Child-led research: From participating in research to leading it

Addressing inequalities in decision-making [1]

KEY POINTS

- Child-led research is a participatory process involving children and young people in all stages of the research – from planning and conducting fieldwork to collecting and analysing data to disseminating their findings.

- Child-led research makes claims to young researchers' expertise and ability to generate knowledge, which can challenge adults.

- Child-led research is a mechanism recognising children and young people's participation rights within research and provides promising opportunities to engage them in shaping policies and practices, ultimately creating changes that lead to better lives for them.

- During child-led research, young researchers come together and work collectively over time, creating increasingly child-led spaces that are facilitated, but not managed, by adults. Young researchers bring their own expertise, based on their experiences, that was seen as advantageous for identifying issues, analysing data and reaching out to peers.

BACKGROUND

Article 12 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises children and young people's right to express their views on issues relevant to their lives. The UNCRC imposes a legal obligation on its signatories to take appropriate measures to fulfil this right. However, implementing participation rights has been challenging for countries and existing structures as it requires substantive changes to be made in how children and young people [2] are viewed by society, ways of working and priorities. As models and programmes develop to address such limitations, child-led research has emerged as an approach that can provide children and young people with meaningful participation opportunities. Thus, there is a growing interest in child-led research as a mechanism to enhance participation rights, based on the premise that children and young people bring particular expertise to the research process. This research briefing provides an overview of the evidence generated by the studies where children and young people led their own research and took actions based on their research findings.

CHILD-LED RESEARCH

One space for children and young people to participate is the research realm, as a way to generate knowledge[3]. There is increasing enthusiasm to recognise children's participation rights within research.[4] This has encouraged children and young people to become involved in research as important informants, as well as research advisers or consultants, research assistants in data collection, or key stakeholders in dissemination.[5] A growing body of evidence suggest that child-led research provides promising opportunities to engage children and young people in shaping policies and practices, ultimately creating changes that lead to better lives for them. [6] As efforts to support children and young people in their undertaking of research increase, and for that research to have an impact on policy and practice, it is timely to consider the opportunities and challenges of child-led research.

RESEARCH BRIEFING
Child-led research: From participating in research to leading it
Addressing inequalities in decision-making

METHODOLOGY

This study aims to critically explore how the processes and outcomes of children and young people's participation in their own child-led research contributed, positively or negatively, to decision-making in humanitarian and international development programme settings. This research used a case study approach to examine two projects where children and young people conducted child-led research. The study involved 48 participants: 26 in the Bekaa & Irbid case study and 22 in the Dhaka case study. The research participants were the young researchers and adult professionals who facilitated or otherwise supported the child-led research. The methods used were focus groups, interviews, document review and observation. The data generated were examined using thematic analysis, through the identification of patterns or themes within the qualitative data. Ethics were given considerable attention throughout the study. Detailed protocols were tailored to reflect the cultures of the research sites and covered issues such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, and omission of information that could potentially harm participants.

The Dhaka case study involved children and young people from a local child forum supported by World Vision Bangladesh. Forum members identified the need for research on birth certificates: in particular the negative impacts on children who do not have these certificates, leading to the inability to attend school, child marriage and child labour. The Bekaa & Irbid study was conducted by a group of refugee children and young people fleeing from the armed conflict in Syria, who had settled both in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon (an area that runs along the Syrian border) and in Irbid Refugee Camp (located in northern Jordan). These heavily war-affected children and young people were invited by World Vision Lebanon and World Vision Syria Response staff members to participate in a child-led research project that explored issues that personally affected them.

MAIN FINDINGS

Unpacking understandings of child-led research:

Research participants identified two elements they believed were key to defining child-led research. First, child-led research should allow children and young people to investigate issues relevant to them. They described child-led research as an opportunity to consider issues important to them, understand issues better and make suggestions for change. This was central to their motivation to join and remain involved in the child-led research, as they wanted to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of other children and young people. Second, child-led research required the in-depth and full engagement of young researchers in all parts of the research process. Child-led research was discussed as a collective rather than an individual exercise, with children and young people engaging in a joint project to reach a common goal of influencing decision-making.[7] This blurs the distinction between child-led research as being a knowledge generation process and a participatory activity. Data from this study indicate that child-led research is a mix of both, in which children and young people engage in research to create knowledge and this knowledge is then used to advocate for change.[8]

Exploring young researchers' expertise and experiences as central components of child-led research:

Young researchers' expertise was core to the success of these child-led research projects. It was grounded in their own experiences, which gave them a particular advantage in identifying issues, analysing data and reaching out to peers. First, they were able to identify issues that children and young people in similar situations to them would find important. Second, they asserted that they could obtain richer and more extensive data, especially around sensitive issues, from their peers than adult researchers; they believed they were more likely to know what approaches and methods would work best with their peers so they would be more inclined to participate. Third, young researchers brought their own experiences to the analysis and findings. Thus, the child-led research could tell a story about the children and young people's lives from the information they collected. Their expertise also assisted in their analysis and its presentation, underlining its strong basis on experience and thus, its believability. While this expertise may lead to honesty and believability, such a personalised approach risked a biased analysis and findings,[9] as research requires a rigour of analysis to ensure that data are systematically analysed and researchers' subjectivity duly considered. Young researchers were aware of such risks. For example, the young researchers expressed the need to reach out to other young people to ensure that these wider experiences and views were represented in their findings.[10] Their analysis was collective rather than individual, resulting in surprises for certain researchers and the need to confirm analysis as a group.

RESEARCH BRIEFING
Child-led research: From participating in research to leading it
Addressing inequalities in decision-making

Generating and sharing research findings to institute change:

In both case studies, young researchers wanted to influence change in a number of ways, including transforming mindsets and attitudes as well as having an impact on policy and practices that affected them. The young researchers' involvement differed between the case studies, both in the design and delivery. In the Dhaka case study, the young researchers reported being fully engaged in the planning of how to disseminate their findings and maximise their research's impact. In the Bekaa & Irbid case study, young researchers were not engaged with the knowledge exchange strategy planning, nor its delivery. The adult professionals gave several reasons for this in the Bekaa & Irbid project. First, they reflected that the cultural environment was unfavourable to listening to children and young people's opinions, as the society was still adult-dominated with limited spaces for children to be heard. Second, they indicated that the local setting was not always welcoming of refugees and, thus, they (and the organisation more generally) were concerned for the potential vulnerability of the young researchers. Adults' concerns about young researchers' protection and vulnerability can lessen their involvement in knowledge exchange – young researchers can and should be involved in safeguarding decisions and be made more aware of their research's impact at all levels.

Navigating multifaceted relationships between adult facilitators and young researchers:

The young researchers perceived the adult facilitators as critical to their project's success. When the young researchers were asked why, they described the positive relationships they had with the facilitator, which the young researchers thought led to their project's achievements. Three elements led to such positive relationships: the facilitators' personality, the positive emotional bonds between the young researchers and their facilitator, and the facilitators' skills and abilities. Looking across the data, young researchers used a range of adjectives to describe their facilitator, including tenderness, caring, sympathetic, understanding and supportive. Such qualities were supportive of the young researchers, helping them to continue with the project, even when there were problems or disappointments. The adult facilitator was recognised as creating a relaxing and egalitarian environment. Thus, the adult facilitators' emotional labour – that is the work being done to maintain relationships[11] – was not only valued by the young researchers but considered essential to the project's success. Child-led research requires a considerable commitment from children and young people, which frequently consists of volunteered time in otherwise busy lives. Children and young people reported that it is critical for the project to provide a fun, supportive and positive atmosphere in the groups; personal self-development; and achieve practical outcomes.

Examining personal achievements of the young researchers:

Young researchers in this study reported individual benefits in such areas as self-esteem, self-confidence, raised personal aspirations, research skills and experience. Furthermore, they collectively agreed that the child-led research provided skills and knowledge that they did not have before, and this helped them to trust in their abilities. They were highly appreciative of the skills they learned during the project; in particular, they prized their new writing, research, group facilitation and negotiation skills, as they were perceived as transferrable to other activities in which the young people may be involved. The adult facilitators also noted young researchers' achievements, including their development of good analytical skills, knowledge of useful research techniques and efficiency when working alongside peer researchers and research participants. The young researchers stated that the projects helped them improve their status within their communities. Young researchers in the Bekaa & Irbid study reported that their engagement in the project assisted them to cope with the pain, sadness and grief they experienced due to their refugee situation. They reflected that they were isolated, depressed and felt as though no one cared about them. The invitation to join the child-led research opened a new space where they could meet peers in similar situations and feel supported, cared for and loved. These young researchers noted that they were happy to make new friends as they struggled with the lack of social contacts after leaving their home country due to war.

CONCLUSION

Child-led research, for this study, did not have to be child-only research and could involve adults; adults' roles were to facilitate this research by providing logistical and skill support and the emotional labour to enable a constructive and motivating environment. The child-led research had similarities to other effective participation activities, such as children and young people reporting positive outcomes in skills development and self-confidence. Child-led research differed from these other participation activities in its claims to knowledge generation and the expertise to do so. Young researchers brought their own expertise to the project, which was argued to have particular advantages for identifying issues, improving fieldwork design and access, and analysing data, over adult researchers. Their expertise was not only their lived experiences but, increasingly, through their skills development, the ability to carry out the research thoroughly and involve a broad range

RESEARCH BRIEFING
Child-led research: From participating in research to leading it
Addressing inequalities in decision-making

of young people. Child-led research was considered innovative by many stakeholders at the time. The novelty gained traction because there was already a level of acceptance that children and young people's participation was necessary and required. Child-led research cannot rely on being fresh and innovative though, if it is going to gain traction as an important contributor to knowledge. It needs to face the challenges of the willingness for systems to change, conventions to be tested and changing priorities. Child-led research is particularly challenging because it tests not only adults' decision-making but also adults' research attitudes and systems. But, it is not alone in doing so, as the move to co-production, generally, and co-produced research, in particular, asks similar questions about knowledge, expertise and systems. [12]

RECOMMENDATIONS

Child-focused agencies, decision makers, adult professionals and young researchers should:

* recognise and embrace children and young people as rights-holders and social actors with capabilities to engage in child-led research projects and contribute to a change in their lives and the lives of others
* ensure a contextualised understanding of the opportunities that child-led research projects provide as a participatory methodology that enables children and young people's participation in public life by using their findings to influence decision-making processes
* consider appropriate strategies that recognise the different types of knowledge that young researchers can generate when using child-led research approaches
* reflect critically on the cultural shift needed to change adults' role from one of managing approaches to facilitating young researchers
* empower staff members, stakeholders and decision makers with the skills, tools and knowledge to support child-led research and engage with the young researchers sensitively and appropriately as these projects work better when adults can support and act
* ensure accountability to the children and young people who participate in child-led research by giving them feedback on the use and impact of their projects
* ensure that young researchers are aware of the necessary safeguarding and ethical issues to be considered both for themselves and the research they undertake.

ENDNOTES

1. This research briefing is based on the report, Cuevas-Parra, P. and Tisdall, E.K.M. (2019) Child-led research: From participating in research to leading it. Addressing inequalities in decision-making. Stockley Park: World Vision International.
2. This report broadly refers to children as young people under the age of 18, following Article 1 of the UNCRC. When writing generally about participation, the phrase 'children and young people' is typically used, due to the preference expressed by older children.
3. Blaikie, N. (2009) Designing social research, Cambridge: Polity.
4. Bradbury-Jones, C. and Taylor, J. (2015) Engaging with children as co-researchers: Challenges, counter-challenges and solutions. International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 18, pp161–173; Louca-Mai, B., Templeton, L., Toner, P., Watson, J., Evans, D., Percy-Smith, B. and Copello, A. (2018) Involving young people in drug and alcohol research. Drugs and Alcohol Today, 18, pp28–38; Jorgensen, C.R. (2019) Children's involvement in research – A review and comparison with service user involvement in health and social care. Social Sciences, 8(5), 149. Available from: https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8050149.
5. Fleming, J. (2011) Young people's involvement in research: Still a long way to go? Qualitative Social Work, 10, pp207–223; Lundy, L. and Swadener, B.B. (2014) Participatory rights-based research: Learning from young children's perspectives in research that affects their lives. IN: Saracho, O.N. and Spodek, B.C. (Eds.) Handbook of research methods in early childhood education, Information Age Publishing, vol. 2. Available from: https://pure.qub.ac.uk/portal/en/publishers/information-age-publishing%284651369d-f870-4a8e-97a4-9ab4d3a01672%29.html.
6. Skelton, T. (2008) Research with children and young people: Exploring the tensions between ethics, competence and participation. Children's Geographies, 6(1), pp21–36; Fleming (2011); Thomas, N. (2015) Children and young people's participation in research. IN: Gal, T. and Faedi Duramy, B. (Eds.) International perspectives and empirical findings on child participation: From social exclusion to child-inclusive policies, New York: Oxford University Press, pp89–110; James, A. (2007) Giving voice to children's voices: Practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. American Anthropologist, 109(2), pp261–272.
7. Houghton, C. (2015) Young people's perspectives on participatory ethics: Agency, power and impact in domestic abuse research and policy-making. Child Abuse Review, 24, pp235–248; Macdonald, S. and Young Edinburgh Action (YEA) (2018) Research briefing, YEA. Available from: https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/35633/CRFR%20Briefing%2092.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y [Accessed: 19 May 2019]; Kellett, M. (2005) Children as active researchers: A new research paradigm for the 21st century? Swindon: ESRC. Available from: http://oro.open.ac.uk/7539/1/ [Accessed: 10 November 2014]; Porter, G., Townsend, J. and Hampshire, K. (2012) Children and young people as producers of knowledge. Children's Geographies, 10(2), pp131–134; Mackenzie, J., Tan, P.L. and Hoverman, S. (2012) The value and limitations of participatory action research methodology. Journal of Hydrology, 474, pp11–21.
8. For further exploration of what constitutes child-led research, including what constitutes research, see Cuevas-Parra, P. and Tisdall, E.K.M. (2019) Child-led research: Questioning knowledge. Social Sciences, 8(2), 44. Available from: DOI:10.3390/socsci8020044.
9. Hammersley, M. (2017) Childhood studies: A sustainable paradigm? Childhood, 24, pp113–127; May, T. (2011) Social Research, 4th edition, Berkshire: Open University/McGraw Hill.
10. Ansell, N., Robson, E., Hajdu, F. and van Blerk, L. (2012) Learning from young people about their lives: Using participatory methods to research the impacts of AIDS in southern Africa. Children's Geographies, 10(2), pp169–186; McMellon, C. and Mitchell, M. (2017) Participatory action research with young people. IN: Hamilton, L. and Ravenscroft, J. (Eds.) Building research design in education, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, pp173–195.
11. Hochschild, A.R. (2012) The outsourced self: Intimate life in market times, Metropolitan Books; Oksala, J. (2016) Affective labour and feminist politics. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 41(2), pp281–303.
12. Campbell, H. and Vanderhoven, D. (2016) Knowledge that matters, Manchester: N8 Research Partnership. Available from: https://www.n8research.org.uk/knowledge-that-matters-realising-the-potential-of-co-production-launch-of-final-report/ [Accessed: 8 November 2018].