

ARVAC (The Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector) was established in 1978. It is a membership organisation and acts as a resource for people interested in research in or on community organisations.

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Teenage kicks

Jonny Byrne, Ulf Hansson and Neil Jarman describe experiences of doing community research with young people in Northern Ireland

The Community Research Programme run by the Institute for Conflict Research (IRC) was developed in response to the needs of community groups in Belfast. In 2003, the IRC was approached by a local community group who wanted help in developing their own research project. The group had noted a growing dissatisfaction in many communities towards researchers as they felt that they were increasingly treated as the subject of research, while little of it contributed to their own work or addressed local problems and concerns. Many community workers also noted that while they often welcomed outside researchers and participated in their research, they often received little feedback on the outcomes.

Following the initial contact ICR began to work with a group of community workers in North Belfast to develop a greater understanding of research methods and practices. This led to the group undertaking a research project looking at the attitudes of young people to electoral politics. This was circulated widely to local political parties and statutory bodies and served as the basis for ongoing local discussions. Since then ICR has continued to work with a range of groups in North Belfast and with others across Northern Ireland to develop training and support for community-based groups who want to carry out their own research projects. This article describes two such projects which have involved young people working alongside researchers from ICR.

Working with Young People

The first project involved working with a group of young people through the YMCA in Larne, County Antrim, a town where there had been ongoing problems due to sectarian violence and harassment. Staff at the YMCA wanted to both document the opinions and attitudes of young people on issues such as sectarianism and community conflict and use the opportunity to introduce young members of the YMCA to research methods and techniques as part of a wider civic leadership programme.

The second project involved working with North Belfast Alternatives, a community restorative justice project, to explore local attitudes to crime, anti-social behaviour and the role of the police in the Sunningdale area of Belfast. It was hoped that the research would feed into the work of the North Belfast Alternatives in developing a strategic plan for their area.

The two research training programmes shared similar features. They both involved working with groups of between 6 and 8 young people aged between 12 and 17 who were already involved in some way with the local host organisation. In both areas ICR staff worked with the young people to devise a training programme that would run over a period of 10-12 weeks and which involved meeting with the two groups of young people on a regular basis, usually once a

week. The initial meetings involved a discussion of their expectations along with an outline of general research skills and methodologies. During this phase the young people shaped the research to focus on themes and issues that were important to them, rather than simply focus on themes identified by the host organisation. As a way of 'cementing' the group and encouraging the work a number of social activities were also organised as part of the project.

In Larne, the group identified 12-17 year olds as the crucial target group for the research. They also felt that developing a questionnaire that could be administered through schools would offer the best means of maximising participants. However, due to time constraints and exam schedules the group were only able to administer the questionnaire in one secondary school. In Sunningdale the young people also decided to use a questionnaire, but aimed to carry out a comparison between the views of young people and adults. In this case the questionnaire was handed out door-to-door around the immediate Sunningdale area, while ICR staff accompanied the young researchers to help their confidence.

The Sunningdale project differed from the one in Larne as the young people also participated in focus groups with local politicians, the police and other young people. The discussions centred on some of the themes that were developed from the questionnaire and these meetings provided many of the young people the first opportunity to question an elected representative and members of the police.

The findings from Larne focused on the large number of young people who had experienced violence and disorder in their communities, but also highlighted an apparent lack of youth provision in the area. The findings from Sunningdale similarly identified a lack of youth provision, but also raised more prominent concerns about travelling through the area at night; the poor relations between young people and the police; fears around under age drinking; lack of communication and interaction with political representatives, and the presence of paramilitary organisations in the area.

Limitations of the Projects

The two projects in turn highlighted a number of issues for ICR in working with young people. Although we thought it might prove interesting to involve young people of different ages, the experience proved to be difficult at times. The young people had different interests and levels of maturity and the younger ones found it difficult to grasp research concepts and methods and retain an interest in the project. Despite a fairly regular attendance at meetings, the levels of interest levels did vary, and attendance dropped particularly when there was football shown on the television. The ICR staff tried to respond to these issues and also took into account the differing interests and abilities of the teenagers. For example, two of the young people in Sunningdale were given the responsibility of taking photographs of the area to be included in the report. It was difficult to ensure that all the young people retained an active role in the research, but in each area a core group was sustained throughout the duration.

Lessons Learned

ICR noted several positive outcomes. The young people gained an insight into the difficulties of conducting research and several young people appeared to increase their self-confidence. They also showed that they could engage in positive activities, which benefited the community as a whole. This in turn challenged the often negative image that young people have in many communities in Belfast.

The young people from Sunningdale for example, were involved in the launch of the research findings. This meant that the young people could claim ownership of the research while giving feedback on the findings to the wider community. The Sunningdale project also enabled the young people to come into contact with a variety of adults, both from their community, from political parties and from the police. This allowed them the opportunity to establish a relationships with people from whom they had in the past felt alienated. Many of these relationships have been maintained through other projects since this time.

The project gave the young people an opportunity to reflect on and analyse a variety of issues that affect their lives. It was important to ensure that the young people could relate to the research and that the subject of the research was felt to be relevant to them. It was also crucial that the young people were able to work in a space in which they could feel comfortable and safe, such as in their youth club or community house. But equally important was the role of the partner organisations, the YMCA and NBA, which provided the link between ICR and the young people, and assisted in encouraging the young people in the project and ensured that the research output was incorporated into their own future work.

ICR have learnt from these experiences and have continued to develop the Community Research Programme and to work with other groups of young people and community based organisations.

More details of the Community Research Programme, plus pdf copies of the reports that are public documents can be found on the ICR website at www.conflictresearch.org.uk