

## Involving young people in research projects

'Triumph and Success' was a two-year peer research project. It was unusual because it was managed by an organisation that had more experience in running projects than doing research (SOVA). It was also different because the researchers who undertook the work on the project were young people. Support and training for the young researchers came from youth workers, professional researchers and volunteers. An evaluation of the project identified the strengths and weaknesses of involving young researchers in this way:

### **f** The Triumph and Success project succeeded in:

- implementing a peer research project that undertook all the research tasks planned;
- engaging and training a group of young people as peer researchers – who stayed with the project from conception to completion;
- giving young people a voice in the design and implementation of research on young people;
- producing recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners about youth transitions, especially in terms of local circumstances;
- bringing major personal benefits to the young people involved.

### **f** Using peer researchers to influence the research helped:

- shape the way that questions were constructed and the themes that the research should explore;
- influence the language of the research – finding a more 'youth-friendly' way of constructing research methods;
- contact hard-to-reach groups and encourage active participation of diverse youth groups in the research process.

### **f** The project did encounter some problems:

- while the level of influence young people had on the research process was high, it was limited because peer researchers were engaged *after* the questions to be investigated had been selected. Greater influence could have been achieved if they had been involved earlier;
- young people's exit from the project was difficult. Not having a strategy created difficulties in moving some of the young people on;
- analysis and contribution to broader debates about youth transitions was limited.

## The Triumph and Success Peer Research Project

The Triumph and Success project was run by the voluntary agency of SOVA and employed a project co-ordinator who recruited three adult volunteers. The project ran for two years in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, and aimed to:

- Identify from young people's perspective the nature of transition to adulthood, using definitions of success and strength generated by young people.
- Develop a definition of success in the language of young people.
- Explore the notion of 'protective/coping strategies' employed by young people.
- Provide a youth-centred account of how experiences within education, the family and the community affect transitions to adulthood.
- Examine young people's perceptions of the usefulness of services and initiatives to support them from childhood to self-determined adulthood.
- Provide recommendations about ways in which young people can be better supported by agencies and institutions.
- Provide recommendations about peer research techniques.

The focus of Triumph and Success was to be on developing a research approach that concentrated on factors of 'success' and 'inclusion' rather than the negative aspects of transition. It was proposed that young people should make a major contribution to all stages of the projects ensuring that a 'youth focus' was developed.

Young peer researchers were recruited by advertising in the local newspaper and in youth centres across Sheffield. Triumph and Success developed an appointment method that informed young people of the tasks ahead and allowed them to make the choice of whether or not to be involved. Continued involvement in the project was maintained by youth work support and the development of a group identity amongst the young people involved. This created a friendship group that supported each other and felt obligated to complete the work.

Once the programme had recruited young people, professional researchers from the local university actively involved them in the design of a

questionnaire and interview schedule. Young people became consultants in this process by commenting and making recommendations which shaped the research method. Peer research also undertook roles and responsibilities in helping to collect the data and analysis the results.

## Key learning and good practice

From the evaluation of Triumph and Success a number of factors were identified that help explain both the success and difficulties of the project. This key learning can be identified under three headings: project development and structure; involving young people; and involving and training young people in research.

### *Project development and structure*

- Building in youth work support in the shape of a central project co-ordinator and volunteer staff helps keep young people involved.
- Having a youth work team as core to the project helps the professional researcher(s) find ways of engaging peer researchers in research tasks.
- Building in flexibility allows the co-ordinator to make changes in the project if and when difficulties arise.
- Having an advisory group whose members have a diverse range of experience can support the work both formally and informally.
- The project start date needs to coincide with the appointment of the key worker.
- A lack of awareness of the time frameworks of other organisations creates difficulties in getting organisations and young people involved.
- Research consultants need to have considerable influence at certain times in the design and analysis stages of the research. For example, encouraging participants to think about the 'bigger picture' at different stages would help the final process of analysis. Youth workers and peer research rely upon strong guidance not just on task-focused work but on making linkages to the questions under investigation.
- Young people need to be brought in as early as possible. Getting them involved at the planning and design stage gives young people influence on the agendas and questions that are set.
- Not having an 'exit strategy' creates tensions and difficulties at the end of the project. For example, by not having a planned strategy from early into the programme young people had difficulty in disentangling themselves from the project.

- Thinking about analysis from the beginning of a peer research project keeps the questions under investigation in focus.

### ***Involving young people***

When it comes to engaging young people and keeping them involved, the following are important:

- Having a well-defined, systematic recruitment strategy in place prior to initiation.
- Having both wide advertising and a targeted approach that focuses on 'hard to reach' young people which will help recruit a diverse group of participants.
- Having a recruitment process that gives young people details about what the work will entail and the level of commitment that is expected of them.
- Allowing young people to choose to be involved.
- Giving serious consideration to the diversity and representativeness of the group of young people involved.
- Creating a participation structure that allows young people to leave and return to the project when they feel ready.
- Encouraging and developing support networks within the group of young people involved.
- Having a co-ordinator that can motivate, drive and support diverse groups of young people.
- Having a youth work support structure that is responsive to young people's needs.
- Having fun!

### ***Involving and training young people in research***

Projects need to do the following to successfully train and involve young people as peer researchers:

- Develop a method where young people are consulted on all the key research *decisions*; and yet
- A method that recognises that young people do not have to be involved, as central players, in *all* the research tasks.
- Have a process that not only informs peer researchers about the research tasks but also introduces them to key tensions and difficulties about doing research - i.e. confidentiality, dealing with aggression and risk, dealing with disclosure.
- Include both youth work and peer support while conducting field work.
- Use training methods that are engaging and allow for discussion and debate.

## Conclusions

The Triumph and Success project has had a substantial amount of success. It has taken a massive investment for all people involved. Young people have, for two years, volunteered many hours of their time. Project workers, professional researchers, senior management personnel and people on the advisory group have offered support and resources as a commitment to seeing the project through to its conclusion. It has not always been a smooth road but it has been successful. Not only did it engage, train and sustain the involvement of a small group of young people as peer researchers but it also managed to construct and implement a participatory project that supported young people's voices, ensuring they influenced and shaped the structure of the research. As a project it also had a significant impact on the young people who became the peer researchers. They clearly felt it had life-changing outcomes for themselves.

"Triumph and Success has given me confidence to go out and get it ... it's helped me get to know other people, who I would never have met before and it's helped me to communicate better ... I feel that I can now talk to people about things that are important ..."

Peer research clearly has a future as a method of engaging young people in project work. Not only does it create opportunities for young people to learn new skills but also for them to gain personal benefits from being involved.

## About the study

The Triumph and Success Project recruited 8 young people aged between 15 and 21 from different social and economic backgrounds to help undertake research on youth transitions in Sheffield. The research project was run by a team of youth workers and supported by professional researchers from a local university.

Young researchers were involved in designing questionnaires and undertook a survey with nearly 750 young people and face-to-face interviews with 60 young people from a range of backgrounds across four wards in Sheffield. This included hard-to-reach groups and young people from ethnic minorities.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Youth researching youth: The Triumph and Success peer research project** by Alan France, is published for the Foundation by the National Youth Agency (ISBN 0 86155 242 3, price £12.95 incl. p&p).