage with the data analysis process thereafter, as quantitative data (especially when constructed to be analysed simply) is easier to analyse and interpret.

Peer research training on basic levels of research methods, interview skills, data collection and research ethics is an integral part of the peer researcher process (Gomez and Ryan 2016). Research training by expert researchers as recorded within the literature varies between 2 hours to 2 days (Kalpatrick *et al.*, 2007; Gomez and Ryan 2016; Dowling, 2016). In both case study examples the level of research training fell within or exceeded those parameters, with our experience with younger children showing that a longer training time was required. Matching training time to the peer researcher age and ability is critical to enabling full participation with children and young people in community development. If qualitative methods are to be used professional researchers should build in longer timescales that focus specifically on that method of data collection.

Peer researchers: dissemination, skills building and impacting policy making

In the CHR study the peer researchers were commissioned by Yeading School to undertake the research with the professional researchers from Bucks New University. The dissemination strategy thereafter was informed by the positioning of the school policy

framework and the university. Dissemination included presentations to Councillors who attended the Special School Assembly; the significance being that the Councillors and Head Teacher were budget holders. Presentations at the University were prestigious for the school and its' peer researchers; for the university it evidenced research impact, engagement with communities and a commitment to an agenda of widening participation. Regarding the latter family and friends were invited to the university to watch their children present. Parents were deeply proud of their children and for many family members it was the first time they had been to a university in the UK. For one of the mothers and her daughter it was potentially life changing, with the mother later informally sharing with the research team she had told her clever and gifted daughter she would not be able to go to university but having seen this presentation and been to the university she would be proud to let her daughter attend. Lastly, the CHR community action peer research project was the basis for consultations and publications specifically aimed at how to conduct good community development research, it became a good practice example (Arnull, 2015), and the Yeading Junior School Head Teacher reviewed and commented on this paper.

In the KAR study the way the peer researchers disseminated the research had a profound impact on its' reach into the community. The sharing of the findings and comments showed the importance of the findings to people within the community. It offered an opportunity for young people to be showcased as positive agents of community development about violence and knife crime with which young people are often negatively associated in social media, media, and policy discussions. The dissemination of the 'Hear Our Voices' report ensured the engagement of more senior council, policing and university staff and it was presented to the Violence Reduction Board within Telford and Wrekin where its' findings were considered, including the elevated level of dissemination achieved within the local

community. Nationally it was disseminated to police forces by the Assistant Chief Constable Jackie Seibre, National Police Chief's Council Serious Violence Co-ordinator and to others who requested it (University of Bath). It has been co-presented by the peer researchers and professional researchers using online methods (due to COVID) at the University of Wolverhampton and watched by family members, policy makers, other researchers, and academics. Peer researchers were enabled to in-put into policy and research fora and share research findings within their communities in ways important to community development. The community has a low uptake of post-16 and post-18 education and the dissemination strategy employed by the peer researchers meant the research findings penetrated their community in a way few research and community development projects do.

Community action peer research projects have the potential to facilitate the upskilling of those within the community, university and beyond meeting the aims of community development. In the CHR and KAR studies this included peer researchers, community workers, police, and others, such as some of the university's own students who supported the peer research training and day of data collection. All gained insight into how participatory research is done, exploding myths about research as an elite activity of little relevance to everyday life. Telford and Wrekin Council and West Mercia police are further engaged with UoW researchers in other projects, seeking to embed a long-term project of community action research which brings real voice to communities where there are elevated levels of unemployment, disability, anti-social behaviour, and crime. The aim is that by building a standing team of community action orientated researchers it will be possible to upskill members of the community and through their participation in and understanding of research, research methods and dissemination strengthen community development. This accords with Eversole's (2010:39) proposition that participation should be 'multi-directional', 'teaching,

engaging and empowering' communities and organisations who work with communities to see things differently.

Confidence

There was not much variance noticed in the confidence levels of the peer researchers despite the age differences, supporting the idea of children as active participants in their own lives (Forde et al, 2018). In both studies, peer researchers were confident, approachable, and resilient while facing difficult questions from participants. Anticipating any age specific difficulties peer researchers might encounter, a staff researcher accompanied each peer researcher on the survey/interview; Gomez and Ryan (2016) have also indicated access to academic researchers may promote retention of peer researchers. We noted the silent presence of the staff researcher enabled peer researchers to feel confident and their 'lesser' role was denoted by their only speaking if called upon by the peer researcher. Their presence acted as an assurance for participants about the valid nature of the research and in the KAR project was a safeguarding component as peer researchers actively approached unknown members of the public in a public place.

Conclusion

Our paper takes a reflexive, case study approach considering two community development peer research projects involving young people. The discussion has focussed on the learning from the two case studies that contributes to theory building regarding the relevance of the structure and methods of community action research projects. Our empirical findings

highlight how the lived reality and demographic characteristics of peer researchers impact the outcomes in a way that is important and different and why that matters.

Given the growing popularity of community action research and its promises for community development it is important to understand how the demographic features of peer researchers shape projects in which they are engaged. These features enable them, if they represent their community, to research parts of their community which would not be reached by standardised research methods (Greenaway and McDowell, 2019; Eversole, 2010) and is therefore important. Young people bring their unique expertise in reaching people in terms of their questionnaire design, framing of questions, approach to potential research respondents and through the methods they use for dissemination. Community action peer research projects can reach those who do not read research reports or research papers and therefore the age and the ethnicity of peer researchers should reflect the populations from whom they are drawn and which they seek to understand.

Training should be age specific to allow for the full engagement of peer researchers and include a focus on data collection techniques that ensures full participation in analysis and dissemination. Ensuring representativeness in terms of age and ethnicity is important because children and young people focus on other young people as their community and by being there draw in those respondents. This can be radical in and of itself. In the KAR study young people had not been considered in the intervention that was designed, although they were intended to be impacted by it. The case study showed that peer researchers could co-construct research and disseminate it in ways that brought a fresh perspective to policy discourse.

Our case studies contribute to the theorisation of participatory methods as a way of meeting the aims of community development because in both studies children and young people's active participation, constructing, analysing, and then sharing and telling others in their community about their findings was a way of challenging power differentials (Sesan, 2014; Hlela, 2016). Young people asked other young people and shared their findings in ways accessible to other young people and adults. Community action peer research projects brought opportunities for community development incorporating emic and etic perspectives affording a 'plurality of understanding' (Smith, 2018: 430) and the opportunity to 'democratise community development towards social movement practice'.

Our theory building approach has utilised researcher reflexivity (Ebneyamini, 2018; Hela, 2016) bringing together two community development projects as comparative case studies (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). We saw how peer researchers shaped and reshaped the projects in their own image, building skills and knowledge as they did so. Research was collected and disseminated in innovative ways that were bold and engaging and reached into the two communities in ways we could not. They utilised links to the professional researchers and other adults involved (teachers and community development workers) and were able to input into policy. When people have knowledge and skills, they can influence how future research is done, with whom, how and to whom it speaks; skills, connections and possibilities are formed, and these have the power to be transformative. The International Association for Community Development, (2021) aims that through 'the organisation, education, and empowerment of people within their communities' socially just community development can be achieved. Research skills may be important for communities at a time of global challenge when knowledge and expertise are themselves challenged. A broader understanding of

research methods, methodologies and dissemination strategies when embedded within and representative of those communities of young people may offer a transformative possibility.

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