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**Engaging young people as partners for change:**

**The UR Community Project**

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**Key Words:**

Young people, participation rights, Article 12, UNCRC, methodology, engagement, children's rights

**Abstract:**

Article 12 of the UNCRC declares that young people have the right to express views and to have these taken into account when decisions are made that affect them. Yet, children's voices are still not universally heard in policy and operational discourses. In many areas of service delivery in particular, young people remain disenfranchised, in spite of evidence which attests to their desire to positively engage with adult decision makers. Challenging the apparent discordance between the rhetoric relating to young people's decision making and reality (as perceived by children), this article offers a new and innovative template for researching with young people as partners for change in the specific context of research dissemination. Seeking to enhance understanding and influence practice, the article sheds some much needed light on how, participation rights can be made 'real' at a local level.

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## **Engaging young people as partners for change:**

### **The UR Community Project**

#### **Young people's participation in context**

The appetite of young people to participate in decision making and their capacity to make a difference is the focus of this article. Funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (grant reference: **RES-192-22-0019**), a partnership project was undertaken between young people and an adult researcher to disseminate research findings on young people's participation. The project intended to do something that the literature suggests is not always undertaken by researchers who work with young people, namely to be child-focused and child-appropriate (see Davies, 2014). Indeed, the research project offered young people, via research, the opportunity to identify key issues that mattered to them and to use research findings to influence local policy and service delivery, and very importantly, to embed participation in decision making within the strategy and practice of local agencies (see Driskell, 2017). This was achieved through an incremental research process which was led by young people, and as a result of their decision making, resulted in engagement with adult decision makers. The engagement which occurred challenged existing orthodoxies concerning young people's participation in decision making and its potential impacts, creating change in local policy, culture and service delivery.

Of course, since the UK ratified the UNCRC, an emphasis, strategically and operationally, has been placed on the importance of young people's right to express their view and be heard whenever decision making occurs that affects them (for

example, HM Government, 2011). And, such emphasis mirrors efforts at both supranational (see Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2016, Council of Europe, 2008) and community levels (see London Youth, 2018), to promote young people's participation rights. However, these emphases pose an interesting challenge: do they actually make a difference to young people or result in the types of positive change that could be expected? Such intimately and importantly relates to the ways that the right to participate can, and might be comprehensively realised. While a change-effective vision of participation is certainly advocated by many (for instance, Redmond and Dolan, 2016, Keating and Janmaat, 2016), and the meaningful participation of young people is embraced as a positive power to improve policy and practice (see Lansdown, 2006, Department for Education and Skills, 2003), it is also true to say that key tensions are associated with the rhetoric and practice of young people's participation. At the forefront of these tensions is the lack of recognition by adults that young people are fully capable of participating in decision making albeit in ways that may not be familiar to adults (see Archard, 2014, Mitchell and Sloper, 2011). It is perhaps of little surprise therefore that although participation rights exist supranationally (see the UNCRC), the implementation of these at national, regional and local levels (in Europe and globally), can be diverse, inconsistent, and influenced unduly by adults (see Quennerstedt et al., 2018, Crowley, 2012).

Arguably, the right to participate in decision making can be transformative (Kay et al., 2014), striking at the heart of young people's lives, recognising their position as community members and through their decision making positively transforming policy and practice which affects them (see Freeman, 1996; Nolas, 2015). Unfortunately, definitional and applied realities of young people's participation remain

heterogeneous and contested (see Cantwell, 2011, Skivenes and Strandbu, 2006, Sinclair, 2004), despite oft-quoted policy commitments (see Kirby and Bryson, 2002). To a large extent, as already indicated, this is due to the disparity between adults and young people as to what the 'participation' associated with young people's rights actually means – research however has certainly shown how young people themselves conceive of, apply and understand the power of their right to participate in decision making (see Tisdall, 2015, Skelton, 2007, Mannion, 2007). Especially poignant to this article, research undertaken in Swansea and published in 2011 (see Charles, 2011) demonstrated that not only did young people understand what 'participation' means, but they evidenced a sophisticated comprehension of its dimensions, locations, implications and possible impact on others.

Having said that, while such claims are repeated through formal consultations with children (for example, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010), and allegedly listened to by adult decision makers, it is understood that more needs to be done to understand young people's capacity to participate and to hear their voices and respond positively to them (see Fahmy, 2017). Especially, far greater attention needs to be afforded the empirical modes of young people's participation in decision making (Horgan et al., 2017). In this context, Lundy (2007), for example, made a compelling case that contextualisation and focus should be granted to the implementation of Article 12 and its exercise by young people. Lundy offers a fourfold model of understanding: creating space for participation; facilitating the offering of young people's voices; listening to young people; respecting young people's views and responding appropriately. However, if Article 12 is to be more than just a charter for mechanistic and sometimes tokenistic (see Anderson and

Dolva, 2015; Matthews, 2001) approaches for consultation with young people, there is much we still need to understand. In saying this it is important to recognise the steps taken by practitioners and academics to address the tensions associated with understanding 'participation' (see Clark, 2017, Ord, 2016, Burns and Birrell, 2014) but an insight into how these tensions can be overcome is needed now. Addressing this gap in knowledge, the article demonstrates how the research process itself provided a tool to achieve the meaningful participation of young people.

Before exploring in detail the research, it is important to understand the space and ethos in which it occurred. The research took place in Swansea, Wales and the environments of both matter. Following devolution of executive and legislative power in 1998, a steady and growing body of policy, strategy and legislative activities have been constructed to promote positive attitudes to children's rights (see for example, National Assembly for Wales, 2014). Also, the Welsh Government has sought to embed children's participation rights into service frameworks, ministerial duties and National Assembly decision making (see Welsh Government, 2014, Welsh Government, 2013a). Moving beyond policy aspirations, the Welsh executive agreed to bind itself in terms of children's rights and supported the enactment of the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure (2011) where Ministers must have 'due regard' to the UNCRC and are open to scrutiny.

Not only has Wales incorporated and implemented young people's rights, but it fosters a pro-participative and pro-rights ethos across the Principality, especially across the public sector (see National Assembly for Wales, 2015). Indeed, positive approaches to young people's rights is visible in the decisions taken by Swansea

Council in the locale where the research took place. Although, since the time of the local authority's inception in 1996 it has sought to realise an ambitious programme for recognising and encouraging the exercise of young people's rights through a large scale youth participation consultation programme, Children and Young People's Charter, and specific, service-related engagement strategies (Swansea Council, 2004, 1999, 1998).

The Welsh environment matters because it contrasts with what appears, generally, to be happening across the UK and in other jurisdictions (see Rees and Williams, 2016, Williams, 2012). The adoption of legislation, policy and an ethos which has been designed to value young people's rights is likely to have created an environment in which, as will be described below, young people felt confident and willing to participate in research and to challenge existing policy and adult-dominated narratives (see Fleming, 2012). Poignantly, the way that the devolved Government in Wales and authority's such as Swansea perceive, make provision to promote and encourage young people's rights reflects the aims of those who promote the 'new sociology of childhood' (see James et al., 1998). Thus, it is perhaps true to say that a pro-rights atmosphere existed (of course, the true extent to which is debatable) and is likely to have impacted upon the research.

### **Young people's engagement in the research process**

The research underpinning this article was designed to actively engage young people in the dissemination of findings already collated from a research project concerning children's participation in decision making (see Charles, 2011, Charles and Haines, 2014). In that project (which will hereafter be called Phase 1), young

people had offered views concerning what participation meant to them, how they made decisions in their lives and the ways that they influenced adults. Critically, Phase 1 demonstrated that young people knew about their rights and wanted to exercise those rights in the context of their everyday realities (see Charles, 2017). Importantly, the young people also recognised and understood the challenges to this aspiration (see Morrow, 2008).

In the research that is the primary consideration of this article and is Phase 2, it was intended that findings from Phase 1 should be used and disseminated by young people. Reflecting the research model adopted in Phase 1, it was ethically imperative that young people should be active in the research process and integrally involved, not just as participants, but as designers and leaders (see Morrow, 2009, Alderson, 2000). Such resonates with with popular views regarding the importance of engaging young people as partners for change and the recognition that they are active and powerful agents in their own lives and the life of the communities to which they belong (see Lansdown et al., 2014, Kränzl-Nagl and Zartler, 2010, Sebba and Robinson, 2009).

Taking forward a child-focused approach to contextualisation and dissemination, Phase 2's research process was established with the aim of working with young people to identify key themes emerging from Phase 1. The approach was also designed to enable young people themselves to determine, in their specific context, which aspects of participation in decision making they felt were priorities for wider dissemination, who these findings should be disseminated to, and the manner in which this could be done. Recognising young people's ability to inform and lead



research, irrespective of their formal academic capacity (see Tisdall, 2010, Flutter and Rudduck, 2004), a mixed group of pupil volunteers were recruited at a local comprehensive School to form a research Steering Team. Critically, the Steering Team was intended to lead, jointly with the researcher, the design and implementation of a research process. The Steering Team proved to be enthusiastic, agreeing to work with the researcher who operated on a 'least adult' approach (see Mandell, 1991): providing advice and support to the young people as they led the project – young people were at the core of the project, not just part of it.

14 young people, aged between 11 and 16 years, with differing academic levels of achievement and from a variety of ethnic and socio-economic groups (reflecting the locality in which they lived) came together to form the Steering Team and this ensured the influence of a range of young people and not just those who might be perceived as being capable of participating in research (see Mockler and Groundwater-Smith, 2015).

Critical sets of principles underpinned the research. First, the need for the research to not simply conform to adult expectations of 'ethical research', but also young people. To achieve this an ethical framework designed by young people with researchers was adopted which aimed to secure basic protections in the research process which included seven key principles which were adopted from Phase 1 (see Charles, 2011: 72-75):

1. Young people must be given sufficient information about the research
2. Young people have the right to take part in or opt-out of the research

3. Young people must be able to exercise their right to freedom of expression
4. Young people's views should be only be shared with their informed consent
5. Participative activities undertaken with young people must be safe and located in appropriate environments
6. Young people have the right to reflect on and interpret what they have said during the research process
7. The research must be a partnership between young people and the research within which each party can get their voices heard

It is important to note that while the ethical framework was initially proposed by the researcher, explained and 'put to' young people participants, following in-depth discussion young people explained that not only did they agree with the principles but they felt very passionate about them. As one young person explained:

"It would be a bit silly having research that is about young people's participation if we didn't have a chance to say what we felt about how it was done, wouldn't it?... We're pleased though that you've asked us about this because we don't want to do another task where we're only good for giving views and then they [the researchers] walk away and never speak to us again."

(Eddie<sup>1</sup>, Research Participant, Phase 2)

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the identity of young people, pseudonyms have been used throughout this article. Gender has been respected in allocating pseudonyms.

Secondly, even though the school wanted to be part of the research project, and parents/carers agreed that young people could participate, the power of a young person to control their participation had to be articulated. Focusing acutely on the issue of informed consent, a 'triple lock' approach was embedded within the research. This consisted of:

- In loco parentis informed consent – Offered by the school to enable the researcher to speak with young people and attend at the premises
- Parent/carer informed consent – Granted by parents/carers, allowing the young person that they cared for to take part in the research
- Young person informed consent – Which young people themselves had to grant (in addition to in loco parentis and parent/carer informed consent)

The rationale for the 'triple lock' was not merely administrative in the sense of seeking to gain informed consent. Rather, the lock was designed to give young people the ultimate say about their participation. Thus, even if the school and a parent/carer said that it was permissible for a young person to take part in the research, without their (the young person's) specific agreement, this could not take place. Furthermore, during the research, if a young person choose to leave, for whatever reason, they could, and they were assured that their data would be deleted. This approach to informed consent was discussed with the young people and they agreed that it was a positive aspect of the research:

“Like, we are the one's who will be doing it, so we know best about what's happening. My Mum is like, 'Oh yeh, want to take part? I'll sign

the form'. So, it's signed, but that doesn't mean she knows much about it. Me, I want to know more and if I don't like what's happening, I don't want anyone to force it so I think it's a good thing."

(Alesha, Research Participant, Phase 2)

Finally, young people would be able to determine, jointly with the researcher, how outputs from the research were to be used. This was deemed to be important by the young people since: "It's our voice, so we should have some say over how its used." (Aled, Young Person Research Participant). It was intended (explained in further detail below) that the young people would exercise a positive leadership role in the research.

This article details many of the decisions taken by the Steering Team during the research and the outcomes of these. Yet, their role was not intended to be confined merely to Phase 2. Rather, and as suggested in the approach adopted in Phase 1, this necessarily included what should happen post-project (see Charles, 2017). In order to address this reality, the Steering Team built into their workplan opportunities to discuss dissemination of their work and to identify opportunities for them to shape and inform post-project activities: this was something that they agreed to and valued. As will become evident throughout this article, young people did exercise a strong leadership role in the research, and influenced post-project outcomes, although some limitations were experienced.

### **Young people as leaders**

The Steering Team developed an incremental work plan consisting of three stages:

- Stage 1 – reviewing the findings from the previous research on young peoples’ engagement in decision making and deciding on the key messages to take forward for dissemination
- Stage 2 – devising a methodology, emphasising their ability to communicate clearly and effectively with other children and adults working in a variety of positions of authority, for disseminating the key messages
- Stage 3 – implementing a dissemination strategy

The Steering Team met at least once a month in School, over a period of twelve months and with energy and optimism the Team deliberated how Phase 1 would be disseminated:

“It’s no good having a book full of things that no-one reads... You’ve got to get out there and talk to people. We’re really good at that, and, let’s be honest, you’re lucky, you’ve got us... Working together, we can talk to lots of people, adults too, and who knows, they [the adults] might even listen for once. That would be good wouldn’t it?”

(Jake, Member of the Steering Team, Phase 2)

Furthermore, in contrast to the findings of other researchers (Skelton 2008 for example) the young people had a clear view about their role which was active and not passive:

“You’ve said that it is really important for us all to work together. We agree. But, you’ve got to realise that means we all get a say – even you – and if we don’t agree, we’ve got to discuss it... Now we’re in, you can’t just go off and do what you want.”

(Josh, Member of the Steering Team, Phase 2)

Certainly the young people affirmed on a regular basis *their* leadership of Phase 2, *with* but not *for* adults and thus they were not dominated as can be the case (see London et al., 2003). For the young people, participation was not simply a mechanistic process or an add-on to their lives (see Landsdown, 2006). Interestingly they emphasised their ‘expertise’ and adopted a lateral application of Article 12, UNCRC (see also Gomez and Ryan, 2016, Clark and Statham, 2005). For example, James reflected on his desire to participate, explaining:

“Who knows young people like us better than us? You don’t, you are too old now, no offence. It was even in the [original] research that the adults don’t always get us. It’s weird because this might happen to us too, but for now, we’re the young ones and we know what to do.”

(James, Steering Team Member, Phase 2)

Exploring the key domains discerned in Phase 1 (family life, education, recreation time and community participation), a decision was taken by the Steering Team that dissemination of findings for all domains would be too complicated and they felt they could have a better impact on their peers and influence adults by focusing on a single theme:

“There’s some brilliant stuff here, but there’s too much to give to people... They just wouldn’t get it. Like, we can spend hours looking at what’s been said and talking it through in our group and with you. That’s fine, but let’s be frank shall we, that’s going to be hard to do with other people who don’t have this chance...”

(Aled, Steering Team Member, Phase 2)

A process of prioritisation was developed wherein, working in small groups and then engaging in debate at a team level, the young people discussed in-depth research findings and presented to each other what they considered to be the key messages from each domain. The process was, in their view valuable because:

“You can’t rush these things... It takes time to understand it.”

(Lucinda, Steering Team Member, Phase 2)

The Team decided to prioritise the theme of community participation for dissemination, because they believed that young people are important active citizens in their communities who can positively impact on the lives of others (resonating with the general standpoint of those who advocate the new sociology of childhood, notably those elements which relate to citizenship, see James and Prout, 2015, Larkins, 2014). Poignantly in this context, Anita said:

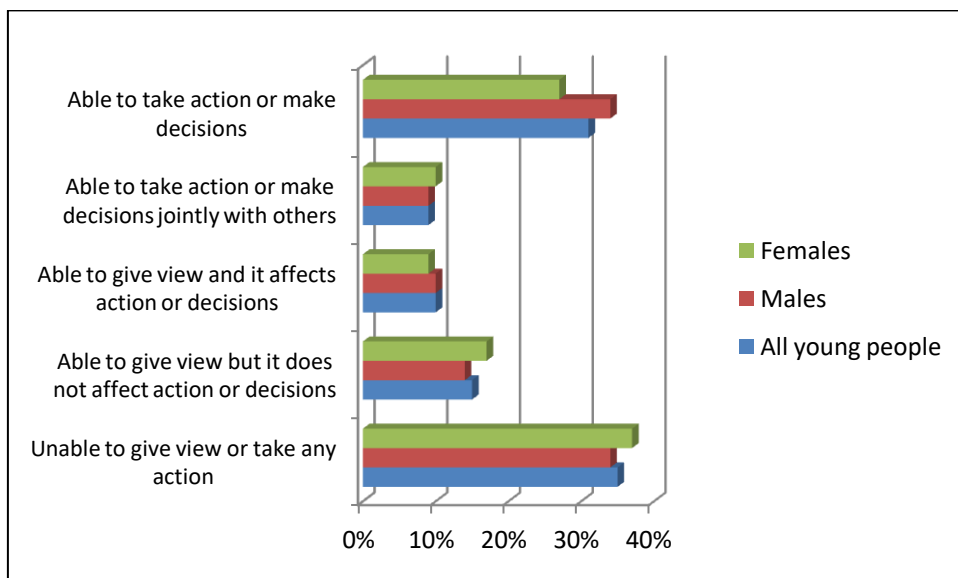
“... everyone cares about the community, and whether we like it or not, we’re all part of the community. So if you live in a village or in the

City Centre, there's a community around you... Like [name removed] said, he thinks his neighbourhood is really unsafe but no-one wants to know - so much for his participation."

(Anita, Steering Team Member, Phase 2)

Clearly the topic of community participation was important. When discussing findings relating to the question 'How much are you able to participate in making a decision about how the Police behave towards you?'(see Figure 1), the Steering Team raised their concerns about the numbers of young people who felt that they had no influence over police decision making as well as the fall in participation as young people grew older.

**Figure 1 – 'How much are you able to participate in making a decision about how the Police behave towards you?'**





It was suggested that Policing practices and the negative image ascribed to young people by the police could be responsible for this finding (as further evidenced in the literature more broadly, see McAra and McVie, 2005). The Steering Team were also able to examine qualitative research comments from the young people who took part in Phase 1. This they did rigorously. For example, Olivia's comments, offered during Phase 1, were of especial interest since they mirrored similar experiences by Steering Team members:

“There was a big fuss about children hanging around the local shop. The owner went, I think, a bit paranoid about us and he was shouting and screaming and everything. In the end, a meeting was called with the Police and some of us were invited to go... some old guy was in charge and he had his rant and the shop owner went on and even the Police had a bit of a dig at us. But then, the old man, he started saying that we shouldn't be able to speak because we were, 'just children'... That's adults making up the rules: they don't want to hear us even though we were really upset about the whole thing too... Since then, the Police sometimes come up to us on the street and tell us to move on, but where to do we go? There's nothing to do and no-one wants to listen”.

(Olivia, Research Participant, Phase 1)

Thus using both quantitative and qualitative findings, the Steering Team, in the context of this specific question, began to conclude that the findings revealed two somewhat hidden, but critical problems, namely that the Police were operating in

ways that favoured the credibility of adults' accounts of young people's behaviour and they were also, perhaps, unintentionally reinforcing negative stereotypes (see UK Parliament, 2014).

This type of exploratory discussion, led to the ranking and thematic re-arranging of findings which produced three sub-themes which formed the focus of dissemination activities:

- 'Safer neighbourhoods' – relating to the need for agencies to recognise young people's need to feel safe and the positive roles that they could play in promoting community safety (see Roberts et al., 2011)
- 'Out of school activities' – recognising the need for young people to have a range of high quality and appropriate facilities to engage with and to have space to meet with friends and socialise (see Welsh Assembly Government, 2007b)
- 'Healthy images of youth' – acknowledging not merely the importance of a positive public health agenda for young people, but the necessity of combating negative, often media generated, images of young people (see Demissie, 2011)

Articulating the view that the task at hand was not simply to translate messages from the research, the Team decided that more had to be done to involve young people as positive partners for change (see Jans, 2004). As Shami powerfully stated:

“It’s really important that we are part of this because it is about us, and about our futures. It gets you down sometimes that you try really hard, really hard, but the older people don’t want to know... What you’ve found changes things a little bit because it shows that we’re not all these bad kids who do nothing. No, we’re people who care about where we live. Do you think we want to live in a pit? No way, and we do stuff to help... So, you’ve got to have us involved too, and not just to sit there, smile and agree with you...”

(Shami, Steering Team Member, Phase 2)

Clearly, therefore, an ambition of the Steering Team was to use the original research as a transformative instrument to influence adults and affect changes in policy and practice, despite the fact that, in their view, adults (evidently frustratingly) did not always take them seriously:

“I think it’s great that we can reach out to people and they will listen. But at the same time, it gets me really angry that you’ve done this research and like hundreds of young people took part but the people who do things, like in County Hall, they should be banging the door down to see what you’ve found out... We’re the future and we are being run by people who live in the past. That’s got to change”

(Melanie, Steering Team Member, Phase 2)

It is worth emphasising at this point that Melanie’s perception, (often addressed within the literature, see for instance, Mumford and Sanders, 2015, Norman, 2009),

was clearly of importance to those who took part in Phase 1 and those who sat on the Steering Team. Indeed, participation *in* and *for* communities mattered greatly to the young people as illustrated by the Steering Team adopting, for Phase 2, the name, '*UR Community*', in the belief that that only by working together *with* adults would real change be created. As Neil had explained:

"*UR Community*... It's simple, but it tells you something really important. That is, we are all part of the same community, whether we're young or old. We can all say it is our community and that's what we want to get across... We're part of what makes things better, not part of what wrecks the community."

(Neil, Research Participant, Phase 2)

It was a move supported by the Steering Team:

"I mean yeh, change it to *UR Community*. Why? Because it is *UR Community*. We're not like some people who have just come in to visit and then we go somewhere else. It is our community too. So when we try to get other people our age involved, we want to make the message clear: you are a part of the community and the community belongs to you and the adults. It's 'UR's'."

(Geraint, Steering Team member, Phase 2)

Clearly, the young people, sought to manifest not merely a rhetoric of participation, but to demonstrate participation in their community: a community that they shared

with each other and adults (see Hart, 2013). This insistence on the pragmatic, applied and empirical reality of participation went way beyond pro-young people consultative approaches and was more literal, lived and clearly, fundamentally transformative to young people. As such, it embodied, in many ways, the frustration of young people as they sought to be heard and to realise those things which, theoretically, they are entitled to and should be able to access (see Matthews, 2007, National Assembly for Wales, 2000).

### **Finding ways to disseminate research findings**

Recognising the universal right that young people have to express a view and have it taken into account (see Article 12, UNCRC), and wishing to open up opportunities for the participation of others in their work, the Steering Team developed a dissemination and engagement plan (see O’Kane, 2000). This plan was divided into four stages and was intentionally incremental (with each stage building on the other)

Firstly, the Steering Team consulted young people in their own School (at form and year Council levels) to test the conclusions that they had reached. Drawing upon the considered views of their peers, which were elicited by Steering Team members and not the researcher (arguably important in mitigating adult-inspired ‘ventriloquism’ as alluded to by James, 2007), the consultation exercise underpinned a city-wide e-survey. The e-survey developed by the Steering Team was to young people across Swansea via the education moodle<sup>2</sup> system, to gain their views regarding the original research findings.

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘moodle’ was an on-line learning platform to which all secondary School pupils in the authority area had access.

Secondly, a city-wide youth conference was held to discuss findings, both at Phases 1 and 2. This conference was attended by young people from a number of secondary schools in Swansea and was a whole day event, hosted by the Steering Team at their school. To optimise impact, and make the point that adults needed to listen to and work in partnership with young people a number of key local adults (for example, the Divisional Commander of Police) were invited to participate.

Thirdly, following the youth conference, an information pack detailing findings from Phase 1 and multi-media created at Phase 2 (such as the animation detailed below) was made and sent to all secondary schools in Swansea so that a continuing process of young person-led dissemination could be enabled (see Watts et al., 2003). The information packs were sent to School Council's, with the aim of form and year representatives sharing findings with their peers and continuing young people's leadership of discussion around their participation in diverse localities (see Kirshner, 2015).

Finally, a multi-agency conference was held, at the request of the youth conference to bring adult decision makers and young people together. The multi-agency conference provided a dedicated space where the ways that young people interpreted research findings could be discussed and recommendations for future action be considered, in a partnership context, i.e. adults and young people working together (thereby ensuring the often missing step of the youth voice-change journey, see Mitra, 2006). Recommendations and concerns included the need for agencies to be accountable to young people, change the ways that they listened to them and to

find methods of constructively supporting young people in their roles as important community members: something that those who promote youth voice deem to be absolutely essential (see Weiss, 2016, Ginwright and James, 2002).

The four stage process which was designed by the Steering Team resulted in 599 young people aged between 11-16 years directly participating in *UR Community* (this was the 14 young people who comprised the Steering Team, 485 that responded to the e-survey and 100 attendees attending the youth conference). Also, 62 adults (the researcher, a youth support worker, 20 adults who attended the youth conference and 40 agency officers, including elected Members, that attended the multi-agency conference) participated.

The process led by the Steering Team was vibrant and created a number of outcomes. These outcomes were two-fold in nature. Firstly, outcomes were created as a result of the young people's participation in *UR Community*: these primarily being an increase, arguably relevatory, in understandings of participative rights (as well as their pragmatic limits) and of the power of young people to inspire and express views regarding these. Secondly, the young person-led *UR Community* project created outcomes at policy and practice levels. Each of these types of outcomes are important (especially those relating to young people's knowledge and views, which are sometimes overlooked, see Evans, 2007). Respecting each, consideration of each is offered below.

**Young people's participation in *UR Community*: expressing views and increasing understanding**

*UR Community* was not meant to simply be an information sharing exercise, and certainly not an opportunity for tokensism (see Hart, 2008). Rather, it was intended to be a young person-led process which, at their direction, and conforming to the participation rights set out in the UNCRC, facilitated the exploration, dissemination and application of research findings. The Steering Team was dedicated, energetic and insightful and their levels of participation, endeavour and innovation were exemplary. However, what the participation of young people in *UR Community* demonstrated was that, even where evidence such as research exists (and reflects their views), frustration remains that young people's capacity to be heard, recognised and make a difference is still limited (see van Bijleveld, 2015, Tisdall, 2008, Cavet and Sloper, 2004).

The literature acknowledges that problems still exist concerning the rhetoric of participation, especially its concordance with young people's views and their perceptions of how they can make a difference (see, for example, Harris et al., 2010). Such was evident through out *UR Community*. In revelatory fashion, young people participants not only acknowledged but explained the potential for barriers to be erected by adults, inhibiting or preventing their participation. This extended to the effectiveness of existing 'participation' initiatives (which were largely processual) which were designed and offered to young people by adults::

"I've said it before and I'll say it again. We know that we can get involved in things. Everyone tells us that. Everyone says, 'Oh, you've got this right in the UNCRC'. We know that, but it is more difficult when you try to do it in real life... Like, with you, you've worked with



us and its worked great. But, sometimes, you wonder if the people who wrote the UNCRC thought about that. You know, how do children use things like the UNCRC and get past adults who don't want to know or help us?"

(Ollie, Research Participant, Phase 2)

Ollie's view is particularly useful in this context since he highlights the paradox that adult-created participation processes, whilst 'creating' opportunities for young people's views to be heard, actually create participative frustration. Repeatedly, young people asserted that they had the right to participate in decision making: they knew this, yet for them, what was missing was the power of that participation to make a difference.

The challenge of participative frustration was especially noteworthy given that *UR Community* was based in Swansea, which has a pro-participative rights policy context (see City and County of Swansea, 2004). Despite this, those involved in *UR Community* felt that not enough had been done to listen to them nor to recognise what they did in their local communities (see Wyness, 2009, Lundy, 2007). Such a finding, young people posited, was exemplified in Phase 1 findings and was something that they commonly encountered (see Sloam, 2014, Polvere, 2014). An interesting qualification to this assertion arose when, whilst discussing the apparent blockage between having a voice, but this not having impact, Steering Team members felt that, on reflection, they did participate and make decisions that affected their community, but, and this was critical, these were invisible to, and largely unrecognised by adults:

“One thing that seeing what others of us have said has done, is make the point that we care, we do things, and that we have to carry on doing this, even if the adults don’t care... They [adults] can’t just make us do things because they feel good about them... This topic [the community] is one of those things that adults say loads that we don’t do enough about. But it turns out that we are getting involved... We are invisible to the adults, they just can’t see or understand our lives, even when you’ve got things like statistics and things showing them what’s really going on.”

(Jimmy, Research Participant, Phase 2)

The juxtaposition between young people participating and adults saying that they wished to enable participation (but then not recognising it), worried research participants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, particular criticism was targeted by the young people towards public bodies such as the local authority for not making meaningful efforts to discern and recognise the contribution of young people to their communities. In Swansea specifically, it might have been expected, given the policy context (see City and County of Swansea, 1998, 2004), that young people would have felt that their participation in decision making mattered and made a difference. Not so though: instead, the authority’s relative failure, in young people’s views, to translate more tokenistic consultation activity into real change, was mentioned frequently. Young people’s concerns regarding public institution’s lack of listening (see Percy-Smith, 2015, Tisdall and Punch, 2012), permeated even discussions about using research to inform adult’s thinking. Research participants feared that

evidence gathered, interpreted and presented by them might be treated lightly, and that any recommendations or conclusions, relegated to being mere policy commitments would be forgotten, rather than reflecting the reality that they flow from a living, organic and impact-generating right (see Tisdall and Bell, 2006). Such realisation inspired the young people and they passionately expressed their desire to work with adults to help them understand just how important the outputs of their participative activities were (see Houghton, 2015). In fact, using research evidence was seen as a way of insulating young people from what they considered to be a systematic type of adult dismissal. The young people knew how powerful research could be and comprehended that adults too perceived it in a similar manner:

“When we were having the conference, it was almost like some of the adults knew that they had been caught out. There they are, saying that they support us, and blah blah blah Then, John [one of the Steering Team members] said what the research said and how it mattered to us. We [young people] were all like grinning, but did you see the face on some of the adults there? They knew then that we had worked it out that what they were saying wasn't true... We caught them out...”

(Sally, Research Participant, Phase 2)

Thus, a key message to emerge from reflections on young people's experiences during *UR Community* was that power differentials (which can negatively impact on the right to participate) between adults and young people remain, despite bold statements made at the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) and promises

offered by the Welsh Government and others (see, Welsh Government, 2013b, Middleton, 2006). Especially during the youth conference, young people stated that because they were an essentially disempowered group (at least, seen that way by adults due to their powerlessness in financial and political terms), adults might continue to hold that their views simply did not count:

“The Council, the big companies and things, they don’t care. Why should they? I heard someone say before, ‘They don’t pay taxes so why should we listen?’... But, the things that happen where we live, they’re better because people listen and take the time... Smaller is better because people care...”

(Ieuan, Research Participant, Phase 2)

The ‘smaller’ agenda alluded to by Ieuan was important to young people and was illustrated as one way of exemplifying differences in understanding participation - and the importance of the difference this made in evaluating the contribution of young people to their community (see James, 2013). Here, reference to the dimensions of participation described in the literature (see Checkoway, 2012, Bonhert et al., 2010, Jennings, et al., 2006) are pertinent. Drawing upon their lived experiences, many young people perceived the adult realm of policy decisions to be remote and inaccessible. Ironically, this, young people suggested was the focus of adult-led participation agendas and activities. Whereas, for young people most participation in decision making, particularly that which they thought was most important, took place in their everyday lives (see Charles, 2017). Such a finding

resonates through youth-related research and signifies a considerable challenge, both for young people and adults (see Wall, 2012, Larkins, 2014).

The disjuncture between adults' and young peoples' understandings of participation emerged as a critical target for future participatory endeavours – and this has critical implications for discussions concerning Article 12 at local, national and international levels (see James and Prout, 2015). The disjunction further poses challenges for understandings of participation rights as articulated in the UNCRC, not least because, as the provisions of Article 12 imply, impact, i.e. the translation of young people's views into action, is required (see Hinton, 2008). In this context, the 'tokenism' described by Hart (2008) concerning superficial consultation or opinion gathering processes, and the potential mitigation offered by some adults that participation cannot be crystallised into an easily translated formula and thus can be diluted in some way (see Wyness, 2018) arguably do not satisfy what the UNCRC was designed to achieve.. However, at a local level, this disjuncture did not, in the view of young people, detract from the importance of everyday decisions: in fact, the reverse was true (see Horgan et al., 2017, Charles, 2011). Rejecting what they saw as an adult-inspired rhetoric of participation, young people's views actually hardened against formal types of decision making. Instead, they strongly asserted that everyday, localised, accessible and meaningful decision making was more important than discussions in committees, councils, or assemblies (something which was evident in Phase 1, see Charles, 2011).

The fundamental importance of the 'everyday' influenced the methodological process of *UR Community* and it is useful to offer an example of how it influenced the

Steering Team's work to emphasise mundane, rather than formal participation (see Akerstrom et al, 2015, Wood, 2012). During *UR Community*, the Steering Team discerned the need for the development of a method through which simple, but powerful messages could be conveyed, both to adults and young people (see Cox and Robinson-Pant, 2006). Reflecting the general view of young people concerning formal participative processes, the Steering Team eschewed such methods through which interaction and communication could occur such as committee meetings. Rather, and focusing primarily on an authentic hearing of young people's voice, a more creative approach was adopted. Whilst the Steering Team had used e-survey's and a conference to disseminate findings, the Team wanted to share findings via something that was personal, experiential and heart-felt. The tool which the young people choose to achieve this was poetry. When asked why poetry could be a useful method, Vince replied that it was person-centred and, importantly, not formal:

“Sitting down with people in a room with lots of paper? That's a really old fashioned way of doing things. We don't do that and why should we? That's yesterday's news.”

(Vince, Research Participant, Phase 2)

Accordingly, the Steering Team incorporated a poetry competition within the youth conference. Whilst this could arguably sound somewhat elitist, it was notable that those who participated were not 'academic achievers', but individuals who felt passionately about their own inability to make a difference to community safety. This method actually created significant interest and led to the involvement of individuals

who might not have participated in formal discussions (see Conrad, 2017, Gregory, 2015).

Contributions made by young people to the poetry competition were emotional, articulate and transformed debate at the youth conference. The sheer empowerment and transformation effected by the poetry was evident in Jack's work. Reflecting upon his poor experience of community safety, through poetry, Jack explained that, rather than being despondent, he was enthused about being able, in a way that was meaningful to him, to explain why being safe mattered to him:

“When I leave my house, any day, any time

I don't want to be a victim, of violent crime.

Something must be done,

It can't go on this way.

Children are too scared,

To even go out and play.

I just want to feel safe,

Is that too much to ask?

I shouldn't be afraid,

I shouldn't have to wear a mask.

Something has to change,

Not later, not tomorrow, today.

And if I have to do it myself,

It's a price that I'm willing to pay.”

(Jack, Research Participant, Phase 2)

Jack's poetry led to both adults and young people becoming emotional and reflective. Through his words and intense imagery, he created a need for people to discuss what he said: Jack's participation was truly powerful and mattered. Certainly, at an event focused upon young people's participation, Jack's poem created far greater impact than any local policy document. His poem was imbued with his response to real life experiences, his passion, fears and frustration. At the suggestion of the Steering Team, Jack's poem was awarded a prize (judged by the young people who attended the conference). Yet, since Jack's poetry was so impactful, and in order to highlight and find solutions for the concerns that he rose, the Steering Team decided to develop it into an animation.

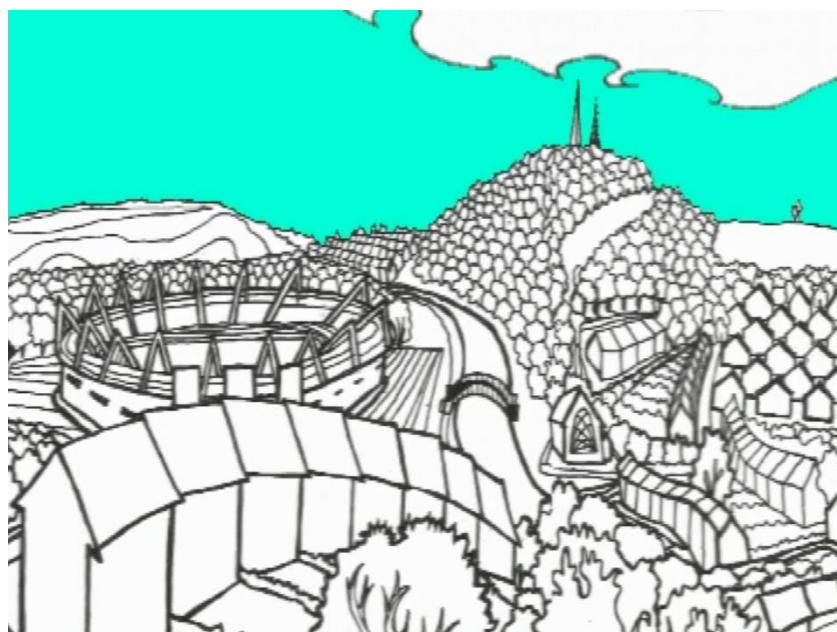
The decision to make Jack's poem an animation was underpinned by a profound intention to share with others the power of the 'everyday' (see Vromen and Collin, 2010) and to demonstrate the diffuse nature reality of participation within the lived experience of young people's lives (see Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006). Such intention accorded with Jack's own views. He said, after reading his poem at the youth conference, that it was related intimately to his own life and personal experiences. But, more than this, Jack saw his words as being locational (associated with and linked to local places and spaces (see Furlong and Cartmel, 2006) and relational (relating to local people that he knew) (see Morrow, 1999). These were realities that the Steering Team believed were critical. Thus, the animation, as a communication tool, was harnessed as a way of completing the translation of the Stage 1 finding concerning community safety, but, place to this in the context and power of young people's lives. As the Steering Team explained, by doing this, the finding would become 'alive' since young people locally would recognise places



depicted, have seen these (and known the environment) and understand the issues to which Jack referred. Poignantly, through words, pictures and emotion, the research would become more real.

These local level and 'mundane' emphases, so favoured by the young people infused the animation development process. Accordingly, Jack, together with other young people created storyboards, travelling through their locality, taking pictures of those places that Jack was worried about and compiled these with appropriate music and voice recordings into an animation. This process, according with *UR Community's* ethos, was led and directed by young people (see Mason and Danby, 2011). A screenshot of part of the animation, which depicts part of Swansea City is at Figure 2.

**Figure 2 – A screenshot from the *UR Community* safety animation showing local well known landmarks**



The resulting animation, which contained the main poems from the poetry competition was, at the request of the Steering Team, distributed to every secondary School Council in the city, together with a summary of findings (re-worded and explained by the Steering Team) from Phase 1. This was something that was felt to be critical:

“There’s quite a few of us here today, but there’s loads of young people in Swansea. I’ve really enjoyed today because we’ve been able to share things... we all seem to think the same, even though we come from different areas. Weird isn’t it? It’s not weird though that the adults were a bit surprised at what was said... Sometimes, I think that they’re too busy and wrapped up in their own lives to care what we think... Children should be seen and not heard? Sometimes they don’t want to see us either.”

(Sammy, Research Participant, Phase 2)

The participation of young people in the *UR Community* project, during all of its stages brought to life the findings contained within Phase 1. Whilst the Phase 1 findings themselves flowed directly from the voices and experiences of young people, *UR Community* facilitated further contextualisation and, led by young people through a participative process, enabled their sharing with an audience which might not otherwise have heard them.

## **Outcomes and reflections from the *UR Community* project**

*UR Community* was a partnership between a researcher and young people, who played a pivotal role in disseminating research findings: something that they did with relish, enthusiasm and a sophisticated understanding of the tensions that related to their participation (see Kellett, 2011). Over a one year period, *UR Community* created a number of critical outcomes by facilitating discussion and the contextualisation of research findings and bringing together a range of individuals (including adult decision makers) from across Swansea to discuss these. *UR Community* further enabled the development of materials that tell others (adults and young people) about the Phase 1 research and explained its potential impact on the lives of individuals, policy and practice (see Kahne et al., 2015). Furthermore, *UR Community* demonstrated how young people, as leaders and determiners of decisions could raise awareness of their right to participate in decision making, and to have their views heard and acted upon.

The energy associated with *UR Community* ensured that it was not simply a time limited endeavour. Thus, work continued on the project after funding from the ESRC ceased and four main impacts were created during the lifetime of *UR Community*.

Firstly, the project facilitated greater partnership working. Such was evidenced through the work of the Steering Team and also in partnership activities such as co-ordinated responses (from adults to young people) to recommendations made at the

Youth Conference and the establishment of a Multi-Agency Participation Standing Conference<sup>3</sup>.

Secondly, the articulation of the need for a new emphasis to be placed on embedding young people's participation rights was heard by partner agencies. Subsequent to *UR Community*, a number of agencies began, after listening to young people's recommendations, to revisit their policy and practice. For example, the Swansea Youth Offending Service created a Participation Think Tank to develop participation policy and to oversee the implementation of pro-participative operational plans which were designed in partnership with young people (Swansea YOT, 2013).

Thirdly, agencies, following *UR Community*, requested access to the Phase 1 research to explore what these mean and how they might impact upon service planning and delivery. The clear messages offered by the young people, especially regarding what their participation rights in everyday life can mean resonated with many officials and there has been an appetite to use the findings to generate greater understandings of young people's views and how these can meaningfully be used to influence the shape and nature of local services.

Finally, the Steering Team itself did not cease to meet. Rather, the Team and the researcher continued to work together and, in addition to using the Phase 1 findings concerning community engagement, work was then begun on using other findings, for example, those relating to education: these are still having an impact currently

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<sup>3</sup> To optimise the impact of the Standing Conference, it was subsequently merged with the local Participation Network which was led by the local authority in Swansea.

(see Understanding Participation Initiative, 2018). The Steering Team also involved itself in the work of local youth groups and engaged them in discussions locally concerning how they might communicate to adults those things which mattered to them and seek to influence change.

Beyond the immediate impacts of the project, others have followed. Two deserve particular mention:

The first impact relates to the communication of their right to participate in decision making. Throughout *UR Community*, young people felt very strongly that methods should be developed that could engage them and their peers in discussion regarding their participation rights (see Sanders and Munford, 2017, Groundwater et al., 2014). Following the sharing of youth conference and *UR Community* project activities with the Welsh Government, members of the Steering Team were invited to assist the Government as it developed the first Welsh child-rights app. Sitting at the heart of this national initiative, members of the Steering Team designed, piloted and agreed with civil servants the format and functionality of the app. The corresponding app was multi-purpose and provided information on young people's rights not only for young people themselves, but also adults (including information about specific UNCRC rights and where advice and practical support can be found if rights are denied or misunderstood). Participation in this initiative was deemed to be highly important to the Steering Team: not least because they wanted to educate adults as much as their peers (c.f. Article 42, UNCRC). Interestingly, the app carries through the 'UR' concept identified by the young people and translated it into 'Our' rights across Wales. Considering the development of the '*UR Community*' term, this really

is a potent reminder of the universal nature of young people's rights. A screenshot of the app is provided at Figure 3:

**Figure 3 – Screenshot of the 'Our Rights – Wales' app**



Through their participation in the development of the app, what young people in Swansea felt to be important has been engaged with across the world. The app has certainly attracted interest, particularly in developing countries.

The second impact of *UR Community* was to inform significant local change. Political endorsement of what was said during *UR Community* led to an engagement of the researcher (maintaining partnership working with the Steering Team) with local authority Cabinet Members. In 2012, following the local government elections, the newly appointed Cabinet Members for Children and Young People and Education and Skills became interested in the Phase 1 research and what had been found via

*UR Community*. The research was very timely in the local context of Swansea and struck a specific 'chord' with the Labour Administration which had been elected to run the Council with a promise that:

“... young people should be celebrated and not demonised. [Swansea's Labour Party] is committed to making the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child a reality for all children and young people in Swansea.”

(Swansea Labour Party, 2012: 11)

Both Phase 1 and *UR Community* were drawn upon and influenced the development of a motion to Cabinet and Council which incorporated the UNCRC into the authority's policy framework (City and County of Swansea, 2013, Charles, 2013). The Steering Team formed part of the consultation for the motion development process and the researcher was the co-author of the report which was unanimously supported by politicians in the Local Authority. Key issues that young people expressed during *UR Community*: the inappropriateness of adult-focused participation processes; the disparity between rhetoric and reality; and the need to recognise the everyday nature of decision making, all feature in the unique child-rights settlement that now exists in Swansea, which includes a binding 'due regard' duty on the Council's executive, a requirement for the publication of a comprehensive children and young people's rights scheme, and the appointment of Swansea University as the Council's independent child rights monitoring body (c.f. National Assembly for Wales, 2011). Further, and notably, addressing young people's concerns regarding their ability to exercise their right to express a view and

have it taken into account, the Council developed new and innovative consultation and participation mechanisms to promote the hearing of young people's voices, via a process called 'the Big Conversation'. Due to its prominence in the local political landscape, the approach taken by the authority means that the types of things said by those who participated in *UR Community* remain current and will continue to be addressed over time.

Ironically, the only limitation to the work of *UR Community* has been the development of this article. Both at the youth conference and in later meetings with the Steering Team, young people made it clear that they wanted what they had done to be written up and to be shared with academics. Yet, it was in the development of the article that limits to young people's participation became visible. Whilst this article is unashamed in its intention to share the positive experience of young people when exercising their right to participate, young people themselves could not fully engage with this academic publication (see Wridt, 2018, Paylor et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the Steering Team insisted that certain issues, such as the poetry competition and description of key deliberations should be included in this article. The reasons for their insistence were twofold. In the first place, the Team were proud that they had achieved so much. This, and notably the method used to enable them to participate were things that they felt strongly should be shared. Secondly, the young people, continuing an earlier theme regarding their participation, wanted their voice to be heard, and, even in the case of a publication which was aimed at academics, was something that they wished to influence. Young people were shown academic articles prior to the writing of this article and the Steering Team, reflecting on what was required (and the types of media that they themselves had created) considered



their capacity to participate in its development to be restrained (c.f. Flanagan et al., 2014, Krauss, 2014). The Steering Team were disappointed about this and queried whether changes could be made to the way that academics share research findings? Possibly, as Megan mooted:

“As well as us working together, we’ve got to think about how we can work with others like you... It doesn’t make sense. The things we’ve done, they’re about us, but we can’t write about us coz it’s got to be done a certain way... How does that make us want to get involved? It made me worry a bit because I can’t write like you.”

(Megan, Research Participant, Phase 2)

This is a fascinating finding: one of the key instruments used to share the findings generated in *UR Community* is something that the young people who led the research felt limits their ability to participate. Touchingly, the young people felt, in this predicament, sympathy for the researcher (who had discussed with them how possibly this limitation could be overcome). For instance, James said:

“We get to feel a bit sorry for you now... All through the research, you said that we could do what we thought would be good to share things. So, we did the conference and the materials for the schools. We got to choose how they looked, what sort of writing and how things came across. You don’t get that... Bit weird really isn’t it? When you came here we all got excited because we got to make decisions and change things but you can’t do that... We were talking

and we think that you having to write like this, well, its probably okay for other people at Universities to read, but it stops us getting too involved really and, let's be honest, we wouldn't read it anyway! Someone needs to have a think about this. It's not what we would do.”

(James, Research Participant, Phase 2)

Respecting the Steering Team's wishes, what they asked be included in this article was, yet disappointment remained that, for academics (and an academic audience), the instrument of an article remained one of the key waya in which what they had done via *UR Community* would be reported. This remains an as yet, unresolved quandary. In light of the strength of feeling communicated by young people, this issue must feature within this article. As well as amending approaches to methodology, reflecting what young people have said, researchers surely must now consider how one of the fundamental academic instruments which advance research should be made more accessible. It should be pointed out that the quality of the work produced by the Steering Team was very high and demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of critical concepts and their practical application. Felicity, a member of the Steering Team, when speaking at the youth conference evidenced this. Her speech included the following:

“When we say that our participation is important, it is. Why? Well, we know that it is all around us, part of what we do everyday. We know too that it is in committees, groups and even our families... Is this weird or special? No. It's just part of who we are and what we do.

When you get down to it though, we know that adults want an easy way out of this. They want to be able to say that they are doing what is good for us. But they aren't. I think they think they are trying to help us, but what they are really doing is stopping us from being heard and worse than that, keeping all the good things we do quiet... we are putting together ideas to make things change and make things better, for us and the adults.”

(Felicity, Research Participant, Phase 2)

Whilst Felicity may not have used academic language, her understanding, knowledge and comprehension of the challenges facing young people are clear.

Considering the points and Felicity's comments above there is a danger that research, although positive and well-intentioned could itself become a tool for participative frustration, if not the alienation of young people. This must be something that should be addressed within the academy.

To conclude, *UR Community* was a project that facilitated a partnership, research findings dissemination process, one characterised by an on-going contextualisation of the young people's right to express a view and to have that view taken into account. Through *UR Community*, young people advocated a move away from traditional, largely policy focused approaches to using research and rather, expressed the view (see Charles, 2011) that their participation rights were located in the everyday: and that they made a real difference within that space and location. For many adults, *UR Community* was challenging. Arguably, the participation

processes actualised in *UR Community* offer an example of a model which can be developed to enable young people, adults and agencies to work together to realise, as touched upon above, the importance of spaces, voices, listening and acting (see Lundy, 2007) in the context of participation, and not simply in terms of a formal, policy-aligned discourse. Certainly, what happened in *UR Community* was that young people shared often powerful messages that highlighted challenges for the future (certainly in terms of understandings concerning their participation rights and how they could meaningfully participate in research and influence others). *UR Community* also revealed the critical, but sometimes unseen role that young people play in their community. Methodologically, *UR Community* was young person-led and acknowledged participants as important community members and partners for change. This method unleashed energy and created multiple, positive outcomes. Such also offers a potential model for future research. Eventually, *UR Community* achieved much more than was originally anticipated and generated impacts which were beyond its anticipated scope. What the project ultimately found was that, to young people, local communities matter and, as Phase 1 findings demonstrate, young people are active community members who want to make a difference and simply want adults to listen to their voices. *UR Community* offered one way of achieving these powerful, yet, in the view of young people, not often attained aspirations :

“That’s just it. No-one owns the community. We’ve all got to share what’s there. Part of sharing is about knowing that sometimes, you don’t know it all. See what I mean? That’s the beauty of it. If you don’t know, someone else will. But, we’ve got to work together... Like

today, people sometimes have to see that they haven't got it right,  
but there is always time to change..."

(Ian, Research Participant, Phase 2)

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