The challenge of Participatory Action Research with children and young people

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Children’s views of their social workers
Overview

- Overview of our project
- Context of participation in Local Authorities
- History and principles of Participatory Action Research
- Cycles of PAR in this project – Cycle 1
- Cycle 2
- Plans for Cycle 3
- Challenges of PAR
- Potential benefits of PAR
Participation – Our Project

- 30 month Knowledge Transfer Partnership - Nottingham Trent University and Nottinghamshire County Council
- Review, map and improve service design and delivery
- Evidence informed practice through anchor institution
- Key focus - increasing and improving participation of children and young people
- Aim to conduct Participatory Action Research (PAR) with children and young people
Participation - Context

- Participation of children and young people vital for service design and delivery to be targeted, relevant and effective

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (signed into UK law in 1992): When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account

- The Council and its partners have a participation strategy, detailing key priorities and actions required to increase participation
Participatory Action Research

**History**
- Origins in Lewin (1946, 1952) as social research which aims for action and positive change
- Action research and PAR have taken many forms in different fields
- In UK, Australia and Europe PAR developed a focus toward professional practice, whilst in US, Canada and Latin America focus towards community action (Stern et al, 2014)

**Principles**
- Active involvement, empowerment, valuing knowledge and experiences
- Power – challenge to traditional imbalance of power within research
- Action – transformation of research into applied practice
- Challenges conventional dichotomies of researcher/researched
PAR – Cyclical Process

Cyclical process

- Planning – the collecting of information and data about the research topic
- Action – participants lead action designed to improve situation
- Review – whether action was successful and why
Cyclical Process of PAR – Cycle 1

- Created open, general plans for participants to shape research and decide key issues
- Met with many children, young people and their workers to engage them directly with the project
- Met with Children in Care Council (a standing participatory arrangement) and other existing groups

Outcomes and Learning

- Challenges accessing potential participants
- Difficulties conveying principles of research to staff and services
- Problems in communicating plans to children and young people in advance of attending their existing meetings
- Unable to set up dedicated group to conduct PAR, required us to refocus plans
Cycle 2

- Refocused on a key area for the Council – children and young people in areas of poverty and deprivation
- Met with services, children’s workers and stakeholders in three locations to explain research and facilitate engaging participants
- Made clear, children focused information for participants

Outcomes and learning

- Meetings took place just before the summer, and with budget restraints many services shut
- Some of the services conducted some participatory activities
- Attempts to reconvene with services and stakeholders in the autumn were not successful, and a service restructure was a key barrier
- Met with small groups of children and young people, to conduct other participatory activities and engage participants directly
Cycle 3 – Current Plans

- “What’s it like growing up in Nottinghamshire?”
  - Young People’s Board acting as advisory group, agreed to engage others to video an average day in their lives, to answer this question
  - Plan to work with participants, to introduce the research, ethical guidelines and safeguarding precautions
  - Participants will film a day in their lives using their smartphones
  - Meet with individual participants to support them to review and analyse video using CAQDAS, identifying any areas for action
  - Organise focus groups/workshops/activity days with participants if they draw out common themes, areas for action, or feel an issue warrants further research
  - Findings to be fed back directly to participants, to the Council, the University and local services
Challenges of conducting PAR

Numerous challenges of conducting PAR, both in general, and specifically in large and complex organisations:

- **Lack of funding and resources** – whilst organisations support participation in principle, they are severely restricted in facilitating it.
- **Motivation/justification** – where no service benefits are guaranteed, difficult to secure sufficient buy-in and on-going investment in research.
- **Logistics** – can be very difficult to arrange research activities in LA’s.
- **Access to potential participants** – perennial research problem starker when participants lead process and gatekeepers unable to arrange access.
- **Funding** – participants should be compensated for their engagement, local authorities increasingly struggle to support and fund participation.
- **Participant motivation** – particularly with children and young people, motivation and excitement to participate can dissipate quickly.
Potential Benefits of PAR

- For children and young people, through:
  - skills development, raising aspirations and building confidence
  - being listened to, and opportunity to share experiences and ideas and improve services designed to meet their needs
  - promoting active citizenship

- For the local authority, through:
  - meeting actual rather than assumed needs, leading to improved impact, targeting of services, and a reduction in costs
  - children and young people bringing a fresh perspective and creative new ideas
  - building the principles and practice of participation more widely into services, overcoming current difficulties

- For the University through:
  - improving links to local children and young people as research participants
  - data generated from research can be utilised for various research outputs
  - using learning from this project and its challenges to inform future research
References


Other texts:

Any questions?

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