RESEARCH FOR ALL

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Research, relevance and respect: Co-creating a guide about involving young people in social research

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Abstract

Although children and young people in schools should be asked for their informed consent to participate in research, they rarely have a say in what research takes place in their school. We draw upon debates about youth participation in research to explore young people's preferences about their involvement in research and how they want to be treated by researchers. To do so, we reflect on the process of co-creating a guide for involving young people in social research with a Student Research Committee and their teacher; this involved group discussions, ranking exercises and other interactive sessions that generated ideas about the preferences of the young people about participating in research. Overall, the involvement of young people in all stages of the research process will enhance what they get out of participating and the extent to which they feel their voices have been heard.

Keywords: young people; participation; schools; research; participatory ethics

Key messages

- Students give priority to matters of social justice and fairness in terms of what topics are researched and how they are treated by researchers.
- Students feel it is important that their voices are heard by researchers and that they have the opportunity to shape how research is conducted and how researchers treat them.
- As well as receiving full information about research and having time to consider whether or not they want to participate, students prioritize the importance of getting some form of feedback about the outcomes and findings of research in which they participate.

Introduction

This commentary reflects on the process of creating a youth-centred research guide with a class of 15–16-year olds who attend a diverse research-rich multicultural secondary school in inner-city Glasgow. The school is research-rich in that many researchers approach the school to request that they undertake research and many of the students have been involved in research projects on a diverse range of topics. One such project

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involved a research team working on a project about faith, ethnicity and place for young people (Botterill *et al.*, 2016; Hopkins *et al.*, 2015), which included a series of focus groups and interviews in the school with young people from diverse ethnic and religious minority backgrounds. Permission to conduct this research was granted by Glasgow City Council Education Services Research Group as well as by the head teacher, who devolves responsibility for research matters to one of the deputy head teachers (Cath Sinclair). During the process of conducting this research, and following reflexive discussions between the research team and school staff, it was noted that it would be useful for the students in the school to play a more active role in research issues, including making decisions about what research is conducted and how, where, when and why research takes place. In this commentary, we outline the collaborative process we followed – and the key issues identified with the students – in the process of creating a youth-centred guide for researchers interested in doing research with young people.

Creating the guide

In order to generate material for inclusion in the guide, a series of classroom activities were facilitated by Peter Hopkins and Cath Sinclair with one class of 15–16-year olds. The class was a registration/form group so the students already knew one another well, having been in the same class for a few years. The group included a diversity of students who were not specifically selected or streamed according to ability or exam performance. Reflecting the ethnic and religious diversity of the school, the group included a number of second- and third-generation Pakistani Muslim students, asylum-seekers and refugees, as well as a small group of white Scottish students.

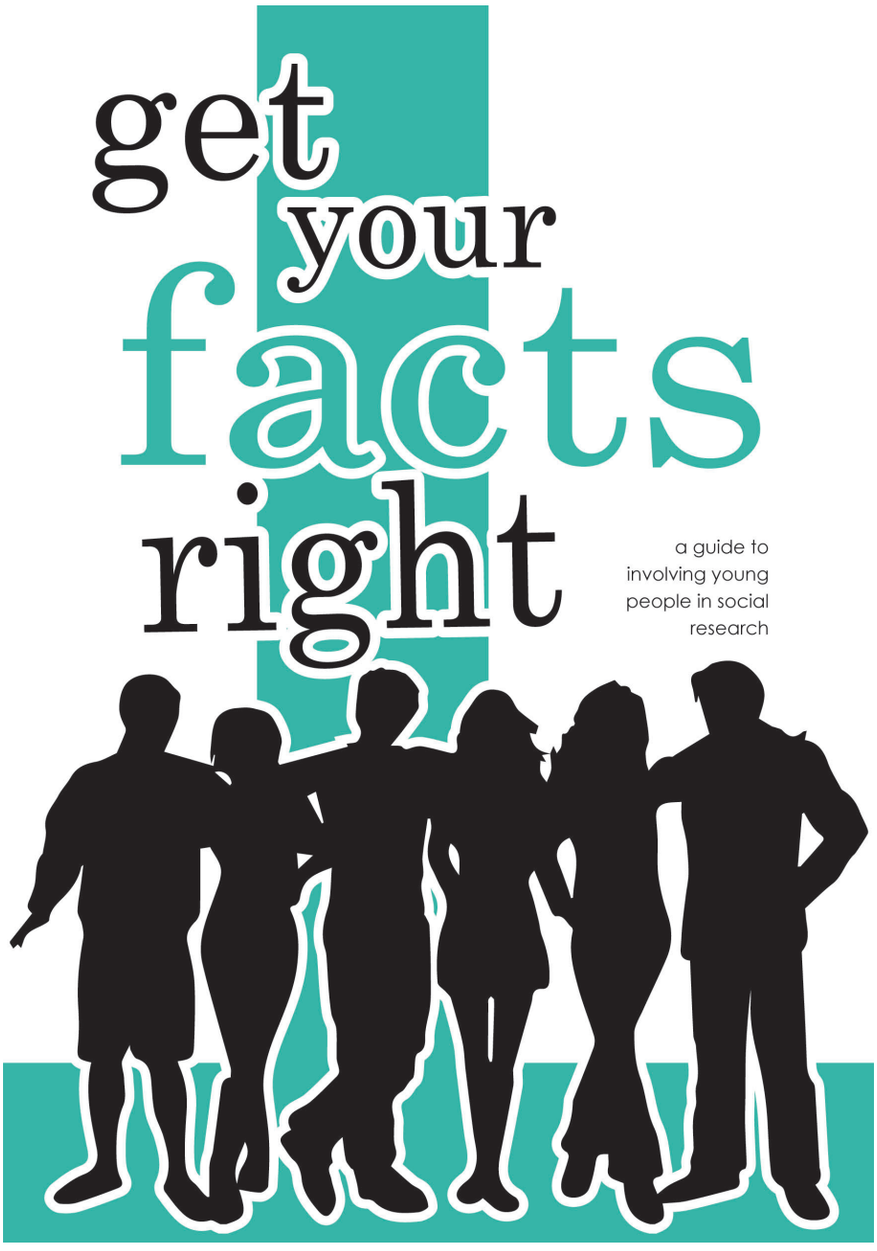
There was then a series of five short interactive sessions – which were participatory and facilitative – focused on key issues, including: different types of research, why research is important, what topics should be researched, the methods that students prefer researchers to use, how researchers should behave and how researchers should treat young people. From these exercises – which included the use of participatory methods using Post-it notes, flip-chart paper and ranking and scoring exercises (for example, Hopkins, 2006) – a list of initial points about research issues and the conduct of researchers was created.

Following this, all students participated in one focus-group discussion (there were four discussions in total) in loosely defined friendship groups to explore the issues above in more depth as appropriate. From these exercises and discussions, five key themes were developed: (1) why research is important, (2) how we want to be treated, (3) how the research should be conducted, (4) how researchers should behave and (5) topics we think are important. All of the focus-group discussions were fully transcribed and all of the notes from group activities were written up by the researcher and then organized under these key themes. Following a series of edits and revisions in collaboration with the students, teacher and researcher, a final list of points was agreed by the students.

The final stage of creating the guide involved a trip by the students to Newcastle University, where they visited different university departments. A key part of this trip involved the students meeting a 'designer' who offered them the opportunity to select the font, layout and overall presentation of the research guide. This included devising the title for the guide: *Get Your Facts Right*. The designer then produced a draft of the guide and the students provided feedback. All changes suggested by the students were actioned: this included changing the colour scheme of the guide, adjusting the

layout of the section about what topics should be researched and adding in more quotations from the focus-group discussions. Once the final revisions were made, the guide was printed and made into a PDF so that it could be shared online (see Figure 1). Visit the *Get Your Facts Right* report online (Students at Shawlands Academy *et al.*, 2016).

Figure 1: *Get Your Facts Right*, a youth-centred research guide



What was included in the guide?

In terms of putting together the guide, all of the points raised by the students in classroom activities and focus-group discussions were compiled under the five themes identified above. All points raised by the students were included in the final guide;

there was no editing out of concerns or issues that were seen to be less significant or unimportant, and the ordering of each point was decided by the students.

An important issue raised by a number of the students, and the first of the five key themes in the guide, concerned the ways in which research is important and can give students the chance to raise concerns about issues and learn more about themselves as individuals. One student noted: 'I think it just makes you reflect back and you end up learning more about yourself as a person.' There was also a sense for some students that research may help to change people's opinions: 'It would change people's views definitely, so that is one way of feedback even if it's not positive or negative.' The final points agreed by the students about why research is important included: making a difference, talking about things we don't normally discuss in class, having a chance to have a say in different things to do with our lives, helps us to understand why we think the way we do and to help researchers. Some students also observed that participating in research can help them in thinking through why they hold the views that they do, how these may or may not change and why others may have different opinions. It was clear from the views of a number of the students that they could see real potential in research in terms of advancing social justice and challenging inequalities. As well as having a voice, students claimed that research was important because it can make a difference and help themselves and researchers to understand the world. Expanding knowledge and understanding the world and its complexity was important to the students. Moreover, students were also aware of the potential changes that can come through participating in research; not only can research offer them space to discuss topics they do not usually have the chance to discuss, it can also help them to understand the way they think and why they may agree with some people and not with others.

Students were keen to emphasize their rights; indeed, one of the classroom discussions focused on some of the key points of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Their right to participate, to have a say, to withdraw if and when they want, to miss out questions or say yes or no and to be treated with respect were all important to them, and there was widespread agreement among the students that these points should be included. In addition, the provision of information about research was raised by a number of students and they said that they wanted to know about any research project, including why it was necessary and what they would be asked to do. It was important to them that research made a difference.

The topic that generated the most discussion and interest among the students was about how they want to be treated by researchers when participating in research, and this is the second key theme in the guide. The final list of points can be seen on page 6 of the guide. Issues of equality and justice were also mentioned by the students and included in the guide. Students felt it was important that they should feel equal to researchers, and a number emphasized the importance of all students being able to participate in research regardless of their background or how well-behaved they are. These points about equality and justice may relate to the diversity of the school and its focus upon qualities of 'equality, respect, integrity and compassion'. Finally, feedback was an important topic of discussion; the students agreed that having participated in a project, some form of written feedback is necessary. Some claimed they would be content with one line of feedback or clarification about whether or not the research worked, whereas others felt that more detailed feedback was necessary. Being provided with information about research projects as well as feedback were both very important to the students. One member of the group said, 'I think some background information would be good, like why is this research happening ... What

is the gain, what are you hoping to achieve with the information you are getting' and another said, 'Aye, if we don't get feedback then there's no point.' It is striking that the vast majority of these points are also mentioned in guidance about conducting ethical research with children and young people (see, for example, Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Bell *et al.*, 2008).

The third theme, how the research should be conducted, was also important to many of the students. They emphasized the importance of research being of relevance to them and in promoting social justice. The main points included under this theme are:

- research should be directly relevant to young people and should be research that will make a difference
- research should involve students signing a consent form so that they are fully aware of what the research is about and what their participation will involve
- research should anonymize the names of the students involved in order to protect their confidentiality
- research should be motivated by social justice and promote the common good
- research should be exciting and not be boring.

There were interesting discussions about the research methods that the students preferred, with most favouring group research over individual interviews. When asked why a focus group would be better than an individual interview, one student said, 'Cos you are all giving your opinions rather than just you giving your opinion ... Individual can get kind of awkward.'

The fourth theme considered by the students was about how researchers should behave when doing research in the school. Most of the discussion here was about researchers treating the students with respect and about them being friendly, sociable and honest. It was important to the students that researchers listen carefully to them. In addition to these points about the personal conduct of researchers, students also raised a number of procedural points, noting that researchers should have permission from the council to undertake research, and should have a 'background check'. A key message from the students was that researchers should be respectful towards young people and other school staff and that researchers should be fully qualified and approved to undertake research.

The last section of the guide presents the fifth theme, 'topics we think are important', in the form of a word cloud.

Presenting the guide to others

Upon completion of the guide, students were invited to present it to Glasgow City Council's Education Services Research Group, who meet in the City Chambers in the centre of the city. This is the committee that researchers apply to for permission to conduct research in schools in the city. The three students who are co-authors of this piece produced a PowerPoint presentation for the committee, which includes educational researchers, psychologists and others involved in the provision of educational services. Although members of the senior management team of the school and the researcher attended this, the presentation was delivered by and led by the students. A representative of Education Scotland attended the initial meeting with Glasgow City Council and subsequently visited the school with other representatives of Education Scotland, and the students presented to them about the creation of the guide. Following on from these presentations, Glasgow City Council have incorporated

the guide into their process of granting access to researchers and a copy of it is available on their website.

Conclusions: Towards a participatory ethics?

The authors of this commentary worked collaboratively to create a student-centred research guide. From this, all of us learned more about the research process, while students participated in decision-making about research and gained confidence through presenting the guide to the local authority and other groups. The classroom sessions and focus groups provided a useful forum not only for talking about the benefits and positive outcomes of participating in research but also for discussing research projects or research methods that students found to be problematic. This led to students offering critical and reflexive commentaries about their involvement in different research projects. In undertaking this project and developing the guide, we have contributed towards developing a participatory ethics (Cahill *et al.*, 2007; Manzo and Brightbill, 2007). By this, we mean engagement in all aspects of collaborative and participatory research and the complex negotiations of ethics during this process. Overall, students felt that they were given an important opportunity to have their voices heard by researchers and by school management, while also being able to shape how research is conducted and how researchers treat students. As one student said, it is important to them that: 'You know that it was worth doing and you didn't waste an hour ticking boxes.'

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Notes on the contributors

Peter Hopkins is Professor of Social Geography in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University. His research interests include: young people, place and identity; religion, faith and spirituality; and the intersections between masculinities and ethnicities. Most of his research involves working with children and young people, with previous projects focusing on: Muslim youth, unaccompanied asylum-seekers, Sikh young men, and university students. He has conducted research in Shawlands Academy for over 15 years.

Cath Sinclair is Deputy Head Teacher at Shawlands Academy, one of the largest multi-ethnic secondary schools in Scotland, where she has worked for almost 30 years. Previous to her current role, she was Head of Religious Studies at Shawlands and Staff Development Officer for Religious Moral and Philosophical Studies for Glasgow City Council. Cath has a keen interest in equity issues, anti-racist education and an interest in how research impacts upon classroom practice.

The Student Research Committee includes about 20 students at Shawlands Academy who all contributed towards the development of the guide. Aksa Ali, Megan Adcock and Mohammad Abdi led the student contribution to this article.

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