

# HARMS AND BENEFITS

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## Using critical-reflexive conversations to facilitate young people's involvement in rights-based policy research

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### ***Background context:***

Recent years have seen increasing involvement of children and young people as co-researchers alongside adult researchers. Co-research involves collaboration between adults and young researchers across the entire research process, from design through to dissemination. This approach potentially offers a more empowering approach to research participation for young people and increased scope to disrupt adultist understandings and interpretations of children and young people's lives. However, the increased collaboration required for authentic co-research increases the ethical complexity of the research process. This may be particularly so when the young researchers themselves might be considered additionally 'vulnerable' – as was the case in this study which involved five co-researchers (aged 17-25 years) who were in (or had recently left) out-of-home care (OOHC). It should also be noted that the researcher did not know the co-researchers prior to commencing the study.

### ***The ethical challenge:***

Qualitative co-research in the social sciences often involves young researchers collecting data from other young participants. In this sense, the young researchers are somewhat expert 'insiders', with the potential ability to recruit other young people, put them at ease and to collect different or more candid data. However, this co-research project sought to uncover how policy actors gather and consider children and young people's views in policy decision-making and the conditions that enable and constrain this process. Therefore, while the co-researchers were young people, the participants in the study were adult policymakers. A key ethical challenge, then, was the potential discomfort for the young co-researchers in being exposed to adult-centric settings and policy conversations.

The study involved the researcher and 1 or 2 of the co-researchers making site visits to observe policymaking in practice. Six sites were visited in total,



allowing all co-researchers to visit at least one site. Policy projects observed included:

- the design of services for young people leaving care;
- systemic responses to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care;
- design of a care leavers' charter of rights to improve case worker practice;
- a regional forum to consult on national children and families' wellbeing policy priorities;
- a full-day meeting of NGO and academic policy actors advocating for national policy priorities; and
- a roundtable discussion between departmental policy actors and NGO expert consultants about how to enshrine the voices of children and young people in policy.

At each site the researcher and co-researchers observed and recorded notes about the site set-up and any words, action and relationships they noticed. Following the observation period, they interviewed nine senior policy actors they had observed (more than 100 policy actors were observed in total across the six sites). The intention was that, based on their observations, the co-researchers would have the opportunity to contribute additional questions to the guided interview so as to adapt it to the specific policy making conditions of the site.

In some sites, co-researchers participated by asking their own interview questions, and in others, they conveyed their interests and questions to the researcher who asked additional questions on their behalf. In three national sites, co-researchers were also invited by policy actors to participate in policy making discussions, on the day, with little notice or time to prepare. Therefore, the risk of discomfort to the co-researchers was exacerbated by the uncertainty in each site and diversity in policy making practices.

### ***The options:***

Many aspects of the site visits could not be ascertained beforehand, which would have allowed for a fuller risk assessment and mitigation planning. Options were:

1. To insist on full disclosure of the expected policy making practices and other policy actors prior to making the site visit. This would limit recruitment of policy actors who were conducting real-time policy consultations and negotiations, which are typically complex, fast-paced, and subject to last-minute shifts in priorities.
2. To conduct interviews only, without observing policy practices. This would minimise exposure of the co-researchers in each site to only one policy actor participant, but would remove a key data collection method. Without observation, recollections of practice may be idealised and compromise research credibility.
3. To use a structured interview, agreed by the co-researchers prior to the site visit. This would remove the pressure on them to contribute to interview questions but would also limit the adaptation of interviews to the site conditions.
4. To engage in significant capacity building and relationship building prior to data collection, such that the co-researchers felt sufficient trust in the researcher and safety in the process.

### **Choices made:**

Where seeking to adopt a co-research approach created the above problem, it also offered the solution – working together and collaborating to identify issues and find solutions through a practice of ‘critical-reflexive conversations’ (Graham, Powell and Truscott, 2016).

These critical-reflexive conversations (CRCs):

- Were established during two capacity building sessions conducted with co-researchers prior to the site visits. These sessions established a relationship of trust, established the practice of critical-reflexive conversation together and built the confidence of co-researchers to contribute research questions drawn from lived experience.
- Continued through a prolonged policy-actor recruitment period that involved external institutional approval processes.

Critical-reflexive conversations were then intentionally conducted:

- Before data collection: to familiarize the co-researcher(s) with expectations about policy actors, the policy ‘problem’ they would be discussing, key concepts like, jurisdiction, early ‘intervention’ and sector regulation, and the arguments for and against children and

young people's involvement in policy development. These prior CRCs helped enable co-researchers visiting the three national sites to actively participate, such as giving their views at the roundtable discussion about how to 'enshrine' the voices of children and young people in policy.

- During (between observation and interview): to reflect on observations about the site, and what made them feel included or excluded. These CRCs aimed to identify specific questions the co-researcher wanted to ask the policy actor during interview. In two sites, where co-researchers were not comfortable asking interview questions, this CRC enabled the researcher to note questions to ask on the co-researchers' behalf.
- After data collection: to reflect on the data collected and debrief the co-researcher(s). In some sites this was extended over a meal or over many hours of travel back to the university. In others, the final CRC was truncated due to the co-researcher's timetables, but was followed up later by SMS, telephone and online. The researcher took notes or recorded these conversations for later use during data analysis.

In one site, a co-researcher was able to respectfully challenge a room of over 50 policy actors to include children and young people with experience in out-of-home care as policy actors. In another, two co-researchers participated in a roundtable discussion alongside five federal policy actors, to identify and challenge the barriers to children and young people's participation. Co-researchers asked questions about how policy actors report back to children and young people affected by their decisions and proposed new methods for including children and young people at the decision-making table. The relationship between the researcher and co-researchers established through CRCs was fundamental to enabling such participation in policy discussions and policy actor interviews. Their firsthand knowledge and experience of child protection and out-of-home care systems also enabled critical reflexivity in the exploration and analysis of policy practices, contributing new knowledge to the gap between the rhetoric of children and young people's participation and the practices associated with giving due weight to their views in policy making.

Following data collection, the key ethical challenge was to ensure the ongoing authentic involvement of co-researchers during the data analysis and dissemination stages and to deliver on our commitment to reach and influence additional policy actors. These stages were undertaken during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought additional stress to

the co-researchers' lives that prevented the planned focus groups (even online). Instead, two rounds of CRCs were held 1:1 with each co-researcher, with key messages and ideas being conveyed by the researcher to build a picture of consensus and divergent views. Co-researchers drew on their firsthand experiences of data collection in policy making sites to critically analyse the data and consider how policy practice might improve. These CRCs explored their recall of the site, the policy actors and policy projects in which they were engaged, and the practices identified during observation and interviews. The researcher prompted with key quotes from the interview and explored co-researcher reactions to the practices they had witnessed. Co-researchers chose an eBook as the best format to reach and influence policy actors, as it mirrored other policy resources and academic reports. Exploring how practices might be improved, co-researchers drew on past experiences of speaking up, advocating or being taken seriously that we had identified in the capacity building sessions.

Researching children and young people's authentic participation in policy making raised the impetus to ensure the authentic involvement of co-researchers in research design, data collection, analysis and knowledge co-creation and the decision to adopt a critical-reflexive participatory methodology. The contribution of co-researchers was fundamental to the research and its outputs, often leading into policy questions beyond the core research questions and to co-researchers taking on an advocacy role. Co-researchers demonstrated the potential of lived experience as a source of expertise in policy deliberation and their capabilities as policy researchers, challenging the notion that 'vulnerability' precludes their involvement in real-world policy settings and decision-making processes.

***Reflexive questions/considerations:***

- How comfortable is the co-researcher in this situation?
- What do I know about the language, setting or relationships that co-researchers might find useful prior to, and during, policy observation and interviews?
- How might I build the comfort and confidence for co-researchers to ask questions about their policy interests?
- How might I communicate in subtle and overt ways the value of the co-researcher's lived experience as a specialised form of knowledge in policy making?

- So what? How is this research making a difference for children and young people?

**Contributed by:** Meaghan Vosz, PhD candidate, Centre for Children and Young People, Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia.

### **References**

Graham, A., Powell, M.A., & Truscott, J. (2016). Ethical research involving children: Facilitating reflexive engagement. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-07-2015-0056>

