

Tokenism in PAR with youth

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Participatory youth research is a form of research that engages young people as partners in every stage of research. Positive attitudes to youth participation throughout the Western world have prompted substantial developments in the field of participatory youth research in the past 30 years. In 2006, several Dutch cases of participatory youth research have been analysed. The preliminary results raise questions about the quality of participation in participatory youth research. Simultaneously aiming at scientific quality and effect within the constraints of time and costs... does it lead to tokenism?

Introduction and background

Participatory youth research –also known as participatory action research with youth or peer research– involves youth in various stages of research. It gained popularity throughout the Western world in the past three decades. Examples of participatory youth research can be found in several areas. In the field of youth care, young people have researched the opinion of youths on foster care, on the chain of youth care facilities and on residential care. In the field of education, students have studied the quality of their school and school absenteeism. Moroccan adolescents have conducted research on their peers' experiences with their upbringing in the Netherlands. Recently, young people in Amsterdam cooperated with the GGD (Dutch local health service) to research sexual behaviour of youth. (Cole, 1981; Alder & Sandor, 1990; Wilkins, Bryans en Hetzel, 1993; Hart, 1992; van Beers, 1996; Bemak, 1996; Dallape, 1996; Kefyalew, 1996; Nieuwenhuys, 1997; Penuel & Freeman, 1997; Hazekamp, 1999, 2003; Noom & De Winter, 2001; Westerlaak, 2003; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Pehlivan, 2003; Pieper, 2003; De Winter & Kroneman, 2003; Jurrius & Havinga, 2004; Jurrius, Straatsma & Strating, 2004; De Jong, 2004; GGD Amsterdam, 2006).

One explanation for the popularity of participatory youth research can be found in the connection with youth participation. Professionals in various sectors have been looking for ways to involve young people in making policy and to implement youth participation for some time now (Naber & van der Plas, 2004). Participation is a quality of participatory youth research, distinguishing this particular method from other youth research methods. Hart (1997) describes several ways in which children can participate. He uses the metaphor of a ladder: the higher on the ladder the participation can be placed, the stronger the influence of children is. The lowest sport on the ladder represents the level of being informed, the next sport is the level of being consulted, followed by advising, co-producing and deciding. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) and Hart warned against using young people in research for decoration or other wrong purposes: giving young people an active role in collecting the data without taking their opinion seriously. Tokenism is the phenomenon of young people appearing to be involved, but actually having little influence on the choices made.

As the popularity of the method increased, questions were raised about the quality of this relatively young research method. What is the quality of the knowledge obtained? Does it lead to participation and changes? In 2005, a literature study was performed to identify criteria which apply to participatory youth research (Jurrius, 2005). The study identified the following four criteria:

- Quality of participation
- Scientific quality
- Effect
- Feasibility



The quality of the participation refers to the way young people are involved in the research. Scientific quality refers to the quality of the knowledge produced by participatory youth research. Effect entails the extent to which the research has effect on policy and people. Feasibility involves costs and capacity.

To gain more insight in the application of these criteria, in 2006, eight Dutch cases of participatory youth research were analysed. The results showed that the criteria were affecting each other. The question arises whether it is possible to meet all criteria at once. This article focuses on the question whether or not simultaneously aiming for scientific quality, effect and feasibility has consequences for the quality of participation of youth in participatory youth research.

The article starts by briefly describing the method used to perform the case studies. The first section of the results shows how, according to researchers and policy officials, participation can be achieved by using participatory youth research. The second section provides insight in the ways tokenism can occur. Finally, the consequences of these results for future participatory youth research are briefly discussed.

Method

In-depth interviews were held with 29 professionals involved in eight research projects. The interviews took place during the first half of 2006. The cases were selected from research projects that were implemented together with youth in the Netherlands in the past ten years, varying on the topics researched, the research organisations, the orientation and the year in which the research was conducted (see Table 1).

Table 1. Overview of cases

Case	Research on...	Organization	Orientation	Year
1	Several topics	Codename Future	National	2006
2	Sexual behaviour	GGD Amsterdam	Local	2006
3	Several topics	Nationale jeugdraad	National	2005
4	Quality of school	WESP	Local	2005
5	Needs of youth in Gouda	PJ Partners	Local	2005
6	Quality of youth care	Stichting Alexander	Local	2003
7	Upbringing of Moroccan youth	JP2000+	Local	2000
8	Discrimination	Stichting Alexander	Local	1996

Fifteen of the 29 interviews were held with adult-researchers who accompanied young people performing the research projects. The other fourteen interviews involved policy officials, who financed the research and/or were involved in the application of the results. The interviews focused on the way the research was performed, the actions taken to increase scientific quality, the quality of the participation of youth, the effects the research had on policy, young people and adults, and the conditions under which the research took place. Each interview took approximately 90 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and coded using qualitative analysing techniques.



Participation

Researchers and policy officials agree that participatory youth research makes youth participation tangible. They claim that young people are more action-oriented and that participatory youth research provides a way to involve young people. A researcher illustrates:

Interest and concentration of young people and adults are different. Many young people do not feel comfortable within a conventional structure of a meeting. Within participatory youth research variable, active methods are employed that are more sensitive to the needs of the youth. Alternating discussions, training, practice, brainstorming, photo sessions, writing, presenting and organizing keeps young people involved. A clear beginning, activities and an end with visible results lead to young people following the structure and seeing the outcomes of their efforts.

Some of the researchers interviewed stress that by using a variety of methods within participatory youth research, more young people can actually be part of the process. Participation is encouraged by providing each young person with his or her own task. By conducting interviews, one reaches young people who want to express their opinions, but do not wish to be involved during several months. Since the interviewer has similar experiences and comprehends what the interviewee is talking about, by talking to each other, an atmosphere of trust develops. This makes it easier for young people to express their opinion. Young people are provided with the opportunity to speak for themselves and also on behalf of their peers. As a result, the recommendations are based not only on their own opinion, but on the opinions of a whole group.

Policy officials opt for participatory youth research because of the expected effects on policy and people involved: young people can use newly obtained knowledge to influence policy. Because the research detects weak spots in facilities and services and the information reflects the way young people perceive reality, this knowledge can be applied to improve policy. Improvements and solutions are based on a stocktaking of the needs and wishes of young people, and therefore correspond better to what they want. Young people learn from their experiences and strengthen various skills and capabilities, as for example their social, organizational and communication skills, as well as their sense of responsibility and their independence, which in turn leads to a greater ability to express their opinions in the future. Equity in meeting and relating with adults changes the way adults think about youth and transforms ingrained patterns.

Both researchers and policy officials see the importance of participatory youth research in providing young people with the opportunity to determine the agenda and topics for discussion. Young people decide on the areas of research themselves, resulting in knowledge that reflects the environment of youth as they perceive it. In their own language, using their own concepts and expressions, young people discuss the themes. This allows them to stay closer to their own perception.



Tokenism

Although participatory youth research incorporates a number of elements that potentially increase the quality of the participation - like involving young people in all phases of the research process and jointly developing an action plan - there are also potential threats to the quality of participation. Earlier, tokenism was described as involving young people without allowing actual influence on the choices made. The interviews reveal that researchers and professionals have the best of intentions with regard to youth participation. There are no signs of deliberate manipulation. However, they do demonstrate the challenges involved in avoiding tokenism in participatory youth research.

Reduction of influence to increase scientific quality

Participatory youth research implies young people researching each other. Researchers promote the advantage of young people talking more freely to each other rather than to adults. This should result in less socially desirable responses, more information, easier access to respondents and research methods suitable for the target group. Young people can help with the interpretation of the results. 't Hart (2003) and Baerveldt (2003) already pointed out problems that arise when involving youth actively in research. Young people are not experienced or trained in interview techniques and in recording the data. Their abilities to process information and to reflect on their own opinion are developing yet not mature. Adolescence is also characterized by sensitivity to the opinion of peers. Young people are likely to be easily influenced (Seifert & Hofnung, 1997).

Researchers and professionals are aware of the fact that young people lack certain research skills. They observe, for example, that young people are less inclined to ask follow-up questions and are quickly satisfied with the answers they receive. They notice that young people find it difficult to let go of their own opinion and to be really curious about the responses.

In the cases studied, several measures are taken to increase the scientific quality. On one hand, there are efforts that improve the quality of participation, because they strengthen the skills of young researchers. Training is a way to teach young people the principles of interviewing within a short period of time. Although there are many differences in the length and program of the trainings, all of them emphasise the importance of preparation, listening and asking good questions. Role playing and interview practice are used to prepare young researchers for their role as interviewers.

On the other hand there are measures that reduce the quality of participation, for example by selecting young researchers and by reducing the influence of young people in the decision-making process. Although some researchers emphasise that all young people can participate, it appears that the research groups often consist of 'skilled, older youth' from the age of fifteen. Professionals point out that for younger people it can be a challenging mental exercise to conduct research. A policy official states that the research is limited by the intellectual and communicative skills of the young people involved. Selecting older youth to conduct the research expands the capacities of the research group.

A professional researcher who guides young researchers through the various steps of the research process and performs several research tasks himself is another way to increase the scientific quality of the research. The formulation of the questions and the analyses of the data are tasks which are usually performed by a researcher. The influence of young people on this process varies per case: in one case young people formulate questions together with the



researcher; in another case young people receive the interview ready made at home. None of the cases involves youth in the analyses of the data. In some cases young people are involved in interpreting the results, formulating the conclusions and developing recommendations.

Reduction of influence to realise effects

Participatory youth research does not only aim for the production of knowledge or for temporary participation. It also has goals for the long term: to improve the environment of young people, and to improve the relation between youth and adults. These goals focusing on influence, participation, equal relations and empowerment are important *raison d'être* for participatory youth research.

By founding recommendations on the ideas of youth, there is greater potential for improvements to be successful. From the interviews with policy officials, it is evident that this is not as easy as it seems. Although professionals and researchers agree on the positive effects on young people, the effects on policy are not always that evident. Recommendations of young people sometimes do not fit the framework policy officials have to work with. A politician illustrates:

It is difficult. For politics isn't always that tangible. It's not only about your own backyard. It's sometimes abstract. Young people like to talk about the sport grounds and the activities in their spare time. They do not know the tasks of the local government. The topics are close to the young people but as a province it is difficult to put their points into actions. It is also difficult to discuss issues with them. That has to do with our complex ways of thinking and reasoning. You can see that some of them can't follow it. Not only because of the terminology used but also because of the level of thinking. I noticed that I often thought too quickly. They think very basic, more like: 'don't nag, do something'. We politicians only think in problems.

Researchers and policy officials are aware that recommendations do not always fit in the framework professionals have to deal with. The ways to deal with this problem vary strongly. A number of researchers underline the responsibility of policy officials to translate the recommendations of youth into policy. They emphasise the importance of young people putting their points across directly about what they need without worrying about frameworks. They plead for improved listening of policy makers to the signals given by young people in their recommendations. Researchers sometimes guide policy officials in translating recommendations of youth into policy.

Other researchers choose to clarify the policy framework to young people and to prepare them for the political arena. They influence the recommendations in order to increase the chance that policy officials can put them into practice. Some researchers pose questions about this practice: they wonder about the quality of participation, knowing that they influence youth because they are aware that in the end the one who pays decides what happens.

Reduction of influence to stay within budget

Researchers and policy officials state that compared to earlier times (thirty years ago) there is currently a positive climate for youth participation. This has had a positive effect on the expansion of participatory youth research. However, several researchers notice that five to ten years ago, some criteria on quality were more strictly applied than is currently the case. They illustrate that before, all interviews were transcribed and that the quality of the methodology and the research principles had the highest priority.



Many researchers experience a lack of time to conduct participatory youth research with the desired quality. They assess the quality through the available means in a given situation: 'The results were good, considering the time we had to conduct the research'. Researchers would like to have more time for recruiting young researchers, preparation, training, analyses, dialogue and guiding the implementation of the results. The researchers stress that good participation takes time:

I do know an example of participatory youth research that had to be conducted in little time. Three meetings were reduced to one. That is not the way you would want it to be. The participation was bad: the young people were not really involved but were only there to illustrate the research.

Perceived decoration

Researchers and policy officials warn for the risk of disappointment in youth participation when young people are asked to be involved in the research process, are enthusiastic and invest their energy, expect much of the results but do not experience visible actions. As a result, young people lose confidence in participation.

The perceived effect of participatory youth research can be minimal. Sometimes this is caused by a complete lack of follow-up actions, a case in which disappointment is justified. At other times, the perceived effect is small because there is a distinction between young people and adults with regard to their perception of time. In some cases, policy officials can give many examples of the actions taken following the recommendations of participatory youth research. They explain though that these improvements take time.

Sometimes it takes years to change an organization. Young people who participated in the research feel that nothing happened with their recommendations. New youths do not know that the improvements are the results of research performed by their peers.

The importance of visible results is underlined by all researchers and policy officials. The results are visible when actions are taken within a short term, are well communicated and are related to the research.

Discussion

Several researchers and professionals are aware of the fact that measures to enhance scientific quality, measures to increase the effect as well as limited access to resources have consequences for the participation of young people in participatory youth research. There is an ongoing discussion on the actual influence young people have on the topics, the questions and the recommendations. Researchers are conscious of their own influence on young people as a result of their knowledge of what policy officials want, what the available budget is and what can be realised.

Experienced researchers argue that negotiating influence always is an important issue to consider in conducting participatory action research. The examples in this article show however that negotiating influence with young people is more complex, because in some cases reduction of influence seems to be for the good of the youth involved. Pessimistic analysis suggests a declining quality of the participation in participatory youth research: to increase the scientific quality, young people are consciously selected and the professional researchers allocate more



tasks to themselves. To enlarge the effect of the research, young people are guided to modify their recommendations to fit the framework of policy makers. To achieve results within a certain time frame the participation of youth is reduced. In the end, young people can be disappointed in youth participation because there are no visible results. Participation of young people in research... or is this tokenism?

Fortunately, many researchers and policy officials involved in participatory youth research do not subscribe to this last view. Their intentions are good, and they are increasingly able to create the conditions to realise good participation in participatory youth research. Nevertheless, it remains important to continue discussing the quality of participation to prevent tokenism in participatory youth research. This calls for informed decisions by policy officials and researchers that take participation into account. In order to achieve this they may ask themselves:

- What choices do we make to increase the scientific quality of the research and what are the consequences for the participation of young people?
- In what way does the existing framework guide the recommendations and what are the consequences for the participation of young people?
- How much time is there to guide young people in the research and what are the consequences for the participation of young people?
- What can be done to realise visible results?

Awareness that aiming at realizing several criteria simultaneously has consequences for the quality of the participation is already the first step in striving for true participation. This article described the perspectives of researchers and professionals who were involved in participatory youth research. Evidently, it is of great importance that young people themselves are interviewed on their perspectives as well. The continuation of this research aims at asking young people themselves how they perceived the participation in the various cases. In 2007, an experiment will be conducted to learn more about the differences between research by young people and by adults.



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