EYSIP

Action Research Toolkit

Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership is funded through the Scottish Executive's Social Inclusion Programme. It works to influence the development of services and policies for the benefit of young people experiencing social exclusion.

Action Research has been the focus of the partnership since it began in March 2000. This toolkit was first established to assist the practitioners in over forty-five action research projects that have been funded by the partnership in its first year. We hope it will also be of use to other practitioners, those working in any situation, and with any age group, in which critical thinking and change are the focus of the work.

The toolkit emphasises the learning that takes place, for both participants and workers, throughout the action research process, in such a way that whatever the outcome of the action research, the learning itself is one successful factor that will emerge. We gratefully acknowledge that in the writing of this toolkit, the learning that has already taken place in projects and shared with us by colleagues has informed our thinking.

Thanks

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Contents and Signposts

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For your first introduction to Action Research

We have tried to use headings and pull-out text boxes to help skim-readers. We feel you can tackle reading this book from start to finish in a half day, although you may choose to use it as a more flexible 'dip-in' resource. For a brief introduction, concentrate on sections One and Six-what action research is, and how it can be done.

Thinking about whether action research is the right approach for the task?

Section Three has a very practical focus on what kind of findings can be achieved through action research, and what will be involved in seeing a project through. Section Four also explores some of the important values and principles behind the approach.

Already started something and want to test ideas?

Sections Five and Six can be used as a reference resource to support your thinking as you work with young people using activities in an action research approach. These sections give ideas for gathering evidence and analysing it.

Want to try action research without committing to something too big?

`Starting Points' in section One encourages you to take on action research in a way that is appropriate for you. If you want to develop your involvement in action research in small steps, use the starting points guide and flick to the Compendium in section Six. You will find things to do with young people that are manageable and fun.

Need some help for trouble shooting

We hope that this book encourages you to get involved in action research, but is above all realistic about what is involved. We always suggest that talking about your work with colleagues, sharing and finding out from others, is an essential part of action research. We recognise that many workers find it difficult to meet frequently. A 'virtual meeting place' is provided on the notice board of www.youthinclusion.org which we hope workers will use to get feedback from others on challenges and successes encountered in their work.

Introduction

Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership was established in March 2000 to promote the inclusion of young people between the ages of 14 and 21 in the City of Edinburgh. This is achieved by using action research to enable excluded young people to identify the barriers they experience preventing their full participation in society. Through the action research process, young people also have opportunities to consider how services or facilities could operate differently to help them overcome these barriers. EYSIP then works with mainstream service providers to encourage them to put the findings of the action research into practice, or to change and develop policies that could make improvements for young people.

This Action Research Toolkit has been produced to help workers and organisations to consider using action research with young people. It is a means of developing your partnership with young people and enabling them to become actively involved in identifying and understanding their issues and concerns, and developing or recommending appropriate responses. Learning takes place for both workers and young people directly involved, and the findings can help the learning to be transferred to organisations, communities and politicians.

Action Research is not just about research nor just about consultation . . . it is a developmental process in which both workers and young people contribute to resolving the issue

Action Research is not just about research (measuring or defining a situation) nor just about consultation (giving people the chance to express their views). It may involve both these activities, but it is also a developmental process in which both workers and young people contribute to resolving the issue in question by proposing solutions and when possible, testing whether their proposed solutions would work. It involves challenging our own assumptions and testing the things we take for granted.

Action research can be used as an approach to working with young people in any setting, as it encompasses a variety of techniques which can be selected as appropriate. The approach can also be used with people of any age, from children to adults. This toolkit provides background information to help understand the principles of action research, as well as suggestions for practical activities which will help workers and young people carry out their projects.

Section One...

Background

An introduction to action research

Why action research?

Starting points

An Introduction to Action Research

Firstly, consider some of the common misunderstandings about action research:

Action Research is NOT...

- A one-off survey or consultation where set questions are already determined by adults and imposed on young people
- A one-off evaluation at the end of a project or activity to gain young people's feedback
- A desk-based exercise
- An academic activity remote from the 'real world' of young people
- Something that involves 'parachuting in' experts to pass judgement on a local issue
- Yet another pointless exercise to be used as an excuse for delaying real action to address issues for young people
- The production of a report that will add to all those others on the shelf gathering dust

The main difference between action research and other forms of research is YOU

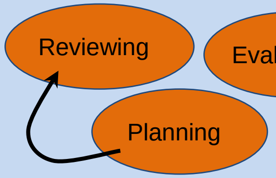
Action Research IS:

- Purposeful-it should be carried out in order to make a difference or to contribute to effecting change
- Challenging-it involves adults and young people in questioning, exploring, going beyond face value or the obvious
- Focused-it is an in-depth approach looking at specific issues for specific target groups
- Small scale-it goes for quality rather than quantity, other approaches are best for large samples of target groups
- Empowering-it should genuinely involve young people as active participants rather than the 'hit and run' approach
- Practical - there is a learning process for all the young people, adults and organisations involved throughout the action research, it is learning by doing: questioning, re-defining and reflecting from start to finish

Action Research uses a number of approaches and techniques, some of these are familiar in other forms or research. The main difference between action research and other forms of research is you. Action research is taken forward by workers, not 'experts' from the outside. As such, the role of the worker is all important in ensuring that the action research is empowering for those involved, that learning takes place, and that things change as a result of the project.

Action research is . . .

A learning process built into a piece of work



A cycle, rather than a start-to-finish approach

Action research involves ongoing reflection, where the experience of your work is monitored, allowing you to re-think what you do, and generate new experiences. It can be used

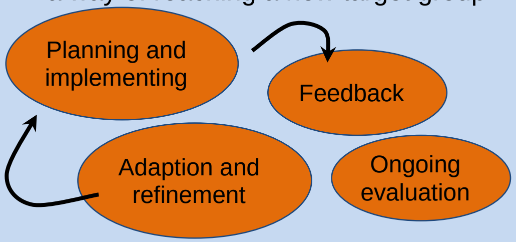
- to enhance everyday practice by making space for thinking
- to address specific problems with the aim of bringing about change
- to develop better understanding of different groups or issues

A means of resolving specific problems and crises

Action research also involves people, rather than doing things to them. The views of young people as participants, and of workers at all levels, all contribute to the process.

Action research should involve approaches that enable everyone to express their views and experiences equally. A means of resolving specific problems and crises A way of developing new projects or finding a way of reaching a new target group

A way of developing new projects or finding a way of reaching a new target group



Unlike traditional research, the process of action research is more open to the unexpected and can involve people in re-defining issues and changing their approach as *work develops*. However, this does not mean the approach is casual. It may be more challenging to record and analyse discussion and activities, workshops and interactions between people or groups, than it is to count off the numbers of boxes ticked in a questionnaire.

Action research is about being thorough in gathering evidence and thinking through the issues raised. By involving people in the process, we must also make a commitment to ensure their effort is worthwhile.

Why Action Research?

Meeting the challenges of working with young people

What kinds of situations do we face in providing support to young people? What kinds of issues are young people facing themselves? Without doubt we can all identify common situations and issues, no matter what kind of service we work in or what target group of young people we serve. Some of these are due to the nature of transition from childhood to adulthood, in which we expect young people to challenge and experiment, and to assert their 'difference' from both childhood and adulthood. However, our work also demonstrates that many young people are facing complex issues, finding themselves in difficult circumstances, and may respond to these in ways that bring them into contact with new risks.

In the last decade, workers have had to find new ways to respond quickly and effectively to issues such as the rise in HIV and Hepatitis C, for example, and changing drug trends. At the same time, while we recognise we will not change the perennial facts of poverty or homelessness or violence or other inequalities through our local efforts, we remain committed to continue searching for ways to change young people's experiences, enabling them to tackle their problems and move on into adulthood safely and successfully.

Action research has supported workers to understand how young people are experiencing issues, and to develop effective responses. Whatever situation workers find themselves in, from dealing with a group of rebellious youths letting off fire extinguishers every night in the community centre, to young people experimenting with new trends which introduce them to new risks, action research can play a role in finding solutions.

How do new ideas come about? Someone is bold enough to risk trying something out, brave enough to know when it hasn't worked, and committed enough to learn from what went well and share it with others

Who knows best for young people?

Those of us working directly with young people are in an important position to identify what will work and what will not work, and best of all, we can do this in partnership with young people.

We sometimes need to remind ourselves, though, that not all initiatives work for all young people in all settings. Action research can also help us discover the weaknesses of seemingly good practice in new contexts, before we make a wholesale commitment to it.

‘New’ Ideas...

Curfews

Peer Education

Mentoring and befriending

Harm Reduction

To help emphasise the importance of this position, consider the following ideas. The first is a current concern to us all, while the others show there is a process from 'new idea' to becoming 'established practice' in which action research has played a part.

Curfews were introduced in the United States and 'imported' as an idea to the UK by a Home Secretary desperate to be seen to be responding to rising fears about 'lawless youth' on our streets. It has been tried in one community in Scotland and seems to be an idea determined to catch on-in December 2000 Henry McLeish, the Secretary of State for Scotland, announced support for curfews as part of a strategy to tackle crime and the fear of crime.

How could action research play a role? If a curfew was imposed on the area you work in, you may use action research to investigate how it is working from the perspectives of young people and explore any new issues it might raise for them; action research could be used to explore other effective strategies for reducing fear of crime, to avoid curfews; or action research could be used to involve the community and workers in other fields in challenging the assumptions around the role of young people in crime in an area.

Peer Education, mentoring and befriending are now all established models of good practice in work with young people. They were new ideas once, but their acceptance in the mainstream has taken place because workers have been able to prove the value of this work through action research.

How has action research played a role? In developing projects, workers have tried a range of approaches. They went beyond simply evaluating if young people enjoyed the experience, and began to explore why and how these approaches were beneficial, and in what ways they were effective in achieving their objectives.

Harm reduction has become a mainstream activity in drugs strategies and many different kinds of research methods have been used in the drugs field exploring drug use, effective interventions and aspects of the lives of drug users and drug culture

How has action research played a role? Harm reduction has involved listening to drug users and using their knowledge and understanding to develop appropriate information and services that will be acceptable to young people. The rise in new trends over the years (the Dance scene has moved from underground to mainstream, and with it a range of drugs have become 'acceptable' to young people) has involved workers in an ongoing process of learning and responding by testing new ideas with their clients.

Starting Points

- Why does that happen?
- What do these young people want to do about it?
- Why did it work or why did it fail?
- How could this be done better?
- Why does this affect some young people and not others?
- What is the best way of achieving our aims?
- What do these young people think about this?

If you have ever asked these questions, then they are your starting point.

However, your next questions are very likely to be:

who will do it?

who will pay for it?

Resources

We have spent quite a bit of time in discussion with colleagues about the question of resources. We hope that it is possible for you to consider developing an action research approach in your work without feeling that a large injection of additional funding is required. Clearly, a lot depends on the scale and duration of the project you intend to develop.

We propose that action research, taken forward on a small-scale, can be integral to your work with young people, rather than an additional activity that requires money or extra staff. It involves approaches that will enhance all aspects of your work and your organisation and therefore has a high 'pay-off for a little extra effort. This handbook introduces you to tools and techniques which involve no cost. However, your commitment to the project in terms of staff time and flexibility must be considered carefully, these may not be 'cash costs' but they are resources which must be justifiably deployed in your organisation. Sections Two and Three help you consider what might be involved. But if you already manage to meet with young people within your existing activities or service provision, you have the only starting point for action research which we would consider to be absolutely essential.

We agree that spending quality time with young people requires some investment: staff time for outreach work and group work, perhaps transport, creches, refreshments, residentials... we agree that work with young people is often compromised by tack of money, and certainly, having a budget to support your action research will enable you to take on more in-depth projects.

Dialogue with Funders

If you wish to use the action research approach in a larger scale project, then you may well wish to cost your project and apply for additional funds. You should think carefully about two issues: how to describe the project, and how to tackle the issue of sustainability.

We have found that the term 'action research' is not widely understood. It seems easy for people unfamiliar with it to get hung up on the 'research' element of the term, and if they an so disposed, to apply some of the common misunderstandings (or prejudices) we describe at the beginning of this section. It is therefore important to describe your project to funders in quite concrete terms. Most funders now are keen that projects evaluate their work and share the lessons they learn. Many funders interested in social justice are also keen to look at how projects propose to gather evidence of the issues they are engaging with and their success in creating change, so there are clearly advantages, that funders will recognise, of using the action research approach . However, it would be risky to try to `educate' funders at the same time as asking them for money. Familiarising those that have already funded you with how action research works should certainly be part of your feedback to them.

We think of action research as a way of gaining efficiency within organisations, a loaded term in the public and voluntary sectors. But surely, in times of scarce resources, it can only make sense to be continually ensuring that what you are doing works, and that what you plan to invest in has been tested out first. Being cost-effective should not mean achieving more with less, it should mean providing quality evidence of the benefits our work, and action research can help with this.

Short-term funding has placed a burden on the sector in terms of continually facing the whole issue of sustainability. We again suggest that the learning process involved in action research can inform the way organisations work and the approaches practitioners use in their work, long after the action research process itself is completed. In this way, the benefits are sustainable. Of course you may well gather evidence that additional services or work with young people is required, but it would be disappointing if this was your only intention from the outset, and it would also be bad practice if you were not open to other possible findings from your work. In the real world of public and voluntary sector finance, we will sometimes use the evidence gathered from action research to make difficult decisions about re-directing resources or recognising that perhaps some of our traditional work practices are no longer appropriate. We hope that being involved in this as practitioners actively using action research, may help us, and the young people we work with, to gain some control over, or contribute more effectively to, this kind of decision making. We discuss how young people may engage with this possible outcome of their work in `Issues for Young People', in Section Two.

Who will do it-skills for action research

The purpose of this handbook is to demonstrate that the skills required for action research are already within your staff team. The crucial skill in action research is to be able to identify what kinds of activities and what style of approach will help the young people you want to involve, to play a full and active part in the work. The quiz on the next page will help you identify which aspects of your skills and experience will enable you to use action research in your work.

Action Research Quiz

Please tick the box if you have ever done any of the following activities as part of your work with young people:

- ☐ 1. Helped young people ask questions about issues affecting them
- ☐ 2. Helped young people ask for more information from services.
- ☐ 3. Helped young people work together- as a group.
- ☐ 4. Helped young people ask questions of other people.
- ☐ 5. Helped young people work out what they need from services.
- ☐ 6. Helped young people make demands of others.
- ☐ 7. Involved young people in learning about themselves.
- ☐ 8. Involved young people in learning about other people.
- ☐ 9. Involved young people in working out how society works.
- ☐ 10. Challenged young people to do something for themselves.
- ☐ 11. Made demands on behalf of young people.
- ☐ 12. Spoken out for young people.
- ☐ 13. Recorded what happens in youth work sessions.
- ☐ 14. Recorded work with individual young people.
- ☐ 15. Evaluated your work.
- ☐ 16. Asked young people to evaluate your work and their work.
- ☐ 17. Looked back over recordings of youth work sessions to see if there has been progress.
- ☐ 18. Planned youth work sessions.
- ☐ 19. Involved young people in planning the sessions.
- ☐ 20. Involved young people in deciding what they want to achieve and planning how they will get there.

Action Research Quiz

Assessing Your Answers

Questions 1-10 Getting the basics right

These activities contribute to working with young people in an empowering way. The activities are not action research by themselves, but are fundamental to the approach of working in partnership with young people and are certainly part of the action research approach.

Questions 11 and 12 Thinking how action research findings or results will be used

Using the findings of action research to challenge service providers or policy makers may involve advocating for young people. However, wherever possible it should also involve enabling young people to speak for themselves.

Questions 13 - 20 Gathering clear evidence

All these activities would be components of action research with young people. Again, the activities are not action research in themselves but are part of the range of activities which would be used in this approach. It involves taking care to ensure you have evidence for your learning so that others can benefit from it.

Three Different Starting Points

We have taken care to stress throughout this handbook that action research is a process, and also that it can be used in a number if different ways. It is unlikely that you will want to embark on a long-term action research project without first having tried some of the approaches suggested in this handbook. The many different work situations you are in will also place different demands on you and bring you into contact with young people in different ways. Therefore, we suggest there are three different ways of beginning your experience of action research.

Snap Shot

A one-off activity such as an event, board game or workshop can help involve young people in an in-depth discussion about a particular issue which will provide a snap-shot of their views and experiences. The picture will be limited to the experiences of those particular participants at that point in time (many factors may affect their views on the occasion you are working with them). In a one-off exercise it would not be possible to suggest that their views or experiences are typical of any other group or situation.

Snap shot exercises can be useful to inform future planning or practice within your organisation, or perhaps to resolve with young people a problem within their group or a specific aspect of provision for them.

Exploring

A series of sessions which is structured and progressive, may involve a range of activities over a short period of time. Each activity may be designed to explore issues raised by the last in more depth. This approach may also be small scale and focused on a specific and quite well defined issue, and efforts may be made to involve a cross-section of young people or to compare findings with the results of other pieces of work.

This exploring approach may help organisations to scope the scale of a problem or help define issues more clearly in order to inform a response. The findings are worth disseminating with other workers to inform their thinking, and it is likely that studies like this will highlight areas for more in-depth investigation.

Investigating

A planned investigation which takes place over a period of time would become a more systematic approach to action research. It may take place on a small or large scale, but issues of sampling who/what kind of young person is involved), and of using a range of methods to tease out issues, would be important.

Work at this level can generate findings which are sound, and which could inform policies and provision affecting young people. When several similar investigations generate common findings, it could be suggested these are reliable indications that policies or practice on a wide scale could be changed for the better, based on this evidence.

Snap Shot

A Network promoting work with girls carried out a one-off exercise with girls from all over Edinburgh. They asked the question 'What should Edinburgh do for girls, and why?' using a postcard exercise.

Each group was sent a bundle of free postcards (collected from cafes and venues around the city in the free racks now available) and asked to respond by a deadline, with the incentive of a prize draw.

A wide range of responses were received from young women:

`we need more sports activities for young women'

'free sanitary towels and tampons'

Overall, the replies suggest that young women want a wider range of choices in women-only activities and in mixed activities, but this is a very loose finding. The Network plans to use the findings to generate more discussion by placing the findings on a website, and inviting groups to make further comments. They have also considered planning an event and using the findings to generate workshops on different issues raised in the postcard exercise. The exercise was useful because it raised awareness among workers involved with each group of how simple exercises can generate discussion—comments that made it onto the postcards were a fraction of what workers found out through asking the young women to take part.

Exploring

A youth club had a strong track record of involving young people in managing their project and fundraising for activities such as weekend residentials. During a period of fundraising, there were a number of thefts in the club, resulting in substantial loss of funds that the young people had raised through a sale. The workers realised that the young people were compromised in not wanting to 'grass' but also angry at their loss. The workers devised a programme to work with young people on attitudes towards crime and reporting crime. The workers used pop quizzes, board games and flash card exercises to explore the issues. They discovered the young people had clear views on what kind of crime they deemed 'acceptable and part of everyday life' and what they felt was 'out of order'. The findings were local and specific to this group. They did not immediately resolve the issues raised by the thefts from the dub. However, it did develop the sense of ownership of the club's resources amongst the young people, and resulted in their involvement in shared decision making about security measures that should be introduced.

Investigating

A befriending project wanted to re-design its service to young people. At that time, it had just started a new group of volunteers that had already been matched with young people. The project decided to use this group to test out what aspects of their existing service were most effective and most valued by the young people. Most young people are linked with befrienders for up to a year, so it was possible to plan an action research process that would develop over time, as the young people's relationships with the project and their befrienders also developed. The project started with a baseline exercise. In addition to the usual information required to enable young people to he matched to volunteers, a more in-depth interview was carried out to explore young people's expectations and feelings about their referral to the project. The interviews were analysed. The findings of the interviews were used to inform the development of further exercises to explore levels of self esteem as the project progressed. A range of exercises were used during a nine month period, such as diary keeping by the volunteers and the young people, some group work games to stimulate discussion, and some one-to-one activities. Towards the end of the period, young people were involved in creative reviewing activities such as flow chart representations of their personal progress during the project. The findings generated through the action research process were much more in-depth than the project's standard monitoring system allowed. The project did not wait until the end of the process before acting on the findings - it was possible to re-design volunteer training, for example, early on in the process, based on the results of some of the exercises. However, in the longer term the project had a much better understanding of how to manage the development of the project for the maximum benefit to young people.

Section Two...

Thinking Things Through

Issues for Workers

Issues for young people

Issues for partner organisations

Issues for managers

Issues for Workers

Time Commitment

Whichever starting point you are considering, there is more to action research than turning up and holding a workshop or activity. Perhaps more than usual, it will involve you in spending time preparing, recording, and considering how things are progressing (reflecting and analysing)-this may be done with young people, or may involve the workers or organisation in spending additional time together outwith their contact time with young people.

It is worth clarifying with your supervisor/manager, if she/he is not directly involved with the work, that this planning and reflection time is essential to the process of action research.

Clarity

Time spent at the outset identifying exactly what you want to achieve is also important. It will help you consider which starting point (described on page 15) is most appropriate, but it will also help prevent you from spinning off at a tangent every time a new and interesting issue comes up-as they will. Establishing clear boundaries for the work will help you focus and while flexibility is built into the action research process, it is also important to be realistic about what can be achieved. The Planning section of this handbook gives some useful pointers, but overall, it may be better to succeed in completing a small-scale piece of work, which is a positive and informative experience for both workers and young people, and may lead in the future to further investigations, than to set out with grandiose and unrealistic ideas and disappoint all involved.

A focused piece of work is less likely to 'sprawl' and lose its way. If the point of the action research is to work towards change, then it is important not to get sidetracked, leaving everyone with the feeling that a lot was done but nothing achieved.

Being willing to learn and to seek support

Our experience is that all the workers that have been involved in the action research projects we have funded, have enjoyed getting on a learning curve that can take them into whole new ways of thinking. This has involved whole teams in having new discussions about their approach and about how to develop their work, which have seen stimulating debate. Being open to this challenging and exploring approach can be more comfortable if workers are willing to seek support. The views of others can help provide that perspective that can be difficult to find when you are in the thick of a project. Edinburgh Youth SIP tries to provide training, support and feedback for workers involved in action research, but again, wherever they seek support, workers should plan to make time for this. Teams should plan preparation time for workers to consider issues that might arise before they get started.

Find out what's out there

Part of the learning process is being aware of what is being done in other parts of the city/country/world, and applying this to our work. Re-inventing the wheel can be an extremely valuable exercise, if it involves bringing a model of good practice into a new situation, or trying it with a different target group, and thoroughly researching what works and what doesn't. Action research is not about getting hung up on innovation, but neither is it about uncritically copying projects or initiatives without first assessing how and why they work. This means that when we are finding out what is going on elsewhere, we want to know more than the story of a project, we will be looking for the way evidence of its success was gathered too.

It can be difficult to find relevant information, especially when time is scarce. Also, we are aware that action research attracts 'doers' rather than background readers. The Internet is particularly useful for people who want to quickly scan for information-but be aware of the limits of the Internet. Have you ever put details of your own work on the net? There are plenty of projects and organisations out there who haven't either.

Some 'meta' search engines are useful for scanning results from a dozen other search engines at once, and some sites have a specific research focus. We look in more detail at how to access research and information in section Three, 'Support from Wider Information'.

Browsing for non-book lovers:

meta search engines:
www.copernic.com
www.dogpile.com

And dedicated research sites:
www.researchweb.org
www.youthinformation.com
www.scre.ac.uk
www.jrf.org.uk
www.scu.edu.au

And online newspaper archives such as
www.guardianonline.com

Putting the questions in context

Before setting out to do your action research, particularly if you are using an exploratory or investigatory approach, you should consider that you may eventually want to set your findings in a bigger picture.

A wide range of data is available on populations and localities, available from the City of Edinburgh Council or Edinburgh Youth SIR Data on health, crime, education and employment are also available from the relevant agencies and can sometimes be given on specified age-ranges or post-codes. All of this data can provide a context for your own findings. Edinburgh Youth SIP tries to collate as much up to date data as possible to help you with this. We also try to keep in touch with action research work across Edinburgh to facilitate networking between workers with similar objectives or approaches.

Issues for Young People

Understanding the way young people want to get involved

Young people excluding themselves from provision through bad behaviour are unlikely to ask for an action research project to develop an effective way of working with them.

Not all issues for action research are generated by young people themselves. Often, it is workers who identify that a particular issue is problematic and needs to be addressed. However, young people's own feelings and understanding of the issue may be crucial to finding a solution, so it is important to consider why and how young people will want to be involved.

Many young people are interested in discussing their ideas and opinions and welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with supportive adults who listen. In particular, some young people who experience specific problems or circumstances recognise the potential benefit of sharing their experiences to make a difference for themselves or others. However, workers must consider carefully how young people will view the project if it is not successful in making a difference. We believe young people can take a practical and reasonable view about this, provided they are not given false promises from the outset.

Some young people may be very realistic about their own interest in taking part-they may want to contribute to a one-off session but be unwilling to commit to a long-term project. Others may express unlimited interest at first then never be seen again-this is in the nature of working with young people, and the action research must be designed to accommodate this. Your knowledge about their levels of concentration, their ability to work with others in a group, their aptitude for discussing, playing games, reading or writing, is what will help you design the right approach for the action research.

Engaging with the political process

We discussed earlier the wider political processes we are immersed in as workers largely reliant on public sector funding. This means we are often engaged in work of a short term nature, although we propose there can be lasting impact from the results of action research. The phrase 'raising expectations' is becoming a cliché which can unfortunately be used as an excuse for doing nothing at all. In some ways, raising young people's expectations may be no bad thing. What is essential in our work with young people is to be honest. It is fundamental to action research that we are supporting young people to critically engage with issues affecting them, and in so doing they will develop an understanding about how decisions may be made as a result of their project. Sometimes the outcomes are not what people hoped for, but that is real life after all. Whatever the outcome, we have a responsibility to ensure that young people reflect on what they have achieved personally and collectively as a result of their involvement.

Perhaps young people's expectations should be raised:

to expect to be listened to, to expect their capacity to understand how the world works will be respected,
to expect to play a role in testing out what approaches will be effective in making changes for the benefit of young people

Feeding back

No matter how fleeting a young person's involvement, they should always be fully aware of the purposes of the action research. It is also good practice to make young people aware of the findings, ideally in a youth-friendly version of any report that is produced. Young people could, of course, be involved in disseminating the findings or advocating for changes as a result of the action research, but where this is not possible, or they do not want to do this, they should be aware of plans for taking things further. These issues are discussed more fully in 'Ethical Considerations' on page 43.

Recognising young people's involvement may include:

Putting information on their National Record of Achievement (held at school)

Helping them add information to their CV

Introducing the Asdan Youth Achievement Awards as part of the project (see www. asdan.co.uk)

Getting something out of it

Creative reviewing tools should be used to help young people see their progress and their personal and collective development. There are plenty of ideas on this in youth work and group work handbooks.

Some forms of reward can be seen as naff by young people—certificates and awards should be considered carefully, although perhaps not written off altogether. Many young people have never been awarded anything - it may be privately very gratifying to receive one, if not publicly very good for the cool image. Certainly, monetary or material rewards are attractive to young people, although there are wider issues to be considered here. One project used cash rewards for young people's participation in a lengthy one-to-one survey, which they promptly used for intoxication purposes, causing a minor local scandal.

For older young people, you may need to consider whether their voluntary involvement with a project compromises their availability for work, and therefore their benefits. In this case considering ways to engage young people properly as paid trainees or employees may be the best reward, and of tangible benefit to their future job prospects.

Edinburgh Youth SIP is considering ways of providing specific training for young researchers and accrediting their involvement in action research, but until this happens, young people should be encouraged to be aware of the skills they have gained and to see where these are transferable to other situations.

Issues for Partner Organisations

One of the benefits of action research can be that it can bring organisations together in practical and mutually beneficial partnerships. However, it should not be assumed that all will be plain sailing, and we would advise that a number of issues are discussed before work gets underway.

Providing access to young people

Where one partner is providing 'access' to young people to enable another organisation to carry out action research with them, tensions can arise. It should not be assumed that all that organisation has to do is inform the young people that there is an opportunity to take part. Very often, workers would have to do considerably more than this to get young people interested, to get them along to group or individual sessions, and to support their involvement before and afterwards. Their time should therefore be respected. The face-to-face workers should be properly informed themselves in order to inform the young people, and their views on the `workability' of your plans with their clients accepted. After all, it is the workers' credibility that may be damaged if they encourage young people to participate in something that they then feel is rubbish.

Shared understanding

The aims of your research, and the way you intend to approach your work, should be made as clear as possible. There should be clarity about who will be doing what, when and why, as far as possible. Since action research is a developmental approach, if there are plans for the work to continue over a period of time, a series of meetings may be the best way to keep everyone up to date with the progress of the work, and what directions it is taking at different times.

Shared guidelines and policies

Not all organisations have the same policies regarding young people. Issues such as child protection, your position on ethics (see p 43) and other guidelines informing your project and your approach should be explicitly agreed beforehand.

Feeding back to organisations

Some organisations will want to collaborate with your work because they have ideas about how they may be able to USE the findings within their own organisations. This is surely reasonable, and as part of planning your time, you may consider how you will provide progress reports, feedback to staff or management boards etc, and enable the organisations to feedback to any young people they enable to become involved.

Ownership of findings

Any final report or publication should at the very least acknowledge the range of organisations that supported you project or that worked in partnership with you. You may not wish to enter into copyright agreements or contracts concerning your findings, but if they are to be high profile, you should consider how the role of each partner is to be represented. It is in the spirit of action research to share what is learned with other practitioners and, wherever possible, policy makers and others who may benefit. This spirit should not be marred by acrimony over ownership of findings. Disputes may also occur if there is sale of any documents that benefits one partner disproportionately.

Issues for Managers

Managers may find themselves in different situations: they may be faced with a member of their staff keen to develop and take on a piece of action research, or they may be interested themselves in initiating action research approaches among their staff.

Key management issues

This toolkit gives a thorough introduction to planning projects, by exploring the time and resource commitments required (see sections One and Three). Managers obviously play an important role in allowing workers the time, space and resources to take forward pieces of work.

Even where workers are applying the approach to a piece of work they are already involved in, perhaps providing a service or running a group, they will benefit from additional time to 'think' (plan, reflect and theorise), to carry out activities which gather evidence, and to collate and analyse evidence.

However, for this investment, consider the benefits to your workers, your organisation, and the client groups you serve. It is a way of generating new ideas and creativity within your organisation to apply to what you do. It is also a way of relating what you do to the wider contexts affecting your work-even small scale action research should encourage workers to make connections and links to the issues which impact on their client group or their organisation.

Creating space for workers to develop

Training for workers is generally one of those items on the wish list reserved for if and when we get some spare cash'. However, training in action research methods is actually pretty thin on the ground in the UK, hence the production of this toolkit. You can find information on training programmes on www.youthinclusion.org, but generally, reading and website browsing are the most accessible sources of information on action research.

This means that workers in the field may have limited access to ideas, inspiration and problem-solving advice. We recommend that managers make space as far as possible for workers to communicate with others in the field from different organisations, in order to share this support.

Morale and motivation

Experimentation. This is one of the most exciting facets of action research and one of the scary things about it, for both workers and managers. Good action research may sometimes push at the edges of what organisations feel is a comfortable relationship with their service users, or may generate more than they really want to hear from their clients. If workers feel caught in the middle of respecting the views of young people and incurring the disapproval of their organisation, this can be a very demoralising place to be. Think about how you will respond to these situations as a manager. You should be able to use this toolkit to judge the integrity of approach and analysis that have generated findings, but in this toolkit there is an explicit position on the values and principles of action research which we hope that managers will support.

It is also in the nature of experimentation, that sometimes activities, no matter how carefully planned or piloted, fail miserably, even for experienced workers. Morale can be low at this point and also, commonly, at the point at which workers are trying to pull together their findings in a coherent report. We mention often in this toolkit the value of an 'outside perspective' to aid thinking when things are 'stuck'. There may be occasions when managers can fulfil this role supportively.

Section Three...

Preparing to get started

The Focus

Who takes part

Managing time

Support from wider information sources

Presenting findings

The Focus

Focusing

Whilst considering 'Starting points', we have already discussed the way that the questions you ask can begin the process of devising an action research project (see p 11). These questions lead to identifying the right research process to find the 'answers' or responses. In other words, they 'frame' that process.

It is well worth taking some time to thoroughly think through your research questions, because they play such an important role in defining your work. 41 These are the questions which should be revisited at every stage in the research process, to ensure that the work you are planning is relevant to these, and that any departure from them is fully justified and thought through (not just caused by a lack of focus!).

When thinking through the questions that you want to answer, and planning the research process which flows from them, there are some key considerations to bear in mind. This process helps to bring a focus to your work. It helps you to keep the work manageable, as there may be many temptations to follow tangents and lose direction.

If you find you cannot condense your aspirations into a series of three or four straightforward questions, it is worth asking yourself two questions:
`am I really clear about what I want to do?'
and
'do I want to do too much?'
There is a limit to what you can find out through one research project- unless you are planning the next Census. If your focus is too broad, you may compromise the quality of, your approach and your findings

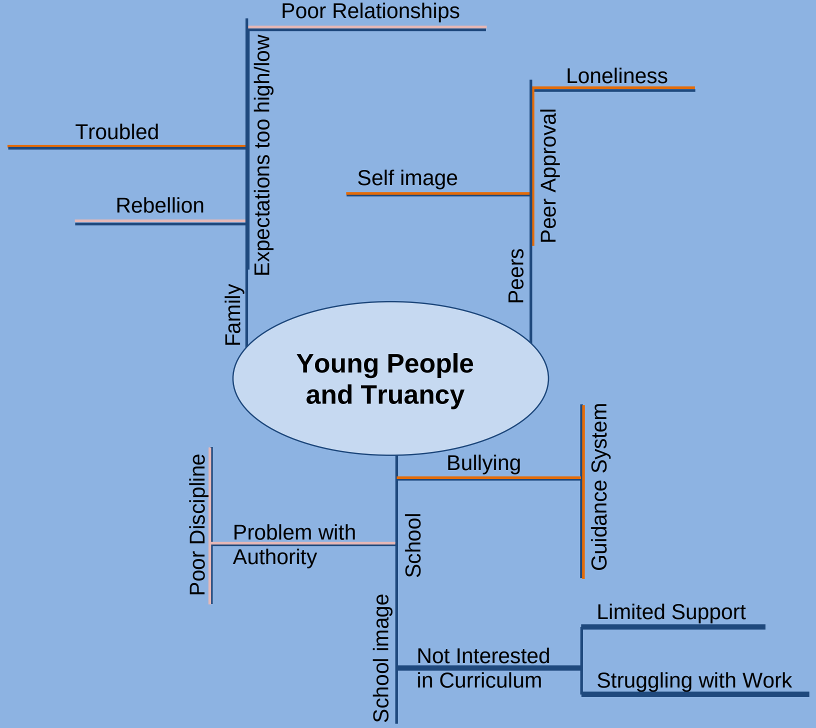
Identifying exactly what you want to achieve through your action research is really important. Clarity of purpose can help you to avoid becoming demoralised because you have become lost in a mass of issues and debates, and failed to achieve what you set out to do.

At the beginning, sitting down with colleagues, and writing a short list of the questions you want to address is a really useful exercise, in ensuring clarity at the start, and providing you with a reference point for all developments that follow.

Often, as soon as organisations in an area find out one piece of research is going on, they become interested in seeing how it can work for them too. Before you know it, the range of questions and purposes of the research become so diffuse that it may become unclear to young people, as well as researchers, what it is they are getting involved in. This caution is not a case against joint working or collaboration, just a minder to work out what is manageable and to apply this thinking to establishing your focus.

Generating Questions-Establishing Focus

Most workers will be familiar with methods of brainstorming to generate ideas. Mind-Mapping is a way of brainstorming which helps to group ideas and identify links between ideas as they are generated.



Possible links highlighted by colour

If, by using this process, different 'branches' clearly emerge, then it could be that these reflect discrete areas for you to focus on. If the map does not identify dear links between questions or ideas, then you might classify these as 'out of the ball park' for this particular piece of work.

Flexibility Vs Boundaries

It is equally important that clarity of purpose does not turn into dogma. You need to strike a sensible balance between setting boundaries, and being flexible enough to change your plans, where issues of particular importance arise. This does not mean chopping and changing every time an interesting issue comes up; this is likely to happen all the time! It means being prepared to systematically review your questions in the light of young people's input, challenging your initial assumptions, and taking on board young people's own understandings, perceptions and priorities.

Whether to involve young people in the exercise of developing the focus, or not, is up to you. Certainly, workers must take responsibility for rationally considering some of the other boundaries that may affect the choice of focus, such as:

- Can we make changes as a result of focusing on this issue
- Does our time and resources allow us to take on this size of issue?
- What ripples or waves may be created from getting involved in this issue, and can we handle it?
- Have we thought of some of the issues and challenges that might arise from this piece of work?

These questions help you to think about whether to narrow, or expand your focus before you start. It should help you establish your aims, objectives and rationale not just for the focus of the work, but for your approach and who you will work with. Some young people may be well able to contribute to these discussions, for others it may be far too heavy going. They may prefer someone else to have identified a focus for them to discuss, contribute to or demolish as they see fit.

The 'questions'

Having established the focus, framing and re-framing questions helps to further develop and refine your ideas about what it is you want to research. The way a question is posed can reflect:

- the perspective from which the question is being asked - is the question about an organisation's priorities, or does it reflect the concerns of young people themselves, or their community?
- the assumptions that people make, and what they are prepared to take at face value

There is a difference between what the problems are for organisations, and what the problems may be for young people. So, for example, we might challenge problems defined as:

- we do not have enough resources to provide our service
- our service needs to be extended to reach more young people
- we are providing a service but some young people are not using it

Whilst these may be legitimate difficulties for organisations to consider, a focus on young people themselves might lead to the re-definition of these starting points as:

- our contact with young people leads us to believe that we may meet needs x and y, but that people with need w don't use our service, or we don't meet this need. What can we find out about need w, and what would young people with this need see as a worthwhile response?

The organisation can then use its findings to consider the implications of extending their service, reaching more young people or re-allocating resources. But importantly, the starting point for the research will have been the focus on young people's needs, not the organisation's service delivery problems.

Re-thinking the approach

For the organisation framing these questions, the 'service delivery questions' or organisational development issues may well be the most important at that stage. It may be time to reflect on whether action research is the right tool for this organisation at this point in time. Perhaps a strategic planning exercise, a service mapping exercise or a user evaluation of the service is more appropriate. Once these management activities are in hand, the context may be better set for a focused piece of action research. It would be inappropriate to try to involve young people in resolving management and organisational problems that could be a result of entrenched issues well beyond the scope of action research. However, if there is a willingness to openly consider re-designing the service in partnership with young people, (within identified resources which young people are able to appreciate if given the chance), then questions focused on young people's needs could lead to a satisfying piece of action research and positive outcomes for both the young people and the organisation.

Setting the 'Tone'

The focus of the research, and the questions it poses as its overall theme, clearly set the tone for the work. Questions can be set which cast young people into specific roles:

- young people in our areas are hanging around the streets and causing problems for the community - what can we do about this issue?

This question accepts at face value the assumption that young people are causing problems by hanging around, and also suggests that they are not part of the community and have no role to play within it.

A more balanced starting point might be to consider the experience that young people have of their community, their perceptions of local adults, the adults' perception of the 'problem'. This approach would help to explore the extent to which the 'problem' reflects real difficulties, or fears based on attitudes and stereotypes. If it is established that there are real difficulties, a response can then be based on the full consideration if the issues during the action research. However, by not assuming there is necessarily a dreadful problem at all, action research could also produce findings that explode some of the myths and stereotypes about young people, and the relationship between adults and young people. This may lead to a response around developing a positive image of young people and a stronger relationship between them and their community, which could be more cost-effective than the knee-jerk 'get them off the street's proposals.

Working with young people to set the tone

We have suggested that young people may be involved in working out the focus of the research. Caution must be applied to this kind of exercise, whether working with adult colleagues or young people. Young people are just as likely as any of us to make assumptions, hold onto attitudes and stereotypes and take things at face value.

One of the features of action research is challenging assumptions. Many of the tools in the compendium (see section Six) encourage people to scratch the surface and get used to critical and reflective thinking about issues. Crucially, you cannot afford for the whole focus of the action research to be tilted in one direction from the outset, if it based on assumptions that have not been fully tested out, just because they came from young people, and were therefore taken as more accurate than those of adults!

Consider these statents from young people-what focus, or questions, may result from taking them at face value?

- **We hang around the streets because we have nowhere else to go**
- **There is nothing to do around here for us**
- **I can't go home late or I'll get battered**
- **The police always chase us for no reason**
- **Every bus driver that does our run home from school treats us like rubbish**
- **If we walked from here to the park through those streets we'd get stabbed by their gang**

Who takes part?

One of the first things to think about, when planning an action research project, is who you want to involve, as participants. In research terms, selecting young people to take part in the research process is called 'sampling'. Action research is an approach best suited to working with smaller groups. This is because it aims to involve young people in the process as much as possible, which takes time, and often involves the use of more qualitative approaches (see section Five) which are also quite time consuming.

The scale of your project, and who you involve, depends on the questions you have identified as the focus of your research. You may intend to take forward the action research with a group of young people you already work with, or wish to contact new young people through other organisations or through outreach/detached work. This will affect your approach, since some methods are more or less successful with young people who already meet together as a group and young people where the group dynamics have not yet been established. Also, bear in mind that some 'groups' are not ones to which young people voluntarily belong (such as groups in schools or residential units) and this may affect their willingness to discuss some issues with each other.

Snap shot, exploration or investigation?

There are a whole range of issues connected with finding young people to take part in your action research project, and some key points are detailed below. However, the amount of time and consideration you should give to these issues depends on whether you want to take forward a snap shot approach, exploration or investigation (see p 15). If you want to explore or investigate, and are therefore looking to generate results which can inform policy or practice, systematic consideration of the following issues is important. If you are looking to adopt a snap shot approach, this is less likely to be so important, as your work is likely to be confined to a local context, and you might not have the time for such thoroughness.

Key issues

The number of young people involved

Imagine you want to find about young people's experiences of health services in Edinburgh, and are able to locate only three young people to take part. Although some of the responses might interest you, it would clearly be very difficult to claim that your results represented the views of all young people in Edinburgh. However, had you been able to contact 20 young people to take part, you would be in a stronger position to argue that your results 'spoke about' young people's experiences in Edinburgh more broadly. Although your sample might not be truly representative, it is clearly more adequate than one involving only three young people.

Features of the young people

Continuing the scenario, imagine that 27 out of the 30 participants come from one area in the city, 25 are male, all use the service that your organisation provides, none are black or minority ethnic, and none have disabilities. This would mean that your sample was biased in a number of ways. Your results would be informative of experiences in mainly one area of the city, and of male experience. It would tell you nothing about the specific needs or experiences of black/minority ethnic young people, or young people with disabilities. It could also be argued that your results 'spoke about' experiences of young people who are currently in touch with youth services, neglecting the views of those who are not.

The 'sample' you select is crucial to what you will be able to claim from the results of your research

Breadth vs Depth

The above issues are important ones to consider, but these are linked to one further issue; whether you want to go for 'breadth' or 'depth' in your project. Some projects might work with a small group of young people, who share certain similar experiences, to try to generate a really detailed and rich picture of their lives and circumstances; these could be said to be about 'depth'. Other projects might try to engage a range of young people to get a sense of how a more generic issue, or set of issues, is perceived by a larger number of young people. This, 'breadth' orientated approach, is likely to give a more surface impression of an issue.

The key thing to remember here is that scale does not equal quality. Social inclusion is not just about tackling generic problems, like poverty, or the effects of living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. It also requires a detailed understanding of the needs and experiences of small groups who face specific forms of exclusion or discrimination. Examples might include detailing the experiences of a small number of young travellers, in relation to a particular issue, or those of young people who face 'multiple exclusion' (exclusion causes by poverty and racism, or living in a disadvantaged area and homophobia). Small scale does not mean less important!

You have to make a decision about whether you want to generate a general picture, or a richer and more specific one. Again, this very much relates to the research question that you choose, and your priorities.

The 'perfect sample' vs reality

Population

To help understand more about sampling, it is useful to introduce the idea of 'population'. In research terms, 'population' means the target group of the research, or the group of young people to which the research question relates. In the scenario we used earlier, the population in relation to 'young people's experiences of health services in Edinburgh' would be `young people in Edinburgh'. In a project about the needs of young people in care in Edinburgh, the population would be `young people in the care system in Edinburgh'.

Recognised methods

There are a number of recognised methods of choosing a 'sample' which is representative of your target 'population':

- choose all members of the category in question (e.g. all young people in care in Edinburgh)
- choose a selection chosen at random (not the ones you can get hold of - a true random sample would take, say, every fifth person on a list of all young people in care in the city, or use a computer to choose names randomly)
- choose a range of young people within the overall target group (some young people with disabilities, some male, some female etc) either randomly or otherwise

Practicalities

In reality, achieving this level of rigour is difficult. Often, the action researcher will simply work with the young people that she or he can contact (provided that these young people belong to the relevant target group). Particularly when looking to undertake research with a hard to reach group, it is just not possible to be 'picky' in order to bend the selection around some complicated model.

In addition to being unrealistic, this way of working may also be undesirable, in what should be a partnership approach to research. Young people should not be excluded from being involved, simply because their involvement will mean that, for example, more young men than young women will end up taking part. The process should appear open and inclusive to young people.

The groups that young people choose to hang around in, or groups established through youth work practice, are unlikely to perfectly represent a particular population. However, working with established groups, where the young people know and are comfortable with one another, is often a successful way of exploring issues, and making progress more quickly. New groups can take a long time to 'gel'. Indeed, in many real life situations, the action researcher may choose to work with an established group, where he or she has an existing relationship with the young people, as a way of developing the work of that group, and providing the young people with a new experience.

In a real life setting, it is perfectly reasonable to work with an established group, or a fairly small number of young people. Trying to contact too many young people in a limited timescale may mean that you do not have enough time to really engage with everyone, and the quality of the experience for the young people is then compromised.

There are clear advantages to working with established groups of young people, particularly where your approach involves group work activities. However, the claims you can make based on your findings should be carefully considered-few youth groups are representative of all young people

When you do decide you need to broaden out your sample by involving more young people, and are struggling to do this, try a 'snowball' approach. 'Snowballing' means asking young people who are already involved to promote the project with their peer group, by bringing along their friends or putting you in touch with them. The group can grow by involving people already familiar to the existing group, rather than bring along newcomers 'cold'.

Claims

However once you have conducted your piece of work, it is unlikely that your findings will apply to all young people. Indeed, it may not be intended to do so, particularly if you have opted for a more in depth approach with a particular target group.

The important thing is to be direct about who took part, whose views are represented, and whose are not, when disseminating results. Where you do this, other practitioners, or policy-makers, will be able to make reasonable judgements about the extent to which your results are relevant to other groups of young people. They will also be able to make informed decisions about whether or not further investigation is required.

The claims you make generally about young people, based on your findings, should be considered by asking the following questions about your sample:

- How many young people are involved?
- Who are the young people? Think about age, gender, geographic area, ethnic origin, disabilities, sexual orientation, and other relevant criteria.
- Where are the 'gaps'? What kinds of young people have not been involved?
- Which other groups of young people might have different experiences from the young people involved in your project?
- What is special about your local context? What might happen, either positively or negatively, that makes experiences in your area different from other areas?

Action research is about challenging assumptions, not creating a whole new set of assumptions about young people generally, based on the experiences of a few.
An important principle of action research is to help us understand how young people's experiences and views differ, rather than lumping all young people together as one undifferentiated group.

Having confidence in your findings

Another aspect of the scale of your project is the number of methods you choose to explore the same issue, with your target sample. For example, some projects start with a questionnaire of a larger number of young people to identify broad issues around the topic they want to look into, then follow this up with interviews of group work activities to consider those issues in more depth. Some might go about this in reverse, using focus groups or group interviews to work out what topics should be included in a questionnaire.

A lot will depend on how much time you can give to the project, and the nature of your target group. It could be suggested that your findings will be stronger if you have used a number of methods in your research, and the findings from each method support each other. This is one form of `triangulation'; where evidence from one source corroborates that which emerges from another. However, action research often works by using a number of methods progressively and after each stage reflecting on the findings. Reflection and analysis can then inform the development of the next stage, in which issues raised previously can be explored in more depth.

Other forms of triangulation, from which your results can gain credibility, involve the use of multiple observers or interviewers. Where a number of workers form similar impressions of an issue from their contact with young people, it can be suggested that this is less likely to be a result of personal interpretation alone, and more likely to reflect something that really is 'out there' somewhere in the world.

You may also want to compare your results with those of other studies in similar areas. Where common findings emerge, it could be suggested that this boosts the credibility of your findings, by suggesting that your results are 'reliable'; capable of being reproduced. Comparison can also be useful even when findings do not come together; you may begin to work through possible reasons for difference which can spark creative thinking, or be better placed to challenge views that you disagree with, by having your own evidence to hand.

Managing Time

Before embarking on your action research project, you will have to give realistic consideration to how much time each stage of your research project will take-time is probably the most important factor in deciding on the appropriate scale and approach to the project, since there is nothing more demoralising for both young people and workers in leaving a trail of half- finished projects behind them. it is also important to be realistic about young people's commitment to the project over a period of time, since youth is such a transitional state that interests and availability can change very quickly.

There are a number of elements of any project which must be alarmed for in a project schedule:

Training and information for staff	The reflective nature of action research does highlight the need for team members working on the project to have time to share their ideas on the values behind the work, and to communicate comfortably their different perspectives on why or how different aspects of the project are emerging	Time spent on team work prior to the project will reap benefits as the project progresses, as will time scheduled for team de-briefings during the project.
Permission, consent, venue/location	These may seem like minor administrative issues, but consider the needs of any organisations you may be working with - schools, health services or any other organisations may need time to consider how the work fits with the demands of their own bureaucracies. Never underestimate the frustrations that can be caused by assuming that these matters are common sense!	Time invested in creating information leaflets about your plans for other organisations can pay off in saved time during this stage.
Background research/reading	Background reading can inform your research, and help you learn from others' work. It can also put your findings into context. Search out local and national sources.	This may be ongoing throughout your project, but can be a helpful 'framing exercise' when you first begin to think about your focus.
Preparation and design	Although this handbook and other sources can give you ideas for approaches, these will always need to be tailored to your specific group and topic, and you may need to be prepared for some approaches to fail or require adjustment.	if possible testing out all your ideas in small pilots, or with a small focus group, will save a great deal of time. This enables you to test language and meaning in questionaires or discussion games, for example, to ensure they will work.
Carrying out the research activities	Much will depend on how you plan to access your target group - if they are already a group you are in contact with, or whether you are starting 'cold'	Be prepared for all the drawbacks of working with young people - even committed groups occasionally fail to turn up, or don't feel like co-operating. Don't draw up the schedule so tightly that these drawbacks can't be accommodated.

Analysis	This is the time-consuming element of research that everyone tends to forget about until they are having to wade through piles of questionnaires, interviews or group-work recordings. It can take longer than the research activities themselves. Transcribing is an activity which becomes easier with practice. However, good recording equipment is essential, otherwise you will be frustrated by hisses and fade outs, often at the 'most interesting' bits. Don't consider transcribing an admin activity you dump on your organisation's clerical staff - transcribing is not necessarily the same as being a good typist. It involves noting changes in emphasis and tone of voice, for example, and pauses and silences.	• **Collating data for questionnaires**, allow 20 minutes for up to 20 questions of tick box/one word answer questions, longer for open-ended questions. • **Transcribing an interview**, allow up to one hour for twenty minutes of tape recording one-to-one interviews, once you are experienced. Allow longer (up to two and a half hours per twenty minutes) if you have had little practice, and always longer for group interviews. • **Analysing interview transcripts**, allow time for developing a 'coding system'(see px) and applying this to each one by reading and re-reading. • **Different games have different ways of gathering evidence**, time spent on analysis will depend on the numbers taking part and the nature of the game.
Presenting the findings	Writing up will depend on your audiences and how you intend to move on at the end of the project.	Remember you may need several different formats: young people, for your organisation, for other policy makers. What about other forms of dissemination: seminars or conferences, articles for magazines or press releases.
Using the findings to influence change	What is your target group and who will be responsible for implementing change?	It may save time from the outset to consider short- , term, medium-term and long-term objectives for using the findings. This will help give participants realistic expectations about what will happen as a result of their involvement as well as assisting your time planning.

Support From Wider Information Sources

We have promoted action research in this toolkit as a practical, rather than 'academic' activity, but, we would suggest that some selective background reading may be helpful when going into projects in more depth by 'exploring' or 'investigating' an issue. Finding out what has been done elsewhere, or what is already known about an issue can help you to progress more quickly, by giving you ideas and helping you to make connections. We would propose that desk-based research should be a critical activity. This is often something that we have to work at; published texts can seem authoritative, and the fact of publication can be perceived as a stamp of validity and accuracy. It is important to remember that all research and policy- based work has an agenda at some level, and approximates the `truth' from different angles. Remember also that your work with young people qualifies you to take your own view, and challenge that of others where appropriate. The process of critical thinking can be really valuable in developing your ideas. By identifying the shortcomings of other pieces of work, you may be able to find 'gaps' you want to fill, and ideas you want to address or test out with young people.

We appreciate that your priority, in taking forward action research, is your work with young people. We would therefore suggest that finding a few relevant texts to read, and minimising time spent for little return, is important. Try the list below for 'quick hits' in terms of locating relevant and policy or practice based information.

Web-based resources

www.scre.ac.uk

For education& research, search facilities. and gateways to further information.

www.scre.ac.uk/spotlight

A series of briefing papers on educational research.

www.jrf.org.uk

Social policy research and development, including a series of four-page 'findings' papers.

www.youthinclusion.org

Information about EYSIP's activities and funded projects, including complete action research reports (where projects have concluded).

www.scotland.gov.uk/inciusion

Part of the Scottish Executive site dedicated to social inclusion issues.

www.scotland.gov.uk

The Scottish Executive website (includes recent publications, press releases and a search facility).

www.childreninscotland.org.uk

Information about current projects and research

www.esrc.ac.uk

Information about current priorities and research of the Economic and Social Research Council.

www.guardian.co.uk

This includes an electronic copy of the daily newspaper, and includes a facility to search an archive of articles (which can be useful for checking the facts on key events, policy and legislation changes etc).

www.hebs.org.uk

The 'research centre' allows you to search the HEBS library on-line, and access survey data and research on health and medical issues.

www.scotland.gov.uk/stats

This site provides national statistics which can help to give a context to your work.

Searching
Using mainstream search engines can be frustrating when you are looking for specific resources, as many of these simply search for key words in sites, without reference to quality or context (which can lead to some unexpected results!). When looking for documents or Internet-based resources, dedicated information gateways can be more fruitful.

www.askeric.org
ERIC is the Educational Resources Information Center, a US-based national information system on educational issues. Askeric is a linked internet-based service. You can email `askeric' your information requests (from the site), and search a version of the eric database (of journal articles and documents). If you find an abstract that interests you, you may be able to locate the full version through a library, or you can go `e-shopping' and buy a version on-line.

www.sosig.ac.uk
A searchable catalogue of Internet resources relating to the social sciences.

CD-ROMs
ChildData is an information resource covering education, health and welfare of children and young people.

CommunityWiSE is concerned with community development and social policy.

Both of the above are published in CD-ROM format and on the web (for a subscription charge). Visit www.oxmill.com for details on how to subscribe, or try your library.

A final point to note
It is worth remembering that context-building work does not have to be confined to reading. One of the most useful forms of background research is getting out there and talking to other practitioners, discussing their work and projects, picking their brains, and sharing knowledge. This process may also being to light useful documents - local research reports, annual reports, briefings - that may not be published works.

Presenting the Findings

It may seem a little early at the planning stage to be considering how to present the findings, but if the point of action research is to make change happen whether in a purely local situation or on a broader basis, then the findings must be useable and useful. This is not to say that the findings are a foregone conclusion from the start, and that the research simply sets out to prove a set of assumptions about what should happen. But if you plan to use the findings to influence areas of policy or practice for the benefit of young people, this will certainly inform your planning.

Audience

Who are you trying to influence? What is their interest in your action research, what time have they got available to pay attention to the process or findings, do you want to influence resources and spending or just raise awareness of an issue? It is important to think this through whatever level you are pitching at, from the local community to policy makers, and consider:

- 'Warming up' the audience by informing them of the project from the start, perhaps asking if there are issues they are particularly interested in that may be built into the research design
- Inviting key players onto an advisory group, so that they are informed about the project on an ongoing basis and perhaps become more committed to taking the findings on board
- Finding out what format is likely to be acceptable-a written report, seminar, conference? What would make them read it /attend?
- Identifying 'friends' of the project-people who may be able to advocate for the findings of the project by influencing others on your behalf
- Considering where your project 'fits' with other policies or strategies at a local or national level

The action research process will successfully involve young people if it is creative and interesting, but at the end of the project, it must also make an impact. This may involve 'playing the game. and recognising that for busy policy makers or practitioners, a simple and direct written report may be the easiest way to digest the findings.

Format

You will need to find a balance by taking into account the needs of your audience and the preferences and aptitudes of the young people involved, as well as the nature of the evidence you have gathered. Creating a mural or artistic output may appear to be a great way of involving young people in expressing themselves during a research project, but what evidence does it offer those who were not involved in the process? Would a busy policy maker be able to take from it any key messages about the young people's needs? Likewise, if a video lands on the desk of an official or politician, it is unlikely to find its way into a VCR unless you present it to them at a seminar or event designed for the purpose. This is not to say that the research activities should be boring or uncreative, but the most effective output at the end of the project must be considered with the audience in mind.

Section Four...

Participation

Ethical considerations

Young people's participation

Ethical Considerations

This section is important to help you think through some of the issues raised by carrying out action research and other kinds of research:

- Consent
- Confidentiality and data protection
- Avoiding exploiting young people's views and experiences
- Protecting participants
- Using images of young people
- Practical issues for workers
- Young people as researchers
- Informing young people and feeding back

Ethics are principles which guide all kinds of work in which we deal with people and persona issues. We all adopt ethical standpoints in our work with young people no matter what we do. In everyday work, this might include child protection guidelines, equal opportunities guidelines, the way we deal with confidentiality, privacy or parental consent.... Any kind of research should be carried out with these principles in mind, as well as taking into account other concerns.

All of the issues will be familiar to you if you have already considered issues such as confidentiality and child protection in your work. As we know, the principles are straightforward, but their application in practice is not always black and white. Confidence to tackle those 'grey areas' comes from having thoroughly thought things through.

Consent

Seeking the Informed and Voluntary Consent of Young Participants

It is essential that young people are fully aware of the implications of taking part in a research project. This means that they should understand what the research is about, how it will be conducted (how much time it will take and so on), what will be expected of them, and how results are to be used. Verbal communication of this would be the barest minimum. It may be helpful for young people to see a leaflet which explains the project in user-friendly terms.

For some young people it is also useful to build in a time delay between asking if they would like to take part, and the actual opportunity to do so, to give them time to fully consider their involvement.

It is particularly important that young people are aware that a piece of work is short-term where this is the case, to avoid feelings of disillusionment and distrust at the end of the process. It is useful to consider from the outset ways of engaging young people whose interest has been sparked in further activities. Some have projects begun by involving young people in fairly limited ways, such as interviews or one-off focus groups, and found that young people request more involvement in the overall project.

During the research process, young people should always be aware that they are under no pressure to take part, and can stop (and re-engage) at points of their own choosing (however difficult this may be practically for workers).

Seeking the consent of adults

When working with under 16s, there are times when it might be appropriate to consider seeking consent from a parent or guardian. When making decisions on this, it is important to consider the context, including your relationship with the young people who are to be involved. There are times when getting parental consent is strongly advisable if not mandatory, and others when it may be more discretionary.

Parental/guardian consent is likely to be necessary when:

- You are doing research in a school, or another institution that requires it
- You wish to take the young people on 'trips', to find out what they think of a new activity or an existing youth project, for example
- You are not previously known to the young person, nor in the community

Parental/guardian consent may be more discretionary when:

You intend to do a piece of research with a group of young people with whom you have ongoing contact, and an existing relationship (for example, at a youth club where you are a worker)

Other roles adults play

When working with adults to gain access to young people, there may be a number of areas where young people's consent to taking part, and their equal opportunity to take part, could cause you concern.

For example, young people's decision to 'opt out' could be compromised by the setting. For example, opting out in a school setting may be seen as a discipline issue, rather than a rights issue. In such circumstances, young people may feel it is an easier option for them to be present for the exercise, but not really participating.

Another example may be when you approach another professional or organisation to gain access to a small group of their clients, and they (perhaps unconsciously) pick out the young people they consider to be the most helpful/well- behaved/intelligent young people, rather than allowing you to access a more representative group. To avoid such circumstances, you may wish to stipulate a selection process that ensures the opportunity to take part is either random, or by criteria that avoids 'hand-picking'.

We have mentioned gaining the consent of parents. Most of us work in a community context, arid the culture of the community should be carefully considered. It may be appropriate to carry out some work with parents of the community to develop their understanding of the aims of your research. Communication should be in appropriate languages.

Confidentiality and data protection

Confidentiality

An assurance of confidentiality is extremely important for participants in the research process. This means that young people should not be identified in written reports and so on (names should not be used, unless they are pseudonyms). Confidentiality can sometimes be about more than just names. Giving too much descriptive information about a participant may give away his or her identity to 'insiders' (perhaps people in services the young person uses), so care should be taken in deciding what to include in any reports on the findings of the research.

Researchers should not normally discuss participants outwith the research project without expressed consent of the young people. Within the project, any discussion should be relevant and purposeful (i.e. to help you work with the young person better). However, the situation may be a little more complex when action research takes place as part of your ongoing work with young people. In this scenario, a decision has to be reached about how information gained through the research project fits into the day to day practice of the organisation, and the network of relationships which already exist. If a young person gives information during a research activity that you may not normally have been given in your regular contact with them, you will have to consider carefully how to treat this information-it is feasible to ask the young person themselves how they wish the information to be treated. Many organisations already have policies on what personal information on clients is passed between workers, and onto other organisations in the case of referral. Also see section on Child Protection, p 47.

Data Protection

Data collection, in an action research project, will usually involve collating information about individual participants, personal characteristics, needs and views. In collecting data, the following issues should be kept in mind:

- Young people should know what you are recording and why, and when they understand the full facts they should give their explicit consent to it and feel in control of this. The consent need not necessarily be in writing (by signature). Records should be kept to ensure that workers can demonstrate that this has occurred at a future point, if necessary
- Young people should know who will have access to the information that they provide (project workers, administrative staff, other agencies when collaborative work is being undertaken, volunteer workers etc)
- Care should be taken to ensure that information recorded is accurate
- By law, organisations have to make personal information about any participant (in written or computerised format) available to that participant on request-young people should be aware of this right and should know that this information can be deleted on request

Organisations holding data (information about individuals) may need to notify the Commission on Data Protection that they are doing so. Visit www.dataprotection.gov.uk or email mail@dataprotection.gov.uk or telephone 01625 545 745 for details.

It should be possible to demonstrate the relevance of all information collected, to the project you are carrying out.

Personal information is confidential - it should be stored in a secure location, and not be passed on without prior consent of the participant.

It is important never to record information which could be incriminating (used to help prosecute an individual or group), as workers or projects could be ordered to comply with a Court order to hand over information

Avoiding exploiting young people's views and experiences

Young people are often familiar with unequal relationships with adults, and may get involved in the research process with the expectation that if an adult asks a question, they must answer it. Although in action research, we are often enabling young people themselves to define the questions they consider important, we should continue to remind young people of their right to withdraw their involvement or withdraw comments they have made.

To allow young people their right to express their opinions (under Article 12 of the UN Convention), it is important that workers are wary of giving signals about what they might wish to hear from young people. It is all to easy to conduct research in a way that sets the agenda and pre-defines a range of responses, and this is the approach action research tries to avoid.

Methods like peer research (using young researchers), allowing young people themselves to select research methods and the ways they prefer to express themselves, and emphasising that workers will not judge young people's responses, may be helpful in promoting the expression of young people's *real* views.

There is a fine line between working to facilitate young people's expression of their views, and 'leading' young people into particular responses. Research projects should give young people a chance to say what they think, and care must be taken to allow this to happen.

Protecting participants

> **Remember**
>
> **It is not our place to make decisions on behalf of young people. However, researchers should show sensitivity and think carefully about young people's support needs. Young people should never feel pressured to talk about things when they don't want to**

Distress

During research, particularly where it raises personal and difficult experiences, participants may become upset and need support; it is important that mechanisms for dealing with such situations are in place. Workers should consider carefully young people's right to express their views if they wish, even if they know they will find it difficult, and when the worker should decide to avoid distress or is concerned about the young person's judgement about whether to continue. Certainly, the level of contact anticipated with young people should be taken into account.

Ways of dealing with potential distress include: offering a 'debrief' at the end of each session (where the young person can talk about the experience of the research, or anything else that it has brought up); and ensuring that the young person has someone (a key worker, friend or carer) on hand if they choose, to talk to if they wish.

Child Protection

Most organisations have a child protection policy which states that, where a young person gives serious cause for concern (for their own well-being, or that of others), suspicions of harm or abuse should be passed on (where the young person is under 16). Workers should be aware of the child protection policy of the organisation with which they are working (or the organisation which runs the venue in which they are working). It is important that where serious disclosure occurs, procedures are in place for dealing with it, and this should be a written policy, so that it can be demonstrated that this was followed after the event, if required. Where a serious disclosure occurs, the worker should have sufficient skill to draw the interview to a close, and refer the young person to someone that they can talk to. Young people should be aware of the implications of making a disclosure to avoid feeling that trust has been betrayed, and promises broken.

Finding the balance

It is important to remember that these situations are as likely to occur in your day to day work with young people as in the action research activities.

An aspect of action research that can 'throw' workers, however, is seeing as documented evidence the experiences and circumstances of young people which before they have only absorbed as experience. The evidence can become a powerful reminder of the realities of some young people's lives.

Images of young people

Where images of young people are to be used, for example photographs in a report, or a video of a discussion for training or analysis, care must be taken.

It is important that young people are presented in a positive way, not as 'victims'. Their full consent should be gained, and where appropriate, the consent of their parents. It would be good practice to allow young people themselves to choose their preferred representations of themselves of their group. There are obvious implications for confidentiality in terms of child protection, and it is important to remember that once reports are in the public domain, either by publication or on the Internet, we have lost practical control of how those images will be used, in spite of copyright laws. Young people need to be aware of this and fully understand the implications. However, this needs to be balanced against the increased self-esteem which some young people may feel in projecting their image into the world, and identifying themselves personally with the project.

It should be considered whether it is appropriateness to use an image at all. Where a sensitive and personal issue is being examined, use of images of participants is unlikely to be a good idea.

There should also be a clear policy on what should happen to videos or photos after the project has ended; are they to be destroyed, or left with a responsible organisation to keep as records of the project?

Working with the media during the project-perhaps to launch the findings or to represent young people's case for change more publicly- should also be carefully considered beforehand. It is not difficult to negotiate clear guidelines with the press, but unless these are worked out prior to involvement it can be very easy to get swept up in the moment and to feel that you have lost control of the representation of the young people and the project.

Practical issues for workers

In terms of location, somewhere safe and young person-friendly is important, ensuring that young people feel comfortable. Certain approaches to action research, such as interviews or small group discussions, will require a location where interruptions are minimised. Locations selected should be neutral, and should in no way expose workers to compromise.

It is important that systems are in place so that each worker knows what his or her co-workers are doing, and can locate them.

Providing information to young people

Informing

We have suggested that young people should be fully aware of what they are getting involved in, but it is also important that young participants do not feel intimidated by this. Reeling a list of constraints off at the beginning of an interview might make a young person feel that, after having been invited to participate, conditions are immediately being placed on his or her participation. It is important to give the young person sufficient time to absorb the information, and work out what they are or are not happy to do or say.

A better approach may be to produce a leaflet, in simple and young-person friendly language, explaining what the research is about, and the assurances and conditions which apply. Accessibility of information should be ensured by sensitive use of community languages, large print, visual or audio formats. The beginning of a session can then be used to ensure that this has been understood, and check for questions (although participants should be given the opportunity to raise queries at any point in the process, not just the beginning).

in circumstances where your contact with young people may be fleeting, for example in casual streetwork contact, going through all of these issues may be more difficult. Your communication must be effective in getting across the main points concisely. However, its is also likely that with this kind of contact, there is less chance that very personal or sensitive issues will be disclosed by participants.

Feeding back to young people

Given that participants are taking time to be involved with the research, it is important that they receive feedback on what is being made of their involvement.

As part of the action research process, it is good practice to make transcripts/recordings of sessions or interviews available to the young participants, for comment, modification and discussion, and to check authenticity on an ongoing basis. Show the young people draft reports, and be prepared to discuss your findings. This gives the young people the scope to challenge your interpretations

Copies of reports should be made available to the young people (in a young person-friendly format if more appropriate), feedback on developments occurring as a consequence of the research (changes in service provision or policy for example) is also important, to make young people feel that their contributions are valued, and have been worthwhile, especially if young people have not been involved in this stage of the work.

Young People's Participation

Hierarchy of participation?

We are proposing that action research should be taken forward by involving young people as much as possible. There is no 'ultimate' in involving young people in action research-it must be designed in a way that is appropriate for the issues being explored and the kinds of young people involved. It is perfectly legitimate for workers to lead the process, provided they do so in a manner which enables young people to express their views freely and identify their own concerns. We suggest that the values underpinning action research should inform your approach to young people's participation in the process:

- Young people are seen as participants, rather than objects of inquiry
- Any approach taken respects young people's abilities and preferences
- Their role is voluntary and they have as much control as possible over their contribution, whatever form that takes

Since much has been written on youth participation in the context of children's rights, we will not reproduce the principles and practice of youth participation here. You could refer to 'Re-Righting Communities' (Save the Children Fund) or 'See Hear!' (National Children's Bureau) both giving the background theory and practical examples of models of youth participation.

The Ladder of Participation is a familiar framework to those already involved in participation work with young people, which could be adapted to look at how different approaches to action research with young people could increase the level of young people's participation. However, we emphasise that we do not see this as a hierarchy of levels. What counts is that you choose the level of participation that suits you and the young people likely to be involved, based on:

- How much time you can realistically spend supporting young people to be involved, and developing their skills and understanding
- The overall timescale of the project-whether young people are really likely to 'stay the course' for a long-term project, or whether your timescale is so tight that there is little time for in-depth involvement by young people
- What scope young people will have to change the shape of the project.

Having well-defined parameters need not be a problem, as long as this is `up front' with potential participants.

The Ladder of Participation

10 **Children in Charge:** Children decide what to do, adults only get involved when asked to do so.

9 **Children Lead/Adults Help:** Children make decisions with help from adults.

8 **Joint Decision:** Adults and Children decide together on the basis of equality.

7 **Consultation:** Adults consult children and consider their opinions when taking decisions.

6 **Invitation:** Adults invite children's ideas but make decisions themselves on their own terms.

5 **Tokenism:** Adults decide what to do, children allowed minor aspects of decision making.

4 **Decoration:** Adults decide what to do, children take part (e.g. by performing ceremonial functions)

3 **Manipulation:** Adults decide what to do and ask children if they agree (they must agree).

2 **Adults Rule Kindly:** Adults make all the decisions, children are given reasons and explanations, but must conform.

1 **Adults Rule:** Adults make all the decisions, children instructed to conform.

0 **No consideration given to Young People**

Realistic approaches and idealistic aspirations

Any young person, given the right skills and support, can be involved in action research as designers, managers, researchers and participants. Their involvement at any level should be planned for realistically, since there is nothing worse that involving young people in a project up to a point, that then collapses due to resource or time constraints.

You should also consider that some young people are happy to have limited involvement with projects-to share their views in whatever opportunity you create for them, and to move on.

It is also worth being very honest with yourself about whose agenda the research is based on. There is absolutely nothing wrong with workers or organisations initiating a project, and there are times where we may have a responsibility to advocate on behalf of young people through undertaking action research that can highlight issues that would not emerge without your input. Indeed, an entirely youth-initiated agenda is a rare event. But it is possible to pursue your agenda while being genuinely open to young people's responses, and over time, perhaps leaving space in your general work programme to encouraging young people's own agendas to emerge.

You should consider how your approaches will engender young people's involvement. Small scale projects have the potential to lead to qualitatively different involvement than those involving large samples. Group work activities carried out with the same young people over a period of time, for example, may involve fewer young people in a more in-depth approach than one-off focus groups; one-to-one interviews take more time but offer more opportunity for participation than questionnaires taking in larger numbers of respondents.

Young People as Researchers

When young people act as researchers, they have the opportunity to increase their sense of ownership of the research process. Young people can be involved as researchers in different aspects of the process: as interviewers or group facilitators, as advisors or in helping to analyse and reflect on results.

Many workers consider there are benefits to developing peer- to-peer work, suggesting that young people will develop a more authentic dialogue between each other than if adults are involved. However, the rights of the young participants who are being interviewed by young researchers must also be recognised. It may be that choosing an approach where young people work in pairs or alongside a worker is the best way forward in some circumstances. It is also good practice to allow each individual participant to choose whether they would prefer to be interviewed by a worker or peer. All of the issues raised in this handbook on practical and ethical issues are also relevant to any young person carrying out research on their peers.

Training for young researchers should be an important part of your planning if you intend to develop peer and this should be dealt with through appropriate training, discussion and support. research. Accreditation for young people's learning and skills should also be considered.

Where young people are acting as researchers, all. the usual considerations issues around confidentiality and. disclosure for example - still apply. It is important that young researchers feel confident about dealing with these issues.

Case studies on levels of participation in small to large scale projects

Young Travellers Project

Workers in the Young Travellers project initiated a piece of action research looking into young people's attitudes to learning. The workers understood through their experience that culturally, formal educational attainment was low on the agenda of the travelling community as a whole for a wide variety of reasons. However, they wanted to explore what motivations young people experienced with regard to learning, and literacy and numeracy in particular. The "workers experience also told them that the itinerant nature of some of the families they worked with meant that it may be difficult to involve young people over a period of time.

The workers took the approach of carrying out some one-to-one interviews, and through this process, encouraging young people's further participation in a group that would meet occasionally and involve young people in activities as well as further research exercises. The group sessions were designed in response to what young people identified as their interests in relation to learning. For example, it was revealed during the interviews that many young people were motivated to use literacy skills for practical reasons, such as the Driving Theory Test, so one of the activities offered was Karting. The sessions were reasonable successful in gathering young people together for future discussion.

The workers had not really anticipated there would be much scope for a greater level of participation, considering how much the young people moved around. However, two young women did maintain contact, and expressed an interest in helping with the project some more. They were paid a small fee for their help in analysing the information from the interviews. This proved challenging however, and they made the comment that this would have been easier for them to do if they had actually been involved in the interviewing!

Drugs Street Project

A drugs project wanted to consider developing an outreach service to young people in the neighbouring community, having heard anecdotal evidence of rising involvement in drug use there. The project is Health Board funded, and felt that more quantitative evidence would be held in higher regard in making the case for extending the service. It was decided to undertake a piece of research by questionnaire, but to involve young people as peer researchers. A timescale of five months was proposed, and the project hoped that a sample of 200 young people would be achieved, mainly through street work contact.

A team of six young people were `recruited' as peer researchers through local projects, although efforts had been strenuously made to involve at least twice that number. They were offered an incentive for taking part in the training, and then an agreed 'fee' per ten questionnaires completed with young people. The two-day training involved lots of games and a light approach to both the issues raised within the proposed questionnaire and the skills that would be required. However, only four young people were remaining by the end of the training. Meanwhile, the timescale for the work was racing ahead, and in the end the questionnaire was designed with limited input from the young researchers.

When the young team 'hit the streets' it became evident very quickly that it would be very difficult to find so many young people to take part. Although the young people approached on the streets were willing to respond, the questionnaire proved time consuming to complete, so this also limited the number of questionnaires that could be completed in one session. After a couple of months, it was clear that to achieve a sample close to the size envisaged, a different tack would have to be taken. The questionnaire was then administered on a self-completion basis in local schools, with the peer researchers introducing the exercise to the classes.

The next hurdle was inputting data to a computer package to help with analysis. The young people lost interest at this stage, finding the process difficult and tedious. However, they did re-engage with the project to help finalise the resulting report and launch it to the press. The extent to which this could be described as a 'peer-led' piece of research varied at different times during the project.

Section Five...

Techniques and Tools

Working with groups and focus groups

Interviews

Qualitive analysis

Questionnaires

Working with Groups and Focus Groups

The distinction between groups and focus groups

The term focus group is often used to describe work with any kind of group to be involved in a research process. Generally, it is no big deal to use the term in this way if you want to. However, we would like to offer a distinction between the terms 'focus group' and 'group', to help clarify issues around who is involved in your action research, and why.

Group

- Could be a friendship group, youth group, class group or other social or interest group
- Likely to involve young people who already meet in that group, and are familiar with each other
- If it is a new group, the criteria for getting involved in it are the categories above, or,
- If it is a group established for the purposes of the research, their involvement will likely be sustained over a period of time, and therefore becomes a social or interest group of a kind
- The entire group members present will participate in the action research, responses will not be selectively included or excluded

Focus Group

- A 'structured' group, either with randomly selected participants or participants gathered to meet specific criteria required by the researcher to provide certain perspectives (such as by age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality or other characteristic or combination of characteristics) or to focus on the particular experiences of different kinds of young people
- May involve young people w ho know each other but often is an `artificial' group gathered just for the purpose of the research
- Is more likely to be a one-off group or one with fleeting contact with the research process

Clearly, one option is no 'better' way than another unless it suits your approach to your project. If a focus group is what you want, to achieve a certain sample of young people (see p 31), then you will have to consider how you will invite young people to take part, and what the drawbacks may be for them in being asked to turn up to take part in an unfamiliar experience, and to express their views amongst other young people they may not know.

However, there are also issues to consider when working with groups where the young people are familiar with each other. At times, a 'group' identity emerges that can obscure the different perspectives of some of the individuals within the group. Care must be taken when interpreting information gathered during group work, to consider whether a particular dynamic or mix of personalities may have skewed young people's responses on any occasion.

Working with groups

There are many quality resources available on techniques for working with groups, we do not intend to discuss group work in general here. We have also considered young people's participation in general in Section Four. Group work is one way of enabling young people to become actively involved in action research as participants or subjects, and will possibly be the means by which young people become involved in directing the research process if this is your aim.

What needs to be considered are the ways in which your work with a group will be recorded on an ongoing basis as part of the action research. The compendium in Section Six describes a number of group work exercises that can be used as means of generating 'evidence' - triggers to stimulate discussion and expression of views that will be recorded and analysed to contribute to the findings of the action research.

But the process of working with the group may also be recorded and analysed as evidence for the project. If this is appropriate, then recording mechanisms must be devised to enable workers, and the group if possible, to reflect on what has happened in each session and to review the way the group has worked. Again 'creative reviewing' activities are included in the group work resources already available, to encourage young people to participate in reflection.

Recording Mechanisms

There are some aspects of recording which require very little attention, and are often part of workers' routine monitoring of their work. However, if you tend to neglect these, it is time to sharpen up. These aspects include knowing who took part in the group session, for how long, where, and what workers were involved. Young people should be noted by age, gender and ethnicity, and any other relevant characteristics.

Additional information that may be noted in your observations include:

- Any particular group dynamic that may influence discussion or participation-for example, were the young people particularly excited over a fight or piece of gossip before the sessions started? Did this enter into the discussion or may it have been a factor in the way young people responded to the exercises?
- Any relationships within the group that may have affected the way different people participate-any bullying or romancing, for instance?
- Has young people's position or perspective changed at all since the last session? Is there any reason identifiable within the group?
- Is the group's level of engagement with the project progressing or waning?

Process versus Output

It is easy to get so immersed in group work activities and group dynamics that you forget the need to gather 'evidence' that can be analysed and contribute to the findings of the project in a way that would be recognisable to an outside observer.

The first set of information (who took part and so on) can be monitored in a standardised way by devising a 'fill the box' section on a sheet, for example, if you do not intend using an electronic system such as MARS (developed by Edinburgh Youth SIP for standardised monitoring of projects' contact with young people). However, the other aspects of recording the process of groups are more narrative-both descriptive and reflective.

This can be challenging if a team of workers is engaged in a project, or if there are different workers working with different groups as part of the same project. Consistency in the approach to recording is essential, between different workers and across a number of sessions by the same workers. While something so systematic as a 'fill the box' approach is unlikely to be satisfying or adequate to cover the wide range of things that may be observed during the group work, leaving recording wide open may also cause problems during analysis. Workers may devise a general format for recording, and agree if there are any particular aspects of the group dynamics or process they are particularly interested in. As far as possible, discussing a common language or agreeing terms may help workers analysing others' recordings.

Workers should also take care when recording to be clear about what is a description of what took place in a session, and what is an interpretation being placed on event by the person recording. Both are valid, and may be equally important to generating an understanding of the work, but the principle of challenging our assumptions as part of the process of action research requires us to reflect on the difference between the two.

Equal voices

Importantly, a structured approach to working with groups can help ensure that each group member can participate equally, perhaps with the opportunity to take a 'turn' or by creating space for young people to work as individuals, in pairs or small groups, on a task. However, they should also be devised in a way that no-one will be put on the spot, sometimes people's choice of non-participation is also significant

Gathering Evidence

Observing a group of young people over a period of time may in itself contribute to an action research project, particularly if, as we have suggested, a specific aspect of the group or group experience is recorded and analysed. However, this 'ethnographic' approach is slow and the evidence gathered over a long period of time may not be the kind that will make an impact on policy makers, for example.

We have suggested that different exercises may help to stimulate discussion. Essentially, these are tools, in the same way that questionnaires are used. The exercises help workers to provide a framework to encourage the group to think about the issues that are the focus of the project. They can help set parameters for the discussion, and enable young people to talk freely or respond in other ways-by drawing or writing, or whatever activities or games will help overcome inhibitions and help maintain concentration.

Some exercises can generate data that is quantitative in nature. For example, if a group of a dozen young people work in pairs on an exercise that asks them to sort a selection statements into piles designated 'agree' ‘disagree' and 'not sure', then it is possible to count the frequency of the statements appearing in each pile.

But additionally it would make sense to find some way of recording why groups made these choices. A discussion may follow in which groups share their views on each statement, which will provide qualitative data. The value of working with groups is often that it can generate insights through discussion, although this is only useful if it is effectively recorded.

Tape recorders can be useful when working with groups, but only a quality piece of equipment is likely to pick up the discussion of a larger group, and the many asides, noises and carry-on of young people often obliterate the actual discussion when it comes to replaying the tape. In addition, you will have to find time to transcribe it (see p37). It is often a useful back up tool to other methods, so that only significant sections of a tape need be transcribed. Being able to provide direct quotes of participants is often a powerful way to illustrate the findings of a project.

Video recorders can also be useful, but tend to affect the group dynamic much more than a tape recorder, which is often forgotten and provides some anonymity, since a disembodied voice is harder to attribute to one person than their image on a screen. Video recorders also require to be operated. This could feasibly involve a young person. Transcripts from either kind of recording could be shared with the group at the next session.

Other standard ways of recording group discussion involve:

- Providing participants with worksheets—there is a drawback if young people are not confident at writing
- Using flipcharts, either for participants or workers to record key aspects of discussions
- To have one worker facilitate the session, while a co-worker takes notes and records young people's comments (these can be shared with the group at the end)

Both video and tape recorders can become a group activity in themselves, as well as devices for gathering evidence. Most young people are familiar with discussion show formats — Kilroy, Ricki Lake and Oprah all raise 'issues' with their guests and provoke It, reactions to 'situations'. These can be fun and can involve role play as a way of depersonalising issues. It may be best to avoid the Jerry Springer style name- and-shame approach though.

Young people's participation in recording things that they consider important during any discussion could be encouraged by:

- Having a flip chart or graffiti wall available for young people's use, so that at any point they can write up a comment, idea or question that they feel is important
- Having a post-box, for more private/anonymous sharing of this kind
- Having a 'moan zone' equipped with tape or video recorder, which young people can use to make comments, express their personal views outwith the group, or emphasise something they feel strongly about whenever they wish
- Having an agreed signal by which they can indicate to workers they want some personal space to express a view they feel is important

Whatever kind of activity is used, workers must first consider how it can be recorded and analysed. Where a number of activities can be used to explore issues, leading to a range of quantitative information and qualitative information generated directly by young people as well as the recording of group processes by the workers with their perspectives, there is a wealth of information to develop understandings about whatever is the focus of your research. Later in this section we look at qualitative data analysis.

Leading or facilitating

Throughout this toolkit we remind workers to consider how they may be influencing the action research process, either by imposing their own unexamined assumptions or bringing their own points of view to bear. Workers can clearly make an impression on groups of young people, steer discussion and filter young people's views, simply with their own personalities, never mind the use of activities which can also reflect a pre-disposition to certain outcomes.

No worker is ever going to be completely neutral, and having a personality is what will enable you to successfully attract young people to get involved. However, you should also be aware of your own effect on the group and consider this when analysing your findings.

Interviews

The One-to-One Approach

Interviews can take on more or less structured formats:

- **highly structured** - involving answering specific questions, and sticking to a pre-defined agenda
- **semi-structured** - attempting to balance the demands of covering certain subjects within a specific time frame, and allowing the participant to develop the discussion, and depart from the agenda to explore issues

One organisation exploring issues around self-harm with young people found the interview the best approach-a personal, confidential method which allowed young people to set the pace and develop the agenda according to what they wanted to express.

However, a few of the interviews lasted around six hours. It was impossible to disengage from the interview when such sensitive issues were being discussed, until the young person felt ready to end the session.

The semi-structured approach is a more flexible one, allowing more scope for young people's participation. It is therefore more in-keeping with the action research approach.

The purpose of a one-to-one interview is to explore issues in some depth. Interviewing can take a while. Whilst it is not good practice to 'spin out' sessions for too long, as young people may find the situation quite intense, it is important to give each young person time to finish saying what they want to say. Having asked young people to 'open up' their experiences and feelings to you, it is unfair to then place limits on their contributions by making them stop before they are ready to do so.

The in-depth nature of this approach makes it suited to exploring particular things at a localised level, with a small number of people. It is not the approach to choose if you want to get a general impression of an issue, or take forward a scoping exercise with larger numbers. Individual interviewing is about producing detailed understandings, and going beyond the surface. It is sometimes seen as appropriate for exploring sensitive or difficult issues in a 'private space'.

The role of the interviewer

The first thing to recognise about the role of the interviewer is that he or she is part of the process, not some neutral presence, and will by necessity influence the direction and content of young people's input. It is impossible to get rid of all influence that the interviewer may have. This is not even a desirable aim. Questions have to be asked to give the interview some structure. Young people's comments have to be received positively to ensure that they feel comfortable to continue. Young people don't want to be interviewed by a robot!

However, the challenge is to minimise the extent to which the interviewer pushes the young people into giving particular responses, meaning that the young people do not really get chance to get their own views across. This is not to say that workers would ever deliberately put pressure on young people. The interviewer can exercise influence in a whole number of indirect and unintentional ways:

His or her relationship, or lack of relationship, with the participant

Where a young person does not know the interviewer, his or her input might be affected due to feeling uncomfortable. However, where a young person has an existing relationship with the interviewer, the nature of this relationship might also influence things. Young people often have a strong sense of what adults want to hear from them. Workers' priorities involve trying to positively impact upon the young people they work with, and even when their approach is to work with young people `from where they are at', it is naïve to think that these priorities do not come across. It is therefore possible that young people will try to give you the answers that they think you want! Other difficulties may enter the occasion when workers ask young people to evaluate services that those workers actually provide - would all young people feel able to tell it to you straight!

There is no way round these sorts of issues altogether. Where the interviewer does not know the participants, it may be useful to arrange a get together before the interviews, and ensure that known workers are on hand whilst interviews are taking place, and that a familiar environment is chosen, to promote feelings of 'safety' and comfort. In all circumstances, perhaps in particular where existing relationships do exist, it is really important to fully explain the purpose of the research. Tell young people that you want to hear their views, and that whatever they want to say is ok.

The questions he or she asks, and how

Interviews should have some kind of schedule or format. It is important to have a list of questions or themes to hand, to give the interview some shape and focus, but to be prepared to veer off course where young people wish to lead the discussion in other directions. The interviewer should be prepared to respond appropriately by reacting to such developments through the course of the session. It is important not to make assumptions about what is relevant to a particular topic. Give young people a chance to explain what they mean. Sometimes the least expected input or connection is the most informative. It is important that interviewers are careful not to 'put ideas into young people's heads', if they want to find out what the young people really think. Try to keep questions as open as possible.

Rather than: *'Do you think that what was happening at home made school hard for you?'* which is very 'leading,

try: *'What do you think made it hard for you at school?'*

Where a young person appears unsure of their feelings, it is important to tell him or her that this is ok. We all have contradictory feelings about things at times, and a young person should not feel forced into giving a fixed response. It may be useful to ask the young person to describe the different ways that he or she feels about the issue at different times, and say that this is ok.

The way he or she receives responses

Interviewers are only human. Everyone has their own particular viewpoints and hobbyhorses. It is important that interviewers are aware of this, and the way that they receive different comments from young people, during the course of interviews. Young people should receive positive feedback (nodding, smiling etc) to encourage them. However, these should be given in an even-handed way. Emphatic nodding when young people say certain things (that the interviewer agrees with), and a straight face at other times (when the interviewer is less convinced), is bound to influence what a young person is prepared to share with you.

Creative Interviewing

Young people can sometimes be unused to being reflective. A basic individual interview approach may not give some young people 'enough to work with', to stimulate their thinking, and help them articulate their responses. Young people with chaotic lifestyles, and disjointed pasts, may have trouble connecting their different experiences together in an interview setting. They may also struggle to explain what might have made things different for them, or what they want. This may be particularly the case if you are a stranger. An advantage of already having a relationship with a young person, is that you will already be familiar with some aspects of their life experience, although great care should be taken in how you introduce reflections on what you already know about a young person to the interview process.

To address some of these difficulties, it may be useful to try out various, more creative, ways of encouraging responses.

- **Vignettes -** the use of a made-up scenario to explore a particular issue. The participant can be asked what they would do in that position, how they might feel, and so on
- **Written or picture prompts -** Cards, with different statements or pictures on them can be used as a basis for discussion. Participants can be asked to order these in terms of priority, explaining their choices, or to explain whether or not they agree with different statements, or how they would respond to what the picture represents for them. Blank cards can be used to ensure that participants are free to add to what is already there

The advantage of using these kinds of props are that they help stimulate and focus thinking. They also allow participants to talk in a more neutral way around the materials, offering the opportunity to talk 'safely' and indirectly about their experiences. The interviewer can allow the young person to 'warm up', and ask more directly personal questions only when he or she *judges this to be appropriate.

Closing an interview

Regardless of the nature of the subject matter of the interview, you should consider beforehand how you will withdraw. Spending any amount of time talking about yourself on a one-to-one basis is not exactly a casual experience—think of other times we experience this: visiting the doctor or a job interview. These are quite intense experiences.

Particularly if the nature of the interview has involved sharing quite 'intimate' views or details, it may not be appropriate just to walk away with a cheery wave. It may be that a more gradual withdrawal is appropriate, where you signal the end of the formal part of the interview by stopping recording, and switching your stance to make a transition from personal to neutral conversation.

We discuss the ethics of feeding back to young people on page 49. Your commitment to do this could be signalled again at the end of the interview.

Ways of analysing young people's input within one-to-one interviews are provided in the 'Analysing qualitative data' section on page 64.

Qualitative Data Analysis

What is qualitative data?

While quantitative data is about numbers, counting young people who did this or thought that, qualitative data is very different. Qualitative data reflects the 'messy stuff' which makes up people's lives: ideas, thoughts, aspirations and meanings. Qualitative data are the things that embody those meanings, that have been gathered during a research process.

Qualitative data can include:

- Pictures, for example, photographs of activities, locations etc perhaps with associated notes you or young people have
- made
- Flip charts, worksheets or other outputs from groupwork activities
- Workers' recordings or notes of their sessions with young people or observations
- Minutes of meetings, other documents relevant to (i.e. making an impact on) the young people or the issue in question
- Text which is generated through participants' own writing
- Text which is generated from transcribing audio tapes or films recording young people talking or other scenes
- The audio tapes or films themselves
- Notes from the direct observations of the researcher.

During the action research process, the kind of qualitative data most likely to be collected, and perhaps the easiest to 'handle' are pieces of text. These may be notes from sessions, and participants' comments either noted down or taped and transcribed from interviews, focus groups, or groupwork. If the data is not text based, it is useful to make sufficient written notes on the data to help with the coding process.

The process of analysis, although it may sound daunting, can actually be one of the most stimulating aspects of action research. It is the point at which you get to challenge assumptions and generate new ideas and thinking, using the evidence you have gathered. The purpose of analysis and coding is to stimulate questions, and look for the 'answers' in the data: the answer may be no evidence', 'strong evidence', this appears to be linked to x and y' or 'this only seems to happen when z is a factor'.

What do you want from analysis?

Your approach will depend on whether you want to be mainly descriptive, telling the story of activities and using extracts from the data to illustrate this; or whether you want to use the data to understand and explain an issue. At the descriptive level, analysis simply categorises data by themes and issues or questions raised. At the more in-depth level searching for explanations, analysis involves exploring context, meaning, patterns, relationships and insights.

Good practice

Analysis is not an exercise in 'cherry-picking'. It is bad practice to read through all the text and simply pick out the comments or quotations that appeal to you, and use these as a basis for a report. This is because the whole point of doing action research with young people is to find out what young people themselves think, experience and want. It is very easy to consciously or unconsciously pick out the comments and input which are most in tune with our own views. The results will end up saying more about us than the young people themselves.

If you want to involve young people in analysing data, it makes sense to see analysis as an ongoing process during the work. At intervals, new exercises can be. I introduced to work with young people in asking questions of the data: what does this mean? Is this la pattern emerging or are some things not linked at all? What are the surprising things and why?

This is not just about trying to avoid bringing our own views to bear on the process of analysing data. It is also about ensuring that the 'loudest voices' don't always win through. Some young people will be more confident than others, and more able to express their views. It is the job of the action researcher to 'bring out' the less confident participants, and find ways of enabling everyone to express their views. Following on from this, it is also the job of the action researcher to give due regard to everyone's views when analysing the data collected.

The bare minimum that the action researcher should do is to bear these points in mind when analysing the data, and make a real effort not to fall into these traps. It might also be useful to check your interpretations of the data with the young people involved in the project, by asking for their feedback on drafts, or discussing what young people mean by different statements. People can use words differently, and it is important to ensure that what you take from the data truly reflects the young people's own intentions. Having a colleague to provide another perspective on your analysis helps to provide a 'critical friend', someone who is not so involved in the work to take a more dispassionate view.

The basics

A structured approach to analysis helps to make sense of lots of data, at whatever level you intend to take it forward. If you have undertaken a range of different activities, then it can be challenging to identify common themes while at the same time reflecting the different circumstances which may have influenced different responses during different sessions.

Without a doubt you should not wait until the end of your work to start to make sense of your data. Your ongoing familiarity with your data should inform your work as it develops. Although you will certainly need to build in time at the end of your project to analyse, reflect and present your findings, the best approach to analysis is to try to classify and explore it, generating questions and ideas about how it is developing different pictures, as it is gathered.

Qualitative data that has gone 'cold' through neglect is perhaps the hardest to analyse.

How is the analysis of qualitative data accurate?

It is almost impossible to divorce the process of analysis from the perspectives of those involved in it. This is why we suggest a systematic approach which helps you challenge your own assumptions as much as possible. However, for many, there is a suspicion of qualitative data. As we have considered in this toolkit, action research does not represent the 'truth' any more than any other research method. But when using qualitative data, it may be important if you want your work to be considered reliable and credible to be able to show plainly how you approached analysing data systematically and carefully.

The other important point to make is that although your approach to analysis can't help but be informed by the perspectives of you and your colleagues, and the young people involved, if you are bringing to bear your experience of young people, a background knowledge of issues affecting aspects of your work, and a critical approach, this can enrich the picture developed by your work, rather than detract from it.

Consider that your data may have a usefulness beyond your initial analysis. How would it look if another worker came along in a year and wanted to build on your past work? The identifiers you apply to each bit of data can be immensely useful, not just in your own analysis. They may allow work to be re-visited.

Making a Start

The first and most fundamental step in analysing data is to devise codes to apply at the very beginning, to all your pieces of data. These are the identifiers of a name (or code) for the young person, age, gender, date the data was collected, the name or code of the researcher, and any other significant features, such as the kind of activity which led to the data being generated.

Developing a Coding System

The next stage for working with a piece of data is to apply codes, or brief notes of what each bit is about, to the different comments made.

Codes can be applied to sections of text, or to tapes, films, workers' reports or any other source, and then used as a basis for analysis and interpretation. This example is based on a text transcript of an interview with a young person, made by the TASC agency during their work on the report Young People's Experiences of Social Exclusion, (Nov 2000)'.

‘I've been on the streets these past two years. I used to beg on the streets...it is good money and a lot of people - a lot more people are doing it now so it's slowing down a bit because a lot more people are doing it but there's a lot of people that are stopping it 'cos it's too addictive and it's dangerous, very dangerous. I've been mugged three times, stabbed once. It's very dangerous...it's usually drug dealers and stuff like that, purely 'cos they want money for drugs and they're doing it to get money for drugs. But I'm glad to say I've been robbed three times and you're lucky if they got like £6 off me in these three times 'cos I never ever keep my money on me. I never kept it on me. Every time I reached £10 I was ahead of them.’

Codes can name issues: begging, money, danger, for example, are fairly tangible issues raised by the young person. However slightly more abstract codes can also be ascribed to this data: 'independence, 'self-image' or 'stigma' could be used.

Codes can have a number of sub-headings, so that one code could be 'begging, and another 'begging - personal safety issues'. Codes can overlap within the text, meaning that a bigger bit of text has one code, like 'life on the streets' (because the whole extract is about life on the streets), and smaller bits within it have more specific codes also, like 'begging:

This extract, if coded, might look like this:

I've been on the streets these past two years. I used to beg on the streets...it is good money and a lot of people - a lot more people are doing it now so it's slowing down a bit because a lot more people are doing it but there's a lot of people mat are stopping it 'cos it's too addictive **and it's dangerous, very dangerous. I've been mugged three times, stabbed once. It's very dangerous...it's usually drug dealers and stuff like that**, purely 'cos they want money for drugs and they're doing it to get money for drugs. **But I'm glad to say I've been robbed three times** and you're lucky if they got like £6 off me in these three times 'cos I never ever keep my money on me. I never kept it on me. Every time I reached £ 10 I was ahead of them.'

Identifier: 'Beefy'

Male, 19 years old
One-to-one interview conducted by CM
Cowgate drop-in centre, 3pm 14th October 2000

Life on the streets-this applies to the whole section

Orange text	begging	
Black text or underline	begging	- money
Blue text or underline	begging	- personal safety issues

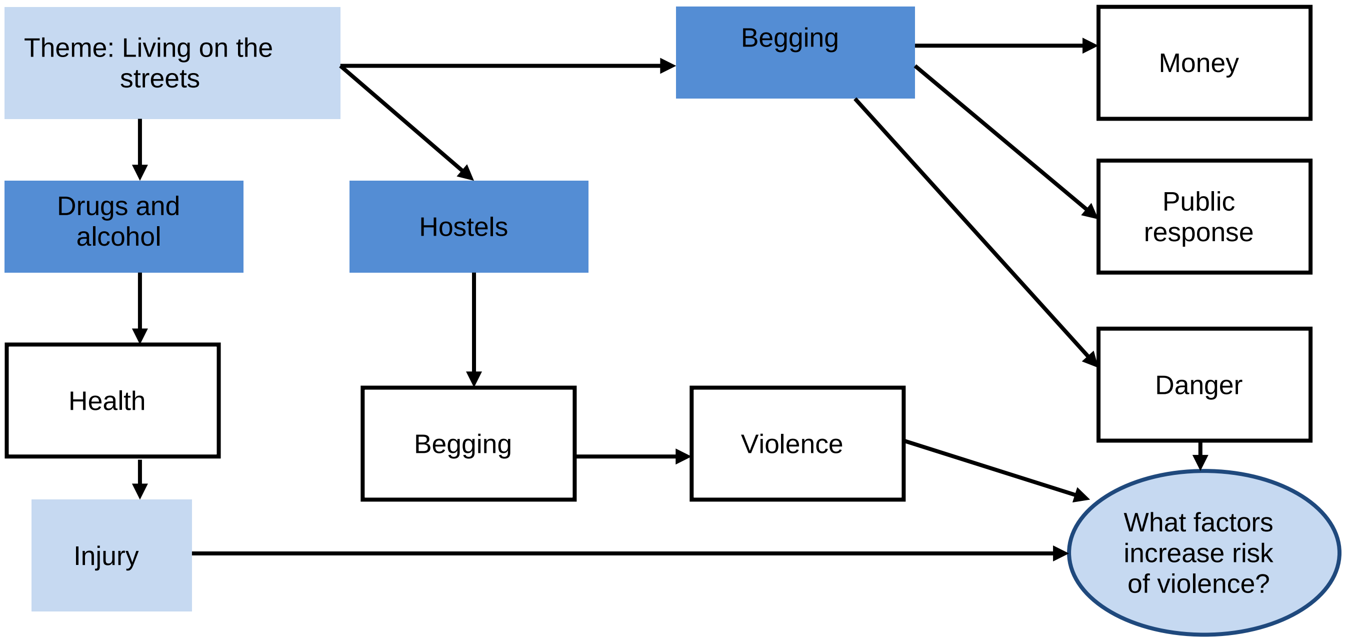
You can see how other 'layers' of codes could be added, such as methods of self protection when begging, the apparent link between danger and drugs, length of time on the streets etc.

How far you go with this is up to you. It would be possible to go on adding more and more codes forever, but it is a case of what is useful. Through a bit of practice, it will become obvious how much detail you need to go into. With large amounts of data, it might just be a case of highlighting bits around particular issues that are of interest, and within those, a couple of different aspects or angles.

It is important to make your codes explicit as they are developed. You do not have to have them all worked out before you start. In fact, you will probably read and re-read your data many times during the process of analysis, anyway. But particularly when a number of people are involved, it is important that everyone is on the same wavelength with the codes. If something emerges that appears to be significant after some of the data has been coded, simply go back and apply the new code where it seems relevant.

Themes, branches, tangents and sub-plots

As you develop your coding system, you may start to map how they are connected. Overall themes may emerge, and within these themes, a number of different issues, questions or ideas will start to emerge. As the work and the analysis develops, links between all these factors may become clearer, or some issues will not fit with the pattern, and might be seen as anomalies or tangents. A system might look like a mind map (see p28), but rather than being a creative process, it must be informed by the actual data you have collected. Hopefully, one of the main themes will be the focus you identified for your research.



Highlighter Pens, Cut and Paste and Virtual Filing

Even though coding might become a straightforward exercise, analysis involves drawing together the coded data so that themes, patterns and links may be drawn out. There are some pointers to help you organise your work:

- A paper based system may involve making several copies of each piece of data. Scissors are used to cut out sections and place them in different categories or codes (which is why several copies are needed). Highlighter pen can also be used to identify sections, while keeping copies 'whole'. If you separate out sections, make sure it still carries the 'identifier'
- information.
- A virtual filing system can be created if you have access to a PC. One 'master' document is filed in a project folder. However, new folders and files are created for each code and sub-code. Using the cut and paste tool, relevant sections are pasted into their folders and files. Again, make sure you paste the identifiers, and crucially, keep making back-ups of your work.
- Post-its are risky, they have a nasty habit of falling off and becoming unattributable notes
- Head space? For genius only.

Drawing out information as findings

Codes can be used to count the numbers of young people who spoke about a particular experience, by seeing how many times the relevant code has been used. This is bringing a more quantitative expression of qualitative data. However, often reporting on qualitative data involves narrative, illustrating your discussion of the work with quotes or illustrations. Sometimes, a number of case studies can be used in reports, which represent the range of findings. Again, consider the benefits of qualitative data, in that young people's stories, experiences and views can be reproduced in their own words, which is not properly achieved in quantitative data.

You can obviously choose which themes and sub-themes you choose to describe and interpret in any reports on your findings. However, you should be wary of presenting data outside of the whole context in which they were gathered. You should present your interpretation of the data distinctly from reporting on the data itself, i.e. make it clear when you are describing the research process or the findings, and when you are providing the insights and understandings drawn from this by you, your colleagues or young people.

Your overall analysis can also be self-reflective. The way that you have devised the structure of codes itself tells a story about how you recognised issues, and the links between them. This may not be of interest to all of your potential audience, but it will certainly be of interest to other practitioners.

Levels of analysis

We have suggested that your approach to analysis depends on what you want from the action research project. You may want to simply gain a more accurate picture of an issue or situation and your data will help you describe this. However, you may have sufficient data that allows you to generate new ideas, or concepts, about the focus of your work, leading to new 'models' of frameworks that can help other practitioners think about their approach to the issue in question. Again, there is no hierarchy of approaches, you must do whatever suits your purpose and your timescale. This framework may help you think this through.

Data: one-off, localised, small scale, `snap shot'

Descriptive

- Looking at data in a local context
- Categorising data by theme
- Assessing prevalence of themes
- Identifying links between themes

Data: a range of data from activities that explore the focus from different angle 'exploring'

Critical

- Looking at data in a local context, linking it to wider contexts through literature or findings of other research
- Exploring the nature of the relationships between themes
- Interpreting why the themes and relationships have emerged in this way
- Drawing conclusions from the findings

Data: from a range of activities, perhaps including different areas or target groups, over a period of time, 'investigating'

Conceptual

- Testing the findings by comparing, contrasting, and asking different questions of the data
- Developing ideas about the themes and the relationships between the themes and structuring this thinking into new frameworks (or hypotheses) that can be further tested by looking at the data or conducting further research
- Drawing conclusions about the value of these new ideas (concepts) in providing better understanding about the issues in question, that would be reliable in other contexts and generally applicable to the issue

It is worth remembering that even if the scale of your project, or the time that you have available, only allows for a descriptive approach, you may revisit the data. If your ongoing work allows you to add to the data for example, or you simply get the time later on, you may subject the data to further analysis enabling you to continue your development of ideas and understanding. This is another reason to be as rigorous as possible in gathering, recording and saving any materials connected with your work, and properly attaching identifiers.

Other dimensions of analysis

We have mentioned briefly that part of your analysis should include putting the findings into the context of how evidence was gathered and under what circumstances. Our work with a number of projects has led us to believe there is also immense value in encouraging action researchers to tell the story of their own roles in the projects. When you present your findings, much of your analysis will focus on the evidence gathered from young people. But we urge you to remember that the learning **you** have gained from being part of the project can benefit others.

Whether it is explored in a separate document, or together with your findings, analysing the project in terms of how it was developed and implemented, and the demands this made on workers, can be immensely useful to others. From the evidence you have gathered, you will be able to see which approaches were more or less successful in enabling young people to participate and express their views. You will be able to measure how much time each stage took. Workers' notes may reveal what the challenges were for them, and how they resolved any difficulties. There could be a range of factors affecting how workers and organisations engage with the project or how the project has been received in the wider community that you will not wish to include in your main presentation of the findings that will nevertheless be useful pointers to other action researchers.

Edinburgh Youth Social Inclusion Partnership is developing a series of **'action learning sets'** that enable action researchers working on similar themes to share experiences and provides an opportunity for collective analysis of the role of the worker. This kind of networking is also taking place on the web through sites dedicated to action research (including www.youthinclusion.org), enabling you to inform others and gain feedback.

Questionnaires

Research based on the use of questionnaires generally provides quantitative information. Quantitative research methods seek to measure or quantify an issue, and usually try to generate numerical evidence; for example, we might be told that number, or percentage, of participants agreed with a given statement, or said 'yes' or `no' to a particular question.

Comfort in numbers

This quantitative focus on numbers is often the first thing people think of when research is mentioned. There seems to be great comfort in trying to measure things by numbers, it appears more 'scientific' to some people and also seems to present evidence in terms which are more 'black and white' - grey areas are glossed over and there is less judgement or thinking required of the audience.

However, we should remember that responses to questions will often depend on factors such as the way that they are phrased, context in which they are answered, what is included (or asked about) and what is not, and that these features often relate to the views and priorities of the researcher. The participants which are chosen for the piece of research - their number, and the qualities that they have - will also have implications for what we can say about the research, and how far results can be generalised (see p 34). But as with any form of research, the main thing to remember is that we should always be prepared to be critical, of both others' research and our own.

What can be counted?

Numbers may not always be the best medium in which to express values, feelings and experiences in a holistic way. This is not to say that questionnaires or other quantitative methods are not useful in action research. However, when we want to get a deeper or richer 'feel' for the more 'fuzzy' (subjective, and open to interpretation) factors of people's lives, qualitative methods might be helpful, either in place of quantitative ones, or as a supplement to them.

Some factors in young people's lives are easily counted-their age, gender and so on, or how many times they may have had a certain experience. However, attitudes and feelings are more difficult toil measure by questionnaire, much depends on your ability to ask the right questions for participants to agree or disagree with, which demands prior knowledge. To some extent, questionnaires only represent how much young people agree with or confirm what its designers thought - the gaps in your assumptions remain unchallenged.

Designing Questionnaires

Suggestions to keep in mind when constructing your questionnaire:

Keep things simple

Make sure that what you ask is straightforward and unambiguous. Try to keep questions short, and avoid additions, like 'or not' at the end of questions. A question like 'do you enjoy going to the local youth club or not?' may cause confusion; what does it mean to say 'yes' or `no' to such a question? It is also important to ensure that you do not ask two questions in one. For example, how could a participant respond to a question like `do you think going to the youth club is fun and educational?', if she felt that it was fun, but not that it was educational, or vice versa.

Keep things relevant

Don't be tempted to ask questions because they 'might be interesting'. Ensure that what you ask relates to what you want to know, and keep it short. Remember - you will have to analyse all the responses afterwards.

Don't make your questions too broad

It is also important to keep questions specific and focussed. Framing questions in too general a way can lead to them becoming ill-defined and almost meaningless. For example, imagine that you wanted to find out about young people's views of school. If you asked a question like `do you like school?' (giving only 'yes' or `no' response options), it would be almost impossible to ascertain what the participants meant by their responses. 'No' could mean 'no, because I get bullied, although I like lessons', `no, because I find lessons really hard and that makes me feel bad about myself', or `no, because I don't think education is relevant for me'. As these examples illustrate, the question is so broad that young people with very different views could be 'lumped together'. It might have been better, then, to ask a series of more focussed questions about bullying, experience of lessons, perceptions of the importance of education and levels of commitment to it, and so on.

Designing response options

It is important that the options you give for responses will actually yield meaningful answers to your question. For example, imagine that you want to find out how often straightforward events occur, like young people going to the youth club. Here, using response options like 'usually' or 'sometimes' is not ideal, as these terms may not mean the same to everyone – one person's 'sometimes' could be another's 'usually'.

So, rather than: *'How often do you go to the youth club?'*

	always ☐	usually ☐	sometimes ☐	never ☐	
try:	at least once a week ☐	at least once a fortnight ☐	at least once a month ☐	less than once a month ☐	never ☐

The second set of options is less open to personal interpretation, meaning that any possible gap between what is understood by a response, and what was intended by the participant, is closed.

However, imagine you want to find out how often young people are upset by family arguments. Here, you might want to get an idea of the proportion of the time, when family arguments are going on, that young people become upset. As you are looking for an idea of proportion, without knowing how often disputes are actually occurring, response options like `at least once a week' etc are less appropriate. (For example, one young person could opt for `at least once a week', when arguments only occur about once a week (suggesting that they get upset every time an argument is going on), whilst another could choose the same option when arguments carry on daily (meaning that they only get upset some of the time as a result). So, in this situation, you might want to opt for the 'always', `usually' etc response options.

Don't 'close things off'

Part of the attraction of questionnaires is that they enable specific responses to be drawn. A response to a question is likely to comprise of a tick in a box, allowing for totals to be calculated and compared, unlike in a qualitative piece of work where a response could be very lengthy. Whilst this is a benefit in this respect, the `closure' involved can lead to participants feeling like none of the options given really `fit', and that they have to agree to something that does not really reflect the way they feel.

One important rule of thumb is to allow options such as 'don't know' and 'other - please specify', with a space for writing in. Another possibility is the use of a 'set of response options', rather than just `yes/no' to give the participant more scope to express a view.

e.g. rather than: *'Do you think that adults get on well with young people in the area where you live?'*

yes ☐ not ☐

try: How much do you agree or disagree with the following -

'I think that adults get on well with young people in the area where I live'

strongly agree ☐ agree ☐ not sure ☐ disagree ☐ strongly disagree ☐

Avoid 'leading questions'

As you are trying to find out the participants' own views (not impose your own upon them), it is essential that questions are as neutral as possible. Be aware of your own agenda, and ensure that you do not set out simply to confirm your own opinion.

For example, imagine that you believe youth crime is due to boredom and lack of recreational facilities, and construct a questionnaire where all the questions focus on these issues. You might find that the participants agree with opinion statements like 'I think boredom leads to committing crime', but that would not mean that this is the only explanation; just that it is the only one you have asked about. It may be that your focus has influenced the participants in thinking of boredom as a key factor. Further, had you asked about other factors, like commitment to and achievement at school or the quality of family relationships, you might have found these to be equally or even more important to the participants. Sometimes browsing through available literature can give you ideas about what might be relevant to ask.

Be careful with 'open questioning'

'Open questions' are where no response options are given, and a space is left blank for participants to write in a response. If their time or concentration is limited, you might find that participants leave these blank, and literacy issues may cause problems if participants self-complete the form. Also, responses will be more difficult to analyse; usually researchers go through all responses and work out a number of key categories and put each response into one of these more limited categories. These kinds of problems can also arise when you include 'other - please specify' options. However, it is likely that only some participants will use these (i.e. they will only be used when the given options are inappropriate), and, as suggested earlier, offering these options is often good practice as their inclusion avoids forcing participants into an option that is not right for them.

`Route' participants to avoid confusion

Make sure that participants are directed past questions that do not apply to them. For example, imagine that you want to ask whether or not young people use youth services, then a series of questions about what they think of them. Clearly, if some participants do not use youth services, they will not be able to answer the following questions, and should be directed past the next section by inserting an instruction:

E.g **'If you have answered 'never' to question 6, now go directly to question 9.'**

However, some people who find reading a chore or have difficulties may lose their way in this kind of questionnaire.

Be sensitive

Know your 'target audience' - ensure that the questions you ask are appropriate for a wide range of abilities, and that they do not probe insensitively around personal or emotive issues.

Self completion or supported completion

You may need to offer supported completion if participants have literacy problems or disabilities, but some young people may prefer self- completion for the privacy and independence it offers. Perhaps doing the same for everyone prevents particular individuals feeling as if attention is being drawn to them, and feeling 'different'.

Some young people may find it difficult to talk about the difficulties they have with literacy, and may have a go at ticking boxes without understanding all of the questions properly. This is a really difficult situation to deal with, and perhaps a change in method (to more discussion-orientated forms of contact for example) may be helpful if you sense that this is happening. It is worth flicking through completed questionnaires to check consistency of responses, to make sure that this problem is not arising where participants are self- completing.

Think about format

Including images on questionnaires, or producing an electronic version, might make it more accessible for those with special needs or literacy problems, or just more fun! If a lot depends on the questionnaire in your gathering of evidence, then it is well worth making the effort to make it as attractive as possible.

Language

Some words are understood in different ways by different people, which can lead to discrepancies between what a participant actually means, and what the researcher reads into it. If a word is open to interpretation, it may skew the results. Some of these problems might be partially avoided by putting the questionnaire together in consultation with some young people to assess what they understand by different concepts, or by trying a draft version out with some young people before administering the questionnaire to everyone, to find out what they find difficult or ambiguous. Where you are trying to explore issues that are difficult to express in simple, concrete terms, it could be that a questionnaire is not the right tool to use, and a qualitative method would be more suitable.

For example, 'sense of community' may mean different things to young people than it does to you, so this would not be an appropriate term to try and use in a questionnaire:

Instead of: *`Do you think that there is a strong sense of community where you live?'*

try a series of questions...

`How many of your neighbours do you speak to at least once a month?'

none □ one or some □ most or all □

`If you needed some help or advice, how many of your neighbours could you approach?'

none □ one or some □ most or all □

`If some local people were arguing in the street, and it looked like someone might get hurt, do you think neighbours would intervene?'

yes □ no □

Analysis and presentation

Once you have designed your questionnaire and collected the data, you will need to analyse it and present the results. Although there are ways of assessing the relationships between different variables or sets of responses (using statistics, usually through the use of a specialised computer package), the simplest form of analysis involves 'counting' frequencies (the number of participants who gave each response to each question).

e.g. Let's take a sample question:

`How often do you go to the youth club?'

at least once a week □ at least once a fortnight □ at least once a month □ less than once a month □ never □

The easiest way to go forward is just to count, using 'gates', the number of young people who gave each response to the question, by flicking through the completed questionnaires.

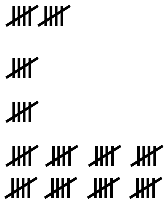
at least once a week

at least once a fortnight

at least once a month

less than once a month

never



This can then be made into a table, for use in your report.

at least once a week	10
at least once a fortnight	5
at least once a month	5
less than once a month	20
never	20

To break things down in other ways, you could total up the number of participants who go to the youth club once a fortnight or more, meaning that you would add together those who opted for 'at least once a week' and 'at least once a fortnight'. You can do the same with questions asking whether the participant agrees with a particular statement, by showing all those who ether agree or strongly agree. Another option is to look at the most common response to given questions, where the majority of people opt for it.

`Descriptive' and 'Inferential' Statistics

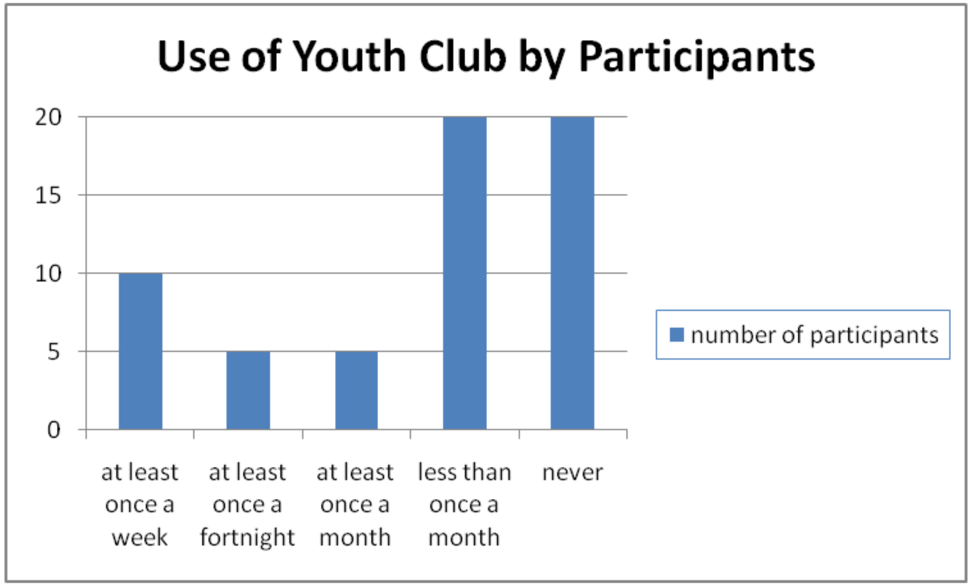
This introduction to questionnaires has looked at the analysis and presentation of quantitative data at a very basic level. Use of 'counts' or 'frequencies' is a form of descriptive statistics; that is, statistics or numerical information that describe a situation or set of views.

Inferential statistics concern the use of various statistical tests, based on the laws of probability, which draw out relationships and differences between variables or factors (e.g. the relationship between gender and smoking). Taking your work to this level requires the use of a specialist computer package (e.g. SPSS), and a considerable understanding of statistics. If you have a statistical background, you may wish to take this on. Without such a background, moving into this territory would require a significant amount of extra training, in addition to time and commitment.

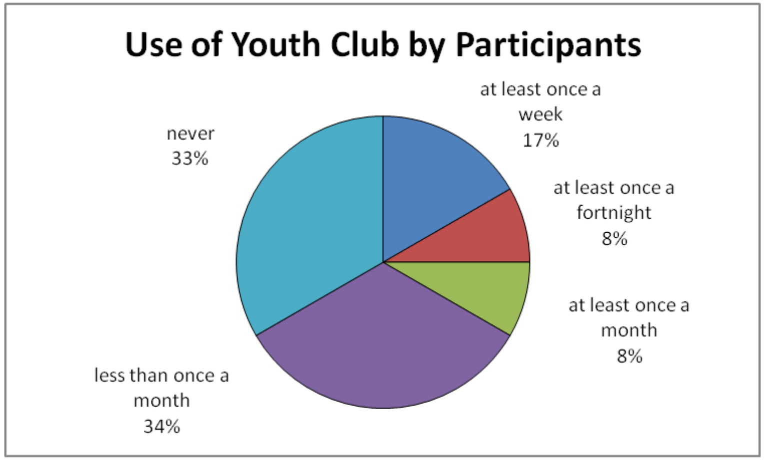
It is worth noting that, with a knowledge of statistics, you may be able to use `scales'; sets of questions which attempt to 'get at' more complex concepts, like self-esteem for example. We have already proposed that, in designing simple questionnaires, complex concepts which may be subject to many different understandings are best avoided, and that a focus on actions or attitudes may be less ambiguous. Use of established and rigorously tested scales is a way of incorporating some of these more complex issues into quantitative research. Scales can be located in textbooks and articles with instructions on how to use them. However, there is a caveat: considerable debate exists about whether they really succeed in 'measuring' complicated feelings or emotions, and many researchers criticise them for failing to account for the different ways that people feel in different situations and circumstances.

Basic Use of Computers

Back to the basic approach, things can be taken a step further using a more universal computer package, like Excel, to display your results in a visual way, using either a graph...



or a pie chart...



Section Six...

Compendium

Groupwork games and workshop tools

Photocopy resources

Compendium

Using the compendium

All of the exercises described here must be adapted to your particular group (or individuals), their circumstances and needs. In addition, they must be tailored to the focus of your investigation. As far as possible we use examples of how exercises have been used in different settings and circumstances to help you judge how suitable they may be for your purposes. Each exercise is described on one side of the page, and illustrated with an example of its use on the other side of the page. The suggestions as to the times allowed, numbers involved and so on should be used as a rough guide only. Much will depend on the nature of your target group.

Be aware of issues such as language and culture, literacy levels, and even the requirements of each activity in terms of physical skills. Your activity should be as inclusive as possible, or easily adapted so that the needs of any of your participants can be easily accommodated to enable them to take an equal part.

The compendium is not comprehensive, it merely demonstrates how many of the techniques in youth work and group work you are already familiar with (or can become familiar with by using existing youth work and group work resources) can be used in action research.

Gathering evidence

The main criteria for 'usability' in terms of youth work and group work activities in action research, is how easily it can be adapted to help you gather evidence:

- Activities which encourage young people to record their views in some way
- Activities that can be repeated in the same way with different groups to contribute to a systematic approach-for example involves young people in different groups in addressing the same questions through an activity
- Activities that will help the facilitator maintain an overview of all participants in a group-those which require individual attention in a group context may make you miss a significant response from another group member while you are occupied
- Activities which are not so complex in themselves that they obscure the purpose-to explore an issue relevant to the action research- or that young people don't 'get' why they are doing it

Having a bag of tricks

It is sometimes hard to tell in advance how a group will respond to activities. Working with a small group of young people to design sessions, or to road-test your ideas for activities, can help to iron out difficulties in the activities you devise. However, different group dynamics can affect responses to even well-used activities, so it is worth having a number of options for activities prepared for any session.

Useful resources

If you are planning to carry out action research over a period of time it is likely you will develop a specific set of resources for your purpose. However, there are a range of resources it is worth having handy for any worker, especially if you are interested in using 'snap-shot' - type research activities on an ad-hoc basis in your ongoing youth work. Hopefully, this toolkit will give you the confidence to do so. Look out for:

- Magazine 'pop'-quizzes that can help you structure discussion around the issues they raise (often relationships)
- Free postcards available in coffee bars and other venues-these have images on one side aimed at the young and trendy, which may encourage young people to use the writing space on the other side, as the post-card size is not big enough to be intimidating (how will I fill that space?). Sometimes the images themselves can provoke discussion, and sometimes young people like them for their collectability
- Newspaper or magazine cuttings , particularly provocative headlines in big print, that reflect issues around your chosen focus
- Glossy magazines-sometimes you can use the pictures, images or captions to illustrate the materials you develop for activities, other times young people themselves can use the magazines as the focus of the activity. Collage is a hands- occupied activity that 'non-artists' can enjoy to illustrate their views or perspectives
- Items to use as 'counters' for board-game or 'your-turn' - type activities (whoever is holding the item has a turn to say something or answer a question). Counters will always get lost, so a trove of different bottle tops, badges, key rings, rubbers, figures etc is handy, but the more different and unusual, the more young people enjoy the selection

Also, have prepared for whenever they may come in handy:

- Old microphones for Ricki Lake-style discussions
- Boxes tarted up as post-boxes or magic/tragic boxes (a form of like/dislike or agree/disagree); a kit of paper, felt tips, scissors, masking tape or blu tac, and so on
- A standard board with places mapped out-see the Board Game suggestion, p90
- A camera with a film handy; a tape recorder with some tapes handy; batteries for both

Devising a session or programme

We have not suggested a range of exercises from warm-up to preparing to exit. It is obviously not always appropriate to launch straight into an exercise which requires in-depth discussion. You must judge the nature of the target group and any potential sensitivities the focus of your project may raise, whether participants are familiar with you or each other, whether their views are required about personal issues or relatively abstract issues. Again, other groupwork resources suggest different activities to warm up, introduce participants to each other if necessary or end sessions positively.

Different activities require different levels of commitment and personal disclosure. It is possible to explore a wide range of issues with young people by presenting issues in the third person, or as hypothetical scenarios, to gain their reactions and views. This may be more comfortable than being asked about personal experiences, although once confidence is developed through these activities, discussion often does become more personal.

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects to explore in action research is the generation of ideas about things young people have only limited experience of. This is why many of the exercises involve providing scenarios or examples for young people to respond to. For example, asking young people what could be different about the way services are provided, may produce a limited response because their use of existing services has not helped them imagine how things could be. So for example, by enabling young people to rate some different aspects of services which have been described to them in a neutral way on cards, their imagination may be given a starting point.

Different activities described here are also more or less useful for exploring different levels of perspective. There are no rules about what should be used for different purposes and the categories identified in the table below are obviously not exhaustive.

	Personal Maps	Diaries	Board Games	Pop Quiz	Rating Games	Flow Charts	Role Play	Letters & Postcards	Flash Cards	Conse-quences	Lists	Captions
Personal Experiences	✓✓	✓✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Looking at Everyday Life			✓✓	✓✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Measuring up Provision					✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Suitable for:

a prop for one-to-one interviews or an individual activity within a group setting

Likely to last:

up to half an hour (maybe longer for the more `arty' ones)

Materials required:

minimum- paper and pens but could use copied worksheets or arts materials

Pointers

When analysing personal maps, look for themes that may be generated:

How do young people 'group' different aspects of their lives

Which features are identified as close to them or a priority, and which 'distant' or less important

How often do certain features occur? For example, in a map of `workers who support me', how often/how closely do teachers/social workers/doctors feature? Is this significant?

Personal Maps

The idea

Personal maps can take a number of forms. Their purpose is to enable young people to sketch out different aspects of their lives. The personal maps can therefore be themed, such as `family' `friends' or 'workers who support me'. They enable a more visual representation of these different aspects, in which different connections can be illustrated, or levels of importance or closeness identified, without asking for long written details.

There is scope for young people to convey personal information by being introduced to a theme and using the activity to consider their own interpretation of the theme. The maps produced can be used as a focus for later discussion, or to gather background information on group members prior to a different activity.

The activity

Mapping exercises can be useful whatever the literacy level of the target group, since they can use single words or pictures, arrows or symbols, to signify agreed representations.

The theme must be made clear to participants. It may be useful to develop one based on your own, or hypothetical, scenario, to show as an example.

The personal map may be shared as a groupwork activity, or may remain personal.

Analysis

You should consider how you will gather information from this exercise. It is feasible that young people will want to keep what they have produced-is it possible for you to copy the map for your analysis later? Or, it may be the kind of exercise you repeat over a period of time to explore whether perceptions of things change over that period, in which case you should agree how each young person's `portfolio' will be kept safe.

The important thing about personal mapping is that you choose one approach and use this as a framework for all participants. This way, although each contribution is potentially quite different, you are looking at the same framework and will find it easier to identify themes from the participants' representations.

Variations

Milestones Map

Map of significant events in a given period, and journeys between significant life points

Spiders Webs

Can be used to map out any theme. Different sections of the web can be used to identify different aspects of life, and the centre is close and important (the young person as the spider), the edges more distant. However, the spider could also represent another feature, such as 'the school' and the web could represent the different people connected with it.

`Me' Collages

A 'tile' of card, piece of paper or paper plate is used for a representative self-portrait. Young people can be asked to signify specific aspects, such as 'my best and worst features' `my skills and talents' etc

Mind Maps or Brain Patterns

These start with a concept, idea or single word. Participants take off stems in different directions to represent different thoughts triggered by the starting point.

Case Study

Group

A group of 8 young people with Records of Need for specific learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia) at secondary school.

Project Focus

The action research is exploring young people's experiences of gaining extra support for their learning difficulty. The areas of interest include how young people feel about their learning difficulty, how they perceive the processes by which their difficulties were recognised and formally identified by the Records of Needs system, and how well they feel their needs are met by different workers within the school system.

Description

Personal mapping was used frequently in the group's sessions, minimising the reliance on literacy to take part. For example:

The Milestones Map was used to enable young people to tell the story of when they first realised themselves that they learned 'differently' from others, to when this was recognised by others, and what was involved in gaining recognition. Themes generated by the maps:

- 3 out of 8 young people experienced years of personal frustration before their learning difficulty was acknowledged by teachers
- 5 out of 8 young people had experienced conflict with teachers on their route to having their difficulties acknowledged
- 7 out of 8 young people were involved in a year-long process of being assessed by several different professionals before their Record of Need was established

Spiders Webs were used to explore the experience of the review meetings which young people with Records have annually. Themes generated by the webs:

- 8 out of 8 young people felt outnumbered and isolated at the meetings
- 6 out of 8 young people felt the presence of a doctor at the meeting pointless
- 4 out of 8 young people felt their learning support teacher was their best advocate at the meeting, the other 4 felt better supported by their parent.

Suitable for:

work with individuals or groups over a period of time

Likely to last:

`Group entries' could be a brief exercise each session lasting 10–15 minutes, personal diaries would be up to each individual, and depend on the nature of the diary

Materials required:

minimum- paper and pens but could use copied worksheets or arts materials

Pointers

The purpose of the diary should be made clear-what specific events/areas of interest etc should be included by young people?

The ownership and status of diaries which record personal information, feelings and thoughts should be agreed beforehand.

In terms of analysis, young people could perhaps be given a coding framework they agree with, and apply this to their own work, showing you only those sections they think apply..They can let you know if they feel anything significant is not covered by the framework.

Diaries

The idea

In their most simple format, diaries can simply be a record of events, happenings or experiences. For example, a group of young people could record all the occurrences of bullying at school over a three week period. Or, they can go further and involve young people in reflecting on these occurrences.

Diaries can be useful in disentangling the myth or exaggeration that can occur around some issues—establishing what is 'strength of feeling' and what events actually take place.

The activity

Diaries need not necessarily be in written format, so do not discount the approach on that basis straight away. They also do not need to be personal, a group can work on a diary to reflect collectively on what has happened either to the group, or to different individuals within the group over a period of time.

The period in which a diary is used need not be very long. In fact, for some young people, it would be unrealistic to stick with it for longer than a few weeks. It may be possible for young people to keep a diary of everything that happens in one day only, or a diary of everything that happens in one session (e.g. group session, visit to the health specialist, particular class in school etc) that takes place regularly over a period of months.

Since many of us have resolved to keep a diary, then lapsed within days of starting, the potential for this activity to fail should be minded. If young people are to keep personal diaries, then perhaps the self-completion will have to be subject to your frequent reminders, or specific parts of your sessions with them to assist. The task may be easier for both groups and young people to commit to if there is a suggested format for their entry.

Analysis

The format will also make diary entries easier to analyse. However, if written narrative is the main source of information, the section on qualitative analysis (p64) will help you.

Variations

A Tick-Box Diary

A very structured approach which might be useful in recording frequency of events or very specific occurrences

A 'Letter to' Diary

Uses the letters and postcards activity (p100) on a regular basis, allowing the diary to become a third-person character for the young people to share experiences or views with

A 'Ratings' Diary

Borrows from the ratings activity (p94) to provide a framework for recording experiences of, or reactions to, a regular occurrence, such as visits to the benefits agency etc.

A Frequency Diary

If there is an interest in how much time young people spend doing an activity, for example, the diary could be specifically used just to note time spent. Or, the number of times a young person takes a bus/uses a leisure centre/goes to the local chippy etc

A Resource Diary

Similarly, you might be interested in a record of how much money young people spend (on what?) or how many times they buy certain things etc.

Case Study

Group

A youth group of 11 young people that have been identified as instigating 'gang' fights with a group from another area

Project Focus

The action research is exploring young people's attitudes towards gang fights, how fights start, and what might help young people steer clear of this kind of activity, to avoid further trouble with the police and adults in the community, who are concerned about 'gang warfare'

Description

Initially, the young people talked with great excitement about the extent of gang fighting in the area, involving groups from several neighbourhoods in a couple of fights every weekend.

A diary was used as a group activity every Monday night for two months, to record the events of the previous weekend. The diaries were used to record the friendship activities of the group as well as their contact with groups from other neighbourhoods, how this was instigated, what took place etc. The themes that emerged were: Only one fight actually took place over a period of eight weeks that involved contact between young people. Two people were involved, although 13 people were animated spectators

On three occasions in eight weeks, groups exchanged insults and threw things at each other, from a distance. This involved three different groupings of young people A pattern could be identified of how these transactions begin, starting with rumour- mongering at school on Fridays and fuelled by mobile phone-calls during the weekend. Friday night is the most popular night for altercations.

On the night of the once-a-month disco, all groups postpone their activities until the disco has closed

The presence of the police adds to the excitement, as both groups involved then join up to tease the police into chases

The worker used these findings with the group to try out a programme of work with the school and local youth workers, which in turn was researched for its impact on the behaviour of the young people.

Suitable for:

groups of 2-8 young people (in larger groups people get bored waiting for a turn)

Likely to last:

as long as it holds attention, anything from 15 minutes to a couple of hours!

Materials required:

a board, dice and counters or a variation on this- spinning a colour top etc

Pointers

The greatest effort in terms of preparation in board games is to generate enough discussion triggers for alt the themes you want to explore.

If you are planning the game for a group of six, you might try to design the game so that each took a turn around six times each. You would need at least 40 cards devised— each coming at a theme from a different angle, so that discussion does not get repetitive.

Board Games

The idea

Board games help to structure group discussion. They provide a format young people recognise in which they will take it in turns, and when it is their turn, they will be required to do something-often answer questions. Your use of the board game is to use this question format to generate discussion. The purpose is not necessarily to put one young person on the spot each time, as the discussion can involve the whole group. However, this format does enable each participant to take a turn in kicking off discussion.

The activity

The 'questions' can be any kind of discussion trigger:

unfinished sentences-'if I was a teacher a school rule I would have is...),

open-ended questions-'how many dates should you have before you have sex?'

statements with response options-'curfews for 10-16s should operate after 9pm: Agree or Disagree?'

You will have to be careful that young people who are not confident readers are not unnecessarily embarrassed when it is their turn to read out a card. Use large type as far as possible. The attractiveness of the game will rely on your ability to devise the discussion triggers using language that reflects the way young people ordinarily speak (not Enid Blyton-style) and presents issues that are relevant and of interest to them.

The style of the board is also important. If you plan to use the activity with more than a few young people, create a large table-sized board, with giant cards and counters. Whatever size the board, don't hold back on colour and style.

How long should games go on for? It is best to design a game where it will not matter if some get bored and drop out, while others wish to continue. Also, whatever kind of 'game' you devise, young people often feel there is little point in participating unless there is a winner, even if it is only being first to reach the centre of the board. Throwing in some rules that involve penalties can pep things up.

Analysis

Board games may best be tackled with two workers-one to participate and keep the flow of the game going, the other to record. It can be useful to devise a chart with all the triggers you have devised listed, so that when they come up, the recorder can easily note the responses accordingly. As suggested earlier, a tape recorder is a useful back up.

Variations

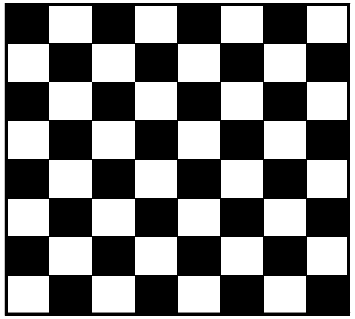
The variations on board games really come from the way you design the 'rules' by which they work. You can apply board games to almost any discussion theme.

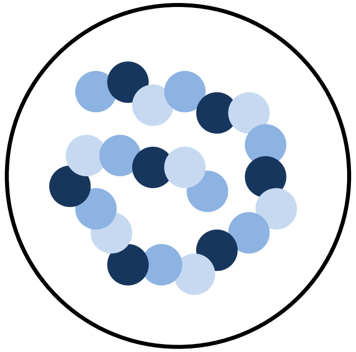
As already mentioned, young people do like some competitive element, even though they realise it is just a technique to get them to discuss issues.

The basics

A board needs to have a starting place and a means of putting you in the position of having to pick up a discussion card, whether by landing on a certain square or throwing a certain number or colour on the dice. There needs to be some way of signifying who is who on the board, such as different counters for each participant.

It does not really matter how people move around the board:





Embellishments

If you are raising different themes in one game, signify each theme with a different colour trigger card, and code places on the board accordingly. Participants could be set the task of being first to collect a full 'set' of colours, or certain colours could come with associated penalties or games.

`Spot prizes' could be part of the plan. Such prizes could be pieces of a 'jigsaw' associated with the theme (e.g a picture of a Ferrari if the theme of your game is joy-riding) or 'clues' to a riddle or treasure hunt etc.

Case Study

Group

Ten different groups of young people who are involved in school initiatives aimed at persistent truants.

Project Focus

The action research was to try and find out if any particular factors were involved in precipitating periods of truancy for young people The action researchers considered that a number of factors might be common: conflict with a teacher; a family upset such as the illness of a parent; and bullying by peers at school. The team wanted to test out these initial ideas before developing in-depth research on any particular aspect of young people's experience. They also wanted to test out their ideas in a way that allowed factors they hadn't thought of, to emerge from the young people.

Description

The board game that the team designed used three different question techniques: open ended questions, scenarios with questions (e.g what should happen now?) and response option statements. By playing the game and carefully recording responses, the team gained some idea of which issues they wanted to explore next through one-to-one interviews:

- It seemed possible that there may be a gendered difference in reasons for truancy that would be worth investigating further
- Personal issues of self-esteem and confidence among young people, not necessarily associated with any of the factors the team had earlier identified, could be another factor in spells of truancy
- That young people may use truancy to gain a sense of control when their lives were 'muddled-up' in some way, a sense of control that they were not able to gain while at school. The team felt it was important to explore this suggestion further, since it may be a crucial point in devising strategies for young people to stop truanting.

Suitable for:

Small groups as a one-off type of activity to explore attitudes. This casual approach could be used anywhere-the street, on the minibus, in .the youth club etc.

Likely to last:

The quiz itself could be devised for completion in a few minutes- the discussion could last as long as you allow it to.

Materials required:

Quizzes can be made onto flipcharts or as handouts. It may not even be necessary for people to complete with a pen, they can just talk about their responses.

Pointers

As the format is exploring attitudes, rather than disclosure of personal experiences, quite 'edgy' issues can be looked at without the approach becoming too heavy. For example, you could design questions to reveal people's attitudes towards racism, sexism or politics without imposing a deadly serious atmosphere.

However, use of language in teen magazines is a pointer to how frivolously potentially serious issues can be presented, so take care not to allow teen-speak to obscure any sensitivities you should be aware of when raising these issues with your group.

POP Quiz

The idea

The distinction we would make between a 'pop' quiz and a questionnaire is that the pop quiz is merely a device to stimulate discussion, offering a framework you have devised to raise different issues through the quiz format. Used imaginatively, pop quizzes can stimulate discussion around any issue where you are trying to explore young people's attitudes. Many young women who use teen or women's magazines will be familiar with the format, and will recognise that it has a fun element rather than being a serious attempt at researching their views, so the pop quiz is ideal to introduce an issue in quite a light-hearted way. Many of the magazines feature their pop quizzes around the perennial 'teen-mag' issues of relationships, sex, `personality traits' and so-on.

The activity

The format usually offers a small number of questions in the form of a scenario, with a set of response options. The user is provided with some feedback for their responses by either a scoring mechanism, or a 'mostly a's/mostly b's' guide to some kind of 'analysis' of their responses. So, it may go something like this:

Q You are at school, when a boy you have fancied for ages asks you if you are going to the school dance. He suggests that you are on his 'passion potential' list for the night. Do you:

A) ask your pal where you can get hold of some contraception

B) Tell him your passion potential goes hand in hand with his permanence potential

C) Go bright red and walk off without saying a word

A series of questions about this kind of issue would help workers steer discussion towards a number of issues. For example, each of these responses could raise issues around confidence and self esteem, knowledge of access to contraception, and even how good or awful school dances are.

The focus of the activity is clearly not completion of the quiz, it is the ensuing discussion. Quizzes can therefore be completed as a group, or individually and then responses shared with the group.

Analysis

Although the completed quiz sheets may give you some data, this will be of limited value since young people may change their first reaction to a scenario or question during the following discussion. As with other discussion exercises, use the quiz as a framework for your recording of the session. Consider the use of tape recorder, or using a co-worker as observer and scribe.

Variations

Voting with your feet

Questions and responses are read out to the whole group. Responses are colour coded, and people move to different colour zones designated around the room to signify their chosen response. This approach only works if questions and responses are very short and snappy.

DIY Design

Individuals or groups able to concentrate and used to some critical thinking, could be asked to design three different responses to any given scenario, to design their own pop quiz. The discussion would then focus n why these responses were introduced as possible options.

This should not be considered the lazy option for workers reluctant to design their own responses. You may have to put considerable work into getting young people familiar with the idea, perhaps looking at other pop quizzes from magazines. You may also have to engineer a balancing act between hilarity and off-the- wall humour and thoughtful responses that properly consider the issue.

Pop-figure pop quiz

It may be easier to design the quizzes using a third-person format for the responses, e.g: Henrik Larsson* would be most likely to choose: Eminem would be most likely to choose: Britney Spears would be most likely to choose:

Game Shows

Your imagination is the limit for the number of game shows that can be adapted to reflect this pop-quiz format: Blind Date, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Never Mind the Buzzcocks etc.

* substitute footballer hero of your choice (or the group's choice)

Case Study

Group

A mixed gender group of young people involved in an Intermediate Treatment group because of their offending. The group members have been working on issues around dealing with temper and anger.

Project Focus

The action research was to try and work with young people to devise realistic strategies for young people to deal with feelings of anger and outbursts of temper. On devising the strategies, the workers hoped to develop a group work resource that could be used by colleagues working with similar groups, but also potentially as part of Personal & Social Education programmes in schools. The team of workers wanted to start their work by exploring with young people if there are any particular situations that lead to increased frustration, and if there are any common experiences between the young people.

Description

The team devised pop quizzes on three themes: responding to adults in different situations; responding to peers in different situations; and responding to family in different situations. The findings generated very different responses from the group on each of the themes. At this stage, the team wondered if young people might feel they needed very different skills in these different areas of their lives to cope with confrontation and negotiation.

The team built on their first attempt. Using the findings from the first pop quizzes, they devised quizzes looking at similar kinds of situations they may experience with any of the groups of adults, friends or family, and offering as response options a range of reactions that illustrate the use of different skills.

The team were then able to consider with young people that some skills were indeed inappropriate for some situations-walking away, for example, could work with friends and family, but could lead to more trouble at school or in other formal situations.

The findings from the pop quiz discussions where then used by the team of workers to devise further research tools, such as role-play and diary keeping, to use with the young people to gain a more in-depth insight into managing temper and anger.

Suitable for:

Groups or individuals

Likely to last:

This can be quite a superficial exercise, used as an introduction to other activities, or it can be a way of engaging young people in in-depth thought about something. Time allowed will depend on your purpose.

Materials required:

This can be introduced on flipcharts or on worksheets. You will need to have some kind of prompt to clearly explain the scoring system.

Pointers

It may be interesting to re- visit this kind of exercise at different intervals, to show any changes over time. For example, if young people are scoring different aspects of a service they use regularly, and at the same time the focus of the research is on how that service may be better developed for young people, then carrying out the exercise at different intervals may have some value in measuring progress of the service.

Rating Games

The idea

Rating games can help establish how young people prioritise issues or how they develop preferences or value one thing over another. They can also help in processes of elimination by involving groups in working to narrow down from a wide range of potential issues.

Another way they can usefully be used is by giving young people a framework by which to assess different things such as services provided to them, the performance of organisations or levels of accessibility/youth-friendliness etc.

The activity

Simple scoring systems are very easy to use with young people, whatever way the activity is presented. However, it is worth spending some time developing the scoring system with the group, to enable the views of different young people to be analysed more meaningfully-we all know that one person's 7 is another persons 5 and a 1/2. Sometimes, it is better to use descriptive scores to ascribe, such as 'excellent, nothing could be improved'; 'ok but some room for improvement; etc. Whatever system, if you plan to use this activity across a number of different groups, you must aim for consistency.

The activity can be approached in different ways-as a group discussion exercise, or as an individual exercise. It will obviously work much better in relation to things young people actually have experience of, so that they can apply the scoring criteria you have agreed with them authoritatively. It is also much easier for young people to apply a scoring system to something that is quite well-defined. If something is fuzzily described, people may gain different perceptions of what it is they are scoring, leaving your well-designed scoring mechanism useless.

Analysis

The activity itself may generate paper-based responses (e.g scores on worksheets you have devised) or responses that you record, either by group consensus or individual, that you can collate and plot by graph or other means. This quantitative information will only be significant if you are sure that your scoring system has been understood and used in the same way by all participants, and if they were similarly clear about the things they were applying the score to.

Otherwise, as with most of the activities here, there may be significant discussion by groups or individuals as they take part in the activity, and you should plan how you want to record and use this more qualitative information.

Variations

Snakes and ladders

This is not a departure to the familiar board game. It is a way of identifying within the flow chart the points at which different things can help or hinder young people, and what might happen if help is available, or if the hindrance cannot be overcome. The snake and ladder symbol, or other recognisable symbols, can be used to identify these points.

Using scenarios or questions as prompts

Being prepared with different scenarios or questions may help young people to work their way through the exercise. It may be difficult for some young people to imagine what would have happened if an event or circumstance had occurred differently along their route. The questions could be designed to assist this process.

Photographs and illustrations

The exercise could be brought to life using photos or illustrations of the individuals involved, of services, workers or other individuals who have played a role in the `route' being described. This kind of exercise can also be used as a kind of personal evaluation of young people's involvement in different things (for example, mapping their involvement in a youth group and the points at which they felt they made achievements or which contributed to their personal development)..

Case Study

Group

A group of 'Christmas leavers' (young people who left school at Christmas, being the earliest leaving date after their sixteenth birthday), meeting at a youth project for young unemployed people, in the spring term after they have left school.

Project Focus

The project workers have been considering how they can develop their work with young unemployed people, at a time when there are a wide range of agencies with a remit for supporting them. The workers have noticed that some of the young people they are in contact with are in touch with a range of agencies, which they seem to use on an ad-hoc basis, depending on their mood and their relationship with the agency workers. The workers feel it would be worth undertaking some action research in partnership with a group of young people who were in the first stages of transition from school to future options. The workers feel it would be worthwhile discussing with the group their decision to leave school, and since school, their contact with different agencies with a remit for supporting their transition to training, work or further education.

Description

Since all the young people went to the same school and live in the same area, their routes were assumed to be similar. The workers introduced the flow chart exercise as a group activity, using the gym space to plot things out on a giant scale.

The findings from the activity generated a lot of discussion amongst the group. Everyone agreed the key points at which different choices or decisions could be taken, particularly leading up to leaving school, but each young person identified different issues that may have led to alternative choices, and had different ideas about what the resulting outcomes might have been.

Findings on how young people were experiencing their contact with different support agencies became useful in the longer term in the development of a young person's guide to services, and in agreements between agencies to share information and develop better joint working. However, the workers decided to immediately focus their action research on working with their group to develop a short programme to take to local fourth year school pupils, as part of a peer-education approach to enable young people to consider preparation for decision making on leaving school.

Suitable for:

Groups or individuals.

Likely to last:

At least an hour, depending on how complex the flow charts become

Materials required:

Ideally, giant paper- perhaps four flipchart pieces joined, or rolls from a paper mill.

Different coloured pens are essential, and perhaps different colour pieces of paper and magazines for illustrating the chart.

Pointers

In many circumstances, flow charts will reflect some of what young people have actually experienced, and some of what they feel would have happened if an event, decision or choice had taken place differently.

If young people are working in pairs or groups, the flow charts can reflect all their different journeys at once, using different a, colours. In this way, common points can be identified, as well as differences.

Flow Charts

The idea

Flow charts can help to explore young people's views or experiences on a process or sequence of events. It is similar to mapping, but allows for different potential routes through a process to be explored, and for routes that are consequential to given circumstances to be considered. This may be useful when looking at young people's use of services, for example, allowing young people to map what happens from their first contact with a service through to exit from the service, and the whole range of things that may happen in between, according to different interactions or circumstances.

Flow charts can also be used to map young people's progression relating to a particular issue over a period of time, identifying key points at which decisions or choices could be made and lead to different outcomes, or events may change the course of things..

The activity

Flow charts are useful because they can be visual-different shapes, symbols or colours can be used to signify agreed features, or they can be highly creative if the young people want to be involved in some kind of artistic input. However, they can also become quite complex, and the easiest way to deal with this is to work in a large space.

In presenting the activity to young people, the flow chart concept may not be so easy to grasp. It may help to have a worked example, and to present the activity as 'telling the story of ....(whatever the focus)'.

Each position on the chart should be identified or described-a further advantage of doing things on a large scale. Young people's own descriptions should be used if you are the scribe, or they can make their own. The links between each point could also be described. These descriptions will help your analysis.

Analysis

The flow charts produced can be used to identify common themes in the different 'routes'. Care must be taken during analysis to separate what is actually young people's experience, and what they think might have happened at different points when choices or decisions could have been made differently. This conjecture is no less valid than the actual experience, especially if it is based on a young person's familiarity with the focus of the flow chart, but it would be wrong to present it as `fact'.

Key aspects of flow charts may be of particular interest to you: the points at which routes change, for example, may signify a specific aspect that could be explore further in subsequent activities.

Variations

Snakes and ladders

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Suitable for:

Groups, perhaps best with young people who are familiar with each other and already work well together.

Likely to last:

At least a couple of hours. A period of 'warming up' may be required.

Materials required:

Space to enable people to work in small groups or pairs without getting in each others' way.

Pointers

Role play is not about theatre or performance, and should not be confused with drama. However, many resources used for drama work can help you, for example, with devising warm-up exercises.

Role Play

The idea

Young people are given the scope to express their views and perceptions, or represent their experiences, through role play. It can be a way of giving free reign to express feelings through non-verbal communication using physical expression.

The activity

Role play does not suit everyone. Some people feel inhibited by the relative exhibitionism, while others thrive on expressing themselves without the written word to hamper their thoughts. Role play should only be introduced once the group have been adequately prepared, by sharing experiences within the group during discussion, and also by using `warm-up' exercises to familiarise people with role play. If the group are not used to talking together and co-operating with each other, the activity may not work. Role play can be used with people working in pairs or small groups as well as in larger groups, but it is clearly not an individual activity.

Role play can be used to explore how people might behave, think or feel in certain situations. It may be possible to ascribe a certain character or loose script for one person (e.g playing a teacher, doctor etc.) and asking young people to role play 'a young person' in response, or vice versa.

Young people can also be given a brief scenario in which to develop whatever roles they feel are appropriate. The role plays do not become whole plays with a cast of thousands, but it may be possible for a small group of young people to get quite involved in creating a 'scene' which reflects the perspectives if different 'characters' and quite long stories of an event or scenario. You will need to consider whether you want every group to share their role plays with the larger group, and the implications for the length of your session. You may need to ask young people to work within clear parameters of time and focus.

Role play can also be initiated using familiar storylines and characters from current television. This may be particularly useful when young people feel unable to create their own characters or stories. Many of the soaps are aimed at teenage viewers and run any number of storylines concurrently reflecting different `issues'. You could use a video taped scene to stimulate discussion and development of roles..

Analysis

The role play is generally used to stimulate discussion, but it can be worth noting how role plays were developed by different young people-what aspects they chose to include, how they conveyed feeling or reflected attitudes, what kind of event or incident they chose to describe. Remember role play can be non-verbal, so if you do use a tape recorder, it should be backed up with notes where necessary on the physical expressions used..

Variations

Chat Shows

Chat shows can be a particularly light-hearted approach to role play which encourages group discussion. Kilroy, Oprah, Ricki Lake, Montel Williams etc all work to the same format: 'guests' introduce a situation, personal experience or story, the host asks questions, and the audience is invited to make comments, share their own experiences, air their opinions, tell the guests what to do and generally sit in judgement. The only prop needed is a microphone. However, choose your model show carefully, as some of the shows definitely provoke strong audience reactions and you perhaps don't want this aggression to become the feature of the exercise.

Forum Theatre

Forum theatre is used in popular political education movements to encourage people to get involved in problem solving or thinking through issues from different angles. A small group prepares a scenario before the group session, which is 'performed' to the rest of the group. However, the audience is invited to interrupt and suggest that things may happen differently than is being described in the scenario. They are also encouraged to finish the scenario by adding further scenes, reflecting their view of what would happen. The initial group does require some skill to be able to take direction from the audience in this way.

Telephones

If young people are reluctant role players in terms of physical expression, they may take to using phones as props. Since many young people have mobiles, this should not be too difficult to arrange. The role play will then be more dialogue based and obviously would not work to reflect meetings or encounters between the characters..

Case Study

Group

A group of young people ages 12-15 who frequently use health services because of chronic ill-health.

Project Focus

A health visitor wanted to consider how young people would begin to take more control over their own health care and use of health services as they grew through adolescence. Her initial work with the group of young people revealed that a major barrier to young people feeling empowered to use services in their own right, was the attitudes of receptionists of the different services they used. The health visitor decided to focus on this issue for a period of time, since she felt she may be in a position to influence the way receptionists worked within her own health centre.

Description

The health visitor devised several different role play scenarios:

- A telephone request to change the time of an appointment
- Arriving at reception late for an appointment
- Asking for information on additional services from a receptionist
- Asking for a preferred practitioner when making an appointment, and refusing a consultation with a disliked practitioner.

The group worked in pairs to develop each scenario, using their current experience of receptionists.

- The group identified a number of issues from this exercise, which were used as the basis for a second role play exercise. This time, the group were asked to present the scenario with the most positive outcome they could imagine, i.e. How they would like receptionists to approach them.
- The group prepared a leaflet of 'dos and don'ts' for receptionists to support a team training input by the health visitor. The group also made a video recording of their role plays to back up this input..

'Quick and easy' activities can be prepared in advance, but the more confident you get, the more you should feel able to introduce an activity on the spot.

This is a good reason for having the bag of tricks handy, with at least pens and paper to hand.

Pointers

You may want to introduce new activities on the spur of the moment, at times when another activity has a raised an issue that you want to explore while it is current, rather than waiting.

There is no reason why you should not occasionally use this opportunistic approach, but you should consider how these activities and the resulting findings fit with the more planned aspects of your work, particularly of you are working with several different groups using the same design of session..

Quick and Easy

Letters and postcards

These are basically a method of structuring personal accounts. They need not be in written format, they could be taped or filmed. The free postcards described on page x are useful for this exercise. Whatever the approach, they provide a framework to encourage young people to give a view or describe their experience. Young people can be given a specific addressee for their letter: a letters page of a newspaper, a known politician, any imaginary or real character, or an alien. Young people could also be asked to reply to a hypothetical letter you introduce, which asks for specific information or asks questions. Variation: An Agony Aunt/Uncle format can encourage young people to imagine what advice is appropriate to given 'problems'.

Flash cards

Flash cards can be used in a multitude of ways:

Sorting exercises: giving a situation or statement and asking participants to put cards in different piles of agree/disagree/not sure

Word association: giving a word or sentence, and asking participants to describe their reactions to the stimulus

Picture association: as above but using pictures (it can be hard to find pictures that are obvious enough to reflect issues you may want to raise)

Unfinished sentences: starting a sentence in such a way that the theme of the activity is obvious, but invites participants to finish sentences in a way that reflects their views

Consequences

This is a matching game, where a number of cards describe an activity and an equal number of cards describe consequences. Participants decide which consequences match the activities, and their matching is used to stimulate discussion.

Lists

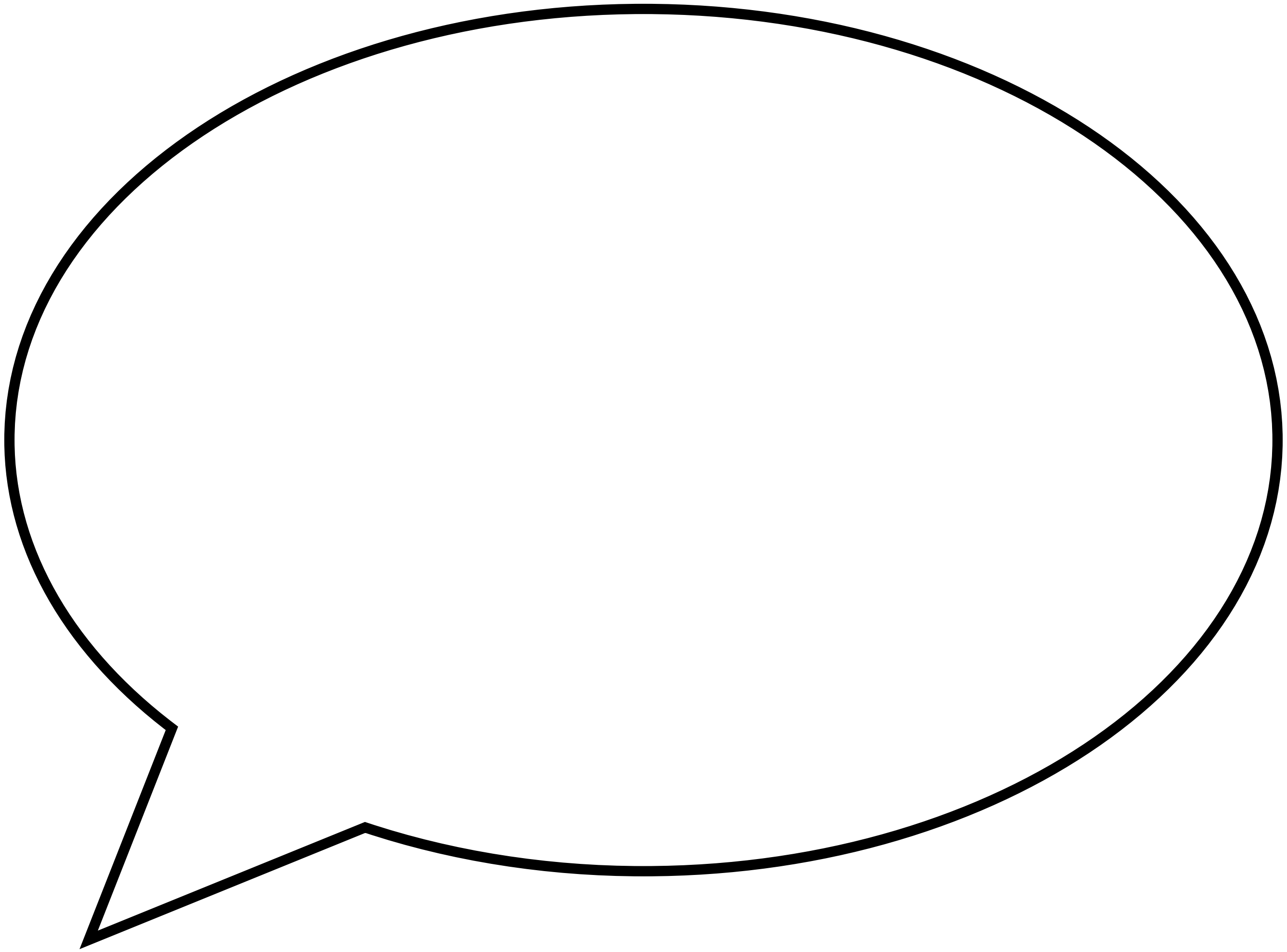
Very simply, a way of individual brainstorming e.g. list 5 things you like about… And five things you don't like about....

Captions

Pictures again provide the stimulus for young people to complete speech bubbles identifying what people might say or think in the situation depicted in the picture.

Photocopy Resources

These simple photocopy resources can be used as templates to help design your activities.



NOT SURE

DISAGREE

AGREE

HIGH PRIORITY

MEDIUM PRIORITY

LOW PRIORITY

Finally, thanks to Kate Philip, Dod Forrest, Sheila Wood and Jane Jones who, over the years, have worked to apply the principles and practice of action research to their work in different settings and whose willingness to share experience has been encouraging to many workers in Scotland.

Thanks to John Arthur and Jon Shute for their warmth and tolerance when things got tiring.

And lastly a big thanks to our close colleagues Paula Aldin-Scott, Bill Dewar and Rebecca Dodd, Jackie Steven and Gillian Burnside who have all made sure we will never take anything too seriously that we forget to have fun while we are doing it.

...afforded me the opportunity to think more critically and reflect on practice...

.. And that's just the toolkit. Getting involved in action research can be a rewarding, energising and refreshing process. It can bring to your partnerships with young people means of considering and reflecting on issues, and testing ways of tackling those issues together.

Today there are challenges to us all to provide evidence of the benefits of our work with young people, of what works and what doesn't, and evidence of the issues that need to be tackled to work towards social inclusion. This toolkit provides ideas about how we can work effectively and creatively with young people, getting beyond traditional survey approaches, to gather evidence of young people’s views, experiences and circumstances.

Action research is also in itself a challenging process. The toolkit provides a realistic and practical overview of what is involved for young people, workers and managers. It clearly describes each stage of preparation, carrying out the work, analysing and using the findings for change.

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