

Beyond Participation: No Research About Us Without Us

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Abstract:

Young people globally are the largest and fastest growing segment of the population. While youth, people aged 15-25, increase in number, the challenge and opportunity facing communities around the world is to create meaningful avenues of participation in civic, economic and academic life. This paper is a narrative research piece describing a youth participatory action research project implemented in Philadelphia in 2017. I describe the youth researchers' experience of identifying a social justice topic of interest to them, collecting primary qualitative data and reporting their findings. I also describe the impact that participation had on the youth researchers through observational data. Finally, recommendations are given for increasing the scope and impact of the program.

Introduction

Young people globally are the largest and fastest growing segment of the population (Brennan et al. 2015). While youth, people aged 15-25, increase in number, the challenge and opportunity facing communities around the world is to create meaningful avenues of participation in civic, economic and academic life (Brennan et al. 2015; Cahill, et al. 2017; Dolan & Brennan, 2016). Inspired in part by Freirean ideas around critical consciousness and learners as co-creators of knowledge as well as initiatives such as the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) youth participation in education, in community decision making and in research has slowly moved from the exception to a more widely accepted technique to produce valuable research (Conner, 2015; Freirer, 1970; Kennan & Dolan, 2017). Whether participation always equates to meaningful opportunities has been debated in the literature (Conner & Cosner, 2016; Farthing, 2012). Yet guiding principles for high impact youth participation have been well-established and will be discussed later in this paper. Based on

observations and experience in working with marginalized youth in low income neighborhoods I argue that participation alone is insufficient in creating avenues for engaged civic, economic and academic life. For youth to be empowered and engaged agents within their communities they must have opportunities not only to participate, but also to lead (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009).

Youth participation in research and civic engagement can too often sink to levels of “tokenism” and be bound by adult expectations of what youth are capable of as well as by what constitutes appropriate forms of engagement (Brennan & Dolan, 2016). Rather, when youth have opportunities to take the lead, make decisions and develop strategies to accomplish goals they will often surpass adult expectations. When youth are in the lead they may have a better opportunity to develop the competence, confidence, character, caring, connection and contribution outcomes that are associated with Positive Youth Development (PYD) (Lerner, 2007).

This paper is a narrative of my experience implementing a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project called Youth As Researchers (YAR) in a poverty stricken urban neighborhood in North Philadelphia. First, I’ll examine the justifications for involving youth as active participants in, and not just subjects of, research. I will then apply the lens of youth/student voice to the youth researchers experience and examine how to move from voice to agency. Through review of literature and observational experience over the past decade of working with youth in North Philadelphia, including most recently, this YAR project, I posit that participation in youth led research increases participants sense of themselves as agents of inquiry, agents of change and agents of ambition.

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this YPAR project is to examine the impact of participation in YAR on minority youth in North Philadelphia. YAR has been conducted internationally and in various urban

and rural context but never in the US and never with this population. I posited that participation in YAR would have beneficial PYD outcomes on the youth researchers.

I also wanted to examine how the youth researchers' findings would be viewed by their community and by policy makers in Philadelphia. Though the concepts of youth participation and youth voice are gaining credence as valid research methods, youth can still be excluded from meaningful decisions impacting their lives and their communities. Youth who are able to bring their own data and research to these conversations may be more likely to be taken seriously by the adult stakeholders and community leaders who typically dictate policy (Brennan & Dolan, 2016). For this reason, the youth researchers adopted the phrase "No Research About Us Without Us" as the tag line for our project. Versions of this phrase have been used before in inclusive participatory research (Johnson, 2009). "No Research About Us Without Us" became a rallying cry for the youth researchers as they prepared to take on intimidating questions and challenging community issues. Therefore, this project and supporting research seeks to address the following questions:

Research Questions

1. How will the Youth Researchers be impacted through participation in YAR?
2. How will the data and recommendations from the YAR project be handled by the community and relevant policy makers?

I. Review of Literature

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a critical pedagogy which assumes that young people should not simply be the subjects of research but are experts in their own lived experiences and in their communities (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). YPAR practices acknowledge the ability of youth to possess and create knowledge that is valid and important (Powers & Allaman, 2012). Through the YPAR process, youth researchers become agents of inquiry and are enabled to think critically about their community and themselves as members of it (McIntyre, 2000). Local knowledge is promoted when youth are engaged in all aspects of the research process including problem identification, data collection and analysis, presentation and developing implications (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). While data collection and reporting by youth is important, it is also necessary that youth take part in the data interpretation so that they are the ones discovering and applying meaning from their research.

YPAR projects can create the “radically inclusive” educational spaces espoused by Torre (2005, p.12) – spaces for intellectual and social development – when minority and marginalized youth participate. By positioning these marginalized youth as agents of inquiry within their communities new local knowledge is created and promoted that may be unattainable for more traditional researchers (McIntyre, 2000; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Racial profiling in law enforcement, Stop and Frisk policies, and other assaults on the freedoms of minority youth in marginalized communities can create a sense of powerlessness over one’s own life and decisions made within the community. Engaging historically marginalized youth in community based social justice research can lead to improvements not only in youth outcomes but also in societies overall (Brennan et al., 2016). Researchers have found that including youth in the research

process is more than simply a method of enabling youth voice – but can also improve the quality of the research process and findings. Because youth are uniquely positioned in their own communities they may come up with questions that adult researchers would not otherwise have developed (Zeller-Berkman, Munoz-Proto and Torre, 2015).

Critique of YPAR

Because of its increasing popularity as a tool for research and critical education, justification for youth participation generally, and for YPAR specifically, have had to stand up under criticism in recent years around the naivety of youth knowledge and accusations of potential adult manipulations (Farthing, 2012). One such critique, known as the “radical critique,” is that YPAR can simply become another form of social control. This critique, summarized by Farthing (2012) states that bringing marginalized members of a society to the decision-making table can become a way to placate those most likely to resist a given policy. Participation in this sense is not empowering, but instead, is a way for those in power to gain compliance. Conner and Cosner (2016) found that Positive Youth Development (PYD) outcomes were greater in a community-based youth organizing initiative when compared to a government sanctioned youth commission. These findings give credence to the idea that YPAR could be used as a means to placate rather than to empower marginalized youth. This is more likely to occur when youth are not involved in all aspects of the research process, including identifying problems and research topics. If adult agendas overpower youth researchers’ interests, then participation may not be an inherently beneficial tool.

Justification for YPAR

To avoid such pitfalls to youth participation, a rigorous process of justification should be undergone by researchers and organizations considering YPAR as a means to educate and empower youth. Kennan and Dolan (2017) identify three critical considerations for justification of youth participation in a research project:

1. The purpose and the theoretical context of the research
2. The preferences of the young people and their parents
3. The available time and resources

Considering the purpose and theoretical context of the research in justifying youth inclusion can validate participation (Cahill, 2007; Holland et al., 2010; Sinclair, 2004). For instance, studies have shown that youth participation can enhance research quality as well as lead to better PYD outcomes (Kellet, 2011; Morrow, 2012). If these are stated goals in a given research project then youth participation is justified. Preferences of young people and their parents are also important to consider. Though social science research is generally seen as more benign than the potential risks of medical research, there is still potential for distress, inconvenience and intrusion into peoples' lives. Therefore, young people and their parents should be given the opportunity to opt in or opt out of participatory research based on their own preferences regarding risk and benefits (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). Finally, the availability of time and resources is important in justifying youth participation in research. There should be enough of both to enable meaningful participation. It has been shown that YPAR can be time intensive and unpredictable (Kellet, 2011; Keenan et al., 2012). Therefore these constraints should be considered. Otherwise, half-baked youth research projects could result in discouragement and eventual indifference in youth participants.

Youth Led Research

Globally, youth have been excluded from development and policy decisions affecting them and their communities and the same is true for marginalized youth in Philadelphia (Conner & Slattery, 2014; Dolan & Brennan, 2016). In many cases youth are better positioned than anyone else to identify the most important issues affecting their communities (McIntyre, 2000). This is seen in the way that young people have more direct access to their peers and select populations than traditional researchers. Youth As Researchers (YAR) is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) endorsed program developed originally by researchers and youth researchers at The National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), (Dolan, et al 2015).

The YAR program trains and enables youth to conduct social justice research in their own communities. At the end of their research projects, youth present their findings and recommendations through innovative venues such as documentary films, info graphics, and social media. The entire process is overseen by researchers from Pennsylvania State University (PSU) and NUIG but is truly driven by the youth participants. The youth researchers select the topic, develop their own research questions and make decisions about the research design, collect and analyze data, and present their findings. The curriculum is essentially a college level mixed methods research course distilled down to its essentials and presented in an easily understandable workbook. YAR was developed and implemented first in Ireland. I, along with colleagues at PSU have implemented the program in an urban context in the United States for the first time.

Youth can be seen as experts in the communities. They are also experts in their own lived experiences. The UN World Youth Report (2016) identifies youth engagement in social justice

as a key factor in equipping youth for democratic participation and civic and community engagement:

The social justice approach [to youth civic engagement] derives from the proposition that youth can be active agents of social and political change in their own environment once they are equipped with the sociopolitical competencies necessary to articulate social and community problems and propose solutions. (Brennan and Dolan, 2016; page 21)

YAR equips youth researchers with these competencies through engagement in rigorous, community based research. Youth led research in marginalized and minority communities can be particularly effective in achieving Positive Youth Development (PYD) outcomes (Torre, 2005; Lerner, 2007).

Youth/Student Voice

Youth Voice has been broadly defined and includes a wide array of activities ranging from youth sharing their opinions with adults, youth and adult collaborations to address problems, and youth strategies to share their views in a meaningful way to change policy and practice in a school or community setting (Conner, 2015; Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2005). Objectives for enabling youth voice in a school or community setting center around changing the social structure of youth roles from “passive and powerless to agentive and powerful,” (Conner, 2015; Conner, Ebby-Rosin & Brown, 2015). Youth voice is seen as a key factor in incorporating youth in the democratic process which is defined by participation of an involved citizenry in government. Following Macedo (1994), “Voice is not something to be given by those in power. Voice requires struggle and the understanding of both its possibilities and limitations. The most educators can do is to create structures that would enable submerged voices to emerge,” YPAR

can be an avenue for submerged youth voices to emerge. This idea highlights the importance of effective youth-adult partnerships within YPAR projects.

Adults play an important role even in youth led YPAR projects. Adults can act as partners, co-learners, mentors, advisers, bridge-builders between youth and adult organizations, and allies in advocacy for the concerns of young people (Jones & Perkins, 2006; Jones, 2009; Mitra, 2005). Effective youth and adult partnerships requires power sharing and mutual decision-making (Mitra, Sanders & Perkins, 2010). A vital element of positive youth-adult partnerships is the feeling of psychological safety. Youth must feel that they are safe to express thoughts and opinions that will be valued and affirmed (Lee et al., 2009).

From Voice to Agency

Rodriguez and Brown (2009, pg. 24) say that Participatory Action Research (PAR) “is an ideal methodology for engaging marginalized youth in educational transformation.” I would broaden this statement to include YPAR as an ideal methodology for transforming marginalized communities. Youth participants should not only have the opportunity to give voice to their opinions, but they should also be given opportunities to become agents of inquiry in research, agents of change in their communities and, what I call, agents of ambition for their own lives.

According to Rodriguez and Brown (2009), YPAR should be; guided by youth in topics that address their real-life needs, committed to validating and building on their knowledge and skills, and committed to creating knowledge and practice that actively improves the lives of marginalized youth. YPAR with marginalized youth should give them power and influence in their community through validating existing knowledge with data and creating new local

knowledge around topics of their concern. It may be more difficult to silence youth voices when they bring their own data to the conversation.

Youth as agents of inquiry simply means that youth can ask and answer questions that interest them. Youth as agents of change means that youth can impact their communities through activism, organizing others and applying their knowledge. Youth as agents of ambition means that youth should have the opportunity to be personally ambitious and not give in to the sense of fatalism and powerlessness that can sometimes accompany growing up poor and marginalized.

II. Methods:

In Ireland, where YAR was developed, the program has been implemented as a module embedded within an existing youth support organization (Kennan & Dolan, 2017). University researchers trained youth and adult volunteers in the YAR curriculum which was then carried out by the youth. As we brought YAR to the United States and to an urban context for the first time we decided to use this same model. The desire was to include youth who live in an underserved urban community as researchers. North Philadelphia was chosen because of its persistent poverty and the challenges that come along with growing up in this setting, and also because of the strong community ties mentioned above. There were two aspects to implementing YAR:

1. **Programmatic:** The first objective of this project was a feasibility study of YAR in an urban US context. I along with other researchers from PSU trained youth in the YAR curriculum and trained adult Saturday Academy Volunteers to assist in the research process. The youth researchers then carried out the project. The data that was generated during the program belongs to the youth. I will report this data as it pertains to overall analysis of the program

2. **Research:** The second objective of this project was to examine the impact of participation in YAR on the youth researchers. I conducted qualitative data collection through interviews and debrief sessions as well as observational data for the duration of the project.

3.

Site Selection

The Setting: North Philadelphia

The streets of North Philadelphia are scarred from decades of declining economic opportunities, high rates of substance abuse, HIV and AIDS rates that far outpace the national averages, some of the highest per capita murder rates in the country and empty lots that used to be homes for working class families (Phila. Dept. Public Health, 2014, Phila. PD, 2016). I was first introduced to this neighborhood as a volunteer mentor with a local not-for-profit agency called HOPE *worldwide*. I was instantly drawn to the people and families that called this place home.

North Philadelphia is a community of contradiction. It has some of the highest rates of drug abuse and violence in America (Phila. DPH, 2014, Phila. PD, 2016). However, over the past decade of working in, and observing this neighborhood I've come to realize that statistical profiles do not tell the entire story. There are blocks and entire neighborhoods with families that have lived, worked and struggled in the community for generations. This generational familiarity creates a bond of fierce loyalty within the community. Individuals look out for one another and care for needs. Groups of youth bond together in what some outsiders would consider gangs, but the youth themselves call cliques or family. Birthdays parties, funerals, recovery groups and neighborhood cookouts all take place at the same community center on 15th Street and York

Street - the Winchester Center. The generational relationships within this neighborhood are an obvious strength and have created a measure of social capital (Flora & Flora, 2003; Robinson & Flora, 2003).

This social bonding within the community also comes at a cost. Outsiders, especially those connected with the city or state government, are often viewed with skepticism. I've been told stories of a series of not-for-profit organizations that have begun programs with youth in the community only to have funding dry up. When those programs end the youth are left feeling more disillusioned than ever. Police are often seen as an occupying force. Most youth have stories of being stopped and frisked, questioned for being on the wrong block, or harassed for minor offenses. Community members cite various city initiatives that have been top down in orientation that have underperformed. According to Flora and Flora (2003):

When housing improvements are delivered in a top-down fashion, and decisions and resources are produced entirely outside of the community, social capital often decreases and dependency increases, as verified by the renewal projects of the 1960's and 1970's... When police protection is denied or the police are viewed as the enemy, when fire protection is withdrawn from an area, and when landlords allow property to deteriorate, personal and collective safety decreases.

The high school graduation rate in Philadelphia was 70% in 2015 compared to 86% statewide. That figure of 70% is an improvement from the 57% graduation rate in 2006 but still a significant hurdle (Cineas, 2015; Pennsylvania Department of Education [PED], 2013). This is a community that faces many challenges to say the least. Youth in this neighborhood become vulnerable to many of the same extremist ideologies that exist in communities like this all over

the globe. In a recent article on a mass shooting in this neighborhood a therapist working in the area is quoted as saying:

If somebody sees somebody get shot and he gets PTSD, his symptoms could include becoming easily agitated, having hyper-arousal, and a shortened life expectancy. So when somebody steps on my foot, I get my gun. These weapons these kids have today, the caliber of the bullets are bigger, and they do more damage. When people see someone's face get shot off, it's a war scene. The drugs need to be harder to make you forget about that. I mean, this is so normal that guys see brain matter and then they go and get pizza (Farr & Palmer, 2017).

Growing up in the midst of challenges like this – one could consider simply surviving as a positive outcome, but the youth that we work with are capable of so much more than survival. This is the reason that I as a practitioner, along with my team of researchers and volunteers, were eager to bring YAR to youth in North Philadelphia.

Saturday Academy is an educational enrichment and mentoring program of the Philadelphia Chapter of HOPE *worldwide*, an international nonprofit organization. Saturday Academy takes place weekly on Saturday mornings during the school year at a community center in North Philadelphia called The Winchester Community Center. This site was chosen because I, as a former director of Saturday Academy, have existing relationships with the youth and volunteers who currently participate. My personal connection with this program and these youth researchers may have influenced the project to be more successful here than it would be in other locations or programs where these connections do not already exist. However, the Saturday Academy program provides an optimal setting and infrastructure for this work because of the educational mentoring relationships and the regular meetings. The weekly meetings provide the

time and space needed for effective program delivery. YAR became a training module for the older child participants of Saturday Academy.

Participants

The current Director of Saturday Academy made a general announcement offering YAR to all of the older participants of Saturday Academy. I then made follow up phone calls to those individuals who had expressed interest. I also hand selected a number of Saturday Academy alumni, now in their early twenties, who received a personal invitation to participate. I selected these alumni because of the potential for positive impacts on them and because several of them were standout participants of Saturday Academy in their earlier youth. Though several of the alumni did attend the first training none of them were able to commit to full participation for various reasons including work schedules, college basketball responsibilities and one young man who was on house arrest. Twelve youth, ranging in age from twelve to sixteen, signed on and were present at the initial training. Seven participants were able to attend every session and several others were in attendance at various stages of the project. All of the youth researchers identified as African American. Only one participant did not live in North Philadelphia. The rest all lived in the neighborhood surrounding the Winchester Center or had at one time but had recently moved.

The youth received informed consent forms explaining the project and the research they were participating in. They were told that they could opt out at any time and that participation was strictly voluntary. No one chose to opt out of the program. Based on these research criteria this project received research ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Office of the Vice President of Research at PSU.

Youth As Researchers Curriculum

The YAR curriculum is essentially a mixed methods research course reworked in cooperation with youth to be more understandable and accessible for youth. Though the curriculum was developed to be accessible for youth it is no less rigorous or valid than more traditional forms of research training and methodology. The description, pulled from the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) website states:

The Youth as Researchers Training Programme created by the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUIG seeks to deliver research skills and workshops to groups of young people nationally and internationally to enable and empower them to conduct their own research. The programme was developed by a team of researchers and youth researchers at UNESCO CFRC, and is an accredited programme by NUIG under the guidance and academic directorship of Professor Pat Dolan. (Dolan, et al. 2015)

The YAR curriculum consists of a training manual for adult facilitators and a workbook for the youth participants. The manual and workbook are designed to complement one another as the youth work through the research process. The training manual and workbook are open source information and can be found online (<http://agsci.psu.edu/unesco/our-programs/youth-as-researchers/youth-as-researchers-manual>).

The manual contains the following sections:

1. **Deciding on a research topic:** This section contains prompt questions such as “What am I interested in?” and “What would I like to change?” meant to jumpstart a brainstorming

process. The youth researchers are then prompted to narrow the topic to a manageable “big idea.” Each section ends with dos and don’ts of research and an example illustration.

2. **Finding out about the Topic:** This section is essentially the literature review. Youth are instructed to find out what information already exists about their “big idea.” They are told to “Find it → Judge it → Record it.”
3. **Planning for Change:** Research, policy and practice is the focus in this section. The youth are reminded that their research is a tool that can be used to affect change when it is targeted towards some aspect of policy and practice.
4. **Writing a research Question:** This section is all about defining the “big idea” through a narrow research question and focus.
5. **Research Design:** Youth are prompted to design their research project now that they have a workable research questions. Qualitative and quantitative research is also explained in this section and when each type of data is appropriate.
6. **Research Ethics:** The youth researchers are prompted to ask and answer the question “How will I ensure the research won’t cause any harm to other people?” in this section of the manual. A framework for ethical research is provided along with illustrations.
7. **Reporting your Research Findings:** Youth are instructed to analyze their data and develop a plan for reporting their research. This could include writing a research report or filming a documentary of the process and results.
8. **Dissemination:** This section is all about developing the key message from the research and getting the important information to the right people.

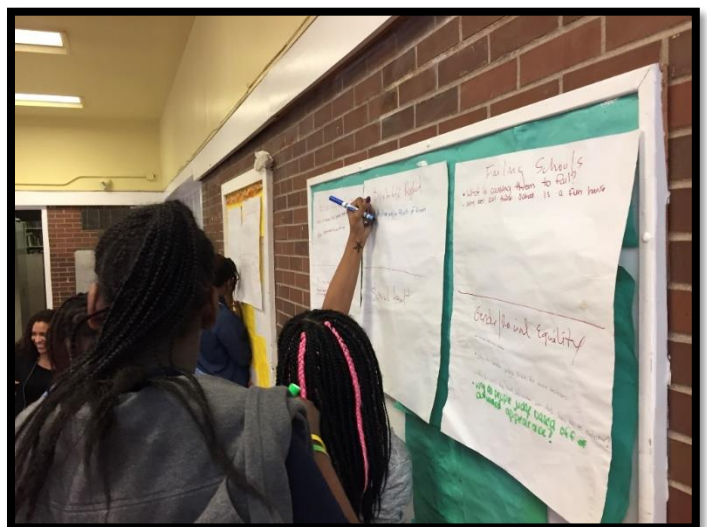
The workbook has corresponding sections with space provided to fill in the prompt questions and take notes. Both the training manual and the workbook were originally designed with an Irish audience of youth researchers in mind. I decided to make alterations to the manual and workbook so that it would be more culturally relevant to urban youth in Philadelphia. I did this through changing the names in the illustrations to names that are common in this neighborhood. The examples were also changed to reflect issues relevant to this community.

Program Implementation

The first step in implementing YAR in Philadelphia was to identify, recruit and train the right volunteers. I wanted to use volunteers who were already familiar with the community and the Saturday Academy program who also had existing relationships with the youth participants. Research shows that the quality of adult and youth relationships is important in youth focused program (Lee, et al. 2009). For these reasons I recruited volunteers who were all school teachers in the Philadelphia School District and who had previously volunteered with Saturday Academy. Because they were teachers they already had all necessary background checks to be able to work with individuals under 18. These volunteers were known to the youth and so the existing relationships enabled efficiency in implementation. The volunteers were also a racially diverse group. All volunteers identified as ethnic minorities, and several were from Philadelphia. This added to the sense of trust and relatability in the relationships between the youth and the adult volunteers. It has been shown that when the right type of adult support is available in youth led collaborations such as YAR that youth felt significantly more positive about their own ability to be leaders in their communities (Jones, 2009).

Once the volunteers were identified and selected, we then developed a timeline for the program. It would take place between April through June during usual Saturday Academy hours. This was ideal timing, but as it turned out, not very realistic. We were not able to complete the project before the children were off for summer break and we lost access to the Saturday Academy facility, the Winchester Center, for the remainder of the summer. Once Saturday Academy began again we restarted the YAR program and were able to finish from September through November. The bulk of the research was conducted from April through June and the fall was used to analyze the data and film a documentary to present the research findings. The summer break became a limitation of the program because we lost a few participants to jobs and other extracurricular activities.

The initial training took place in April. Our team of researchers from PSU traveled to Philadelphia to meet with our adult volunteers and the youth researchers. One of the volunteers who is a Vice Principle in charge of the educational climate in a Philadelphia High School began the training with a series of ice breaker activities designed to get the youth and adults interacting. I then explained the process in detail beginning with explaining what the United Nations (UN) and UNESCO are and how their research could benefit local communities and contribute to



international efforts towards youth inclusion in education and research. We quickly moved to a discussion about their community.

Table 1: Potential Research Topics

Research Topic:	Potential Research Questions:
Gender Equality	a) Why aren't women paid the same as men?
Racism and Racial Equality	a) Why does race and color even matter? b) Why do blacks say "Black Lives Matter" but don't show love for each other? c) Why do people judge based on outward appearance? d) Why do we have categories for race?
Sexual Assault	a) Why do people think that they can take advantage of others? b) Why do people think it is okay to abuse children?
Drugs	a) What pulls people towards drugs? b) What's the hype about drugs? c) Why are drugs so hard to avoid?
Fighting	a) Why do people like to fight? b) What does fighting solve? c) Why do kids think that fighting is the answer?
Gangs	a) Black on black crime? b) Belonging to a gang: is it by force or by choice?
Police Brutality	a) Why do black people experience police brutality so much? b) Who holds the police accountable?
Environmental Health	a) Why don't people just throw their trash away instead of on the streets? b) Why do people think it's okay to smoke?
Gun Violence	a) Why don't parents keep their guns in a secret place? b) Why do people rely on violence? c) How do people get guns into the neighborhood? d) Why do people sell guns here?
Disability Neglect	a) Why do people think of [individuals with disabilities] as different when they are really just special? b) Why do people look at them as a joke?

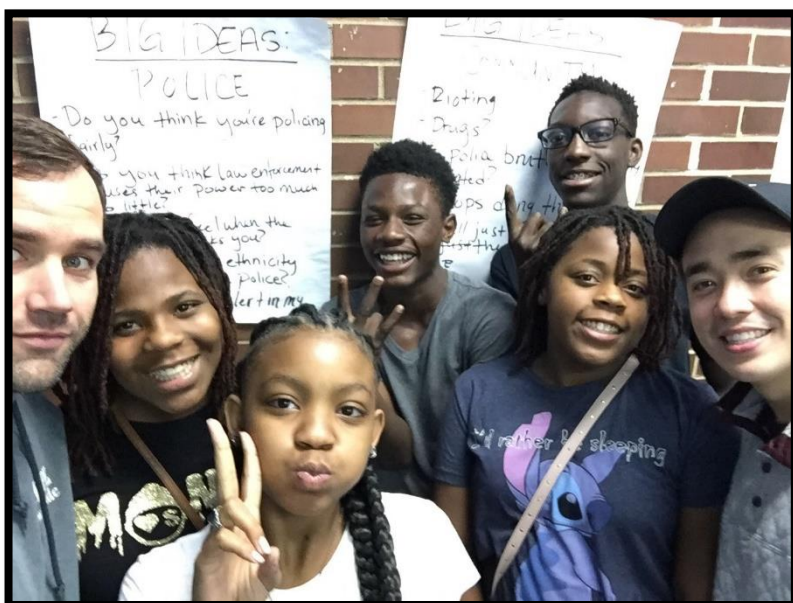
We began the discussion about the community identifying positive aspects of their neighborhood. The youth discussed things about their community that they appreciated. We then moved to aspects of their community that they wanted to change or find out more about. At this point all of the adults in the room took a step back while the youth researchers stepped up to the wall where we had placed large white posters for writing ideas. They began discussing and

debating topics of interest among themselves and from this point on the discussion and the research process truly was youth led and adult facilitated.

The youth researchers identified the topics listed in Table 1 as potential research “big ideas” and started to ask questions about these topics.

At this point in the training we took a lunch break to talk about the various ideas that were put forward as potential research topics. This group lunch was bonding as we shared food and serious discussion about the merits of each potential research topic. After lunch we decided to vote on the topics that the youth were most interested in researching. The top three vote getters

were Racism, Police Brutality and Gun Violence. We voted again with only these three topics as options and the youth voted on racism. Many of the youth brought up the political climate around the 2016 presidential election campaign in general and the rhetoric



coming from Donald Trump’s current presidential administration in particular as a reason they were interested in researching racism.

After much discussion and deliberation, the youth researchers and the adult facilitators decided that the topic of racism was too broad to research in an effective way and that the best way forward was to combine the top two topics: racism and police brutality. Many of the youth voiced

concerns about their own interactions with police in their neighborhoods as well as stories they had heard from friends and in the media as reasons for researching racism and police brutality.

Do they handle young people of color any different than they do white youth?

As the discussion around racism and police practices in their community progressed the youth researchers began to focus in our specific questions they would want to ask police officers if given the opportunity. They wrote these questions on paper and then discussed with the group as they tried to identify their specific research question or questions. The initial questions for police officers are as follows:

Table 2: Questions for Police Officers

Questions for Police Officers:
1. "Why do y'all think that just because y'all the law y'all have a lot of power and can do anything?"
2. "What makes cops so scared [in our neighborhood]?"
3. "How do they feel after killing a black [person]?"
4. "Why do you feel the need to kill African Americans when they reach for something like an I.D. or drivers license?"
5. "Why do some white officers only target black people?"
6. "Why do cops think that blacks are weak but really we are strong?"
7. "What is the percentage of racist officers?"
8. "Why do white officers have the need to do wrong things and when it is found out they think they are not in the wrong and don't get a charge?"
9. "Why do they believe stereotypes?"
10. What is the percentage of black officers in law enforcement [in Philadelphia]? What about whites?"
11. "Why won't law enforcement show the same respect to blacks that they do to whites?"
12. What is the percentage of black officers in U.S. law enforcement?"

Many of their questions reflected their lived experiences based on their own interactions with police or from stories they had heard about in their neighborhood. However, once someone asked about who had actually had a negative encounter with police officers the percentage was very small. Many of their assumptions were instead based on stories they had heard in the media. At

this point one of the youth researchers asked what turned out to be a profound question that would shape the direction of their research.

How can we say “Black Lives Matter” but we’re killing each other every day?

One of the young women asked the question “How can we say ‘Black Lives Matter’ if we’re killing each other in the streets every day?” This question sparked a new direction for the discussion. The youth decided to also examine the community’s responsibility in creating an environment where crime and violence seemed acceptable. They decided to also create questions they would like to ask community members if given the opportunity. These questions were collected and compiled to inform community surveys that would be distribute at a later date. The community focused questions were as follows:

Table 3: Questions for Community Members

Questions for Community Members:
1. “Why so u say ‘Black Lives Matter’ if we kill each other on a daily basis?”
2. “What do we need to do to get better and stop the reputation of black people?”
3. “Is police brutality racially motivated?”
4. “Is the community to blame for the negative stereotypes [about our community]?”
5. “Why do we riot?”
6. “What role do drugs play in this community?”
7. “Are cops doing this [discrimination and brutality] on purpose?”

It is significant that the youth researchers turned to self-reflection of themselves and the community at this point. This was entirely unprompted from any of the adults and came from two young women in particular. As the discussion continued many other youth also began to think about why their community has the negative reputation of drugs, violence and crime. They were not eager to let police officers off the hook but were also eager to look deeper into root causes of these issues.

Based on these discussions the youth researchers decided on two research questions:

Research Questions:

1. How do police view the neighborhoods in which they work?
2. How do community members in these neighborhoods view police in their community?

Study Design

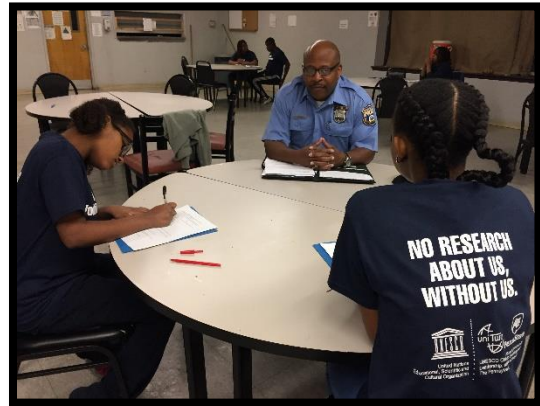
The youth researchers took 5 Saturdays during April and May of 2017, to create interview scripts and Likert style questions for police officers. They also developed a survey designed for the community that would reflect community perceptions of police officers and policing practices. The surveys were designed using the Tailored Design Method (TDM) in order to be user friendly and accessible to respondents (Dillman, 1978; Dillman et al., 2014). Copies of the Police interview script and the community survey can be found in the appendix of this paper (Appendices 1 & 2). The next step was to somehow find access to police officers who would participate in these interviews.

One Day At A Time (ODAAT) is a drug and alcohol addiction recovery organization that, their own words, “utilizes a community-based recovery model and support system, allowing people to recover in the same environment in which they became addicted” (ODAAT, 2018). ODAAT has been a partner organization for Saturday Academy in mentoring youth and building community in north Philadelphia for over twenty years. Mel Wells is the President of ODAAT and widely regarded as the unofficial Mayor of North Philadelphia. Through Mr. Wells connections we were able to obtain permission from Richard Ross Jr., the Police Commissioner of Philadelphia, to interview police officers who worked in the districts where the youth researchers live. These were the 22nd and 39th Police Districts. The police interviews would take

place in an ODAAT community center bordering the 22nd and 39th police districts. The youth decided to conduct the community surveys outside of this same facility.

Police Interviews

The youth researchers interviewed police officers on June 3, 2017 at the ODAAT Community Center. We had a team of two PSU researchers present as well as the adult facilitators. There were ten youth researchers present to conduct the interviews. Circular tables were set up in a large meeting room so that the youth could interview as a team of two or individually. Each researcher was able to conduct at least one interview with a police officer and some interviewed multiple officers.



One of our adult facilitators conducted an exercise of mock interviews discussing and displaying helpful as well as detrimental interview techniques before the interviews took place. The youth researchers responded well to this activity. Up to this point they were all very nervous and some expressed feeling insecure

about their ability to interview police officers.

My role at this point was to introduce the police officers to the youth and direct them to their interview stations. I also observed the youth and police interactions throughout the interview process. A fellow member of the PSU team was also there as an observer and took detailed observational notes. From our observations it was



evident that the youth and police officers seemed guarded at the beginning of the interviews. Some of the officers did not wait to be asked questions, but instead began describing their jobs and the difficulties that anyone outside of the profession would not understand. In these cases, the youth researchers waited patiently and listened attentively until the officers had finished. Then they began asking some of the set questions from their interview scripts.

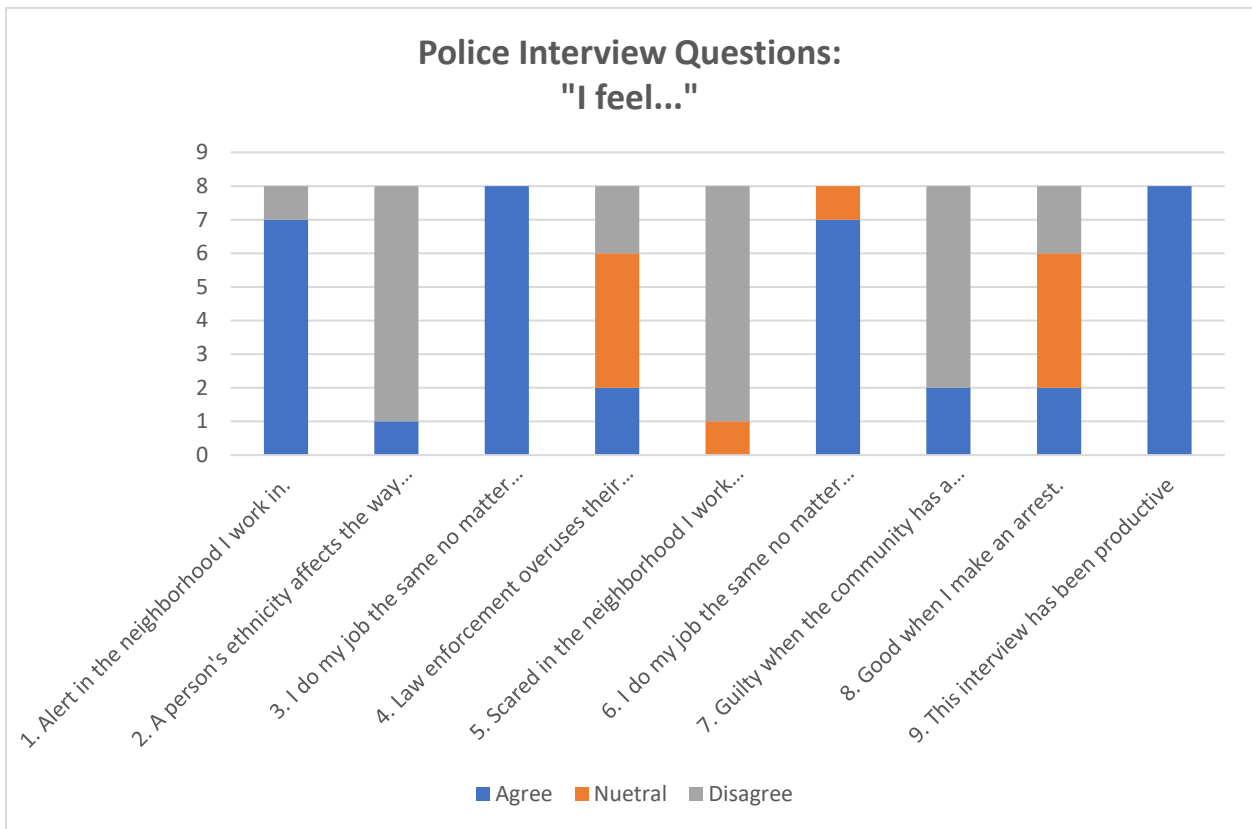
The interviews lasted approximately twenty minutes each. Over the course of time the police and youth began feeling more comfortable and had more natural conversations. Some of the youth remained timid throughout the interviews but most gained confidence throughout the process to speak their minds and ask difficult questions. Most of the officers warmed up rather quickly to the youth and appeared to appreciate the direct interactions.

In all the youth researchers conducted interviews with eight officers from the 22nd and 39th police districts. The officers were racially diverse and had a wide range of on-the-force experience. Some had been police officers for decades, while one officer was in his third day out of the police academy. He didn't have much to say in his interview.

Table 4: Police Survey Questions: I feel...

Police Survey Questions: "I feel...":
1. Alert in the neighborhood I work in.
2. A person's ethnicity affects the way I police.
3. I do my job the same no matter what neighborhood I'm working in.
4. Law enforcement overuses their authority.
5. Scared in the neighborhood I work in.
6. I do the same no matter what ethnicity I'm working with.
7. Guilty when the community has a negative perception of me.
8. Good when I make an arrest.
9. That this interview has been productive.

Graph 1: Police Interview Questions



After the last officers left there was a palpable sense of relief in the room. The youth researchers felt victorious and seemed more confident than before. There was a piano in the

interview room and the entire group gathered around and began to play music and sing songs together. This seemed to be a spontaneous outpouring of positive energy from having completed a difficult task. We had a debrief session over lunch and some of the responses are recorded below.

I feel like my voice is being heard...

In the course of debriefing it became clear that the youth researchers believed that the interviews were positive. Their responses and comments indicated an increase in their personal confidence, competence in interacting with adults and connection to the other researchers as well as to their community as a whole (Lerner, 2007). The quotes listed below illustrate the youth researchers' sentiments directly after the interviews and point to impacts in several of Lerner's (2007) C's of PYD; competence, confidence and connection.

KeKe: I feel like my voice is being heard because sometimes people tell me I'm just a kid, but adults aren't always right.

Troy: I'm just speechless right now from this whole experience. I feel like I could do this [interviewing] for a living.

DeShawn: I realize that police are just people trying to do their job.

Star: I was nervous before but I feel like I could interview anyone now.

Following the interviews and the debrief there was a palpable feeling of accomplishment coming from the youth researchers. They gathered around a piano in the facility and began singing songs together and dancing. It was obvious that they felt they had accomplished something significant.

How can I volunteer with this program?

Another important observation made by the research team was the response of the police officers to the youth. A few of the officers were very personable and enjoyed the youth



interactions from the beginning. Others initially seemed guarded at the beginning of the interviews. Some of them reverted to their more familiar roles as authority figures and took charge of the conversation. However, as the conversations continued these officers' demeanors changed and their tone softened. They eventually allowed the youth researchers to take the lead in directing the conversation and began asking questions of the youth as well. Some of the officers' comments are listed below.

Officer Morse: How can I volunteer with this program?

Officer Oliveras: I'm going to take you guys fishing with me some time.

Officer Donahue: We need to be doing more of this in the community.

I observed connections between the officers and the youth researchers based on the officers responses and the change in interactions from the beginning of the interviews to the end. Both groups were more relaxed and friendly by the end of the experience. We didn't solve the problems associated with police and community interactions in this one meeting. However, the seeds of empathy and understanding were planting for both groups. This point will be illustrated

later in this paper as I describe another interaction that a youth researcher had with a police officer.

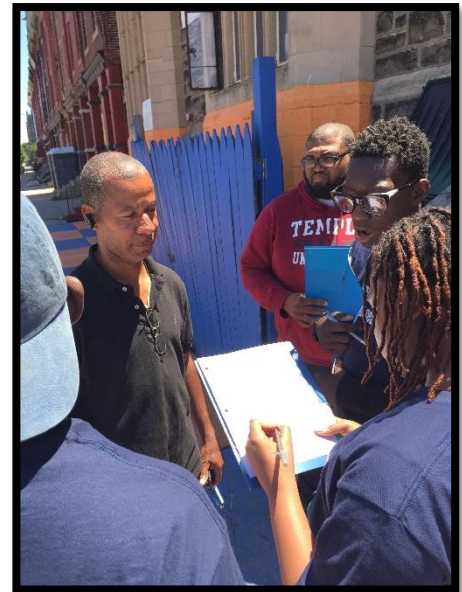
Community Surveys



The next step in the research process was to collect surveys of community members' perceptions of police in their neighborhoods. The youth researchers decided that convenience sampling using surveys would be the most effective methodology for obtaining a general understanding of the community's feelings towards police officers. The youth were placed in groups of two or three youth researcher along with an adult facilitator. The surveys

were collected on Lehigh Avenue and 25th Street in North Philadelphia. It was about midday on Saturday and there were plenty of people available to participate.

The youth were able to collect 30 completed surveys. Once the youth perfected their invitation to participate they obtained an approximate 50% response rate from community members who were asked to participate. The survey responses are listed below:

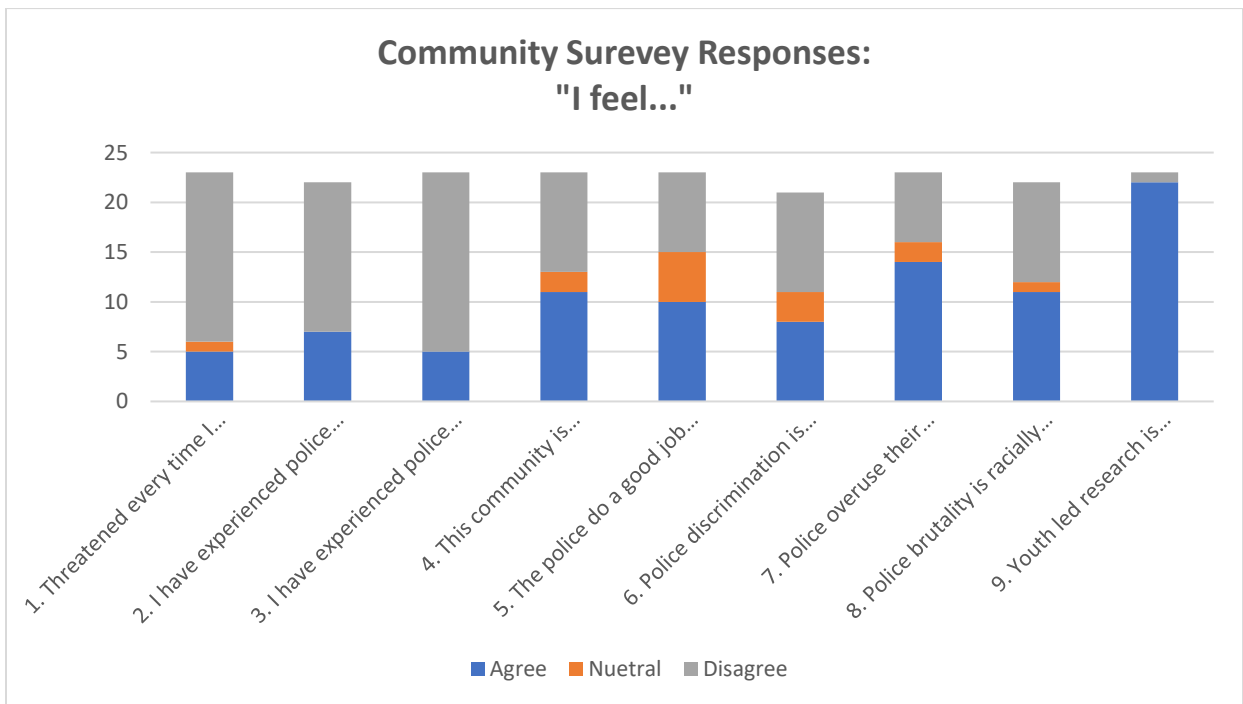


Street Survey Questions and Responses:

Table 4: Community Survey Questions

Community Survey Questions:
1. I feel threatened every time I see a police officer.
2. I have experienced police discrimination.
3. I have experienced police brutality.
4. This community is responsible for creating negative stereotypes.
5. The police do a good job keeping us safe.
6. Police discrimination is targeted towards men.
7. Police overuse their power towards minorities.
8. Police brutality is racially motivated.
9. Youth led research is positive for this community.

Graph 2: Community Survey Responses



Data Analysis

Once survey questionnaires had been collected and compiled, the youth began analyzing the data. What they found was different than the narrative that appears most often in popular media and was much more nuanced than anyone expected.

I have no problem with the police

The community surveys tended to be more positive towards police officers than negative. The majority of community members expressed support for, or at least acceptance, of police. The majority of respondents (78%) had not experienced police brutality. The majority (68%) did not report feeling discriminated against by police officers. The majority (74%) of respondents said they did not feel threatened around police officers.

Community members were split on several questions including whether the community was responsible for creating a negative image and reputation (48% feel the community is responsible; 43% feel the community is not responsible; 9% were neutral). Respondents were also split on whether police brutality is racially motivated (50% feel that police brutality is racially motivated; 45% do not think police brutality is racially motivated; 5% are neutral), whether the police do a sufficient job keeping the community safe (43% feel that police do a good job keeping them safe; 35% disagree; 22% are neutral) and how gender impacts potential police discrimination (38% feel that discrimination is targeted towards men; 48% disagree; 14% are neutral). 61% of community respondents said they do feel that police overuse their authority when dealing with minority communities. Respondents were nearly unanimous about the positive impacts of youth led research.

“Our Research shows...”

The youth researchers decided that creating a short documentary film was the best way to disseminate their researching findings. We contacted film-making professionals to mentor the youth through the film-making process. The youth wrote the script, learned how to use cameras, learned about lighting techniques, directed scenes and narrated the video. The film was then uploaded to YouTube and made available to the wider community



(video link - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vChNQVh4bkQ>). Youth promoted their film on social media and through word-of-mouth. It was also sent to Police Commissioner Ross, to policy makers in the Philadelphia Department of Behavioral Health, to community organizations like ODAAT and Saturday Academy and to researchers at PSU.



The final step in the research process was to hold a film screening and discussion panel for the youth researchers to present their findings. The screening was held on February 24th at the same ODAAT community center where the interviews took place. Eight youth researchers were present along with members of the community, police officers, and representatives from ODAAT and Saturday Academy as well as other partner organizations. The youth researchers discussed their process and findings and then showed the film. They also participated in a question and answer session with the audience.

Once again, they started out nervous, but once they began speaking their confidence levels lifted and they took the lead in a room full of adults.

Next Steps

The sentiment from everyone involved in this YAR project, from the youth to the police officers and community members, is that this type of youth led research should continue. This project didn't solve any of the issues around police and community interaction in North Philadelphia, but it is a first step towards youth finding their voice and the community and police listening. When the youth researchers are able to present their findings, not just their opinions, it seemed that the community was more likely to listen. Youth were also able to make more informed decisions and form more accurate perceptions of their environment and this controversial social issue.

Youth led research projects should become the rule rather than the exception when the topic involves youth. Then the phrase "No Research About Us Without Us" will not just be a slogan, but a standard for valid, community based social justice research.

III. Results

The previous sections explore the YAR program and the experiences of youth researchers in a single case study in North Philadelphia. As the research project was concluding I wanted to find out what this experience meant to the youth participants, how it impacted them. PYD is not simply focused on fixing bad behavior. Rather, the goal is to enable development of positive attributes and characteristics that will likely help youth to succeed in the future (Pittman et al., 2003). We had a series of debrief sessions and group interviews in which we focused on the

youth researchers' experience, what they learned and if they had developed any positive characteristics because of participation in YAR. We asked questions through the lens of Lerner's 6 C's of PYD, particularly around the concepts of confidence, competence and contribution (Lerner, 2007).

Lerner's C's

In Lerner's (2007) PYD paradigm **Competence** is identified as one of the core outcomes of any PYD program. The Act for Youth PYD 101 fact sheet summarize Lerner's concepts as follows; Competence as having the ability and motivation to work collaboratively with others for the larger good, and to sustain caring friendships and relationships with others; to respect and affirmatively respond to differences among groups and individuals of diverse backgrounds, interests and traditions; to respond affirmatively and cope with positive and adverse situations, reflect on one's emotions and surroundings, and engage in leisure and fun; and to learn in school and in other settings by gaining basic knowledge needed to graduate from high school, use critical-thinking, creative, problem-solving, and expressive skills (Lerner, 2007; Act For Youth, 2018).

A selection of quotes from the debrief sessions that illustrate an impact on youth researchers' competence are included below.

Kevin: It [participation in YAR] taught me to be more specific in a research topic and how to be more confident in communication.

KeKe: It taught me how to see police officers in a different way because I used to think that they were all bad but now I see them in a positive way.

Daia: To speak my mind more so that I know that I will be heard because of us being heard by what we're doing in speaking to the officers.

Kevin: We don't usually have a chance to speak to adults and ask questions about why and when we started this program we realized that we can really stick to our guts and speak our minds and ask why to the police officers.

CeCe: Yeah, it definitely boosted my, um, speech, because I don't really talk in front of a crowd a lot so this was a big deal.

Kim (the one participant who was not from North Philadelphia):

I'm not really a member of this community, so... I feel like I know this community better.

Confidence is defined by Lerner as having a sense of mastery and future, being aware of one's progress in life and having expectations of continued progress in the future.

CeCe: It taught me how to step out of my comfort zone and not just to settle for average and just stay quite. It just taught me to speak up and not be afraid.

Kim: I never really had a problem talking to adults before so... um... it just made me more confident to people my age, really, because now I feel more comfortable talking to people my age.

Daia: It taught me to have a bigger voice than what I already have.

CeCe: I didn't really think 'I should be in this group called Youth As Researchers.' I just did it cause I thought we had to. At first I thought it was going to be boring and when we was like "Police Brutality" I was like 'oh - we can't do nothing about that because the cops are horrible.' But now I see them a way different way and I started getting way more outgoing and confident and I feel like we actually can make a change. Like the more we

got into it, like the interviews and stuff, it just made me feel more confident and that we can really solve this problem, or that we can get people to listen to what we're trying to say about the police officers.

Contribution is defined as being involved as an active participant and decision maker in services, organizations, and community. A selection of quotes pointing to impact in the youth researchers' sense of their own contribution are listed below.

KeKe: It taught me that us kids can also talk to others about situations like police brutality and that we can ask them deep questions, so that helped me.

KeKe: Alright, so before this for myself, I used to like... I got way more confident. Before this, before y'all came Mr. Jim asked us who wanted to do research and I was like 'I'm not doing that. I don't want to do all that... I don't really want to put myself out there and do stuff...' Even though I seem like a really like, volunteering type person, sometimes I like, back things off. Now I see myself as a member of my community. I mean, I always was, but it's easier said than done... but now I've done something to be a member of my community. So I look at myself as a member of this community, and like a person that's going to change things around me.

Kevin: Um... I feel like I put myself out there now and started to help out more with the community. People get to see teenagers can really make a difference.

Many of these statements point to impacts in multiple character traits and they need not be mutually exclusive of one another. These responses do make clear that Competence,

Confidence and Contribution were the PYD traits most impacted by participation. The youth felt more positively about themselves and their abilities based on their participation in YAR.

Presentation

One of the final steps of my own qualitative research on the impact of participation on the youth researchers was to observe them as they presented their film and findings to police officers, community stakeholders and not-for-profit organizations. The film screening and panel discussion went as expected, but the question and answer session highlighted unique outcomes. One of the audience members asked if any of the youth researchers wanted to become police officers after their interactions. The answer was a resounding no, however, several of the youth researchers ambitions had changed based on their experiences. One young woman said that after her research experience she wanted to become an investigative journalist to highlight important community issues. Another youth researcher stated that he would like to become a university researcher and continue to investigate problems. Others mentioned things like organizing within their community and a desire to attend college at Penn State University.

Don't I know you?

One of the youth researchers then told a poignant story. In February, 2018 the Philadelphia Eagles had just recently won the Super Bowl and there was a city-wide parade to celebrate. The researcher was attending the parade when an officer approached him. He was initially startled when the officer singled him out of the crowd and said "Don't I know you." The researcher was relieved to realize that he had interviewed that very officer months earlier and they were able to reconnect at the parade. As he was finishing his story that same officer, Officer Oliveras, arrived at the event and was able to tell the story from his point of view. This simple

interaction was meaningful both to the youth researcher and to the officer as they reconnected and retold the story at this presentation.

We as researchers aren't claiming that interactions like these will end racial profiling, "Stop and Frisk," or negative police and community interactions. However, it is significant that the officer saw this 16 year old African American man at a parade, and rather than seeing him as a potential stop and frisk candidate, recognized him as a youth researcher with whom he had interviewed. These



types of interactions, if continued, may serve to change perspectives and attitudes. Such interactions also can help build a familiarity and connectedness that can help suspicion and violence on all side from unnecessarily escalating. As perspectives change, policies may as well.

Project Limitations

This project was a case study to examine how YAR would work in an urban context in the US. The goal of this project and study was not to be generalizable to other contexts, but to examine the impact of participation on the youth researchers. Having said this, there were some limitations to the project.

1. Selection bias with police officers: The police officers were not a random sample of police officers in Philadelphia. Some of them were selected by the Police Captains in the 39th and 22nd districts. Others just happened to be on shift and available at the time of the interviews.
2. Convenience Sampling: The surveys were collected around midday on Saturday in a popular business district of the neighborhood. Because of the location and the timing

most of the survey respondents were older adults. If the survey would have included younger community members there may have been different sentiments regarding perceptions of policing in their neighborhood. Young people may be more likely to experience negative police interactions due to policies like “Stop and Frisk,” simply for living in a predominantly African American neighborhood (Hannon, 2017).

Hannon’s (2017) research shows that, in Philadelphia, the violent crime rate of a neighborhood is significantly less of a predictor for stop and frisk rates than the racial composition of a neighborhood. We may have missed some of these perceptions because of the age of most of the survey respondents.

3. Programmatic timing: Because the program spanned spring semester, the summer and the Fall semester, we lost some of our original participants to jobs, life transitions and other unknown factors. We had twelve participants at the beginning and had 8 complete the entire project.

IV: Recommendations

This YAR project provides opportunities to increase youth voice within their community and to add to rigorous and inclusive scholarship. Some recommendations for the youth researchers’ findings are as follows:

1. The YAR video on community perceptions of police and police perceptions of the community should be included in continuing education training courses for the Philadelphia Police Department and shown to all new police officers in Philadelphia to provide insights into the factors that create positive and negative interaction between these two groups.

2. The youth researchers who participated in this YAR project should be given more opportunities to speak in public and in their schools about their research and findings, further establishing themselves as contributing members of their communities.

The findings from the observational data collected throughout this project also create an opportunity to for YAR projects to continue. The following are recommendations for educators and policy makers regarding the YAR program:

1. YAR should become an ongoing educational module of Saturday Academy, allowing the current youth researchers to continue investigating the community issues that they identified as of interest to them.
2. YAR has been shown to increase PYD outcomes. Therefore, YAR should be viewed as a tool not only to educate youth, but also to develop characteristics that lead to success in the future. YAR should be included in middle and high schools throughout the School District of Philadelphia as a means of enabling youth voice and developing confident, competent and contributing youth citizens of Philadelphia.

V: Implications and Conclusion

This youth led research project was always about the impact that participation would have on the youth. The data shows that the youth participants did undergo a transformative experience. They expressed more confidence in themselves and in the group's ability to impact their community. They also grew in their confidence to accomplish long term goals, to speak their mind to adults and to conduct valid research. But even more than this, the data collected by the youth can have a positive impact on community and police interactions throughout the city, not only with the youth and the officers who participated in the study. When youth are given the

tools to conduct youth led research, their voice is not just opinion, but can be validated by data. Youth led research is like a megaphone for youth voices within their communities, enabling them to participate in consequential decision making and community building.

At the beginning of this project I assumed that the youth researchers would choose some topic around gun violence or drugs because of the reputation of the neighborhood where they live. With hindsight it now seems obvious that they chose racism and police interactions as their research topic. The YAR training took place on the heels of the contentious 2016 presidential election in which race and racism were front and center topics of discussion. Their choice to study racism and police interactions is also a reflection of their lived experiences. As experts in their own lives they wanted to find out more about issues that impact their lives. My expectations versus the reality of what the youth chose to study is a primary example of why youth led research, not just youth participatory research, is so important. If I would have told the youth researchers what to study and how, their experiences and the impact on the community would have been vastly different. Because they had the freedom to lead in all aspects of the project while the adults facilitated but “got out of the way” (Mitra, 2005) the youth researchers were able to conduct research on the topic most important to them and to their communities.

The youth researchers who participated in this project are, in one sense, extraordinary. They overcame fears, asked and answered difficult questions, spoke truth to power and spoke truth to their own community. They become agents of inquiry, agents of change and agents of ambition – deciding for themselves where they want their live to progress rather than waiting, fatalistically, for something ordinary to happen to them. However, in another sense, they are not extraordinary at all. These youth researchers simply reflect the potential that any child has when given the high expectations of opportunity, instruction and power to lead. These youth researchers took the

successful journey from “passive and powerless to agentive and powerful,” (Conner, 2015; Conner, Ebby-Rosin & Brown, 2015). How many more youth globally are ready and able to take that same journey if given the opportunity?

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Appendix A:



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

- UNESCO Chair in
Children, Youth and Civic Engagement
Ireland
- CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE



Institute for
Lifecourse and Society



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

- UNESCO Chair in Rural Community,
Leadership, and Youth Development,
The Pennsylvania State University



PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY



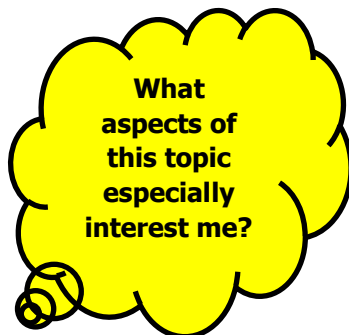
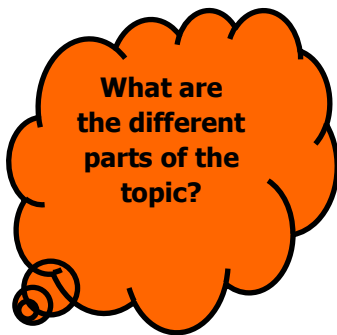
Youth as Researchers Workbook

Your Life, Your Community

“No Research About Us Without Us!”

(1) Deciding on a Research Topic

Step 2: Narrow the topic by asking questions



Brainstorming Ideas

1. ...

2. ...

3. ...

(2) Finding Out About the Topic

Instructions:

Cut out these index cards and use them to keep track of all your research sources.



Type of Source:

Author's Name:

Year of Publication:

Title:

Brief Summary:

Key Pages:



Type of Source:

Author's Name:

Year of Publication:

Title:

Brief Summary:

Key Pages:



Type of Source:

Author's Name:

Year of Publication:

Title:

Brief Summary:

Key Pages:



Type of Source:

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Type of Source:

Author's Name:

Year of Publication:

Title:

Brief Summary:

Key Pages:

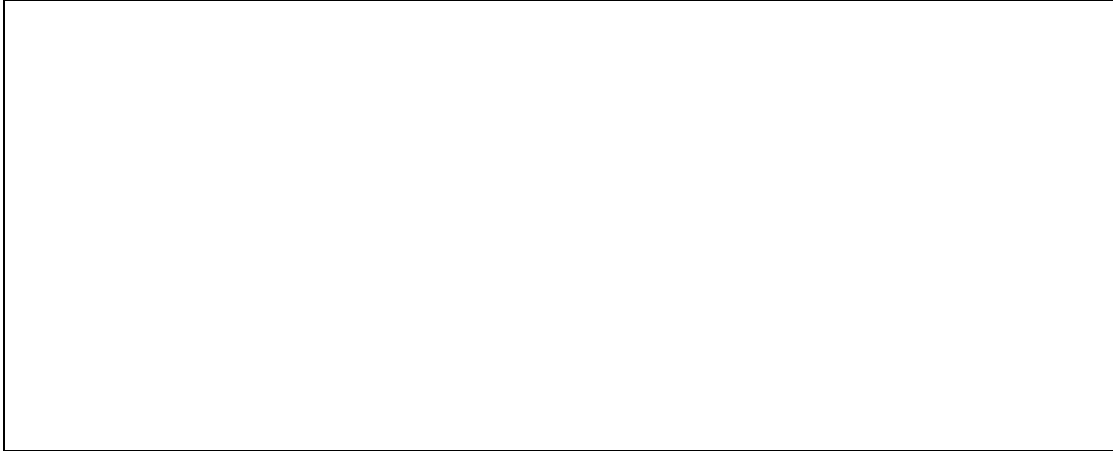
(3) Plan for Change

Instructions:

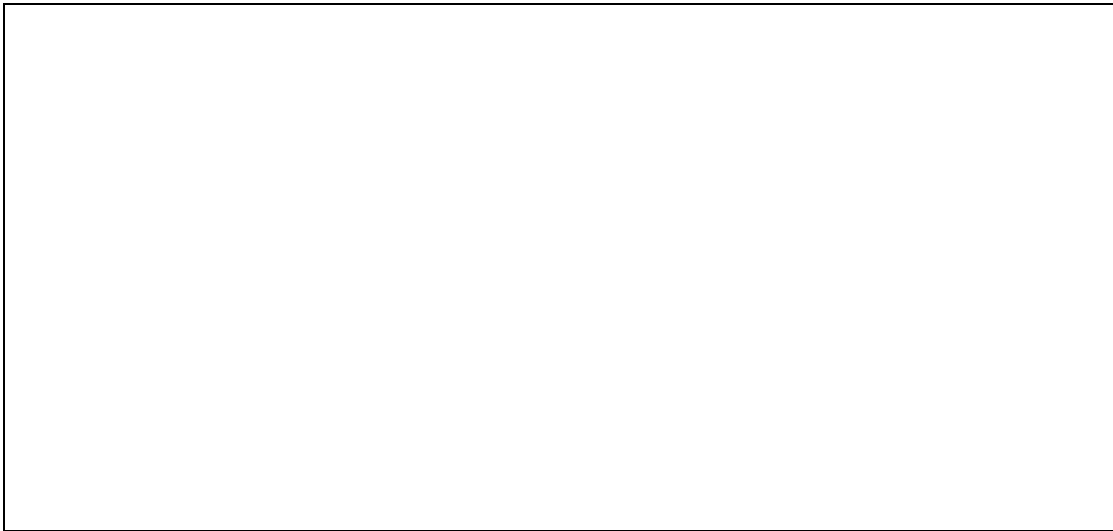
Answer the three questions about your topic to consider how your project could influence policy and practice. Then think of different ways that your research project could be developed into an action project.

1. What do you want to change and why?

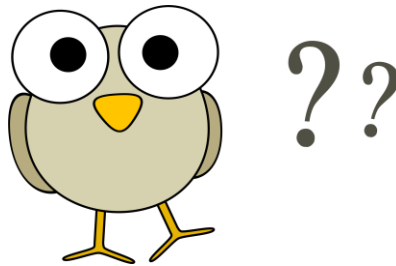
How could your research project develop into an action project to influence ***Policy?***



How could your research project develop into an action project to influence ***Practice?***



(4) Writing a Research Question



It is important that your Research Question is concise and to the point. When deciding on our research question it can be useful firstly to reflect and consider the following:

After reading your research project, the reader should know:

(5) Research Design

Instructions:

Fill out each table by providing examples of your research methods that fall within these categories.

Secondary Research

Quantitative

Our Research will involve:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Qualitative

Our Research will involve:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

(6) Research Ethics

Instructions:

List the ethical considerations for your research, taking note of the ethical framework in the manual.

The ethical considerations for our project are:

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

(7) Report your Research Findings:

Instructions

Write up your research findings. Make sure to include the following:

- Aim / Research question
- Introduction
- Methods
- Results/Findings
- Conclusions
- Recommendations



(8) Dissemination

Instructions

Answer the questions below and use this as a basis for drawing up a 'dissemination plan'.

What is the main message of my research?

Who will I 'target' with my research?

How will I get my message out there?

Appendix B:



Youth as Researchers Training Manual

“No Research About Us Without Us!”

Acknowledgements

The Youth as Researchers Training Manual and accompanying workbook have been adapted from the National Youth Agency (NYA) *Young Researcher Network Toolkit*. It was also informed by the Foróige (2013) *Leadership for Life Programme Workbook*, the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (2012) *Making Sense of Social Research: Programme Manual* and Kellet (2005) *How to Develop Children as Researchers*, London: Sage Publications.

The NYA Toolkit is available at:

http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/820654/young_researcher_network_toolkit_dec_2010.pdf.

What is the Youth as Researchers Training Manual and accompanying Workbook?

The training manual and workbook were developed by a team of researchers and youth researchers at the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre in the Institute for Lifecourse and Society under the guidance of Professor Pat Dolan. The team comprised Maria Campbell, Danielle Kennan, Chloe Greene, Ailish Gowran and Keith Egan. The manual provides a step-by-step guide to carrying out a research project and the workbook is designed to complement the training by suggesting practical tasks to support the research process. The manual draws on examples of research previously undertaken by students of the Foróige Leadership for Life Programme. This youth programme is accredited by National University of Ireland, Galway under the academic directorship of Professor Pat Dolan and is delivered by the youth organisation Foróige in projects and clubs nationally. Module 2 of the programme requires the students to work on a team research project investigating local, community or global issues.

Please cite as: Dolan, P. et al (2015) *Youth as Researcher Training Manual*. UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre.

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The authors are responsible for the choice and presentation of views expressed in this Training Manual, which are not necessarily those of UNESCO and do not commit the Organisation.

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Introduction

Youth As Researchers: Your Life, Your Community

“No Research About Us Without Us!”

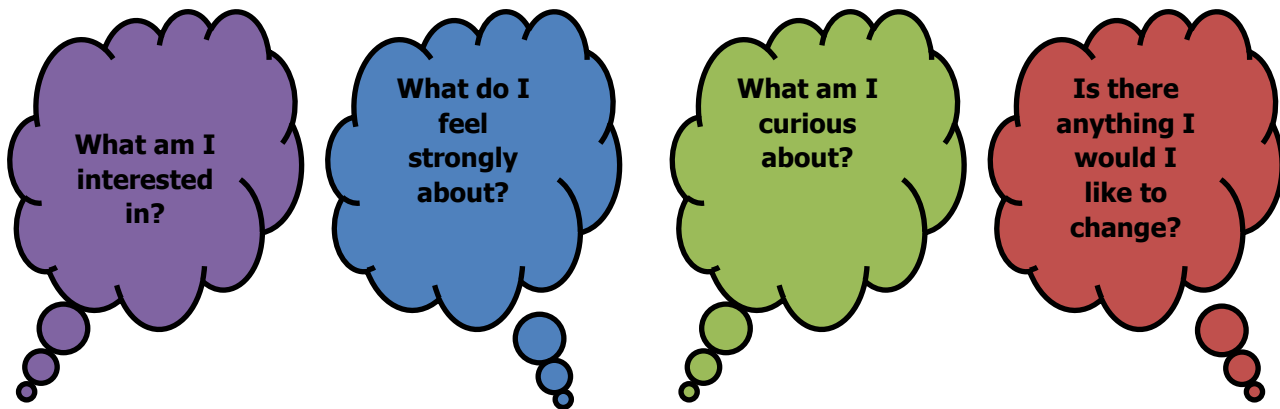
Research is a process by which we **‘find out’** about something. You have probably been involved in research at some point. In school you might have been asked by a teacher to look up facts about the history of your local community or to fill out a survey for classmates who are trying to set up a mini-company. TV news reports and newspapers are always filled with articles that include things like ‘new research has shown that...’

The great thing about carrying out your own research is that you can **‘find out’** about something that affects **young people** or a problem in **your community** that needs to be addressed. Your research can then be used to **influence change** in an area or to address a particular issue. However, in order for our research to be valuable we must ensure that it follows a certain set of rules. This manual and accompanying workbook will offer a step-by-step guide to carrying out a research project that adheres to good research standards. In the end, you will have produced a valuable source of information on issues that affect **your life and your community**.

(1) Deciding on a Research Topic

What am I going to research?

Step 1: Chose an idea



- Brainstorm ideas;
- Consider interests that you, or if you are working as part of a team your fellow researchers share, such as common hobbies, living in the same area etc.;
- Think about things that affect your lives, such as lack of facilities, relationships with your friends, parents, siblings etc.

Step 2: Narrow the topic by asking questions



Adapted from Kellet (2005) *How to Develop Children as Researchers*. London: Sage. At this early stage you don't need to be too specific; that will come later. For now just try and come up with a 'big idea' for your research. Here are some possible topics that will give you an idea of where to start:

Homelessness	Violence	Politics	Police Interaction
Nutrition	Mental Health	Drugs/ Alcohol	Recession
Education System	Global Warming	Peer Pressure	Sex Education
Voting Age	Eating Disorders	Happiness	HIV/ AIDS
Bullying	Disability	Teen Pregnancy	Older People
Self Esteem	Internet Benefits/	Minority	Animal Welfare

Do

Choose a topic that you have an **interest in** and that is **relevant** to you and/or your research team. Remember this is your chance to have **a voice** on issues that affect your life!

Don't

Don't start off with anything too specific. Keep your early stages of research broad so that you can narrow in on an aspect of your 'big idea' later on in the process.

Example: Finding a “Big Idea”

LaShawn recently had a friend who was shot on his block. His friend survived but LaShawn knows too many people who didn't survive. He observes violence around him on a regular basis and

wonders what factors contribute to it all. He brings this up to his research team and they agree that this is an important topic to examine.

(2) Finding out about the topic

What information is already out there?

In this next stage you will find out information that is already available on your **'Big Idea'**. This will allow you to narrow down your topic to a more specific area by identifying gaps or problems that need to be addressed. It will also ensure that you are not carrying out research that has already been done. In research language this is called carrying out a *literature review*.

Literature Review

This means finding out what information and research is already out there about the topic you have chosen.

Three things to remember when carrying out your Literature Review:

Find it → Judge it → Record it

Find it:

- The Internet is always a good place to start but make sure to look at other sources as well, such as books or articles.
- Try your local library for these books or old newspaper articles. A librarian might be able to guide you in the right direction.

Judge it:

- You will probably be able to find loads of information on your topic pretty quickly. However, not all the information you will find will be useful to you. Make sure to ask yourself a few questions about the information. The guide below is a useful checklist for judging your sources.

- **Think about who has written the information:**

- Are they an expert? What makes them an expert?
(For example: does the author have good qualifications / experience? Is it a university or government published document? Is it in a well-known and respected website or newspaper?)
- What is their opinion? Are they writing a neutral report or trying to convince people that their opinion is correct.

- **Check the facts:**

- Where have the facts come from?
- Can you check they are accurate?
(If the facts come from a reliable source, for example, it is written by an expert, it is a university or government published document, it is in a well-known and respected newspaper then you can generally assume the facts are accurate. (See also the section on websites below).
- When was it written – are the facts out of date?



- **Think about who runs a website:**

- An online encyclopedia like Wikipedia can be a great starting point, but the information is created by a variety of users and should be checked with a different source too.
- A charity may have reports and information on their website and it is in their interest that the information is accurate, up-to-date and professionally presented.

- **Don't just copy big sections from websites or reports:**

- Pick the sections you need carefully.
- As much as possible, summarize the information in your own words.
- You should say where you found the information.

(If it is a website, name the owner of the website, the address and the date you accessed it. If a report, book or newspaper article, give the author, title and date it was published).

Adapted from the Foróige (2013) Leadership for Life Programme Workbook Module 2.

- Most importantly, you must ask yourself ***'is it relevant to my Big Idea?'*** This can be the hardest step, as you will have lots of information that might be interesting but not necessarily related to your research. For example, if you are researching crime rates in North Philadelphia and the report focuses on New York it won't be useful for your research.
- Use a highlighter to go through all your information and pick out important points you want to discuss with your group.

Record it:

- Once you have found your information it is important to organize it in a way you can find easily later on.
- A good tip is to write up an index card for each source, which includes:

Type of Source: Internet, book, newspaper article, interview etc.

Author's Name:

Year of Publication:

Title:

Brief Summary: A couple of sentences to sum up what the source tells us.

Key Pages: Page numbers for quotes, interesting points, etc.

Do

When working as a group it is important that you don't end up reading the same things. It is a good idea to **divide up into sub-groups** and each take a different aspect of the project to research.

Don't

Don't forget to keep a record of where you found your information. You don't want to spend valuable time later on going through all your research trying to find a specific statistic.

Example:

Dominique and her research team divided into smaller sub-groups to carry out their literature review.

- The first group researched gun violence. They gathered information from websites such as www.phillypolice.com and www.neighborhoodscout.com as well as Temple University researchers who have examined this issue before.
- The second group concentrated their research on newspaper articles about North Philadelphia. They also interviewed community leaders, block captains and youth in the neighborhood.

Each group wrote up an index card on each of the sources they used. Then they came together and used all the information they had gathered to narrow the focus of their 'Big Idea' and decide what their project was going to do.

(3) Plan for Change

What will our research do?

Your research is an important tool. It can be used to **influence change** in an area or to address a **particular issue**. It is important to always keep this in mind.

Take a look at this triangle, which is a reminder of the relationship between research, policy and practice:



Research: A way of gathering evidence that can be used to support changes to policy and practice.

Policy: A plan or course of action, which is taken by governments or other organizations to determine their decisions and actions.

Practice: How we actually do something.

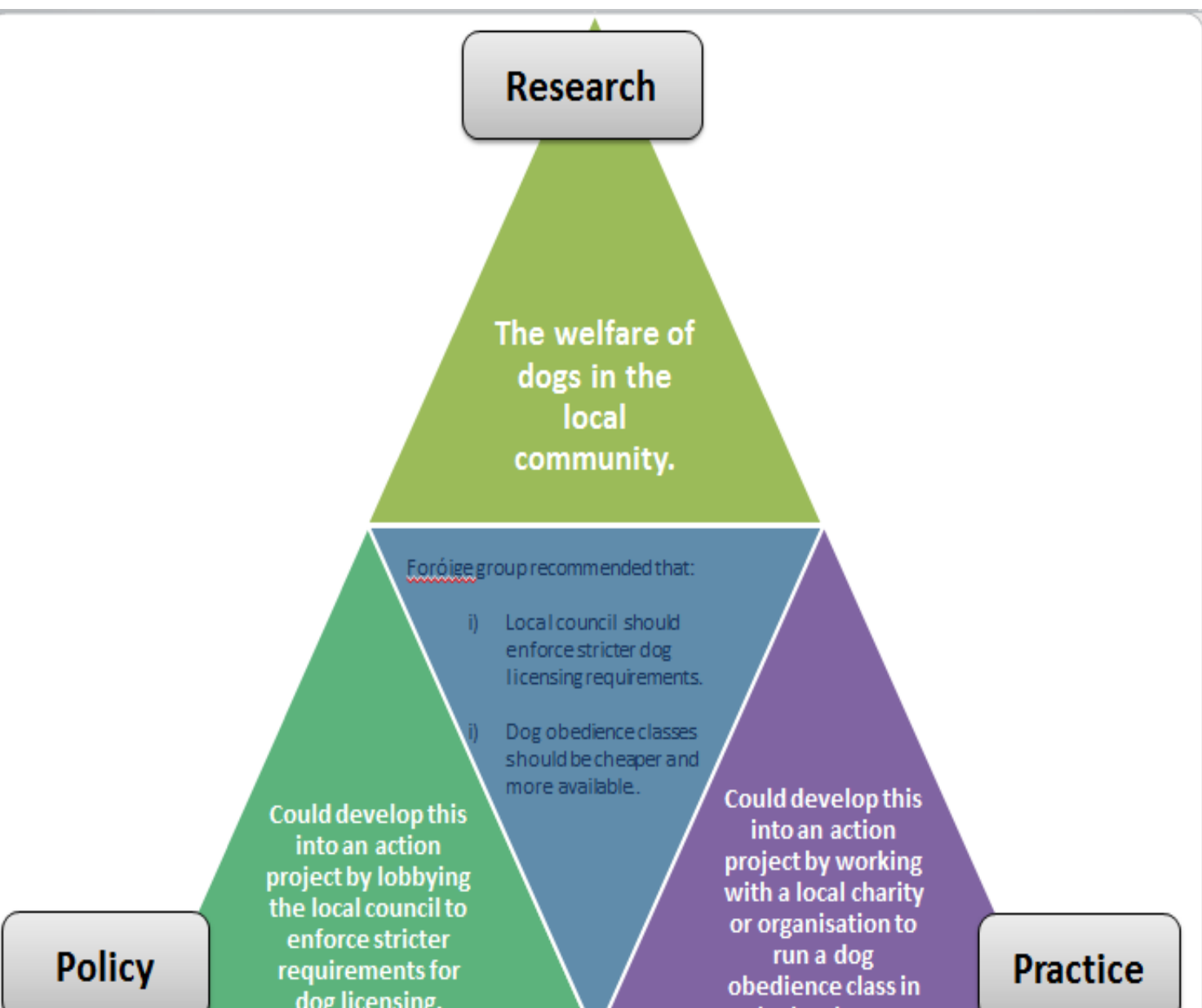
In order for your research to influence change, it is important to know whom your research should target. For example, if you want to influence policy change you need your research

to target local members of government or members of the local county council. On the other hand if you want to influence practice you want your research to target organizations working in the area, such as charities or local school systems.

Ask yourself:

- What do you want to change, and why?
- Do you want to influence change in policy, practice or both?

Take a look at this example. It comes from a research project completed as part of a previous Youth As Researchers group. It illustrates how the research could have been developed into an action project.



Do

Keep an **action project** in mind. This research project could only be the beginning.

Don't

Don't underestimate your capability. Your project has the ability to make a real change, so think big!!

Example:

Dominique, LaShawn and their group planned to find out why young people in North Philly get their first gun. By examining the reasons that prevented youth from being more involved in productive activities, the group hoped to be able to influence both policy and practice.

- Their research could influence *policy* by highlighting ways in which the government could improve policies to promote interesting employment opportunities for youth in the neighborhood.
- Their research could influence *practice* by making recommendations on how to involve youth in more sports and education activities after school.

(4) Writing a Research Question

What are we trying to find out?

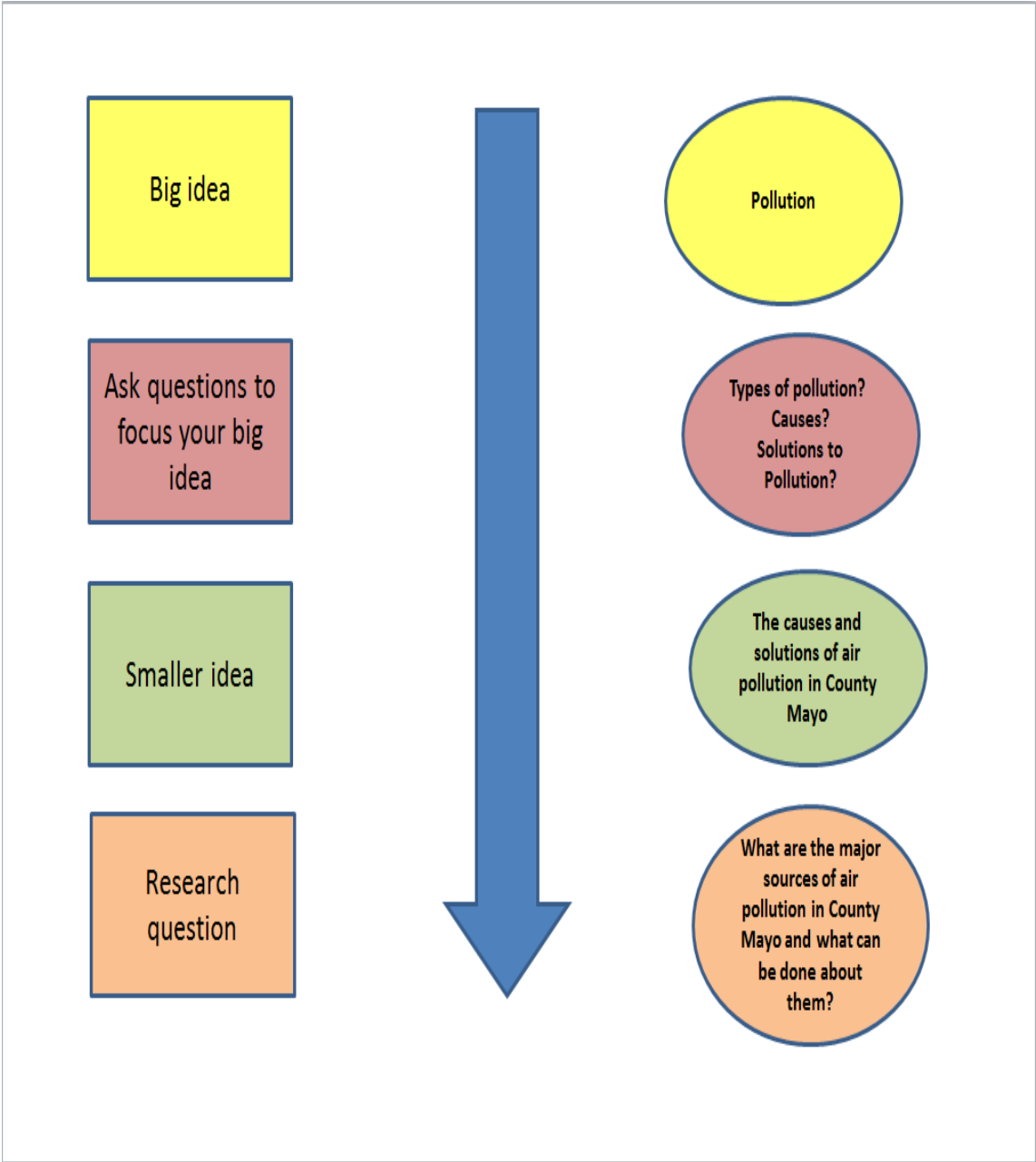
A research question is another way of framing what is the **aim** of your research.

A research question will help:

- **Narrow your focus and define the limits of your research:** Instead of asking 'what do young people want?' ask 'what afterschool facilities do young people want in North Philadelphia?'
- **Manage time:** Is it possible to research all this in your timeframe? Maybe you should narrow the focus. You could do this by adding an age bracket to your research. For example, 'what afterschool facilities do young people aged 13-18 want in North Philadelphia?'
- **Remain Motivated:** You can use your research question to make sure you don't get sidetracked with information that isn't useful to your research.

Framing a research question

Framing a research question means going from a '**Big Idea**' to a smaller, more focused question that you can answer by doing a research project.



Do

Don't

Answer this question....

After reading my research project, the reader should know_____

Don't leave your research question **vague**.
Make sure you are as specific as possible so that your research is focused and manageable in the timeframe

Example

Dominique and her research team brainstorm to decide what they want their research question to be. They decide on two questions:

- 1. Why do youth in North Philadelphia obtain their first gun?**
- 2. What can be done to change their intentions and create positive alternatives?**

(5) Research Design & Methods

How will I answer the research question?

There are many different types of research and it will be up to you to decide what research methods will best answer your research question. Some of the main types of research and methods are described below.

Data

This means any information you gather as part of your research.

Primary	Secondary
<p>Primary research involves collection of data (information) that does not already exist.</p> <p>Data can be collected by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questionnaires • Face-to face or telephone interviews • Focus Groups • Observation. 	<p>Secondary research involves analyzing existing data i.e. information that exists already, such as that collected by the national census office.</p>
<p>For example, if you were assessing why youth obtain their first gun:</p>	

Conducting primary research could involve anonymous interviews of your in the neighbourhood to see if there are any trends in why youth obtain guns.

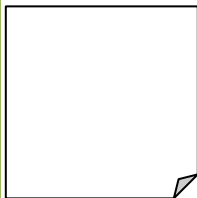
Conducting secondary research could involve summarizing a report that the local city council produced on average age of gun violence victims and perpetrators.

Quantitative

Qualitative

Quantitative research is used to measure how many people feel, think or act in a particular way.

- **It answers questions that begin with “how many” or “how much”.**
- **It allows the researcher to gather the views of a large number of people (aim for at least 20).**
- **Common methods include telephone interviews and multiple choice survey**



Qualitative research is used to provide the researcher with **in-depth understanding** of an issue and the reasons behind it.

- It answers questions that begin with “why” or “how” something happens.
- It involves a small number of people (minimum three).
- Common methods include face-to-face interviews, group discussions (focus groups) and open-question surveys.



Research Method 1 : Questionnaire

Using questions that have a limited number of answers for people to select from (closed questions) can make it easier to compare results.

Using open questions means that people can answer however they choose. This may make it harder to compare results, but allows for more freedom and variety in the answers. These types of questions are better for interviews.

Closed Questions (best for questionnaires)

Do you exercise regularly? (Select one)

Yes

Sometimes

No

What qualities do you think are important for leadership? (Check all that apply)

A good listener

Patient

A loud voice

Bossy

Good communicator

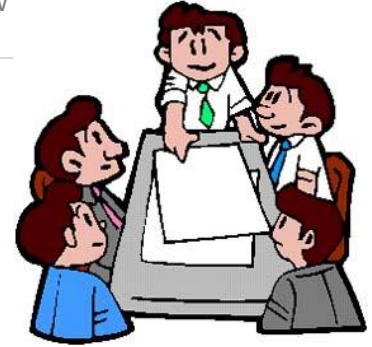
Open Questions (best for interviews)

What exercise do you do?

What qualities do you think are important for leadership?

Adapted from the Foróige (2013) Leadership for Life Programme Workbook Module 2.

Research Method 2: Focus Groups



Focus Group

Planning:

1. Establish a purpose: Are you trying to get people's opinions about something, testing out an idea or encouraging discussion on a topic?
2. Write your questions: Leave about 10 minutes per question so the conversation can flow. Begin with a more general question and then move to specifics.
3. Chose a facilitator: This person should know a lot about the research and its purpose and be confident in front of a group. They should also have spent time thinking about the ethics of the project and how to avoid the discussion becoming sensitive to any participants. They should also consider how everyone in the focus group can have an opportunity to speak.

Organizing:

1. Participants: Usually 6-10 people. Where will they come from? Make arrangements and have a backup plan in case something goes wrong.
2. Recording the session: You could use a voice recorder, video camera or get someone to take notes. Make sure to get permission from the participants for this.
3. Location: Quiet rooms in a location that is easily accessible. It's a good idea to arrange the chairs in a U shape or all sitting at one table.
4. Props: Whiteboard or flipchart and markers, refreshments, notepad and pens, name tags, clock.

Conducting:

1. Begin with introductions and make sure everyone feels relaxed.
2. Follow the questions you have written but also leave some room for spontaneity so the facilitator can ask more detail about points that come up.
3. Keep discussion on track, always have the purpose of the focus group in mind.
4. Keep each question to the arranged time limit.
5. For more information you can see these useful links:

6. This video shows both good and bad examples of a focus group and can be a great place to start your discussion <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Auf9pkuCc8k>
7. This link provides checklists for defining your focus group and samples of questions. <https://assessment.trinity.duke.edu/documents/How to Conduct a Focus Group.pdf>

Research Method 3: Interview

An Interview in the research context is the verbal conversation between two people with the objective of collecting relevant information for the purpose of research.

Interviews allow you to get more detailed answers from the participants than you would by carrying out a survey. They allow you to get the story behind a participant's experience, and also enable the interviewer to pursue more in – depth information around the topic.

Interview and Focus Group Do's & Don'ts

Do's

- Give plenty of notice to your participant when requesting to conduct interview
- Encourage the participant to give more details with probes like “What do you mean by... ?” “Can you tell me more about ... ?”
- Use your body language to encourage the participant by nodding your head or leaning forward to indicate interest
- Begin with easy questions to make the participant feel comfortable
- Record the interview (as long as you have the participant's permission)

Don'ts

- Conduct proper research prior to interview / focus group, and be sure not to limit your research to only one source. While the internet might be the easiest option, you can research by reading newspaper articles, official reports and books as well.

- Avoid questions that can be answered by yes or no. The purpose of an interview is to get more detailed answers than you would from a survey.
- Don't show any surprise with your answers as the participant might feel like you are judging them.
- If the participant are speaking try not to interrupt them. Instead make a note and refer back to the follow up question later on.

(6) Research Ethics

**How
ensure**

Example

In order to answer their research question, LaShawn, Dominique and their research team have decided to conduct different types of research.

They will:

- Gather information from reports produced by the Philadelphia Police Department and the Mayor's Office (Literature Review).
- Conduct an interview with a staff member from the local youth organization (Qualitative).
- Invite youth to answer an anonymous closed questionnaire about their involvement in community activities (Quantitative).

**will I
the**

research won't cause any harm to other people?

Research Ethics:

These are the correct rules of conduct to follow when carrying out your research. Following these guidelines ensures that we uphold our moral responsibility to protect research participants.

In order to
your
has no
effects

ensure
research
adverse
(causes













any harm) to those who participate, you must consider the ethical issues involved

Avoid situations such as these:

- A research topic that is particularly sensitive or personal, such as interviewing someone about bullying who may have been bullied in the past. This could cause them to get upset.
- Collecting data from research participants who may be vulnerable or 'at risk', for example people who are homeless or suffer from addiction or mental health issues. You as the researcher may not be equipped to deal with issues that arise during your interactions with such research participants. For example, a young person might disclose that they are self-harming, and you as the interviewer do not know what to say or do.

An **information sheet** is a useful way to explain the project to people who have agreed to take part in your research. This way, the participants can take time to read what the project is about and understand how they will be involved if they agree to participate in the research.

Your information sheet should contain the following information:

	The aims of the project. 
	Who will be carrying out the research and what their roles are.
	
	Descriptions of what you need the participants to do, like answer a questionnaire or join a focus group. You should also give details how long you expect it to take. 
	How you will keep the information confidential (more key tips of confidentiality are included below). 
	Explain that participation in the research is completely voluntary and that they don't have to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. 
	A statement about any potential risks, harms and benefits to participants. 



The contact details of the group carrying out the research that they can get in touch with if they have any questions (note: do not provide a personal phone number or email address).



If you are worried that your questions might be too personal you should show a copy of them to somebody like a teacher, social worker or someone involved with the group you are interviewing. This person might know better what is appropriate and could make any changes necessary.

Confidentiality

Your participants will be more comfortable answering questions if they know how their answers will be kept confidential. An easy way to do this is to explain how the data will be kept, stored and deleted. Usually the data will be stored safely for a short period of time after the research is completed. For example the research should provide information stating, 'we will record the interview, and the recording will be kept until (state the date) then it will be deleted. Only the researcher will be able to hear the recording'.

Framework for ethical research



Example:

The research team is aware that they are dealing with a topic that is potentially sensitive. In order to ensure that their research follows the correct ethical codes of conduct they spend time talking about how the project might affect those involved.

They agree to ensure that:

- All the research participants are fully informed about what the research team is researching, why they are undertaking the research, what is involved in partaking in the research, what they will do with the findings and how they will protect individuals' anonymity etc.
- They are discreet with the data collected and keep it in a safe place where only those in the research group can access it.
- They do not share the identity of the interviewees in the write-up of their report.
- They won't ask personal questions that are not necessary for their research.

(7) Report your research findings

How will I report the research?

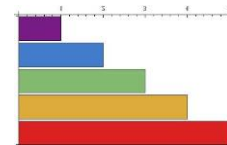
Analyzing your Results

When analyzing data (from questionnaires, interviews, focus groups etc.), you must look back at your research question i.e., the reason you undertook the research in the first place. This will help you to organize and categorize your data and it will help you to focus on answering the question.

Basic analysis of quantitative information

(Responses to closed-question questionnaires)

1. Organize the information, i.e., add up the number of 'yes' responses, 'no' responses for each question etc.
2. Once you have completed your calculations you can create a table in excel to show the responses.



Basic analysis of qualitative information

(Responses in interviews, focus groups or open-questions in a questionnaire)

1. Read through all the data.
2. Organize similar answers or comments into themes, e.g., concerns, strengths, weaknesses, similar experiences, suggestions for change etc.
3. Label the themes and write up the findings under each theme.
4. Identify any patterns in the themes, e.g., most people were aware of..., some of the people had concerns about...etc.



Interpreting the data you have collected

1. Put the information in perspective, e.g., compare what you found to what you expected or to previous research in the area.
2. Consider recommendations to help improve the situation.
3. Record conclusions and recommendations.

Writing up your research

Include the Following:

Aim: What you hoped to achieve (research question).

Introduction: Background to the project.

Methods: How you went about looking into the issue e.g. interviews, internet search, focus group etc.

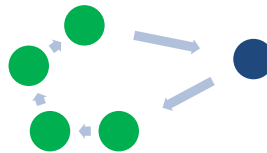
Results/Findings: What you found out.

Conclusion: What conclusions you came to.

Recommendations: Key recommendations to solve the problem. These should be creative and practical.

To write-up your findings in an interesting way, think about using:

- pictures or images
- diagrams or bar charts
- and quotations



“there isn’t enough to do in the evening” (Girl, 16)

Example

Dominique, LaShawn and the research team gather all their information. From the responses they received during the interview and the completed questionnaires, they identify three major barriers to the involvement of young people in productive activities, and therefore, their reasons for getting their first gun. They organize all the data under each barrier identified. They write up their findings and produce a report. In their recommendation, they include five recommendations that the government, the local community and organizations can take to overcome these barriers.

Having no options for productive evening activities was one of the contributing factors in why young people get their first gun. One of the recommendations identified by the youth research team was to create more arts and athletics based after-school programs in the community.

Do

Organize your research in a clear and concise way. Use photographs, images or diagrams to present your findings in an interesting way and if you carried out primary research include some quotations. Use bullet points to make your recommendations clear.

Don't

Don't forget your **research question**. The write up should be directed towards answering this question.

(8) Dissemination

How will I share the research?

Now that all the work is done it's time to put your energy into getting the message out. Telling the right people about your research means that it may be used as evidence as part of a larger campaign to implement change.

Dissemination:

Developing the key messages from your research and ensuring that it is shared with people who can bring about change.

Be clear about the main message of your research.

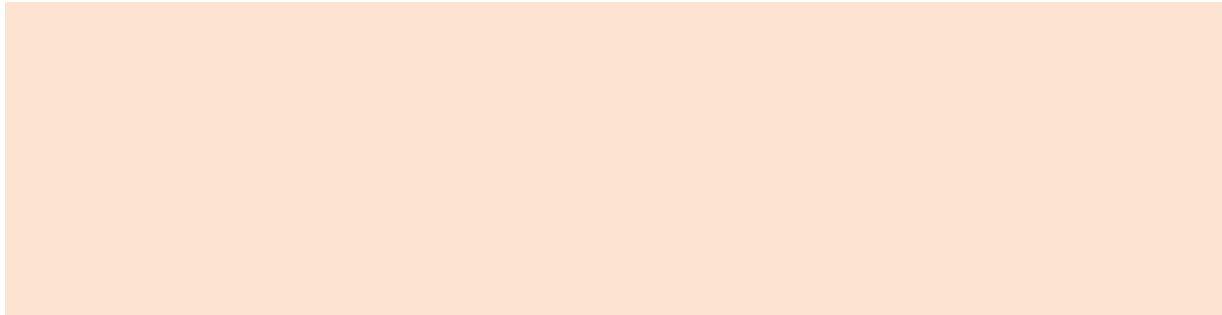
Have a list of people who you want to 'target' to share your research with.

Ideas for dissemination

- Send your research report to local members of government, city councils, charities, schools or anyone who might be interested. Make sure to include a personalized letter highlighting the key message of your research to ensure that they read it.
- Put it on a website.
- Hold a public launch event.
- Contact the local press.
- Share information on the research in existing newsletters.

Example:

After they have completed their research project, the team holds a launch night. They invite key people such as a local Government representative, representatives from community groups and members of the community. At the event they present the key message of their research and encourage everyone in the community to join in the effort to create arts and athletics based after-school programs.



Do

Pay attention to dissemination. This is the most important step in ensuring that your research impacts the issue it is addressing.

Don't

Don't simply send copies of your research to a lot of different sources. Make sure to think about ways to make it **accessible** to the person who is reading it. This could be with an accompanying letter, a YouTube video or a colorful leaflet.