Promoting Youth Community Engagement through Active Youth Participation in Research: Possibilities and Limitations

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses learning possibilities and limits of working with youth researchers in participatory action research. Based on Engaging Girls, Changing Communities, a study designed to investigate barriers and facilitators to young women's leadership and civic activities in new urban environments, we analysed youth researchers' reflective notes, training evaluation reports, data quality coupled with reflections from a youth researcher community action initiative. Our analysis reveals that community-driven research projects like Engaging Girls Changing Communities offer youth the chance to learn from community members, their peers and from academics. The paper concludes that the process of social capital and skills building for the youth researchers outshines the challenges deriving from their involvement in the research.

Keywords: participatory action research, positive youth development, community engagement, research learning, youth researchers and female empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of youth as researchers in social science, health and education studies has gained momentum, particularly in studies that adopt participatory research methodologies. Various scholars across disciplines have emphasized the benefits of engaging youth as partners in empirical investigations, thus, there is general consensus that youth participation in research produces relevant data, foster positive youth development, engage and build youth capacity for knowledge production and analysis, as well as help create networks amongst youth and their peers. At the same time, little critical analysis has been done on some of the key constraints emanating from youth-centred

participatory research; therefore, this paper seeks to fill this gap by highlighting the learning opportunities and challenges of conducting studies with youth as primary researchers and community interventionists. Specifically, using youth researchers (YR) reflective notes, training evaluation reports, data quality coupled with other youth researcher activities; we examine the pros and cons of youth researcher learning and overall engagement in Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC), which was a three-year community-university research project that examined girls' conception and experiences with leadership and civic engagement in new urban environments. This participatory action study strived to respond to concerns that girls' potential for civic activities and leadership positions will remain untapped if new ways of nurturing girls' leadership are not pursued. EGCC promoted the development of girls as future leaders and encouraged young women to deconstruct and re-conceptualize leadership in their own terms.

METHODOLOGY

The Community Dialogue Approach methodologically framed Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC), which is a structure that was used in previous projects that informed its formation (see, for example, (Anucha et al (2009 - 2014); Dlamini et. Al; 2005-2008). With elements of traditional action research, the Community Dialogue Approach conceptualizes community engagement as a methodological practice and research as a community dialogue that must fully engage community stakeholders. Community partners are extensively involved in defining the focus and implementation of research. The Community Dialogue Approach emphasizes the use of multi-methods and encourages applied research that is meaningful to the community yet maintains scientific merit.

Methodologically, following funding, the EGCC project followed the typical research protocol in which university investigators request and receive ethics clearance from the related Research Ethics Boards. Thereafter EGCC embarked on activities that could be catalogued into three stages. First was a community forum that engaged the community partners and youth representatives. At this forum, the project was introduced, investigative questions and proposed methods were discussed and where necessary modified, and methods for various ways of participating were presented. Second was the employment and hiring of youth researchers to conduct interviews with other youth. A faculty researcher in conjunction with a seasoned doctoral student who was also a researcher in the project conducted this training. Following the training, youth researchers conducted and transcribed interviews. These interviews were followed by an end of year celebration forum that, similar to the first forum, brought together community-university partners to discuss the next steps of the projects as well as have the youth researchers share their interviewing experiences and preliminary understanding of the data. The third stage of EGCC involved facilitating youth-led community initiatives, which had the overarching objective of introducing novel avenues of engaging young women and girls in leadership and community activities. Furthermore, the partnerships with community organizations purposed

the harmonization of the actual leadership aspirations of young women and girls with existing leadership programs that community organization offer. Overall then, EGCC was designed to counteract gender imbalance in both Canadian community and political life as well as facilitate knowledge mobilization on leadership and civic engagement.

The following section reviews literature on participatory research studies that integrate youth. Subsequently, using lessons drawn from the second and third stage of the EGCC, we present the learning, benefits and confines of engaging youth as researchers and initiators of community intervention projects aimed at promoting leadership and civic engagement among female youth. The paper concludes by offering some guidelines on how to effectively facilitate youth participation in investigations on matters of concern to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW ON YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH

There are vast amounts of literature that address the engagement of young people in research. A significant amount of this literature informs on the ways that youth-serving community organizations engage youth in program evaluation and implementation. In this literature youth, in particular, are recognized as making important contributions in decisions about the programs designed to serve them (Fetterman, 2003; Horsch, Little, Smith, Goodyear, & Harris, 2002; London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003; Sabo Flores, 2008). Correspondingly, in this literature, youth input on the community programs is sought; as well, often youth act as researchers by conducting surveys or

interviews that explore adult and peer ideas about the programs. A decade of this practice has led scholars to emphasize that youth led evaluation, if used properly, can be crucial in adult understanding of best youth program practices (London et al., 2003).

Another set of literature informs about the involvement of young people in participatory action research, especially research that is designed to investigate and impact youth lives. This literature documents benefits for young researchers, which include gains in self-confidence and self-esteem, the belief that their views matter and can effect change, meeting new people as well as gaining knowledge and skills that can be useful, for example, in seeking further employment Anucha et al 2009 - 2014; Boeck and Sharpe, 2009; Malinsky, and Lubelsky, 2007; McLaughlin, 2006).

> ...participatory action research can be used as a teaching tool about social and political issues and inequities.

Among these studies are those that suggest that participatory action research can be used as a teaching tool about social and political issues and inequities. Accordingly, this set of literature suggests that research as a teaching tool needs to have a framework that helps youth analyze the causes of, rather than simple identifying inequity. That is, youth may easily notice differences or inequities between neighborhoods, for example, but may still not have a framework for understanding why this might be. Through participatory research, young people can be taught to

critically assess their social context with varying levels of complexity; consequently, they will be able to offer ideas about why resources are distributed as they are.

This literature further emphasizes the role of participatory action research to provide tools for young people to interpret and make sense of their social and political environments and implications for their future. Accordingly, youth's sense-making becomes the basis for their development; as well, how they think about their neighborhoods, schools and communities, becomes critical to supporting their capacity to help build, shape or challenge institutional settings (Flanagan and Gallay, 1995). Earlier, Boyte (1991) have suggested that participatory action research, because of its focus on teamwork, public speaking and problem solving, could help youth develop competences associated with "public work". In this vein, research participation prepares young people for engagement in a democratic society. Putnam (2000) states that at a time when social scientists find that many people have "disengaged from democracy," there is a need for new strategies, which will awaken them to community problems and motivate them to take action; consequently, research participation provides information for adept citizenship.

There is also a group of literature that is skeptical about the involvement of youth in research – of different kinds. Part of this skepticism derives from an argument about the existence of information about the kinds of roles that adults play to support effective youth engagement, and that while research efforts are beginning to focus on developmental outcomes for youth, still needed is a richer base of evidence demonstrating the impact of participation on both young people and the communities of which they are a part. Oliver (1993) suggests that people's involvement in research may "constitute an abuse of their involvement unless it is linked into policy- making structures so as to influence outcomes directly" (cited in Lloyd, 1997, p. 79). Petrie applies this critique to research with young people, expressing concern about what she calls "extractive" research, which "mines" young people for information. She promotes an alternative view, where " . . . researchers try not to use people taking part in research only as sources of information, but to establish relationships with them and also give them something back, with a view to achieving positive change" (Bennett et al., 2004 cited in Petrie et al., 2006, pp.35–36).

Part of the skepticism about involving young people in research also derives from power dynamics and additional issues that are likely to emerge that are related to the research but are not planned for. Stacey & Turner (1998) indicate the need to engage in dialogue with young people about emerging issues in a way that neither shuts them down and sends them underground, or allows their continued expression to occur to the detriment and/or offence of other group or community members, or the project over- all. Furthermore, there is a limit to how much research can rely on borrowing from the young people's participation agenda regardless of its strengths, as this does not address all the issues the research agenda needs to consider.

Often, young people have their own priorities that consume their time and the research becomes an added-on activity to already busy lives.

In EGCC, we started the research by asking the question: "is involving youth as researchers worth it"? We soon realized that in order to benefit from partnering with youth in community research, our structures and practices as the lead researchers and those of York University as an institution must be committed to meaningful transformation and learning. We wanted to avoid placing youth in a research project simply for the sake of adding a nuanced element since we viewed it as a very problematic practice and contrary to goals of involving all stakeholders in the process of inquiry, particularly youth as representatives of an overlooked group.

FINDINGS
Recruiting and Training
The Engaging Girls Changing Communities (EGCC) project recruited eight female youth researchers who were trained to conduct peer interviews. The selection of youth researchers (YR) was purposive (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Ristock & Grieger, 1996), focusing on girls 16 to 22 years who were enrolled in education institutions (i.e. high schools, colleges or universities). The YR included five African Canadians, two Caribbean Canadians and one Turkish Canadian.

In all stages, youth researchers were encouraged to keep journals to use for reflecting on each activity. The first activity in which YR engaged was learning to interview. At this stage, YR worked with a faculty member over a period of 15 hours to learn about conducting qualitative research. The training required that the YR do some preliminary readings and arrive prepared to discuss questions and otherwise inform the training sessions.

The training included discussions regarding research ethics, interviewing strategies, how to generate probing questions, and how to transcribe audio recorded interviews. The YR also participated in mock interviews with each other, and then completed a reflection sheet regarding their training experiences. For the second part of their training, the YR were instructed to conduct a 15-20 minute interview with a young woman who may have something interesting to say about girls and leadership. The transcripts and reflection sheets from these interviews were used to provide feedback to the YR in order to improve their skills. Reflection sheets indicate that on the one hand YR benefited from the training because it developed ethical lenses, taught them critical skills that they would use to look at their environment and the context of their interviewing, as well as empowered them to work with their peers. On the other hand, however, YR expressed frustration with the training materials stating that it was difficult to comprehend and that it took a long time to go through. At the same time, YR felt that researchers were not ready to work with them to break down the material or to even acknowledge its level of difficulty.

Interviewing stage: Benefits and Confines
Interviews began shortly after the training and, for each interview, YR were required to immediately reflect on it through journaling. Journal data indicate that youth researchers reported nervousness, or little confidence pertaining to their interviewing skills at the initial stage of the process. As one youth wrote:

What I found most challenging is assuming the interviewer role as usually I am the subordinate.

Another stated,

This was my first interview [first time conducting an interview] and I was extremely nervous.

Journal data following the first interviews indicate more gains than challenges on the part of the YR. One of the gains evident from the YR's reflection journals is that all of them had personal points of convergence with some of the responses participants gave to the interview questions. In other words the answers given by respondents resonated with YR as they could personally identify with the experiences being recounted. In this way, YR expressed being able to relate and connect to the participants' values, which ultimately led to some form of "bonding". As one YR explained:

*Out of all my interviewees thus far she is the **closest to my values and views**. All of the answers she gave I agree a hundred percent with all of them.*

Another YR wrote:

*I can **relate** to her in her feelings of wanting her family as a whole to be closer (emphasis added).*

Perhaps because of this bonding scenario, when hearing challenging experiences, YR sometimes felt that they had to protect the participants; that is, they "felt" the participants' pain. Moreover, this connection to participants often presented a challenge in that YR expressed hardship holding their opinions to themselves so as not to unduly influence the responses of the participants. The following two quotes are illustrative of the latter two points:

When listening to her I felt more like I needed to help her and protected [sic] her that at times I felt like I was straying from my task.

Another youth researcher wrote:

My main concern was to abstain from challenging her comments.

The most documented gain by the YR during interviewing was learning, which included learning about the subject of investigation, that is, leadership and community participation as well as learning how to conduct research and learning about themselves. Commenting about having learnt how to articulate long held thoughts, one YR remarked:

*I learnt so much from the girl's point when she said guys don't take girls seriously even when they are leaders. **I kind of had the feeling but I never actually took that in"** (emphasis added).*

Similarly, other YR revealed the following:

I particularly enjoyed her thoughts on some of the major barriers women face. Her critique on the portrayal of women in the media and how it affects women in a holistic manner (self-esteem, self-image, relationship between man and women and between women and women) was very insightful.

Another YR commented that:

What I mean is that while I was interviewing the girl I was learning something from her that would help me later on. Interviewing is not only asking the other person some questions, it's communicating new people to dig up and learn some experience form the person's point of view.

By internalizing responses from the youth participants, the YR became direct beneficiaries of new knowledge during the data collection phase. In so doing, the YR assumed multiple functions including: the role of the "insider" researcher who conducted peer interviews; the role of a research participant who engaged with the research questions through journaling and other activities; and, the beneficiary who gained and applied 'new insights' to their personal life or translated this 'newly acquired knowledge' into actions for social change.

Gains and Constrains of YR's Community Intervention Activity

Following the interviewing stage, the YR were given the opportunity to work with the researchers to share their interviewing experiences, analyze the data through reading and creating themes of the transcribed scripts and share emerging findings at a forum that involved the community and other related stakeholders. At the symposium YR shared their experiences through creative presentations[1], which were followed by discussion sessions on the challenges and barriers to girls' leadership, and strategies to overcome these challenges (including strategies that the girls themselves could utilize).

Subsequent to the forum, YR were given a chance to identify a pressing issue within their community and design a corresponding intervention initiative. With the support of a Project Coordinator and funds, the YR developed an initiative entitled *"Naturality: The Strength of a Girl"*. This youth- driven- initiative was designed to increase girls' understanding and importance of healthy eating and physical activity. Additionally, the initiative also sought to heighten girls' critical consciousness of dangerous and unrealistic ideals of body images and build young women's capacity to engage in civic activities and advocacy work relating to healthy living. Informed by their personal observations and experiences and the 2011 report from Public Health Canada on health issue among Canadian youth, the youth researchers devised a day retreat comprising of healthy living workshops and iterative physical activities, which attracted a total of 20 girls between the ages of 16-20 years from Toronto.

At the end of the retreat, participants completed a survey in which they responded to the questions: How has the retreat affected your views or perception of physical activity and healthy eating? In what way has your attitude towards taking action in promoting healthy living changed? How has the experience broadened, changed or deepened your understanding of negative influences on body image? To disseminate the results of the initiative and maintain the relationship with the girls who attended the retreat, a blog was created. Essentially, the blog served as a platform for the youth researchers, the youth attendees and other girls from the broader community to share their experiences, lessons and ideas on

healthy living and physical activity in the urban environment. Based on the feedback received during the debriefing sessions, the YR viewed the community intervention activity as an invaluable component of the research process especially because they were able to construct a project that directly corresponded with their interest and offered them the chance to engage in community development as primary interventionists. This conception of research coincides with the ideological framework of the Community Dialogue Approach in which, research is understood as an academic and community-focused endeavour with significant practice and policy implications (Anucha et al, 2013). In addition to the benefit of contributing to community development, the participation in the community intervention activity also created further employment and skills development opportunities for the YR. Also, YR expressed their satisfaction with the level of autonomy and the sense of agency that they were endowed with during the community intervention activity.

Key challenges enunciated included the amount of resources provided and the longevity of the initiated project. For instance, some of the YR became disengaged shortly after the day of the retreat and did not participate in the blogging element of the community intervention activity while others maintained their involvement and connection with EGCC. Additionally, ideas and suggestions relating to the expansion of the Naturality initiative by the YR and youth participants could not be realized as the allocated resources only allowed for a small-scale project. Nevertheless, the Naturality initiative proved successful as a pilot project and was expedient in mapping the approach, process and methods for the subsequent nine youth-led community initiatives that were undertaken by a group of selected female youth leaders and their team members. All in all, the community intervention demonstrated that if adequately equipped with resources, girls are able to assume leadership roles, participate in civic life and function as agents of social change in their communities.

DISCUSSION

As previously stated, inspiring youth voices and active participation in youth-based research is strongly advocated in the literature. Engaging Girls Changing Communities (EGCC) is in line with this literature; in addition, EGCC contributes important information about the processes of youth engagement in research and the complexities that are part of this commitment.

To begin, EGCC is in line with literature advocating research as a learning tool for young people. Accordingly, it is clear from the YR's own documentation that engagement in EGCC provided immense opportunity for learning from the community, peers and from the university researchers. But learning mediums were not equally valued by YR in that book and other tools that to them resembled "school" were shunned. For example, the initial YR training was deemed challenging simple by virtue of including texts that needed to be read, that is, 'homework' so to speak. Similarly, activities such as preparing to share preliminary findings following the interview period, because they required a more 'school like' feature, became more of a challenge and took longer than what was originally envisaged. Thus, the challenge for future research initiatives such as ours is to consider alternative ways of teaching

and learning that would be more appealing to youth. Accordingly, it would be important for these projects and university researchers to offer the youth an option to create for themselves, scenarios of learning about research that use pedagogical tools of their choice.

Second, EGCC supports literature proclaiming that research enables youth to be change agents in their community, especially when given the tools to analyze and make- meaning of their environments (e.g. Flanagan and Gallay 1995). Accordingly, as indicated above, the devotion to the community initiative, which was a commitment of five hours per week for a consecutive eight weeks to organize *"Naturality: The Strength of a Girl"*, is clear indication of YR's ability to analyze, discuss with each other, and make a plan towards changing the health and socio-psychological perspectives of young girls of their age. The initiative succeeded in enhancing the knowledge and awareness about healthy living and physical activity of girls living in Toronto. Also, even if to a limited degree, because of the technology savvy-ness of YR, the creation of a Facebook page and other communication channels meant that the girls were able to stay connected and communicate with each other beyond the designed activity.

Third, as researchers, we cannot overemphasize the importance of the insider working with similar others in their community. Engaging youth as primary researchers meant that participants displayed a greater willingness to disclose personal experiences that were sometimes sensitive in nature. By creating a comfortable space and gaining the trust of their peers, the 'insider' youth researchers were able to generate useful data. This finding confirms Powers and Tiffany (2006) who assert that the participation of youth in research leads to the production of more reliable and meaningful data that may otherwise not have been accessible to traditional, adult driven methods.

Although insiders have had a reputation for having easier access to the community and for the ability to provide more authentic research accounts, they have also been faulted for being intrinsically subjective and too close to the community personally and culturally to be able to capture its nuances (Merriam et al., 2001). The involvement of YR as insiders in EGCC had a positive impact; however, some data indicate the validity of the latter caution of the limits of proximity to the community.

In EGCC, there were instances where nuances deemed as 'understood' by the YR thus leading to a form of information "loss". For example, because of the YR insider status resulting in experience-sharing-moments, the youth researcher and participants "bonded over" mutual feelings, thoughts, observations and incidences in a language and jargon that may be unfamiliar to the academic. The following script indicates commonality of experience and knowledge between the YR and the participant, which is not articulated. The researcher, however, is left hanging regarding the knowledge that is shared:

Participant: My parents it's just like... they are so developed.

Youth Researcher: Yea, they know more than you think.

Participant: The thing is with my parents they seem like they don't

know stuff but then technically they know what they do.

Youth Researcher: They do.

Participant: In a weird way.

Youth Researcher: They do. Trust me, they just act as if they don't …

Participant: And they will probably like act … like clueless about stuff but then they know it.

Youth Researcher: That's true. […]

Further, it is important to note that experience-sharing moments may or may not generate data that align with the over-all research topic. In some instances, the academic is left with the task of consolidating the discord between meaningful data that the youth researcher obtains but might not directly relate to the originally drafted research questions. Powers and Tiffany (2006) point to the potential tension between the expectation of the university researcher and that of the youth researcher. Accordingly, "taking youth voice seriously in participatory research means balancing the conflicting priorities between the needs of the young people and the needs of the research process" (p. 85). As they explain, in certain cases accommodating the needs of youth researchers could result in having incomplete data.

Finally, power dynamics were sometimes at play in EGCC and rendered unplanned for actions that impacted the data collection process and created challenging relations between YR and university researchers. For instance, the project coordinator, who was responsible for overseeing the interviewing and transcribing phases and activities often had problems receiving transcripts from YR and would solicit the assistance of the researchers to nudge the YR into compliance. In this sense, rather than acting as mentors and collaborative leaders, the university researchers sometimes had to assume the role of "research police". In the end, the data would be received but relations between researchers, some YR and the coordinator were tainted. Even though this was not a dominant occurrence in EGCC], it is a finding that raises questions about the value of relying on youth to collect data from other youth and the reliability of the data gathered and transcribed. Such power play also raises questions about the value of youth working with other youth in situations where authority channels are established but not necessarily respected to the point where 'adult' authority becomes the ultimate way to resolve issues.

CONCLUSION

In Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC), we started the research by asking the question "Is involving youth as researchers worth it"? We conclude that youth involvement in our research was invaluable and that the learning that occurred overweighs the pitfalls. Youth researchers learnt ways to create spaces for themselves in the communities in which they worked, gained research and other interpersonal skills, and developed social capital that enabled them to further their educational and professional goals.[2]

Following from feminist and critical theorists, Merriam at al. (2001) note that researchers are taking up more nuanced approaches to identity that recognize the intersectional relationship between race, culture, gender, sexuality, class and ability.

In this vein, it has become a common practice in many fields for researchers to position themselves in relation to the communities in which they are working (Bridges, 2001). All researchers are complexly positioned, and whether explored explicitly or not, this positioning informs everything in our research including data collection, relationship with participants, methodological and theoretical approach. In EGCC the positioning of YR as girls who were working with other girls, opened up the kind of learning and network building that became the basis for the validity of the knowledge construction fundamental to the study. Also, because the study investigated issues of gender leadership and youth engagement, the data provided knowledge not just for the researchers but to the youth researchers as well. As one researcher eloquently put it:

> *I learnt so much from the girl's point when she said guys don't take girls seriously even when they are leaders. **I kind of had the feeling but I never actually took that in***" *(emphasis added).*

EGCC community activities such as Naturality also illustrated the impact of participation on both young people and the communities of which they are a part.

In EGCC, through journaling, youth were able to document some of the research joys and challenges that allowed us as researchers to critque the value of our methodology. Evidently, bonding with their peers, created a sense of togetherness for youth researchers, while at the same time, presented us with questions of how youth should address points of divergence when they occurred. As already stated, one youth researcher documented, "My main concern was to abstain from challenging her comments." Methodologically, research undertakings must seriously consider points of disagreement in similar ways that it considers the bonding that occurs during interview scenarios. We suggest therefore a methodology that allows a degree of YR autonomy in data collection. That is, it would be interesting, for example, to have instances where youth researchers are given the authority to conduct interviews in their own ways, handling ideological disagreements in ways that they would in real life situations and not "abstain from challenging" points that they do not agree with. Such a leap in practice would be a novel contribution to existing qualitative methodologies.

Youth engagement in research is indeed valuable; however, there exists a need to derive better teaching and learning methods that will occupy youth in ways that do not resemble schools and that tap into youth's popular culture and associated contemporary systems of learning. Similarly, future studies need to consider the interplay between adult and youth authority in order to map out the ways that adults can be seen as supporters and mentors rather than police and stand-alone sources of power and authority.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

[1]While most youth used mainly PowerPoint as the main medium, some youth created videos, photography, etc. to enhance their presentations.

[2] For instance, two of the YR who, at the time of the study, were in high school, successfully gained entry into university and started their undergraduate studies.

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