

# Action research with young people: possibilities and 'messy realities'

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## **Abstract**

This paper reflects on our experiences of using participatory action research (PAR) with young people as part of an EU H2020 project<sup>1</sup> exploring the spaces and styles of youth participation in formal, non-formal and informal settings. The paper outlines key tenets of action research and provides a brief review of the literature concerning the use of PAR in youth research. Drawing on three case studies, we provide an honest account of some of the messy realities involved in realising the promise of participatory action research in practice. The central focus is on how the action research played out in practice, the challenges of undertaking PAR within the context of a funded project with predefined deliverables, the power relationships between researchers and young people and how agendas are negotiated in action research. We conclude with some critical reflections on lessons learnt, highlighting the importance of acknowledging the exploratory nature of PAR and the critical role of the researcher as facilitator.

*Key words:* action research, PAR, young people, participation, reflection, knowledge

*Aktionsforschung mit jungen Menschen: Möglichkeiten und "chaotische" Realitäten*

## **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Artikel reflektiert unsere Erfahrungen mit der partizipativen Aktionsforschung (PAR) mit jungen Menschen im Rahmen des EU-H2020-Projekts „Partispace“, in welchem Räume und Stile der Beteiligung junger Menschen in formellen, nicht formellen und informellen Settings untersucht wurden. Der Aufsatz umreißt die wichtigsten Grundsätze der Aktionsforschung und gibt einen kurzen Überblick über die Literatur zur Verwendung von PAR in der Jugendforschung. Anhand von drei Fallstudien aus dem Projekt „Partispace“ geben wir einen Überblick über einige der nicht vorhersehbaren, mitunter auch chaotisch anmutenden Realitäten, die bei der Umsetzung partizipativer Aktionsforschung in der Praxis entstehen. Wir zeigen auf, wie sich die Aktionsforschung in der Praxis abgespielt hat, welche Herausforderungen es mit sich bringt, PAR im Rahmen eines geförderten Projekts mit vordefinierten Ergebnissen durchzuführen. Des Weiteren diskutieren wir, welche Machtverhältnisse zwischen Forschenden und Jugendlichen bestehen und wie die konkrete Umsetzung in der Aktionsforschung ausgehandelt wird. Wir schließen unsere Ausführungen mit einigen kritischen Überlegungen zu den gewonnenen Erkenntnissen und heben hervor, wie wichtig es ist, den explorativen Charakter von PAR und die kritische Rolle der Forschenden als Vermittler\*innen anzuerkennen.

*Schlagwörter:* Aktionsforschung, PAR, junge Menschen, Partizipation, Reflexion, Wissen

## 1 Introduction

During recent decades, a rich seam of qualitative and ethnographic research has supported a conception of young people as social actors, recognising their values and experiences in their own right, alongside policies that promote young people's rights and encourage their participation in decision-making (Loncle et al. 2012; Percy-Smith/Thomas 2010). Young people are increasingly seen as citizens able to engage as partners in making sense of and taking action in their own lives (Kirby et al. 2003). Across Europe and elsewhere, attention has focused on developing structures and processes to support young people to 'have a say', and also to take more active roles in research (Clark et al. 2001). At the same time, the limitations of these structures and processes have prompted a move to 'new democratic arenas' (Cornwall/Coelho 2007) where young people evolve their own styles and spaces of participation.

The terms 'citizen engagement', 'youth participation' and 'co-production' reflect a growing interest in participatory approaches that seek to democratise the research process by sharing power with participants. However, there is an innate contradiction in pursuing participatory objectives within contexts of 'scientific' research where methods and outcomes are predefined, often leaving space only for token participation. Action research is one form of participatory research that enables participants to engage in all stages of the research process, that questions and challenges power and established wisdoms and instead values different kinds of knowing. It is a learning-based approach involving collaborative inquiry (rather than just data collection) that aims to challenge assumptions and develop alternative understandings and practices through cycles of learning, action and reflection (Weil 1998). 'Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve [...] their own practices, their understanding of these practices and the situations in which the practices are carried out' (Carr/Kemmis 1986, p. 162). However, this can be difficult to achieve where research is driven by externally defined objectives approved by funders.

The Horizon 2020 project 'Spaces and Styles of Participation: Formal, non-formal and informal possibilities of young people's participation in European cities' (PARTISPACE)<sup>2</sup> was concerned with exploring styles and spaces of youth participation, in response to concerns that young people are 'not participating'. Our starting point was that young people are participating, but not always in ways that are recognised as such. The project included a (participatory) action research phase, providing a space for young people to reflect critically on their own participation by developing their own projects and learning from that experience, so that we as researchers can in turn learn with and from young people. Within the constraints of a set timescale and multiple 'deliverables', we thus aimed to engage young people in exploring and articulating meanings of participation from their perspectives.

This paper reflects on our experiences of using action research with young people, drawing selectively on case study projects from across the PARTISPACE project. We aim to give an honest account of some of the challenges in realising the promises of (participatory) action research in practice. A central focus is on the way in which the action research played out in practice, on the power relationships between researchers and young people and how agendas are negotiated.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we discuss some key tenets of action research and what has been learned of the challenges and realities from other youth research