

Young People as Partners in Research

Experiences from a Research Circle with Adolescent Girls

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to contribute to methodological developments within the growing body of participatory research that involves young people. Eight adolescent girls, in the age of 15-19, from mainstream and special schools were participating in a Research Circle. Together with two trained scientists, they did research on how young people define participation and exclusion in the diverse school. In this article the process in the Research Circle is described. Methodological and ethical challenges when dealing with young people's changing lives and adult oriented bureaucracy are discussed. However, the article also highlights the dynamics that young people bring to the research process. For example, the shift in research perspective when the young research partners wanted to explore teachers' expectations, actions, and intentions as well as their peers, or the young researchers' ability to draw on cultural competency in order to ask different questions and to analyse the results in new ways.

Keywords: participatory research, Research Circle, child, methodology, children's rights

I. INTRODUCTION

The article discusses young people's involvement in research and describes a Research Circle where eight adolescent girls were involved as partners. There is a developing interest in social research to incorporate youths' perspectives in developments and evaluations of social services, welfare programmes, and policies (Taylor 2009) and the number of research projects, that account for young people's contributions by inviting them in the research process, has accelerated during the last decade (Christensen & Prout 2002). Childhood researchers Pia Christensen and Alan Prout (2002) have identified four perspectives that frame young people's involvement in contemporary research. Traditional treating of children as *objects* of socialization is still working within research that uses proxy and measures children on adult terms. However, this perspective has been seriously challenged by developmental understandings of young people as *subjects* with unique understandings and interpretations of the world. Within childhood studies children have also been acknowledged as *social agents* that are active as co creators of cultures and social structures. As social agents children are understood as both formed by society but also, by interpretative reproduction, capable of forming unique peer cultures as well as reforming social structures that guides child-adult relations (Corsaro 2005). More recent understandings of child as a rights bearer have led to developments in how children should be involved in research (Robinson & Kellet 2009), and a view of young people as *participants* or *co-researchers* is framing contemporary images of children and childhood (Christensen & Prout 2002; Kellet, Robinson & Burr 2009). Young people's involvement in research covers the whole spectrum from being involved on adult terms in adult led projects, to partners in

collaborative research settings with adults, but also in research projects that are entirely youth led (Mason 2008).

Young people's involvement in research have been promoted from epistemological and ethical approaches (Beazley, Bessell et al. 2009) grounded in theories of either sociological childhood disciplines or the human rights discipline. The institutionalization of sociologically inspired perspectives of children as competent actors inhabiting socially and historically constructed childhoods have coincided broadly with an ambition to upgrade children's societal and political status by developments in the children's rights framework and the drafting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989). These developments are related to human rights theories of proliferation (Bobbio 1996) and otherness (Benhabib 1992, Wall 2008). Childhood sociology has been successful as a critical dissident to traditional understandings of children and childhood (Kampmann 2003). However, having reached the status of institutionalized discipline and mainstream paradigm (Kampmann 2003), a 'second phase of development', as well as critical introspection has been requested among contemporary childhood researchers (Bühler-Niederberger & van Krieken 2008, Kampmann 2003). According to Alanen (2010) social childhood studies would benefit from exploring the evolving interconnections between childhood studies and rights research in order to come to terms with inherent issues of childhood studies such as balancing analytical and normative registers, and the double-edged result of promoting the agency of the child (see also Kampmann 2003). Exploring these interconnections will also help understanding what happens to social research, theories, and practices when young people are affirmed as rights-bearers (Alanen 2010).

Young people's perspectives have the potential to enrich our understandings of their various experiences (Kellet 2005, Jones 2009, see also Smith 2006). Also, ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child implies governmental and institutional incitements to provide means for young people to participate in research on their own terms. Within academia participatory research has the potential to account for these and the international knowledge base on including young people in research is expanding. Since participatory research evolves within contexts its nature is shaped by cultural and historical circumstances. In Sweden, the tradition of study circles of the popular movements offered a platform for the development of Research Circles as an arena for participatory research (Lundberg and Starrin 2001). The development of participatory research with young people has, however, not been as apparent in Sweden as in some other countries (Sundberg, Forsberg et al. 2006:8).

A. Aim

The aim of this article is to contribute to methodological developments within the growing body of participatory research that involves young people.

In the following text the fundamental principles for participatory research are introduced. Both sociological and rights-based approaches for involving young people in research are discussed. An overview of a Research Circle with adolescent girls is presented and the process of the Circle is outlined in some detail. Finally, methodological weaknesses of the Research Circle, as well as ethically and power related dimensions when doing research together with young people are considered.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Young people as research partners: a sociological approach

Young people's roles in research are guided by the way we understand children, childhood, and relationships between adult and child. Developmental psychology has formed the dominating paradigm on how we understand childhood and young people (Corsaro 2005). However, although giving valuable insights in young people's developments and unique ways of perceiving life, this paradigm has been criticized to focus the becoming human in favour of the human in becoming (James and Prout 1997; James, Jenks et al. 1998; Alanen 2001; Mayhall 2002; Corsaro 2005). Most significant for the development of modern childhood studies are the understanding of children as actors, childhood as a social construct,

children's agency to interpret and creatively reproduce societal structures, and their ability to contribute to the adult society. As a social construct childhood is a variable of social analysis connected with other variables such as gender, function and ethnicity. Children and childhood must be understood in connection to a specific context and the existence of multiple childhoods, become possible (James and Prout 1997; James, Jenks et al. 1998; Alanen 2001; Mayhall 2002; Corsaro 2005). Since societal and historical circumstances shape understandings of childhood, as well as the experiences of those inhabiting childhood at that specific time, childhood and children's experiences become worthy of study in their own rights.

Berry Mayhall (2002) has applied feministic standpoint theories to argue for the importance in involving young people in research about their life circumstances. A standpoint can be described as a place from which human beings view the world and understanding children as innovative social actors with unique standpoints, they become important partners when exploring their life conditions. In contrast to standpoint approaches within gender, disability, and minority studies adults sometimes claim their ability to provide a child's perspective based on the argument that, once upon a time, they were themselves occupying childhood. However, when identity formation is understood as a social, rather than a personal, project (Gubrium & Holstein 2001) children's agency to interpretatively reproduce peer cultures that differ from the cultures of earlier generations (Corsaro 2005) makes such a proxy-position problematic. Firstly, adults' memories of being a child in a certain time cannot easily replace experiences of the contemporary child occupying the childhood of today. Secondly, construction of identity takes place within a framework of what makes sense from where we are rights now. Grown ups' memories of childhood are constructed from an adult standpoint and how they choose to interpret the past become mirrored by present undertakings and locations. Memories of childhood become inevitably diluted with experiences of adulthood (Järvinen 2004, p. 47).

B. Young people as research partners: a rights based approach

Young people's involvement in research have been related to their civil rights as human beings (Beazley, Bessell et al. 2009). Children's rights have been stated in fifty-four Articles within the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations 1989). Four of these articles were identified by Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, and Waterson (2009, p. 370) as directly applicable to the scientific field, and have been re-written into scientific criteria (Figure 1).

Article 3 and 12 in the CRC are considered as two of four guiding principles and are called the principles of 'best interest' and 'participation', the latter being the most radical element of the Convention compared to its predecessors¹. However, using a rights based approach in research that involve young people as research partners, it seems appropriate to also consider the two additional guiding principles of the Convention, embodied in Article 2 and 6. Adding these principles, two more research criteria can be worked into the model of Beazley, Bessell, Ennew, and Waterson (2009). In this extended version of the model the non-discrimination criteria (article 2) would challenge scientists to develop scientific methods that provided equal opportunity to all children, regardless of gender, class, function, ethnicity, relation, culture, sexual orientation etc, to be partners in research. The essential meaning of article 3, that emphasizes the best interest of the child, should instruct the researcher to rethink aim and processes in terms of gains of the individual child. Also, the criteria of life and development (article 6) would propel social research to explore societal, institutional, and organisational practises that depowers children and put them in exposed situations.

¹ Declaration on the Rights of the Child, League of Nations, 1924/1959

Children's rights as research criteria

Research criteria	Article in CRC
Researchers must conform to the highest possible scientific standard	3:3
Young people's perspectives must be integrated in research	12
Methods used must allow young people to express their opinions freely	13
Researchers has a duty not to harm or exploit young people in research	36

(Beazley, Bessell et al. 2009, p. 370, own adaption)

Figure 1. Children's rights, as described in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, have been re-written as research criteria.

According to the modern human rights theorist Norberto Bobbio (1996) the CRC is a natural development of a human rights framework in a process of continual development. In response to historical and societal changes the contemporary rights-bearer is increasingly considered as a person in specific socio-historical context (Bobbio 1996). Originally crafted for the ideal man other groups, i.e. women, children and persons with a disability, are now becoming incorporated into the human rights framework as human rights proliferate and specificate (Bobbio 1996). However, feminist- (Harding 2004, Benhabib 1992), minority- (Yuval-Davies 2006), disability- (Söder 2009), and childhood researchers (Wall 2008) have argued that when contract theories become extended to others than the abstract man it has implications on how they are to be interpreted. Human rights philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1992) argues that the semantic legitimacy of categories and theories crafted by men for men have to be revised when applied to groups whose experiences are formed in the context of care and interdependence² (Benhabib 1992). This assumption is supported by Wall (2008, page 523), who claims that when children are understood as rights-bearers, human rights might have to be re-imaged 'in the light of childhood'. Realising children's rights challenges modern ideals of rationality and independence and, according to Wall (2008), induce postmodern understandings of interrelatedness into the human rights framework.

C. *Young people as research partners: reflections about power and nature of participation*

1) *Power*

According to feminist theories, exploring the standpoints of marginalised groups is important to provide a full picture of the workings of the social order in society (Harding 2004). When young people become involved in research they add a perspective from a group whose engagement in the world is framed by adult structures (Jones 2008), and whose perceptions and experiences are often less epistemologically privileged than adults' (Robinson & Kellet 2009, Qvortrup 2005, Mayhall 2002) Moreover, thanks to young people's ability to trade on their sub cultural capital they can ask different questions, increase accessibility to data providers, and add complementary insights in the data analysis (Corsaro 2005; Kellet 2005; Nairn, Higgins et al. 2007; Gallagher 2008).

"it is not that the child's voice has ontological status simply because children have been excluded from the production of knowledge, but in including children and young people's understandings of the phenomena they observe, measure or are part of, new possibilities are opened up" (Jones 2009, p. 124).

Doing research with young people issues of power is brought to the fore. Vertical power structures between adult and child will inevitable frame interactions between scientists and young research partners (Christensen & Prout 2002, Robinson & Kellet 2009). However, also horizontal power dimension needs to

² Here Benhabib (1992) refers to women, children, and fools.

be carefully considered (Taylor 2009, Mayhall 2002) since young people belong to a heterogeneous group with the same hegemonic power structures as in the adult population. Belonging in peer cultures are structured along horizontal power axis. But, power is not equally distributed and belonging is negotiated along vertical structures that define insiders and outsiders (Janson, Nordström & Thunstrom 2007). Young people's perspectives are particular to the childhood they experience (Masson 2009, p. 44) and efforts need to be undertaken to make research available to young people in different situations (Masson 2009). Being in the same age does not provide a sole criterion for having access to an insider perspective and Nairn, Higgins et al (2007) call on a more critical discussion about what characterizes young people that volunteer as partners in research teams.

2) *Nature of participation*

In the beginning of the ninetieths Hart (1992) published a modified version of the model 'ladder of participation' to determine the nature of children's participation in projects and programs. The model is extensively quoted and has been used as a theoretical framework when evaluating young people's participation in various contexts (Bergström and Holm 2005; Elvstrand 2009). A common misunderstanding is that climbing higher steps is a quality criterion per se. However, it is the firm belief of the authors of this article that the extent of young people's involvement should be determined by the aim and characteristic of a project. When the research agenda is mainly set from an adult perspective young researchers' ability to trade on their sub cultural capital become compromised. Under such circumstances young people's involvement might be more appropriate in terms of informants than as research partners (McLaughlin 2005; Nairn, Higgins et al. 2007). In terms of research from a rights perspective it is the right of young people to always be informed and have their views taken into consideration. However, it is also every child's and adolescent's right to choose not to participate. Involving young people, as partners in research should always be considered in terms of their best interest.

D. *Research Circles as arenas for participatory research*

Young people as research partners are part of participatory research which is an umbrella term for a range of different research that, to greater or lesser extent, involve people in different ages whose conditions are being researched (Reason & Bradbury 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart 2000, Greenwood & Levin 2000). Some positions argue that it is the privilege of those with the 'reality' experience to define the Why, What and, How of the research, thus giving the researcher a primarily consulting role (Hall 1984, Uggerhøj 2008, Greenwood & Levin 2000). Other positions value scientists' capacity to direct attention to structures and phenomena that might be hidden in everyday practice.

Participatory research with young people adheres however to the some principles that seem to be common to all research with participatory ambitions:

- The purpose of research is in accordance with the interests of all participants and the research aspires to bring about real changes in people's lives
- Research is conducted in a way that lay people can participate in the process
- Research is based on generally approved academic standards as well as 'reality-based' experiences, knowledges, and needs
- Research is conducted in close collaborations between scientists and research partners and the process is empowering in order to prevent that a group of people is working together with a scientist for the latter's convenience.
- Scientists and research partners have joint ownership of the results

Participatory research will be shaped by its contextual circumstances and in Sweden Research Circles, as an arena for participatory research, was developed during the late 1970's. Its history can be traced in the Swedish study circle tradition of popular movements and the aim to bring knowledge to "ordinary" people on their own terms (Lundberg and Starrin 2001). The Research Circle has been described as a meeting

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point of different kinds of knowledge and competences to tackle a shared problem (Lundberg and Starrin 2001). The democratic principles for participatory research apply to Research Circles as well. Regardless of one's role or occupational position outside the circle, every circle-member have the same right to participate in the public will formation, and discussions and reflections within the circle constitute a source of complementing data in itself (Lundberg and Starrin 2001).

While some participatory strategies de-emphasise the role of the researcher (Brown 1983), research competence is considered as an important element of the Research Circle (Lundberg and Starrin 2001). The researcher in the Research Circle often acts as a tutor with a considerable responsibility to propel the circle forward and act as a scientific advisor and teacher. While perhaps not having personal experiences of the issue being researched, the researcher has the scientific training of relating local problems to structural issues as well as how to relate these to theoretical analysis. The democratic and collaborative nature in Research Circles enables circle-members to produce fuller understandings than would be possible alone (Sundberg, Forsberg et al. 2006:8).

Participatory research is often linked to action research and its goal to achieve immediate social change for those involved. However, the agenda of Research Circle is often, not of explicitly enabling social change, but to see an issue from different perspectives (Sundberg, Forsberg et al. 2006:8). In the reserarch circle being described below immidiate action was outside the scope of the circle. The approach can rather be described as drawing on young peoples experiences in order to design future policies appropriate to young people's complex lives.

III. A RESEARCH CIRCLE WITH ADOLESCENT GIRLS

A. *Participants*

Young students from both mainstream and special intermediate- and upper secondary schools received an invitation to a Research Circle about school. The recruiting process tried to account for varied experiences in terms of gender, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicity, and function. The Circle members came to represent variations in three of these terms as eight girls, both hearing and hard-of-hearing, with different socioeconomic- and ethnic backgrounds agreed to take part in the Circle. The girls were in age between fifteen and nineteen and at the time enrolled in three different schools.

Headmasters and teachers of intermediate and upper secondary regular and special schools were informed and approved to the study. Recruiting from different schools no united strategy could be used to reach the students³, but teachers, school social workers, and school-councils were used as channels to get in contact with the students. Once contact was established the students were invited to attend an information meeting in order to make a more informed decision whether to participate or not. This meeting took place at the University at two different dates and attending students were informed that the ambition of the Research Circle would be to contribute with young people's perspectives on their school-life. They were also informed that the undertakings in the circle would be documented and included in a doctoral thesis.

To the first meeting five girls showed up and to the second meeting four girls appeared. The educational material 'Research Circles for Dummies' (Raninen, Edström et al. 2006), written by three students having participating in what seems to be the first Research Circle with young students in Sweden (Sundberg, Forsberg et al. 2006:8), were used to explain the Research Circle as an arena for participatory research. The girls were also informed that as research partners they would be expected to reflect and be

³ At one school participation in the Research Circle was published in the catalogue of pupil's choice. At another school the school social worker and students in the school council worked hard to established contacts with students. At a third school students were personally contacted in class and invited by the project leader.

actively engaged in the forming of the research process. The democratic understandings within the Research Circles of everyone's equal right to participate in the public will formation were emphasised. It was also explained that the project leader would be responsible for administrative tasks such as contacts with schools, compiling and preparation of research material, agendas, and protocol. A discussion about what could be regarded as a proper compensation for participation was held and the girls agreed upon receiving a cinema ticket for each session. All girls in the information meetings agreed to be a part of the Research Circle.

The Circle was run by a PhD-student and a senior scientist. The PhD-student acted as a project leader, advanced secretary, and scientific mentor, and had a considerable responsibility to propel the Circle forward. The senior scientist acted as scientific consultant and participated in most of the meetings. The young people participating in the Research Circle are interchangeably referred to as research partners, partners in research and girls in the following text.

B. Procedure of the Research Circle

The circle continued for five months and met during two hours every fortnight. After-school meetings took place in the evenings and were located both at the University and in a conference room at a café. According to a mutual agreement all members received a protocol via e-mail shortly after the meeting. In this way everyone was kept up to date even if they missed a meeting.

The first task accomplished in the Research Circle was the signing of mutually agreed upon contract with rules of conduct. Important topics in the contract included "*what is said in the circle stay in the circle*", and "*everyone has the right to change her mind*". Since the Research Circle was part of doctoral studies about participation and exposure in school the contours of the research issue were already defined before the initiation of the circle. During those circumstances it is, according to Lundberg and Starrin (2001), fundamental that the research partners get enough time to establish a common relation to the research issue and have the freedom to limit and reformulate the issue. The first four meetings of the circle were used to frame the research issue of the circle. The research partners worked with antonyms and photo voice to get accustomed to, and define dimensions of participation as a research issue. The work of specifying research questions were initiated in brainstorming and further discussed on web-platforms and in physical meetings.

Before choosing data collection methods the circle members received training in ethical guidelines, various data collection methods⁴, as well as education about children's rights as stated in the CRC. This education was provided by two young students enrolled in a project at the Swedish Academy for the Rights of the Child. The circle-members mutually agreed to use semi-structured surveys as their primary method, but also suggested semi-structured interviews to provide complementary accounts. Structured and unstructured questions were formulated during web-based and physical meetings and the circle-members used their informal networks to run pilots of the instruments.

Accompanied by the project leader, the girls worked in pairs to collect surveys among 100 students and 33 teachers. Data collection took place in class or at staff meetings at the three schools that were represented in the circle. The project leader was responsible for coding the data into SPSS as well as for compiling text based data accounts into an orderly record (Hummelvoll 2008). Structured data accounts were analyzed using frequency tables, cross tabulations, and graphs. The girls worked in pairs to perform categorizations on text based data accounts and wrote short summaries on their results from content analysis and frequency tables. Every pair's categorizations and result summaries were peer-reviewed by one of the other pairs in the circle. The project- and research leaders were responsible for compiling and editing the results summaries.

⁴ Semi-structured interviews, diaries, traditional as well as web-based surveys, and PI-method.

In the initial phase of the Research Circle the girls told that they wanted teachers, parents, politicians, and other students to know about their research results. It was mutually agreed that the results should be presented both orally and in a short pamphlet. Before printing the pamphlet the edited text was jointly reviewed by all circle-members. The research partners have participated in a presentation about their experiences of doing research together at a Child's Rights Conference for professionals, politicians, and researchers. They are also going to disseminate their results to the students and teachers that participated in the data collection, as well as to professionals and researchers at an international conference in November.

IV. YOUNG PEOPLE AS RESEARCH PARTNERS: ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES

The young research partners contributed to every step in the research process. When framing the research issue they discovered additional dimensions that could later be incorporated in the instruments created for data collection. In the data collection phase they acted as gate-openers to an arena currently experiencing research exhaustion and in the analysis they were able to draw on their sub cultural capital to enrich the understandings of the results. However, during the process some challenges, major as well as minor, arose due to adolescents and adults different realities.

1) *New dimensions identified*

Involving partners with an insider perspective in terms of minority age and various functioning the present study resulted in more complex understandings of the research issue. While getting familiar with the research issue (participation in school-life), the research partners identified dimensions that the project leader hadn't come across in earlier research reports. It is possible that the additional dimensions of the research issue would have been identified without including young people in the framing of the issue. Still, these dimensions seem to have gone unnoticed in related studies and the early identification allowed the circle to account for the dimensions when creating instruments for data collection. Also, in analysing the results the young researchers were able to explain important variances in accounts of bullying, harassment and ill treatment in schools.

2) *Twist in the perspective*

Belonging to a group often understood as dependent on adult supervision (Mayhall 2002; Qvortrup 2005) the young researchers also became spokespersons for their capacity and responsibilities. This made them question the project leader's student-approach and suggest that the circle should undertake research on teachers as well (protocol from meeting 19-02-2010).

3) *Flexible meeting arrangements*

The fact that the research partners were enrolled in different schools necessitated the creation of alternatives to physical meetings. Although meeting in person were the most usual meeting form in the Research Circle (and also the one most appreciated by its members) the creation of a web-based network was of great value. On this platform the project leader could receive quick responses in critical phases of the Research Circle and research partners, who were not as outspoken in the physical meetings, had access to additional ways of voicing their reflections.

4) *Incongruence in time aspects of adults' and young peoples' lives*

Since 2008, all Swedish research that involves "handling of certain sensitive personal data" has to be examined by a regional ethical committee "regardless of whether research subjects give their informed consent or not" (Vetenskapsrådet 2010). No examinations or approvals can be done after the initiation of a research project. The committee meets once a month and a request for approval should have reached the administrative secretary three weeks before the meeting. The final decision is reported some days after the committees meeting (Regionala etikprövningsnämnden i Uppsala 2010).

This procedure of ethical research review required decisions that somewhat compromised the research partners' participation in the present Research Circle. A joint application for ethical review was made for

both the creation of a Research Circle with young people and the research being conducted within this circle. An alternative approach would have been to divide the ethical review into two processes: an initial review to get approval to start a Research Circle, and a second review where the forms had been jointly written by the circle members. However, Research Circles need extensive preparations and constant nurturing not to run out of energy (Lundberg and Starrin 1990). With the present bureaucracy in ethical approval procedures it takes at least four weeks to get an approval (in this case it took seven since the first meeting got cancelled due to too few applications). One month is a long time to wait once the circle has gained pace and defined its objects of study, research questions, and methods. While adults often have the opportunity of extensive forward planning, young people's lives are much more changing. Moreover, ethical review forms are based on traditional ways of doing research as the aim of the research project, its methods, informants and ways of disseminating the data has to be thoroughly described in order to get an ethical approval (Vetenskapsrådet 2010). This is not always coherent with the dynamics of participatory research processes.

Ethical guidelines when conducting research that involves humans should be protected. However, the administration time, traditional orientation of the application form and the bureaucratic language of the application forms don't contribute to make the ethical procedure available neither to the dynamics of participatory research nor to young people's changing lives.

5) *Designing a participatory study takes times*

When presented with various research methods the research partners readily chose semi-structured surveys as primary data collection method. Considering that students are exposed to a large amount of surveys of various kinds it is possible that the girls were more used to surveys than any of the other methods presented. It is possible that having provided more time to explain and understand the opportunities and limits of each method, other data collection methods would have been used. Considering the wealth of survey studies performed in school this would probably have been a wise choice. That said, almost all students (99 %) that were present the day of the data collection participated in the survey.

V. DISCUSSION

A. *Methodological weaknesses of research conducted in the Research Circle*

The failure of recruiting boys as circle-members was partly accounted for by making sure that they participated in the pilot study of the data collection instruments. However, the inclusion of male students in the Research Circle would probably have added valuable insights in the analysis of the data accounts.

The project leader established contacts with principals and headmasters of various schools in May 2009 and the Research Circle was initially planned to start in September 2009 and run for eight months. Due to problems getting in contact with students⁵ the circle had its first meeting in December 2009. Since some of the circle members would graduate or change school forms in the end of May 2010, the decision was made to run the circle for one semester instead of two. Due to this the research partners participation got somewhat compromised compared to the initial research plan. Instead of being involved in literature reviews, the project leader became responsible for providing information about previous and present research about the research issue. Student researchers were also planned to take on a more active role in the encoding of structured and unstructured accounts by receiving education in SPSS and NVivo then what actually happened.

⁵ Students were initially planned to receive an invitation letter about the RC from a familiar teacher or peer. This recruiting strategy resulted in two (!) students. In a second recruiting round students were approached directly in class or via e-mail by the adult researcher informing and inviting them to participate.

Involving eight adolescent girls in a Research Circle about participation and exposure in school will not account for the full complexity of young people's varied life circumstances. The fact that students with a hearing impairment participated in the circle should not be understood as reflecting the perspective of all young people with a disability. It does, however, reflect some experiences from a group of adolescents where communication breakdowns repeatedly interfere to restrict participation in school.

B. Young researchers are ambitious and competent

Motivating the research partners was never a problem, as they readily got involved in each new phase of the research process. On the contrary the opposite was required when the girls wanted to involve various target groups and different data collection methods within the scope of the circle. Since some of the research partners would graduate and move away when the spring term ended in May it was considered as important to close the circle on time. It is a fine line when trying to encourage creativeness and engagement and at the other hand narrowing the focus to what is manageable within a restricted time frame. Hence, an important task for the project leader became to consider and communicate what would be possible to deal with in the present circle, as well as what could be accomplished within the scope of a renewed circle after the first had ended.

C. Ethical considerations when involving young people as partners in research

However, due to their inferior position towards adults, young people have some unique features in common. Besides being in a process of physical and mental development, young people share the experiences of having their engagement in the world framed by adult structures as well as being excluded from mainstream political participation (Jones 2008).

The study was approved by the ethical committee in Sweden and no adolescent under the age of 15 participated in circle. The ethical considerations were explicitly made clear in the rules of conduct formulated in the initial phase of the circle. When some schoolwork made it impossible to attend a meeting the young research partners were to inform the project leader, but were also assured that they did not have to attend all meetings to be part of the Research Circle.

The nature of participatory research made the consideration of informed consent more salient in the Research Circle. For one thing, the circle continued for an extended period of time and, secondly, it was not possible to provide extensive initial information about the research process and methods since the whole point was that this would be determined by those participating in the circle. Under these circumstances Kellet (2005) suggests an ongoing process of informed consent. The research partners were repeatedly reminded that they did not have to attend the meetings and that their school work was to be privileged.

Fundamental in the Research Circle is that participants become engaged in equal relationships with no one enjoying greater power than anyone else (Tee, Lathlean et al. 2007). However, involving young people as partners in research does not automatically solve the problem of inherent power imbalances based on cultural- and social values, experience, and age. According to Olitsky and Weathers (2005) power imbalances, due to different backgrounds, education and knowledge of research will always persist within participatory research with young people. In the present circle it was the adult project leader who initiated the research, drew the contours of the research issue, invited the research partners, and acted as employer in terms of distributing cinema tickets. The Research Circles democratic ambition might help to identify some of these power imbalances. However, instead of trying to eliminate all power differences some suggest that a more realistic goal is to promote a research process where these discussions are continuously considered and made explicit in the group (Olitsky and Weathers 2005; Gallagher 2008). In the present circle most meetings took place at the University where traditionally adult expertise is privileged. This might have contributed to a more vertical power relationship in the initial phase of the circle the research partners had to be repeatedly encouraged to question the suggestions made by the project- and research leaders.

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