THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

| Provisional Mark | 66 |
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School of Social and Political Science – PG Feedback Form

| Exam number | Student B |
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| Course Instance | February 2014 |
| Course Name | Involving Children and Young People in Research and Consultation CPD |
| Component Name | Assessment |

*Please note that both the comments and the grade remain provisional until ratified by the external Exam Board in May and will be subject to change, moderation and review by our external examiners. This includes whether or not any penalties imposed are upheld.*

**Overview**

| Marking criterion | Comment | Grade A-H (if appropriate) |
|---|---|---|
| Critical/conceptual analysis | The assignment squarely meets the requirements of the task, in considering two case studies and a range of elements from sampling to dissemination.<br><br>It has a considered approach, assisted by the use of sources, to the choices made by the two case studies.<br><br>Given the growing 'insider' interrogation about claims to participation, and involvement of young people in research, the assignment would have benefit from even greater consideration of the ethics and dilemmas involved in the research (including the engagement of young researchers). | B |
| Strength/cohesion of argument | The assignment is effectively argued, assisted by the use of sources. | A |
| Use of sources/evidence | As above | A |
| Structure & organisation | The assignment was clearly and tightly organised. | A |
| Breadth and relevance of reading | The assignment has a judicious selection of references, that are relevant to the topic. Even broader reading might have heightened the critique. | B-C |
| Clarity of expression, presentation and referencing | The assignment is clearly expressed, well presented and follows reference conventions. | A |
| Suggestions for future work | The assignment has many strengths, to use in future work: it squarely meets the task, has a lucid writing style, is well organised, makes good use of selected references and is | |

| | considered in its discussion. | |
| | It would be further strengthened by further 'testing' the case studies, and bringing in even wider reading to assist in doing so. | |

*Susan Elsley and Kay Tisdall, as course convenors, maintain a file of anonymised assessments with feedbacks for further students to consult. If you would prefer to have your assignment not included within this file, please inform Kay Tisdall k.tisdall@ed.ac.uk.*

**Introduction and summary of research projects' aims**

It has been observed that there has been a shift (within anthropology and beyond) in thinking about children and young people as individuals who are to *become* adults, to individuals as cultural agents and social actors *in their own right* (Mitchell, 2008: 60). Moreover, there has been a (perhaps related) trend towards involving children and young people much more actively in research, not only as participants but also as trained researchers (Lundy et al., 2011: 716).

This paper compares two cases of organisations which involved young people actively in research, as young researchers, supported by (adult) research staff. These organisations are Barnardo's and the National Children's Bureau. For brevity, the Barnardo's Young People's Research Project (Case Study 4) will be referred to as the 'Barnardo's Project' and the National Children's Bureau Project (Case Study 3) will be referred to as the 'NCB' project. To assist the reader, both of these case studies are from the CRFR website. I refer to the page numbers from each of the case studies (as downloaded, and unaltered, from CRFR website). As is likely to be already clear, 'B' is short for the Barnardo's case study and 'NCB' is short for the National Children's Bureau case study.

The overall aims of the Barnardo's project were as follows: to recruit and train a group of young people as researchers; to carry out a piece of research on a subject chosen and developed by young people, with people as the researchers; to produce a 'product' (written report, video etc) which would inform Barnardo's practice and/or policy development (p 2 B). This project involved an evaluation of the Summer Arts College (SAC), attended by young people living in South London.

The NCB project had the following aims: to provide an indication of the range of participatory activity that is currently being undertaken at local, regional and national level; to draw on the experience of a wide range if organisations to provide information and practical advice on different ways of involving children and young people; to report on the ways and means employed in developing participatory organisations (through publication of a Research Report) and by sharing this with others (through the preparation and publication of a Handbook) to promote this approach to increasing effective participation by children and young people (p 2 NCB). This project involved combining a literature review with a number of case studies to gauge the range of participation, and what participation involved, whilst drawing on the different organisations' experience.

Whilst the projects listed the above as their overall aims, both also referred to a number of other aims. For simplicity, and given the word count constraints, only these overall listed above aims will be reflected upon in this paper.

**Fieldwork Methodology**

<u>Sampling</u>

In the NCB project, a database was compiled following prospective agencies responding to the researchers. This database was used as a sampling frame from which to select the case studies, and it also served to provide a picture of the "range and nature of current participation activity" (p 6 NCB). This seems entirely appropriate given NCB's express aim of drawing on the experience of a 'wide range' of organisations (p 2 NCB). The only limitation of this approach was that it depended on how the agencies defined 'participation', which is a subjective term, as the NCB authors acknowledge, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, in certain areas participation was tokenistic (p 9 NCB). However, the methods used by NCB were clearly able to interrogate what 'participation' meant for each organisation; thus this limitation is by no means a major one. The Barnardo's project used purposive sampling which again was fitting because it sought to find out about the experiences of the young people attending the SAC, and could only use *this* sample to discover this.

Method

The NCB project adopted a 'mixed methods' approach, combining documentary evidence (and its analysis) and semi structured interviews with both children and young people, and adults. Semi structured interviews are particularly useful in research projects which have certain questions which must be answered, but which also depend on the interviewee raising and discussing their own experiences, which by their very nature, cannot be known. As Adams points out, it is preferable in qualitative research to "let the interviewee guide the conversation, as it is their experience that is the focus of the interview" (Adams, 2010: 20). Moreover, of course in allowing these digressions, the interview can be "very productive", with the generation of certain data which may not have otherwise been produced (Dicicco- Bloom B and Crabtree, 2006: 316). The interview approach adopted by the NCB was appropriate given its aim was to "draw on experience" (p 2 NCB) from the organisations researched. Moreover, the NCB project, on the advice of the young researchers, tailored the interview approach to suit the needs of the participants, and for those interviews involving children and young people, made them as informal as possible.

The Barnardo's project similarly employed a variety of methods of data collection, which included the more traditional qualitative methods of interviews, with a participatory method which included a ranking exercise in the form of a graffiti board (p 4 B). This participatory method like other participatory methods, is likely to have reduced the power imbalances at play in the research (Coad, 2012: 12), thus making it more ethically minded, and perhaps also improving the quality of the data produced. Evaluation information was also collected through suggestion boxes and graffiti walls, and group sessions which consisted of closed evaluation questions supplemented by the asking additional questions. In this way, as is reported by the authors, the data collected was a good combination of quantitative and qualitative data; this triangulation of the data will have strengthened its validity and reliability (Golafshani, 2003: 603). Each individual approach used here has its own strengths and

weaknesses, but the greatest strength of the data collection approach by Barnardo's is that it used all of these approaches: all participants were able to express their views, in a manner which most suited them. As Hill comments, "there is no one 'best' method" to acquire young people's views, and as such, "ideally they should be offered a choice and range of methods" (Hill, 2006: 76). Furthermore, having a range of methods also protects against the sometimes flawed assumption that all children like what are deemed 'child-friendly' methods, and do not like, or are incapable of engaging with the methods used in research with adults (Punch, 2002: 330); it is about *choice*. Likewise, the NCB project employed a variety of methods (p 7-8 NCB). Whilst it did not offer a choice to the adults involved as regards the research method, the use of other methods such as documentary evidence and its analysis, triangulated the data.

In both projects, young people informed the design of the project. As Hill observes, "young people generally think that if they or their peers have influenced the questions they are asked, then the response will be better" (Hill, 2006: 80). Indeed, one of the oft-cited strengths of having young people involved in the design of research which involves young people, is that they "speak the same language", and others include "the ability to share common experiences" and "potentially feeling less intimidated by researchers in their peer group" (Coad, 2012: 12). Thus it would seem that this approach helped to ensure that NCB gained the information it needed, from all stakeholders including young people. Furthermore, again the involvement of young people in this research process helped Barnardo's ensure one of its project aims was fulfilled.

Data Analysis

Whilst neither project discuss in detail the way in which they analysed the data, it is assumed that it was carried out rigorously.

Lundy et al suggest that "directly involving children in the process of data interpretation as co researchers is crucial". This is partly because at this stage, the findings are attributed meaning, and this is a "key matter" which affects children and young people (Lundy et al., 2011: 726). Whilst there is "widespread agreement" that young people *should* be involved in this stage of the research, there is little empirical evidence for their involvement in data analysis *in practice* (Coad, 2012: 12).

In the Barnardo's project, there was a clear attempt to involve young people in the data analysis process, providing them with the requisite training and involving them actively in the process (pages 8-9 B). Despite their best efforts, young people did not seem to be interested in the analysis (p 9 B). The adult researchers in the Barnardo's project were clearly correct in allowing young people *not* to engage in this stage against their wishes; ethical research depends on the voluntary involvement of participants. As acknowledged by the authors, this seeming apathy may have been countered by the use of computer aided packages (p 9 B), rather than analysing the data manually. It is impossible to

say if the use of such aids would have indeed helped the young people to be more engaged. Whilst it is acknowledged that this project was subject to time and budgetary constraints as all research projects are, it is suggested that using such packages and, importantly, training young people to use them, would have improved this project. This would also have enabled Barnardo's to better fulfil its aim of carrying out a piece of research on a subject 'as chosen and developed by young people, with young people as researchers' (p 2 B), given that one would assume that the development of the project would demand active involvement in all stages of the research process, including analysis of findings, given the importance of each stage.

**Ethical Issues**

As Kellet (and others) outlines, adults are not adept at conducting research simply because they are adults; comprehensive training is required in order for an adult to be fully equipped to conduct research, and its various attendant elements (Kellet, 2011: 208). In the same way, children are not inept at conducting research simply because they are children. Both of the projects delivered comprehensive training, with a particular focus on ethical issues (both general and project specific) to the young people to enable them to conduct the research ethically.

Informed consent is of course the "central element" in ethical research (Crow et al., 2006: 83), and it is also an ongoing process, not merely beginning and ending with the signing of the consent form. The Barnardo's project ensured the consent was informed and ongoing through providing the requisite information, and through reassuring participants that they could withdraw their participation at any stage.  The NCB project was larger in scale. In such projects, it is not always possible to ensure consent is gained from each person. NCB acknowledge the limitation of this (p 6 NCB). In those cases where consent was gained, it was only verbal. Had I been in charge of this project, I would have sought to acquire written consent. The consent would be gained through providing age/stage appropriate information sheets and consent forms. Whilst the use of such measures may create awkwardness or may make the research seem more intimidating, age appropriate forms and an informal chat about why these are needed are likely to be sufficient in reassuring young people, and making them feel at ease, particularly where their peers are researchers. It is also my view that by completing a consent form, young people have more time to consider their participation, which is important to ensure their *truly* voluntary participation.

Both projects guarantee confidentiality with the exception of any revelation which suggests a child or young person is at risk of harm; this is best practice and is in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. Ethical considerations are not limited to research participants; they apply also to researchers and are particularly important here with young people as researchers, as acknowledged by the NCB authors (p 6 NCB). Both of the projects provided honorarium payments, in the form of food, accommodation and outings, to the young researchers. This recognises the time and effort the young

people put into the research. As Kellet rightly highlights, "children are busy people too and their time is a precious commodity" (Kellet, 2011: 208).

This is not an exhaustive list of the ethical considerations in these case studies.

## <u>Dissemination</u>

Both of these projects had the aim of producing a report to be disseminated to relevant partners. In the Barnardo's project, two outputs for the research were used: a short written report and a postcard summary (p 9 B). The young people were directly involved in the design of the postcard. The Barnardo's project's dissemination aims were clearly met in that adult stakeholders and adolescent participants were informed of the findings at an age (or stage) appropriate level. One of the aims of the Barnardo's project was for the research to be used to inform policy and practice, and it is stated at the end that there is a commitment to use the information garnered to inform the planning of (then) next SAC (p 10 B). Moreover, another of the Barnardo's project aims was to carry out a research project as developed by young people. Again, 'developed by' is assumed to refer to all stages of the research process. Lundy et al also suggest that a UNCRC informed approach to involving children and young people in research would involve them contributing "directly" to the final report and in the further dissemination of findings (Lundy et al., 2011: 728). This suggests that the Barnardo's project ensured that the young people's involvement in the research was active throughout, and was not piecemeal. In addition, the involvement of the young researchers at this stage helped ensure that the postcard was indeed 'speaking the same language' as one of its target audiences; this is less likely to have been the case had adults solely been responsible for it. As Punch importantly highlights, it is difficult for "an adult researcher ever to totally understand the world from a child's point of view", simply because adults, as adults, are no longer children, and quickly forget elements of our childhood (Punch, 2002: 325). I suspect other organisations which offer similar programmes to young people would have been interested to hear of the findings of a thorough evaluation that was young person led, though evidence of wider dissemination such as this does not feature in the report.

In the NCB project, a final report and a short project summary was produced. In addition, two adults and 2 young researchers were invited to a major conference to launch the report, and 'almost all' accepted the invitation. The young researchers helped to plan and deliver this conference, and some of whom also presented at it, and the young researchers were also involved in writing the report (all p 15 NCB). Therefore, the NCB project also succeeded in properly involving young people in the research process, as well as meeting their aim of producing a report.

## <u>Bibliography</u>

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