

Factors that influence student co-researchers to remain on a project team:
The student co-researchers' perspective

by

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Using a qualitative case study approach, a study looking at what student co-researchers value while they are part of a research team was conducted. The three questions guiding this study included: What personal changes did student co-researchers experience? How does a Co-operative Inquiry approach contribute to youth engagement and positive youth development? And, What adult skills are evident in building a strong youth led research project?

Data was collected from a Co-operative Inquiry research project entitled *62 Ways to Change the World*. The multiple sources of data included: key informative interviews and a focus group with student co-researchers from *62 Ways to Change the World* and all documents pertaining to the research project.

By understanding what young people value while they are on a project team strategies that contribute to sustainable student-led research can be developed and shared with organizations, educational institutions and governments that are currently or are interested in conducting research with young students.

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I would first like to acknowledge the student co-researchers that dedicated their time, energy and commitment to the project – *62 Ways to Change the World* and additionally those student co-researchers that participated in further inquiry. Our work together was challenging yet we managed to have fun throughout the process. The time we spent together has significantly influenced the way I will continue to engage with students.

Dr. Miller has significantly influenced the way I think about and approach the research process. He has been an inspiration and has confirmed that researchers are human beings. His commitment to action research and youth engagement is unquestionable and a reminder that passion in your work will result in action.

Dr. McGregor and Dr. Clover thank you for taking the time to review my drafts, challenge my assumptions, and provide me with a road map that requires critical navigation rather than one that dictates directions.

My family I left behind in Toronto and my “new” west coast family has supported me throughout this journey and I am ever so grateful. My parents have always encouraged me to not only dream but to follow my dreams no matter what stands in the way. To some, my move across the country may have appeared to be unwise however, my stubbornness and persistence has led to a learning experience that has profoundly impacted me.

I would like to acknowledge Jakub Malec, my partner in life. His encouragement, his love, patience and continued support is much appreciated and cherished in my heart.

Although you were 4, 372 KM away you always took the time to listen to me and encouraged me when things seemed impossible.

Finally, thank you to the University of Victoria. My time in Victoria will never be forgotten. I feel honoured and privileged to have completed my post graduate work at this institution.

Dedication

If you hold a cat by the tail you learn things you cannot learn any other way. Mark Twain

This thesis is dedicated to all those who believe in the richness of learning.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Personal Interest

In the spring of 2009 I had the pleasure of working alongside Dr. Gord Miller and students from School District (SD) 62, Sooke, British Columbia. A research project conducted jointly by students from five different schools (Belmont, Pacific Secondary, Dunsmuir Middle School, Westshore and Spencer Middle School), SD 62 and the University of Victoria (UVic), *62 Ways to the Change the World* identified what motives and supports youth to stay in school. In an effort to support the project eighteen middle school and high school students attended nine training sessions. Topics that were reviewed included: research methodology (specifically action research), data collection and analysis, using technology equipment in research (video recorders, digital recorders and digital cameras), ethics and knowledge dissemination. All student co-researchers conducted interviews and facilitated focus groups. As a result over three hundred students were given an opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions surrounding issues that affect young people staying in school.

Although I have studied action research I have never experienced it firsthand. Not knowing what to expect I was awed by the extent the students bonded with not only one another but with the adult partners. Equally surprising was the student's eagerness to participate in the project. Dedicating their time after school, attending all training sessions and meeting their data collection goals I knew that my experience was unique and maybe even rare. To better understand what contributed to the success of the

research project I wanted to have a dialogue with the student co-researchers who participated in the research project about their personal experiences on the project.

Curiosity about the research process, my commitment to young people's voice and my desire to improve student-led research projects has led me to this project. By understanding, from the student co-researchers' perspective, what works to help young people participate in research projects, I hope to learn how project leaders can create an environment that is conducive to student co-researchers. The student co-researchers have uniquely contributed to the research project and I believe it is crucial to capture their experiences. The information gleaned from the student co-researchers can be disseminated at conferences and in workshops that are designed to address the needs of student-led research projects. Furthermore, this body of information may contribute to the development of a tool kit that can be used by both students and adults in future practice.

Before discussing the details of the research study a detailed overview of the research project – *62 Ways to Change the World* is provided below. Additionally my role as a member of the research team will be further discussed so that you have a better understanding of how I was involved in the research.

Project Overview

Victoria's Vital Signs (2007) report indicated that in 2004-2006, 30.5% of 18 year olds did not graduate from high school, compared to 23.2% in BC. Victoria Foundation identified a need to support staying in school initiatives and a grant was awarded to Dr. Miller. Due to the nature of the issue, transitioning youth were the target population for

the project. Transitioning youth are defined as students in grades between middle school and high school¹ and grade 12 to post secondary.

Working in collaboration with Sooke School District 62² eighteen diverse students, ages 13 to 19 and from five different schools, were recruited for student co-researcher positions. The eighteen student co-researchers were purposively selected through staff contacts and counselors at each of the five schools. In order to carry out valid and ethical research the student co-researchers underwent extensive training in research design, methodology, data collection and analyses and knowledge sharing strategies.

The methodology that was used for *62 Ways to Change the World* was a form of Action Research known as Co-operative Inquiry. The investigator, Dr. Miller, chose this methodology because of its participatory and experiential (learning through doing) nature. Since the project went directly to the source to seek solutions and further develop a framework for engaging youth to stay in school it was crucial to engage members of the particular school community in the research project. The philosophical approach of the research project can be better understood by Hills and Mullet's (2005) definition of Collaborative Action Research:

A collaborative, participatory, and action oriented research methodology that performs research with rather than on, to or about people. Those involved in the study are both co-researchers, who generate ideas about its focus, design and

¹ Generally grades between middle school and high school include grades 8 and 9.

² School District #62 (Sooke), serving approximately 8,200 students, is located on South Vancouver Island adjacent to British Columbia's Capital City of Victoria. Communities of the school district include Sooke, Port Renfrew, Metchosin, Langford, Colwood and the Highlands.

manage it, and draw conclusions from it; and also co-subjects, participating with awareness in the activity that is being researched. Collaborative Action Research engages people in a transformative process of change by cycling through multiple iterations of action and reflection. (p. 280)

Participation in the project required a high level of commitment. All eighteen student co-researchers attended nine training sessions and an additional twenty planning sessions were held over the course of the year (April 2009 to March 2010). Training sessions were facilitated by Dr. Miller and three adult co-researchers assisted with various tasks throughout the process. Planning sessions were not attended by all eighteen student co-researchers and generally were facilitated by the students. Two adult co-researchers attended the planning sessions. Given the nature of a Collaborative Action Research approach a follow-up reflection/action cycle was facilitated at every session (training and planning). This gave all participants an opportunity to evaluate the session by reflecting on “what worked well – WWW” and “I wish – IW”. All participants were encouraged to reflect on group and individual practices in an effort to improve future practice and identify next steps.

Through key informant interviews and focus group sessions, in two middle school and three high schools, over 350 youth voices were captured. All data was gathered and analyzed and a PowerPoint presentation of the results was developed. Using the PowerPoint presentation and other creative presentation methods student co-researchers shared their findings at town hall meetings and conferences. Various media outlets (A-Channel, Goldstream Gazette, CFA, Sannich News and Time Colonist) captured the

stories, by interviewing some student co-researchers, and showcased the results on screen.

In recognition of the significant time required for participation in the study, student co-researchers were offered a stipend. This stipend reflected the principle investigator's commitment to youth engagement and reinforced how essential the young peoples voice was in this study. Due to limited funding, students participating in planning sessions (post June 2009) were not offered stipends. All student co-researchers were aware of the funding circumstances and a number of the students expressed a desire to further participate in the project despite the lack of financial compensation.

In terms of the project's current (March 2010) activities a group of student co-researchers and two adult co-researchers continue to meet on a weekly basis. The bulk of the sessions are spent planning awareness raising activities and preparing for a community action-planning meetings. A number of the student co-researchers have expressed a need to continue to work on the project so that concrete solutions can be identified and acted upon.

My Role as a Co-Researcher

To further understand my personal interest in the research study I will describe my role in the project – *62 Ways to Change the World*.

In most situations of my life I am actively looking for unique experiences where I will have an opportunity to contribute to a “greater” good. This desire is not a need of heroism but rather a desire to understand. Stake (1995) acknowledges that qualitative researchers have a desire to understand the complex interrelationships that exist among

all things. It is through this understanding that I, as a researcher, can contribute to the human experience.

After discussing the *62 Ways to Change the World* project proposal with Dr. Miller and having attended the first planning meeting in April 2009 with the school board and student representatives, I was immediately attracted to the project's vision. The opportunity to be a part of a dynamic experience and my interest in learning about and engaging in Action Research influenced my decision to partake in the research project.

My role in the project cannot be narrowly defined rather my responsibilities varied as the project evolved. Initially, Dr. Miller and I agreed that I would record the content of the training sessions. I listened with due diligence and often followed up with respondents to verify my notes. As a "human recorder" I often felt like an outsider who was looking in. This feeling was not a result of any particular incident but attributed to my nature – generally I am quiet and observant when I first join a new group.

This feeling of "outsider" quickly disappeared as I become an active member of the research team. I began to view my role not as an "outsider" recorder but as a co-researcher who was engaging in a new learning experience. The training sessions were filled with conversations as we (student co-researchers and adult co-researchers) grappled with questions that required varying perspectives. Since this was my first introduction to Co-operative Inquiry my role as a learner allowed me to connect with students in a way that eliminated the perception that I was an "expert" due to my age or position. I am not suggesting that my previous research experience did not influence my understanding of the technical aspects of the research process however, my lack of knowledge about the

research methodology did contribute to open dialogue where I was able to seek assistance from the students.

My role as a researcher was informed by a desire to engage appropriately with the research participants. I wanted to develop a trusting relationship with the student co-researchers, in which they felt comfortable sharing personal information and where they felt safe, empowered and listened to. This opportunity allowed me to reflect on the research process, engage in dialogue and learn from young people and adults alike. We questioned and challenged one another, we solved problems together and we built networks by sharing information that we collected.

Statement of Problem

The World Health Organization's Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986) emphasizes that people's participation in their own health decisions is essential for enhancing personal skills and strengthening community action. This charter is not only applicable to the adult population but also to young people, and this demands attention to the ways in which young people participate and engage. Youth and community development practitioners strive to empower community members of all ages and backgrounds to create a healthy, sustainable, and just society and environment (London, Zimmerman & Erbstein, 2003, p. 34). When isolated from community (and organizational) development youth development efforts are stunted in their ability to cultivate young people's individual growth, their membership in communities, and their ability to effect institutional and community change (London, Zimmerman & Erbstein, 2003, p. 34).

In the case of this study, student-led research and evaluation is explored as a direct means by which young people can have an impact in their community. Youth-led evaluation empowers young people by providing them with the tools to develop and validate knowledge and to direct the development of the programs and policies designed to serve their needs (London, Zimmerman & Erbsstein, 2003, p. 37).

Furthermore, engaging in community action projects can foster positive relationships with caring adults and allow marginalized youth who have few positive outlets to feel like they can make a positive difference (Flicker, Maley, Ridgley, Biscope, Lombardo & Skinner, 2008, p. 288). The value of student-driven research and evaluation is unquestionable, however little is known about what young people consider “effective partnerships”. “The literature is peppered with calls for more youth-driven participatory evaluations of PAR projects, but relatively little guidance is available” (Chen, Poland & Skinner, 2007, p. 127).

Research Questions

In an effort to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that student co-researchers identify as having an impact on their decision to participate in or remain active participants within a project research team I would like to answer the following questions:

- 1. What personal changes did student co-researchers experience?** Determine the extent of the co-researchers experience in terms of major learning; change in skills, attributes, beliefs and attitudes; and perceived role in the school and community.

2. **How does a Co-operative Inquiry approach contribute to youth engagement and positive youth development?** Determine what elements/factors, throughout the research process, were integral to the students' sustained participation.
3. **What adult skills are evident in building a strong youth led research project?** Determine whether partnering efforts have an impact on the perceptions of student co-researchers toward adult partners, research and their community.

Moreover, the process of conducting research with student co-researchers fascinates me and it is important for me to understand, from the students' perspective, their individual experiences.

Operational Definitions

For the purpose of this thesis three terms that will be used throughout the paper are defined.

Youth Engagement

The meaningful participation and sustainable involvement of young people in shared decisions in matters, which affect their lives and those of their community, including planning, decision making and program delivery (Smith, Peled, Hoogeveen, & Cotman, 2009, p. 8).

Student Co-Researcher

All those involved in the research endeavour are both co-researchers, whose thinking and decision-making contributes to generating ideas, designing and managing the project, and drawing conclusions from the experience; and also co-subjects, participating in the activity which is being researched. When referring to student co-researcher it will be assumed that the student is also a co-subject (Reason & Torber, 2001).

Co-operative Inquiry

As one articulation of Action Research, Co-operative Inquiry, as a method, is based on people examining their own experience and action carefully in collaboration with people who share similar concerns and interests. The inquiry is based on cycles of action and reflection that engages four dimensions of a science of persons: treating persons as persons, a participative world-view, an extended epistemology and a liberationist spirit (Reason, 2003).

Dilemmas in Methods and Interpretation

Data will reflect experiences, ideas and opinions of student co-researchers involved in the project, *62 Ways to Change the World*, thus caution should be advised in interpreting the results of the study because they may not be transferable beyond the scope of this project. It is also important to highlight my presence as a researcher may have influenced the participants' perspectives. The assumptions that underpinned this research study are discussed in Chapter 3 (page. 37) and further study limitations are addresses in Chapter 5.

In summary, this thesis is organized in the following fashion: Chapter two will provide an overview of the literature about youth engagement, students as co-researchers, youth-adult partnerships, settings approach and Co-operative Inquiry. Next, in chapter three, I will report on methodology and methods used in the study. Chapter four will discuss the results in a narrative format. Finally, Chapter five will serve as a discussion about the results followed by the study's limitations and implications for practice. Chapter five will end with recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature and Concepts

To gain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence student co-researchers to remain on a project team the following concepts will be explored: youth engagement, students as co-researchers, youth-adult partnerships, settings approach and Co-operative Inquiry.

Youth Engagement

Adults often perceive young people as in need of assistance rather than being community assets (Jones & Perkins, 2006). This perception is problematic as it automatically excludes young people from any decision making power and as a result further promotes the adult agenda. In fact, young people are capable of making significant and lasting contributions (Delgado, 2006) and are their own group's most effective spokespersons (Delgado & Staples, 2008). Furthermore, youth engagement fosters civic competence, a sense of identity, interpersonal skills, and social responsibility among young people (Smith, Peled, Hoogeveen, & Cotman, 2009, p. 9). By eliminating adult bias young people acquire a better understanding of their context, aspirations, assets, needs and concerns (Delgado, 2006). A shift in power recognizes that young people have ability, rights and corresponding responsibilities (Delgado & Staples, 2008) and their contributions will bring a perspective that cannot continue to be overlooked by adults and institutions they control (Delgado, 2006, p. 9). A shift in power does not assume that adults "disappear" from the equation but adults often assume

supportive/consultative roles that are based on how young people view their own needs (Delgado & Staples, 2008).

Although the term youth engagement may have multiple meanings the following definition will be adopted for the purposes of this proposal. Youth engagement can be defined as “the meaningful participation and sustainable involvement of young people in shared decisions in matters which affect their lives and those of their community, including planning, decision making and program delivery” (Smith, Peled, Hoogeveen, & Cotman, 2009, p. 8). I particularly like this definition because it highlights the notion of shared decision making. In this context I understand the term “shared” refers to both youth engagement and adult engagement, which lends itself to open dialogue and reciprocal learning.

It may not be clear what the benefits of youth engagement are but while reviewing research that is closer to home I was surprised by the impact that youth engagement had on young people. The McCreary Centre for Society (2009) found that high school students in British Columbia who reported higher levels of youth engagement were more likely to report better health, higher self-esteem and greater educational aspirations, and were less likely to report extreme levels of stress or despair, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and substance use. I was intrigued by the finding that those who were the most engaged in their activities were less likely to have seriously considered or attempted suicide in the past year, compared to those who were involved in activities that were not meaningful or those where they felt they had little or no input (Smith, Peled, Hoogeveen, Cotman, & the McCreary Centre Society, 2009, p.53). Clearly, if youth engagement has such profound

implications I am curious why it has not become a common practice among organizations and institutions.

Student Co-researchers

One obvious way for young people to voice their feelings and opinions is by engaging in research and evaluation. Vancouver's Youth Friendly Health Services (YFHS) project found that young people can be involved in all aspects of a research project. By experiencing the full research process (survey development, data collection and analysis, and the dissemination of results) young people are given the opportunity to have a voice and make decisions as partners, as well as develop a range of important and transferable skills (Smith, Peled, Hoogeveen, Cotman, & the McCreary Centre Society, 2009).

Unlike conventional research approaches, where young people are often spoken for, youth-focused research approaches ensure that (a) research questions are not only pertinent but asked in a "youth-friendly" manner; (b) research findings lead to interventions that are relevant; and (c) outcome measures are framed in such a way that they take into account a youth-specific change agenda (Delgado, 2006, p. 35). Benefits go far beyond making young people competent researchers. The fact is that many benefits translate into the domain of civic participation, with society being the ultimate beneficiary (Delgado, 2006). In an effort to maximize the benefits of young people participating in the research realm partnerships with adults must become a reality.

Youth – Adult Partnerships

To better understand the role of students as researchers it is crucial that the vision also involve adults (Delgado, 2006). The manner and degree will vary but adult participation must be integral to a research project. Adults can fulfill a variety of roles, such as providing expert advice on research related matters, motivating young people during difficult phases in a research project, role-modeling democratic decision making, validating experiences, helping young people reflect and tie learning experiences to other areas of their lives and providing advice on personal or social aspects of the lives of young people (Matysik, 2000, as cited in Delgado, 2006). Youth-adult partnerships should not assume that young people should do everything of importance, that young people are skilled in all aspects of a project and that young people have enough time to engage in all tasks. In fact, Camino (2005) has learned that young people desire to share responsibilities and tasks with adults, rather than do everything themselves (p. 77).

Strong relationships between young people and adults serve protective and developmental functions (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005, p. 1). Referred to as youth – adult partnerships, the term is generally defined as a fostered relationship between young people and adults and both parties have equal potential to contribute to decision making processes, utilize skills, learn from one another and promote change through various opportunities (Jones & Perkins, 2006). Projects focused on strengthening youth – adult partnerships may be a successful strategy for addressing community issues (Jones & Perkins, 2006) and they can help promote knowledge, competency, and initiative among young people (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). Over time, these relationships facilitate youth's engagement in learning concepts

and skills relevant to careers and in improving their self management abilities and developing capacities to function effectively in the world around them (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005, p. 3). Although youth-adult partnerships may seem ideal in a research context it is often not the reality.

One factor that contributes to widening the gap between young people and adults is that both young people and adults have limited experience in working with partners (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). Additionally, adults may be hesitant to work with young people since there is a lack of literature that addresses how youth – adult research partnerships can meet the needs of the young people. According to Camino (2005) people are still learning about youth-adult partnerships and as a result there remain relatively few signposts to guide policy and practice. Many programs catered to young people fit into the traditional program structure wherein young people are the receivers and adults are the providers (Jones & Perkins, 2006) and adults have been beset with the question of what it means to partner with young people in institutional, cultural and societal contexts (Camino, 2005).

Clearly, more studies on student co-researchers and adults working together over longer periods of time are necessary to confirm whether partnering efforts actually have a long-term impact on the perceptions of individuals toward one another and their community (Jones & Perkins, 2006). Therefore, understanding what student co-researchers value while on a project team is an important area of inquiry. Policy-makers and practitioners can benefit from research that clearly describes the complexity of what happens in youth – adult relationships and provides vocabulary that differentiates fundamental phenomena (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005, p. 7).

More recently Mitra (2009) identified factors that foster youth – adult collaborations (1) fostering trust and respect among group members, (2) creating meaningful (not equal) roles, (3) building the capacity for youth and adults to successfully fulfill their roles, and (4) establishing a group size that is not too small (p. 409). Although the four factors speak to a youth-adult partnership they are specific to a school environment. Arguably, a research-orientated context may be different from a school-based context since the notion of adult authority (i.e. teacher or principal) may be less prevalent in a research context where adults are generally not perceived as authoritative. Clearly, more in-depth research is needed to further explore the intricacies between student co-researchers and adults within research oriented groups. This field will consistently forward if we are prepared to document through research our youth-led research efforts (Delgado, 2006).

In summary, further research needs to address the outcomes of youth-adult relationships and partnerships:

Demonstrating accountability for practice is an ongoing concern for practitioners. Government and private foundations are most likely to provide resources when they see “hard” evidence that a given strategy is effective. Researchers can support practice and advance knowledge by documenting the outcomes—youth, adult, organizational, community—that emanate from different types of youth–adult relationships and partnerships. To be effective, this research needs to identify mediators and moderators of program effectiveness. What are the processes whereby a given type of relationship is effective? How do these processes differ by culture, age, type of organization, and numerous other factors?

Research needs to articulate the path of associations between organizational context, types of youth–adult relationship, and types of outcomes (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O’Connor, 2005, p. 7).

It is my intent to contribute to a body of knowledge that addresses youth engagement within a youth – adult research partnership from a student co-researchers perspective.

Settings Approach

62 Ways to Change the World was a collaborative project with School District No 62. The school leaders, also referred to as champions, played a crucial role in enabling and sustaining the student voice and collaboration with UVic. Mitra (2007) notes that “partnering with students to identify school problems and possible solutions reminds teachers and administrators that students possess unique knowledge and perspectives about their schools that adults cannot fully replicate” (p. 237). Seeing an issue through the eyes of a student is arguably different than asking an adult administrator to speculate. Students also have access to information and relationships that teachers and administrators do not which may encourage interaction with those individuals who are reluctant to interact with school personnel (Mitra, 2008).

Facilitating youth-adult partnerships in schools may be challenging, especially if a school is just being introduced to the idea. Mitra (2007) identified three strategies that administrators can initiate in order to increase student voice in school decision making and in classroom practice. These include: (1) Fostering youth-adult partnerships within the context of a schoolwide learning community, (2) Buffering from administrative

bureaucracy within schools, and (3) Building bridges beyond school walls with intermediary organizations (p. 237). Although the above strategies address how student voice can be increased less is known about how to engage students as active partners in school change (Mitra, 2008).

62 Ways to Change the World relied on the support of several school administrators to proceed with the project. Meetings that were held with the student co-researchers and administrators from the district office and school staff from the five schools were crucial and were deemed important during the research process. School administrators can serve a more direct role in advocating for the inclusion and partnership of young people in schools by extolling the value of working with students and by sharing their knowledge of the school and the district (Mitra, 2007). School administrators can also play a supporting role in strategic planning to ensure the best possible reception of project activities (Mitra, 2007).

Student co-researchers dedicated a great deal of time to the project *62 Ways to Change the World*; they attended training and planning meetings, collected data and facilitated focus groups, prepared materials for various events and rehearsed for conference presentations. Oftentimes the students found that the responsibilities conflicted with their school and extracurricular commitments and sometimes they wished they were able make up work, extend their deadlines or have the project work count towards course credits.

It is clear that even if school administrators value the importance of youth-adult partnerships, fostering those relationships may fall to the wayside since there may be competing priorities (Mitra, 2007). In school settings, fostering collaboration between

young people and adults requires the intentional creation of new roles other than “teacher” and “student” (Mitra, 2007, p. 247). Intermediary groups or organizations can provide strategies that may help adults become coaches who can then provide students with meaningful opportunities and foster their skills (Mitra, 2007). Intermediary organizations can also serve as a support networks by: accessing financial resources, networking and disseminating information on behalf of a project (Mitra, 2007).

Co-operative Inquiry

Co-operative Inquiry is a methodology first conceived by researcher and consultant John Heron in 1968 as a way to do research with people rather than on them (Heron, 1996, p. 1). In an effort to maintain an authentic collaboration among the student co-researchers and adults who participated in “*62 Ways to Change the World*” a Co-operative Inquiry was applied as the research approach.

Grounded in a science of persons³ the inquiry argues that all those engaged in the inquiry process enter the process as persons, bringing with them their intelligence, their intentionality, and their ability to reflect on the experience and to enter relations with others (Reason, 2003). In a Co-operative Inquiry, all individuals involved in the research process are both co-researchers and also co-subjects (Reason, & Torber, 2001). As co-researchers they participate in the thinking that goes into the research – framing the questions to be explored, agreeing on the methods to be employed, and together making

³ A science of a person in this sense is not a science of the Enlightenment. It does not seek a transcendental truth, which Descartes and his fellows would have us pursue. A science of a persons embraces a ‘postmodern’ sentiment in attempting to move us beyond grand narratives toward localized, pragmatic and constructed practical knowing that are based on the experience and action of those engaged in the inquiry project (Heron, 2003, p. 206).

sense of their experiences. As co-subjects they participate in the action being studied (Reason & Torber, 2001, p. 14).

Delgado (2006) argues that the greatest compliment one can give a research project is that the results were meaningful and the experience was meaningful for all those who participated (p.19). Consistent with the goals of a Co-operative Inquiry, the methodology is grounded in the belief that society can be made better only through the partnership of all sectors of the community, in this case the students (Delgado, 2006). By engaging in goals that are larger than individuals, often common goals for the good of a community, solid youth-adult partnerships are formed as a result (Camino, 2005). Additionally, a Co-operative Inquiry was appropriate since youth-adults partnerships do not work as well when the purpose is to mentor youth, or to promote youth development among individual young people (Camino, 2005).

As one articulation of Action Research Co-operative Inquiry, as a method, is based on cycles of action and reflection that engages four dimensions of a science of persons: treating persons as persons, a participative world-view, an extended epistemology and a liberationist spirit (Reason, 2003). A human process dependent on the development of healthy human interaction is important both during a research process and outside the research realm. The ability to foster youth-adult collaborations contributes to the success of projects and also prepares young people and adults with experiences, or tools that can be drawn on in future projects (Delgado, 2006). By creating youth friendly environments (respectful, safe, inviting, non judgmental) during the research process power relations that may exist due to position, age or previous experience are minimized. It will be important to create research processes that may

contribute to student co-researchers competency in critiquing “mainstream” knowledge and institutions, and the effects of power relationships and privilege (Delgado, 2006).

The form of Co-operative Inquiry can range from full collaboration through all the stages of inquiry, to genuine dialogue and consultation at moments of project, encounter and making sense (Reason, 1988, p. 9). Student co-researchers and adults from *62 Ways to Change the World* engaged in a full collaboration. For example, student co-researchers made the decisions that pertained to the project’s outcomes (i.e. group name, logo development, survey question development, data collection, presentations, etc.). Adults were mainly responsible for facilitating some of the logistical processes (i.e. booking meeting rooms, ordering food, arranging transportation, administering meeting minutes, etc). Although there was overlap in some of the responsibilities it was clear that each group (students and adults) had a set of agreed upon roles. All those involved in the inquiry endeavour act as co-researchers and contribute both to the decisions which inform the research and the action (Reason, 1994).

In summary the research framework that the *62 Ways to Change the World* team engaged in could be summarized by describing the “To, For, With” approach cited by Camino (2005). *62 Ways to Change the World* avoided the “To” and “For” but tried to exemplify attitudes that maintained the “With” element.

“Doing to” youth often occurs in health treatments or in adjudication systems.

“Doing for” youth can occur when adults take over for youth because they assume youth lack necessary skills, such as when a parent or teacher does a young person’s homework “for” him or her. “Doing with” youth occurs when adults

consider youth as having strengths and assets, and when the relationship is reciprocal. (NA, cited in Camino, 2005, p. 83).

This framework does not intend to get out of the way of young people or to give up individual power rather it is about challenging existing beliefs and assumptions so that issues that matter to the inquirers can be collectively addressed. The vision is to locate ways for youth and adults to join together for shared action, and in the process create environments for individual development, as well as for the common good (Camino, 2005, p. 85).

Chapter 3 – Methodology and Methods

Hart (2002) reports that “there is a strong tendency on the part of adults to underestimate the competence of the young while at the same time using them in some events to influence some cause; the effect is patronizing” (p. 8). However, a shift in power recognizes that young people have ability, rights and corresponding responsibilities (Delgado & Staples, 2008) and their contributions will bring a perspective that cannot continue to be overlooked by adults and institutions they control (Delgado, 2006, p. 9).

Using a case study approach, the goal of this research project was to examine what factors student co-researchers identify as having an impact on their decision to participate in or remain active participants within a project research team. In order to avoid a top down or non-inclusive approach, it was important that the methodology for the study was qualitative in nature and maintained a participatory process.

I believe I have professional relationships of considerable mutual respect with the co-researchers I have chosen to conduct my research with. My continued involvement in this project has not negatively impacted the course of the study but has served as an asset. Jones and Perkins (2006) believe that young people are understandably more positive toward working with adults with whom they have had past interactions with. Our collaboration began in April 2009 and remains rooted in the understanding that we are mutually constructing knowledge. We have gone through the research process together and I feel that we have a common understanding that we are working together to achieve a common purpose, in this instance, improve future practice. Student co-researcher’s

personal stories about their project experience will help adult partners understand what it is young people value and need when they are on research project teams.

The project involved students from Sooke School District 62 from the following five schools: Spencer Middle School, Dunsmuir Middle School, WestShore Centre for Learning & Training, Belmont Secondary School and Pacific Secondary School. The five schools from the Sooke School District 62 were selected because of their ongoing participation in the project *62 Ways to Change the World*. The following chapter will address the research questions, the design of the study, philosophical framework, methodology and methods used, data selection, collection and analysis, ethical considerations and issues of validity and reliability.

Research Questions

“Research plays an important role in any social intervention that seeks to achieve significant social change” (Delgado, 2006, p. 260). The field of youth-led research is still in its infancy and will enrich the field of social research before the movement is no longer considered a “movement” but part of the establishment and a priority (Delgado, 2006).

My personal experience suggests that young people, within a youth-led research context, have the means to impact their community and society. Further, I believe it is crucial to attract, engage and sustain young people in initiatives that directly address their needs. By valuing activities that young people find meaningful and relevant to shaping their environments and circumstances, solutions will be driven by the stakeholders and more likely to be addressed by realistic action.

The Co-operative Inquiry approach confirmed the benefits of student led research in terms of immediate impacts; meeting project objectives, and long term impacts; establishing partnerships within the Langford community. In an effort to understand, from the student co-researchers perspective, the factors that impacted their decision to participate in and remain active participants within *62 Ways to Change the World* the following questions guided the study:

1. What personal changes did student co-researchers experience?
2. How does a Co-operative Inquiry approach contribute to youth engagement and positive youth development?
3. What adult skills are evident in building a strong youth led research project?

In responding to these questions the objectives of the research were to:

1. Determine the extent of the co-researchers experience in terms of major learning; changes in skills, attributes, beliefs and attitudes; and perceived role in the school and community.
2. Determine what elements/factors, throughout the research process, were integral to students' sustained participation.
3. Determine whether partnering efforts actually have an impact on the perceptions of student co-researchers toward adult partners, research and their community.

Design of the Study

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), paradigm is the basic set of beliefs that guide action and can be viewed as consisting of three main elements: ontology,

epistemology and methodology. Furthermore, [research] paradigms define for the [researcher] what it is they are about, and what falls within and outside the limits of legitimate inquiry [research]” (Guba and Lincoln, 1994 p. 108). Guba and Lincoln (1994) go on to say that the three main elements of a research paradigm may be summarized by answering the following questions:

1. What is the form and nature of reality? – the ontological question
2. What is the basic belief about knowledge? – the epistemological question
3. How can the researcher go about finding out whatever s/he believes can be known? – the methodological question

In an effort to gain a deeper understanding of my research paradigm I will discuss the three elements using Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) three questions.

Ontology

What is the form of nature and reality, what is the nature of the world?

Traditional research, also referred to as a positivist orientation, is normally understood as a ‘technology’, as a set of methods, skills and procedures applied to a defined research problem (Usher, 2006). Generally, the characteristics of a scientific mode of research enable predictions, generalized explanations and inadvertently lend itself to control and cause-effect outcomes. Usher (2006) summarizes the characteristics of research in the ‘scientific’ mode as “... if it is known that X causes Y then it is possible to predict that where X is present Y will happen and if that is known then the presence of X can be controlled in order to make Y happen” (p. 10). The ontological assumptions, from a positivist/empiricist perspective, view the nature of the world as orderly, lawful and

predictable and are ill-suited to the complexity, embedded character and specificity of real-life phenomena (Gillham, 2000).

As I reflected on my theoretical perspectives I could not support the notion that reality exists “out there” and it is observable, stable and measurable (Merriam, 2009). Rather, I support the assumption that there are multiple realities or interpretations of a single event (Merriam, 2009) and that reality is socially constructed. Therefore, my job as a researcher is not to “find” knowledge, but to construct it (Merriam, 2009). By supporting the notion that truth is relative and this ‘truth’ is dependent on one’s perspective I recognize the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning (Baxter, & Jack, 2008). My intention is “to view the case from the inside out: to see it from the perspective of those involved (Gillham, 2000, p. 11).

In my particular research study I am interested in understanding the meaning student co-researchers have constructed, that is, how did the students make sense of their experiences in the world. It is through the students’ stories that I will be able to better understand their actions. This understanding can be better understood as:

[This understanding] is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting – what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what’s going on for them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting. (Patton, 1985, p. 1, as cited in Merriam, 2002)

Merriam (2009) refers to this understanding as the emic, insider’s perspective, versus the etic, outsider’s perspective.

Epistemology

A positivist/empiricist epistemology lends itself to a research approach that emphasizes determinacy, rationality, impersonality, prediction (Usher, 2006). The focus is exclusively on methods and outcomes and fails to consider the research process (Usher, 2006). Since I am interested in understanding the project experience from the perspective of student co-researchers selecting subsets of variables, through appropriate controls or randomization, would lead to exclusion of contextual information (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, a dualist and objectivist epistemology lends itself to what I call an “I” and “them” approach. “The investigator and the investigated “object” are assumed to be independent entities, and the investigator to be capable of studying the object without influencing it or being influenced by it” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). This approach was not considered because it assumes that values, biases and previous experiences are absent from the investigation or can be controlled. In reality, my ongoing relationship with the “investigated object” was a primary reason why this inquiry was pursued and became a priority.

Social research is concerned with interpretation, meaning and illumination (Usher, 2006). Furthermore, a hermeneutic/interpretive epistemology in social and education research assumes that all human action is meaningful and has to be interpreted and understood within the context of social practices (Usher, 2006). This approach aligns with my views of “knowledge” construction since I was neither a ‘sole researcher’ nor a ‘subject’ in the project *62 Ways to Change the World*. As a co-researcher, working alongside a team of young people and adults, it was expected that both the student co-researchers and other stakeholders contributing to the project had the same characteristics

of being sense seekers and sense makers (Usher, 2006). Similar to Usher's (2006) views my sense is that research is a social practice and what it says and what it does is significantly located within that context. "Research is a social practice carried out by research communities and what constitutes 'knowledge', 'truth', 'objectivity and 'correct method' is defined by the community and through the paradigm of normal science which shapes its work" (Usher, 2006, p. 17).

As a 'participant' of *62 Ways to Change the World* it would be rather difficult to separate myself from the context of which I was and am a part of. Usher (2006) adds "... the notion of the individual researcher standing outside the world in order to understand it properly, seems highly questionable" (p. 21). However, research that is focused on insight and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives" (Merriam, 2009). A youth-adult partnership requires inclusion of young people in the creation of knowledge and sharing of ideas (Mitra, 2008, p. 227).

At this point you may be wondering how I, as a researcher, interpreter and meaning producer, can be objective about the meaning produced by those we are researching? Stake (1995) explains that the artist (the researcher) is the agent of our (the participant and reader's) knowledge and although this is 'our knowledge' the presentation and interpretation of the artist cannot be avoided. Rather than bracketing or putting ourselves aside Usher (2006) goes on to say:

One's pre-understandings, far from being closed prejudices or biases, actually make one more open-minded because, in the process of interpretation and

understanding, they are put at risk, tested and modified through the encounter with what one is trying to understand. (p. 21)

This notion of pre-understanding acknowledges that knowledge is produced prior to engaging in a traditional research process. Additionally, I would argue that the process of 'pre-understanding' lends itself to mediation/self-reflection which I consider to be a critical activity in my research practice.

Finally, the aim is not to discover-- for that is impossible-- but to construct a clearer and more sophisticated reality (Stake, 1995). Similar to Merriam's (2009) beliefs I believe that research that is focused on insight, and understanding from the perspective of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives. If I genuinely support youth engagement it would be contradictory of me to take a positivist approach. Rather I am interested in conducting applied research that aims to improve the quality of practice among co-researchers (young people and adults). I hope the findings of this study will inform research practitioners and/or organizations that are interested in partnering with young people to conduct research and/or evaluation. "In this way, evidence about what constitutes 'best practices' is generated by people examining their experiences in practice and reflecting on those practices" (Hills, & Mullet, 2005, p. 284).

Research Methodology

I decided to conduct a qualitative case study approach using a single holistic case design. "Case study research studies an issue explored through one or more cases within

a bounded system (i.e., a setting or a context)” (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007, p. 245).

The decision to use a case study approach was determined using the following three conditions as suggested by Yin (2009): (1) the type of research posed, (2) the extent of control the investigator has over actual behavioral events, and (3) the degree of focus on contemporary as opposed to historical events (p. 8).

Since the single most defining characteristic of case study lies in delimiting the object of study, the case, (Merriam, 2001, p. 27) it is important for me to identify the case in my proposed research. As I am interested in understanding the unique experiences of student co-researchers this study is bound by the context, the research project *62 Ways to Change the World*, and more broadly the school setting (School District No 62). The student co-researchers joined the research team in April 2009 and many have continued to participate in the project (March 2010). It was in these settings and during the specified timeframe that student co-researchers made decisions regarding their project participation. This is considered an intrinsically bounded unit of analysis since there were a finite number of student co-researchers involved in the project and the project was bound by a context and a timeframe. As suggested by Merriam (2001) this assumption was verified by the application of a technique that aims to assess the boundedness of the topic (p. 27).

It is common practice that the inquirer purposefully selects a number of cases to show different perspectives on the issue (Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, 2007). Since my research question is focussing on the experiences of student co-researchers from *62 Ways to Change the World* eight students were selected to participate

in the inquiry. The eight students participated beyond the training sessions (once the funding and stipends ran out) and attended most (more than 15) planning and meeting sessions. The student co-researchers are from different schools, represent various ethnicities and vary in age and gender. Their experiences have been influenced by many factors and it will be crucial to capture their various perspectives.

Selecting eight participants to complete the research study is consistent with the holistic-case design outlined above. Although it may have been possible to select only one or two students to participate, Merriam (2001) suggests that the more cases included in a case study, and the greater the variation across the cases, the more compelling an interpretation will be.

A primary intent of this study was to conduct an instrumental case study to understand, through the student co-researcher's lens, their experience on the project. Philosophically, like, Gillham (2000), I believe we only understand how people behave, feel, think if we get to know their world. An instrumental case does not disqualify the case (the individual) rather the emphasis is on uniqueness of the case, and implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself (Stake, 1995, p. 8). The eight student co-researchers will be instrumental to learning about the factors that contribute to program participation and sustainability.

The secondary intent of this study is to improve action through theoretical understanding. Bassey (2003) believes educational research is concerned with improving action through understanding. Developing research environments that are conducive to

the needs of young people is a desirable goal and can only be achieved if young people are listened to.

As I want to understand a real-life phenomenon that encompassed important contextual conditions (Yin, 2009) I believe case study was the most appropriate method. Regardless of the techniques used a major objective of case study research is to collect data about actual human events and behaviour (Yin, 2009). A number of research methods were reviewed but were found inappropriate. Briefly the following methods will be discussed: experimental design, historical, and survey research approach.

An experiment deliberately divorces a phenomenon from its context and attends to only a few variables (Yin, 2009). Since an experimental design controls the context I believe the students voices would be undermined and result in misrepresentation and/or limited understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

A historical research method approach usually deals with non-contemporary events (Yin, 2009). A history research method would not be appropriate because the unit of analysis is bound by a current timeframe.

One may assume that the questions proposed could be asked using a survey. However, a survey's ability to investigate the context is extremely limited (Yin, 2009, p.18). The number of questions than can be asked and thus the variables to be analyzed are often limited and again would result in what I call a "cookie cutter effect" – pre-determining the student voice. The case study method and individual interviews that could be tailored to individual contexts would limit the cookie cutter effect.

This case study inquiry is grounded in a qualitative mode of inquiry where episodes of nuance, the sequentially of happening in context and the wholeness of the

individual are emphasized (Stake, 1995). “The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 2009, p. 4).

Furthermore the decision to conduct a qualitative case study stems from one of the problems of positivist inquiry known as the nomothetic/idiographic disjunction. Guba and Lincoln (1994) describe this as the inapplicability of general data to individual cases, they further expand by stating “generalizations, although perhaps statistically meaningful, have no applicability in the individual case” (p. 106).

Conducting the Study

This phase of the project, *62 Ways to Change the World*, began in April 2009 and concluded in April 2010. The eight student co-researchers, involved in this phase of the study are between fifteen and eighteen years of age. Except for weeks when there was a school holiday or the students were preparing for their provincial exams, we meet weekly for approximately two hours. This section of the methodology chapter will discuss the sample selection, research assumptions, ethical considerations, the inquiry location, and the data collection methods and data analysis.

Sample Selection

I chose to conduct this study with eight student co-researchers who participated in the project *62 Ways to Change the World*. Since I wanted to understand and gain insight from a sample that I believed has engaged in a unique experience the sampling strategy was nonprobabilistic in nature – also referred to as a unique purposive sample (Merriam, 2001).

Research Participants

Several considerations guided the process of selecting participants for this phase of the project: (1) the student's degree of participation (student is continuing to participate in the project – *62 Ways to Change the World*), (2) the availability of the student co-researcher (the student has time to conduct an interview and/or focus group), and (3) their interest/comfort in this phase of the project (the student is interested in sharing their personal experience and/or the student is comfortable sharing their personal story).

The group size was limited to eight participants, as some students were no longer participating in the project due to competing commitments, some were no longer interested in the project, some were unavailable due to school commitments and others were no longer living in the area.

The participants were from School District No 62 and came from diverse backgrounds, and social groups. While these social distinctions were not requested or readily apparent to me, they were noticeable to the students. After a conference the co-researchers attended one participant shared the following comment with the group “it is so cool that a group of such different students can work together to accomplish something so unique”.

In December 2009 this phase of the research was discussed with the student co-researchers at one of our weekly meetings. Although the students were engaged in cycles of action and reflection throughout the project they were not individually interviewed about their experience. Once the research questions were developed they were shared with the student co-researchers. Students had an opportunity to review the questions and

to suggest changes. No changes were recommended as students agreed that the questions were clear and understandable.

Documents and Records

All documents that were produced throughout this project were selected for this case study. Documents included: meeting agendas and meeting minutes, newspaper clipping, media briefings, presentations and presentation scripts, final funding report, photographs, videos, facebook wall posts and facebook photo comments.

Videos where students reflected on their practice or where they provided testimonials were selected and used for this case study. Clips were between one and three minutes in length. Other videos were not selected due to the content (i.e. presentations at conferences, training sessions) and/or length (over 40 minutes and up to three hours). The length of the videos was a factor that I took into consideration since I did not think it was fair to ask the students to watch several video clips that were over 40 minutes.

There were 262 photographs that were produced throughout the project. Of the 262 photographs, eight photographs were selected. These photographs were selected because they were the photographs that students commented on (comments written on the group's facebook page). The photographs were taken throughout the project – the earliest photograph was taken April 17, 2009 and the most recent photo was from March 10, 2010. Personal documents, facebook posts, photographs and comments and testimonial video clips, were selected because they “refer to any first-person narrative that describes an individual's actions, experiences, and beliefs” (Bogdan, & Biklen, 2007, p. 133). Given that I am interested in the student co-researchers perspectives the personal

documents were an important source of data as they concern the student's attitudes, beliefs and view of the world (Merriam, 2009).

Data Collection

Qualitative research methods were selected for this study because I wanted to generate data rich in detail and embedded in context. Since I conducted a qualitative case study multiple sources of information were collected. As I was interested in the factors that contribute to student co-researchers engagement, from a student co-researcher perspective, the primary sources of data collection were student interviews and a focus group with the student co-researchers. In addition, all documents pertaining to the research project were collected and reviewed.

Prior to outlining the details of the methods I want to address my role as the primary instrument for data collection. Maintaining an 'open mind' is impossible since in case study research the researcher is the (human) research instrument (Gillham, 2000). However, our level of 'closed-mindedness', which includes our shortcomings, biases, and preconceptions, are normal but need to be acknowledged (Gillham, 2000). The following are assumptions that underpinned this research study:

- Student co-researchers have an understanding of the research process. This understanding will assist them throughout the study.
- I knew enough about the reality of the respondents to construct meaningful questions.
- Student co-researchers understood the questions and interpreted the questions as intended; students provided me with honest answers.

- Case study is an effective method for understanding young people's perspectives.
- Engaging young people in research is inherently a good thing for knowledge and for young people.
- My continued involvement in the project and my role as the researcher did not cause discomfort on the part of the student co-researchers.

As mentioned previously a holistic case study is the main method. Within it different sub-methods were used: interviews, documents, and a focus group. This approach is referred to as multi-method since data is accumulated by different methods bearing on the same issue (Gillham, 2000). The most important advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2009, p. 115). Most importantly, collecting information from multiple data sources helped ensure that the research findings accurately reflect the students' perceptions. By incorporating multiple methods, such as, observation, interviews and recordings results will lead to more valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities (Nahid, 2003, p. 604).

Interviews

In order to maintain a relaxed environment where the co-researchers and I engage in informal conversations, semi-structured life world interviews were conducted. This type of interview is defined as "an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1998, p. 5). This approach is not about rigidity but about engaging

in a dialogue where the interviewees have opportunity to formulate in a conversation their own conceptions of their lived world (Kvale, 1998).

All interviews were done in person and were held at various locations. Students selected the location (mall, café, restaurant or school library) and the date and time of the interview. However, interviews were not held during school hours or late into the evening. Most interviews occurred during lunch hour, immediately after school or on the weekend.

All interviews were taped, transcribed and summarized. Transcribed notes and/or summary notes were available to the student co-researchers three days after their interview.

Focus Group

A focus group can be defined as a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment (Krueger, 1988, p. 18). The focus group that was conducted served a dual purpose: first, to keep the student researchers informed, presenting to them what the data meant to me, and second, getting feedback from the students, what did the results mean to them? The format was informal and there was a lot of back and forth dialogue. We were asking each other questions and clarifying the findings. Notes were taken during the focus group but the conversation was not recorded.

As Krueger & Casey (2000) mention there are several characteristics of a focus group: (a) people, who (b) possess certain characteristics, (c) provide data (d) of a qualitative nature (e) in a focused discussion (p. 27). The focus group that was conducted had key individuals that participated in the project *62 Ways to Change the World*, the

individuals present were interviewed and participated in the focus group where the discussion focussed on several aspects of the data. Additionally Krueger (1988) adds, “focus groups are an appropriate procedure to use when the goal is to explain how people regard an experience, idea or an event” (p. 20). Although individuals were interviewed and reflected on their personal experience, group members have a tendency to influence each other and further contribute to the discussion (Krueger, 1988). Throughout the focus group session, students built on one another’s responses by elaborating on points that were raised.

Documents

As Merriam (2009) I have chosen the term document as the umbrella term to refer to a wide range of written, visual and digital material. All documents that I accessed were from the earlier phase of the research project. As previously stated, documents included: meeting agendas and meeting minutes, newspaper clipping, media briefings, presentations and presentation scripts, final funding report, photographs, videos, facebook wall posts and facebook photo comments (online documents). Documents were used in the same manner as data from interviews and the focus group – to furnish descriptive information and offer insight into the student co-researcher’s personal experiences.

Analytic Memo

Finally during the data collection phase I maintained an analytic memo as a way to facilitate reflection and analytic insight following each interview, group meeting and the focus group. An analytic memo is defined as any writing that a researcher does in relationship to the research other than actual field notes, transcription or coding. A memo

can range from a brief marginal comment on a transcript or a theoretical idea recorded in a field journal to a full-fledged analytic essay (Maxwell, 1996, p. 11). I have created a document (see Appendix A) that assisted me in the process of reflection and in developing a broader understanding of how the insight gained is related to the research questions. The template also contributed to my understanding because it forced me to engage in a consistent reflective process. Dates and times were recorded so that I can track how my ideas developed throughout the research process. Although I could have done this reflection using any piece of paper it was important to have this template for organization purposes. Once I completed an interview I had a copy of the document and I engaged in free writing. This document template was a part of the research process and became an integral practice.

Ethics

In order to consider the ethical implications for the students participating in the study, meetings were held to discuss consent and ethical issues with my thesis supervisor and committee members. Since the project *62 Ways to Change the World* already had a full ethics approval I was not required to submit an ethics application. However, I did review the application in detail and followed up with my committee to raise my questions or concerns.

Although the research project has undergone an ethical review by the Office of Research Services, Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) at the University of Victoria there are ethical implications that need to be further considered and discussed.

Informed Consent

When Dr. Miller and I introduced this phase of the research project to the students we outlined the nature and purpose of the research. I explained to the students that although the results will be used for the project *62 Ways to Change the World* they would also be used for my thesis. As some students did not know what a thesis project was I provided them with a brief overview, students also had an opportunity to review my thesis proposal and ask me questions. Students did ask questions regarding the study but none of the students requested to review my thesis proposal.

All student co-researchers were notified that I would be requesting individual interviews and a follow up focus group. A statement that outlined the voluntary nature of this phase of the project was read to the students and sent to them over e-mail. Once I discussed that their participation in this study was voluntary and there was no obligation to participate I asked the students to contact me if they were interested. All students who were present at the meeting said they were interested in participating in the inquiry.

As the design of the study progressed and the research questions were developed students were reminded about the research study. Even if the students originally committed to participate I reminded them that participation was voluntary and it was okay for them to change their mind (this was done approximately two months after the initial discussion about the study).

In an effort to acknowledge the student co-researchers contributions I offered to purchase interviewee's lunch or dinner (depending on the time of the interview). Additionally all participating students were given a \$25 gift certificate after they completed the interview. It was important for me to show my gratitude since young

people bring a unique perspective to the research process and their knowledge has equal if not greater legitimacy than knowledge obtained from books and formal classroom instruction (Delgado, 2006).

Since the students knew that this phase of the project was being used for my thesis students may have thought that they would let me down if they did not participate in the study. Although I have developed an honest and respectful relationship with the students I had to remind the students that it would be okay if they dropped out of the study. I reminded them that I would not take it personally and it would not impact our relationship. Two students who originally committed to participate in the project approached me and informed me that they could no longer commit the time.

Once I summarized the individual interview and/or personal video clip (testimonial) I shared my notes with the student. A debriefing, once the data is collected, permits the participants to ask questions regarding the results and allows them to clarify any inconsistencies in the reporting. The students were reminded several times that all transcriptions were available for review if requested.

All summarized data and final results remained anonymous. Information shared by the students was quoted and reordered but the identity (name, age, gender, school) of the individual remained confidential. Gender was not recorded in the final results since there were two male participants.

Many people enjoy doing research in a field where they may have a personal interest and/or subject expertise (Anderson, & Arsenaut, 1998). In my case I was both personally interested in the research study and I have spent the last year with the research team (student co-researchers) so I was familiar with the context. While thinking about

this study I was concerned about my personal interests and the influence it may have over the objectives of the study. Specifically I did not want my ability to make fair judgments or relationships to be put at risk (Anderson, & Arsenaut, 1998). I raised my concerns with my thesis committee and they reminded me it is important to reflect on relationships that exist within a research team but that they do not foresee any ethical implications or conflict of interest within my study.

Two process-related ethical issues were reflected upon throughout the course of the study: (1) community based research is embedded in multiple social context and institutions and involves ongoing collaborations across a spectrum of individuals, and (2) community based research involves a dynamic and ongoing interaction with the community (Moretti, Leadbeater, & Marshall, 2006). Both considerations will be addressed in the next two paragraphs.

Although I am a graduate student from the University of Victoria I am working in partnership with School District 62, and working in the city of Langford. As a result, it is not enough for me to abide by the University's ethical codes but I must consider the fact that each group, community and institution has its own values, polices and code of ethics (Moretti, Leadbeater, & Marshall, 2006). Each system comes with its own history and procedures for identifying and resolving problems, as well as its own beliefs, hopes and fears they relate to the process and outcome of collaboration (Moretti, Leadbeater, & Marshall, 2006, p. 234). By identifying all the stakeholders involved in the research process I felt I was better equipped to deal with ethical situations should they arise.

Community based research is dynamic and changing as a function of communications among institutions, communities and participants (Moretti, Leadbeater,

& Marshall, 2006). It was crucial for Dr. Miller, the student co-researchers and I to establish clear lines of communication. Specifically, scheduling meeting and interview dates and times was a factor that we all considered. In an effort to respect one another's time we agreed, beforehand, that we would communicate upcoming meetings and interviews via facebook. If there were changes, which often occurred, we would notify the other person(s) ahead of time. Some student co-researchers found that they did not like to communicate online and they requested that information was sent to them via text message or by contacting them directly on the telephone.

Disseminating findings can raise ethical problems (Merriam, 2009). In this particular study it was important to openly discuss issues of data ownership. Since I was responsible for data collection and analysis it may have appeared that this was "my" project. In an effort to clarify any assumptions I discussed that all results belong to the project, and therefore the student co-researchers can use the results. Data would remain anonymous but student co-researchers may incorporate results in presentations or written reports. All student co-researchers who conducted an interview received a summary of the interview and had an opportunity to provide feedback.

Data Analysis

The data set consisted of transcribed interviews, focus group notes, and visual, personal and public documents. The process of data analysis was done in conjunction with data collection. Coding and category construction began when I read over the documents, reviewed video clips and when I read over the first interview transcript.

Analysis became more intensive as the study progressed and once the data collection was complete (Merriam, 2009).

Analysis and data collection

Interviews were transcribed prior to conducting the next round of interviews (rounds consisted of two interviews). I intentionally spaced out the interviews so that I had an opportunity to reflect on the findings. This process gave me time to think about the new interview data and the data I already had organized (visual, personal and public documents). Merriam (2009) notes that without ongoing analysis “the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed” (p. 171). This approach to data analysis was ideal as it was important for me to discuss my progress with Dr. Miller and allow my ideas to unfold overtime. This sense of the data “marinating” contributed to ongoing analysis and further understanding.

All collected data was organized into a comprehensive package (case study database). Having information stored and organized in one location was crucial to accessibility and efficient retrieval. The packaged materials were read several times.

The strategy that was used throughout the analysis phase was the constant inductive and comparative method (Merriam, 2009). Throughout this process I was constantly asking myself what does this mean to me? How can I make sense of this? And how does the data address the research questions.

Since I had an abundance of data the overall process of data analysis began by identifying segments in the data that addressed the research questions. Merriam (2009) refers to this segment as a unit of analysis that may be meaningful to the study. She goes on to say that it could be a word a participant used to describe a feeling or a full record of

an incident (Merriam, 2009). Breaking data down into bits of information allowed me to look for recurring themes without feeling overwhelmed. I believe, human beings have limited memory capacities and by focusing on key bits of data, I was able to manage the research results. Codes were assigned to pieces of data and contributed to category development. This process (coding and category construction) was done for each set of data.

Initially many categories were generated. However, as additional transcripts and documents were reviewed some categories became subcategories. For examples students indicated that learning occurred from co-researchers while another student indicated learning occurred from the adult co-researchers. Rather than having subcategories for all individuals who influence the learning process one category “learning from others” was used. After tentative categories and subcategories were created all evidence, including coded data, was sorted and organized under the appropriate category.

There came a point when I realized that no new information, insights or understanding was being generated, and Merriam (2009) refers to this point as saturation. Prior to the point of saturation I was operating from an inductive stance where I was developing themes and categories. Once saturation was reached, nothing new was coming forth; I began working in a deductive way – “testing” tentative category schemes against the data (Merriam, 2009).

It was important for me to keep in mind that categories are only abstractions derived from the data, not the data themselves (Merriam, 2001, p. 182). As I may have misinterpreted the student co-researchers perspectives it was crucial for the students to review my categorization. If the co-researchers expressed a lack of representation in the

concepts I then went back to the raw data to ensure that emerging themes, concepts and explanations were accurately being represented.

Validity and Reliability

To address the potential problems of establishing construct validity and reliability of the case study evidence Yin (2009) suggests the following three principles: (1) use multiple sources of evidence, (2) create a case study database, and (3) maintain a chain of evidence. All three suggestions were used in this study.

The most important advantage presented by using multiple sources of evidence is the development of converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2009, p. 115). For example if a student co-researcher reported that s/he was engaged in the research project because there was an opportunity to work closely with adults I would then review video documentation to see if this claim can be supported by other sources. Data triangulation was a crucial technique since multiple sources of evidence provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon and address the problems of construct validity (Yin, 2009).

A case study report may not have presented adequate data and without a case study database, the raw data may not be available for independent inspection (Yin, 2009, p. 119). Since I am a novice it was important for me assemble all the collected materials in an organized fashion. By having the information in a central location I was able to access the background information more efficiently. Student co-researchers may have not been satisfied with my interpretations and final reporting and data retrieval would need to happen in a timely manner.

Additionally, the trustworthiness of qualitative research was further addressed by reviewing the following ten questions developed by Merriam (2009): (1) What can you possibly tell from an n of 1 (3, 15, 29, etc)? (2) What is it worth just to get the researcher's interpretation of the participant's interpretation of what is going on? (3) how can you generalize from a small, non-random sample? (4) If the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, how can we be sure the researcher is a valid and reliable instrument? (5) How will you know when to stop collecting data? (6) Isn't the researcher biased and just finding out what he or she expects to find? (7) Without hypotheses, how will you know what you're looking for? (8) Doesn't the researchers' presence result in a change in participant's normal behaviour, thus contaminating the data? (9) Don't people often lie to field researchers? (10) If somebody else did this study, would you get the same results? (p. 212). Rather than answering questions individually I will attempt to address a few questions per paragraph.

As mentioned in the previous section on construct validity a case study design that uses multiple data sources is a strategy that enhances data credibility (Yin, 2009). Multiple sources of data (pieces of the puzzle) were converged in the analysis process and the findings were strengthened as I had a better understanding of the whole phenomenon (Baxter, & Jack, 2008). For example I did not only focus on the video clips to understand the students experience but I interviewed the students directly so that we can engage in an ongoing exchange. By using various methods of data collection (interviews, focus group and documents) triangulation was employed. The practice of comparing and crosschecking data "remains a principal strategy to ensure for validity and reliability" (Merriam, 2009, p. 216).

In an effort to remain true to the original case I involved the student co-researchers and Dr. Miller in the analysis phase. I prepared summary notes so that the team could provide feedback. This “member check”, also known as respondent validation (Merriam, 2009) was extremely important since I was responsible for constructing the students’ reality. Baxter and Jack (2008) report that when participants have an opportunity to discuss and clarify the interpretation new or additional perspectives may emerge as a result. As a research professional it was important to paint an accurate picture by interpreting the data to my best ability.

Since the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research this is often considered advantageous, as humans are both responsive and adaptive (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) assures, we are thus “closer” to reality than if a data collection instrument had been interjected between us and the participants (p. 214). My prolonged exposure to the phenomenon (experiences of student co-researchers) within its context (research project) also allowed me to build a rapport with the students. Established relationships with research participants often leads to the collection of multiple perspectives and understanding and reduces the potential for social desirability responses in interviews (Krefting, 1991, cited in Baxter, & Jack, 2008). However, one must acknowledge researcher biases that may have impacted the study (Merriam, 2009).

The reliability of the document material used in the research study was crucial to the data collection phase since it was not impacted by the presence of me, the “investigator” (Merriam, 2009). Visual documents (specifically the testimonials and photograph comments) “are objective sources of data compared to other forms” (Merriam, 2009, p. 155). Students were not required to leave comments on photographs

or provide testimonials. Students initiated both processes and felt it was an important practice to maintain throughout the project.

My interest in the student co-researchers experience began at the onset of the research project (April 2009). Although I was not collecting data I was consciously reflecting on my personal experience as a research team member and asking myself questions such as “I wonder what the students are experiencing, is it similar to what I am experiencing? Are they experiencing a learning curve in the same way as I am?” My initial reflexivity, Merriam (2009), was primarily focussed on comparing the students’ experiences to my personal experience within the project. This comparison that was purely based on mere assumptions contributed to my “aha moment”. Instead of comparing myself to the student co-researchers and assuming that I knew what the students were experiencing I realized that it was crucial to hear from the students what their personal experience was like. Like the student co-researchers I was new to the project but there were significant differences among us. I feel this shift in my thinking at the onset of the project influenced, in a positive way, my research approach. While collecting and analysing the data I acknowledged my personal experience but I made a conscious effort not to let it influence how I report the findings. This was challenging at times but such clarification allows the readers to better understand how I might have arrived at a particular interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2009).

Chapter 4 – Results

In an effort to develop a deeper understanding of the factors that student co-researchers identify as having an impact on their decision to participate in or remain active participants within a project research team the following three questions will be discussed in a narrative format: (1) What personal changes did student co-researchers experience? (2) How does a Co-operative Inquiry approach contribute to youth engagement and positive youth development? (3) What adult skills are evident in building a strong youth led research project? A narrative is used because it is my intention to transport you, the reader, to the research setting that student co-researchers experienced. Emphasis is on the stories the students told and how their stories were shared (Merriam, 2009). Similarly, case studies, which have as their goal to convey understanding, contain enough description to provide a vicarious experience for the reader (Merriam, 2009, p. 262).

These narratives will be written to deliberately represent both the voice of the research team and the student co-researchers. The primary purpose is to explore the research experiences of the student co-researchers in this study however, as a way of illustrating the interplay between student and adult co-researchers, the voices and experiences of the adult co-researchers will also be included. The names are all pseudonyms, including the adult co-researchers.

Getting Started – The Environment

It is a warm spring day and the four adult co-researchers are preparing for their first training session. The drive into Langford, where the meeting will be held, is filled with excitement, anticipation and last minute planning. Someone asks whether we should do an icebreaker to start the training session off “after all, icebreakers are supposed to help people get to know each other”. Some think it’s a great idea but the others are not so sure, we come to a consensus and decide against an icebreaker. We arrive at the school board office, enter the boardroom and begin setting up for our first training session; the students will be arriving shortly.

Physical Environment

The boardroom served as the meeting space for all nine training sessions. The board office in the Sooke School District 62 is generally used for regular board meetings, special public board meetings and for the Education Committee of the Whole Meetings. Issues pertaining to district finances, services and education programs are often the items on the public agendas. Student attendance at the board meetings is rare; when the eighteen student co-researchers are surveyed all students admit that this was their first time in the boardroom.

Although the boardroom was initially a foreign place to the student co-researchers they have many fond memories of the space. When Jessica reflects on her experience the boardroom is associated with comfort and familiarity.

Jessica: ...the board office was kind of like a comfort to us, that’s where we came, we had our dinner there, we had our meeting, we were just used to it ... we got into a routine knowing that this is where we go, this is what we eat, this is who we see, this is what we talked about so I think that was kind of a comfort – the way everything stayed the same for a majority of the time.

During one of the reflection cycles the facilitator wraps up by asking the student co-researchers the following questions: “what worked well today”? And what do you wish we have at the next meeting session – “I wish list”? When it is time for the “I wish list,” Rebecca immediately answers: *More comfy chairs, the seats are really comfortable, I like having meetings here.*

Furthermore, during informal conversations the student co-researchers continually request to hold meetings at the boardroom and Morgan, who is familiar with the booking process, takes initiative and books the district boardroom for an upcoming planning meeting. Although, Morgan found that the district office was booked on several occasions she persisted and made sure the research team returned to the boardroom.

Supportive Environment

The positive atmosphere that is felt during training sessions and/or meetings at the boardroom keeps coming up in conversations. This environment was not created artificially instead the research team established group norms and a team code of conduct at the onset of the project. While Sue, one of the adult co-researchers, prepares to take notes on a flipchart the student co-researchers begin to call out group norms:

Having a voice, feeling safe, treating one another with respect, creating a trusting environment and no judgment, no leaving people out instead creating an inclusive environment, providing encouragement – a supportive nudge, acknowledging one another by taking a genuine interest in ideas, reflecting on actions and maintaining a positive environment.

Discussion further continues about the group norms and the facilitator asks “how do we support engagement and a sense of belonging among our team”? From this discussion a “team code” is created. Seven items are considered a priority for the group: (1) *create a comfortable environment*, (2) *work it out one on one*, (3) *reflect on the situation – step*

back from the conflict, (4) seek mentors and mediators, (5) don't let it fester, (6) have a sense of responsibility – work for the community, and (6) use all ideas.

Although the group norms and team code were never formally discussed again Jessica reminisces about what worked in the project and what she would recommend for future projects.

Jessica: I think my thing would be is that you have to connect everyone. You have to feel as if you are a family, you have that connection – like we had after the first time ... when people left you feel like you miss that person like that was your family and I think if you were to do this again I think you would really need to have that not formal but informal way of running it – that's when you get people to really open up in your group...

To further elaborate on this point I followed up with a Jordan and asked “how and who created that atmosphere? How was such a connection formed? What allowed that to happen?”

Jordan: I think kind of the way everyone was really happy and the way Anna was there and she was kind of like a mother she was just so kind – the way that everyone would always smile and everyone was really happy. I think that kind of made people connect which is the warm openness of the way.

David, although not part of this conversation adds:

David: The other team members that were in the project were more like a group of friends rather than just like a research team. I also felt more comfortable when I was there I wasn't being talked down to or judged.

The adult co-researchers reflect on their first day of training and seem quite pleased they decided against the icebreaker, it was not how the students wanted to meet each other. During the reflection cycle when the facilitator asked, “what worked well today?” Amy responded “*No lame icebreakers*” – the others laugh and nodded in agreement.

Clearly, the icebreakers may have not been a favoured activity but David, Jessica and Debra feel there were opportunities to get to know the research team.

David: Most fun I think was the training sessions at the beginning when we were all just meeting each other and we did the activities and worked in groups.

Jessica: It was great to have youth from all different groups and all different backgrounds and we were just able to come together and work as one. It didn't matter who you are what kind of things you were into you, you're working as a team and I think that was the strongest part of our group – just being able to work as a team...

Debra: I liked getting to know students that maybe you would've not gotten to know even in the group. Like I think the group was made up of all sorts of people. There were people from the band, the popular kids at school and maybe people that no one really knew people that came from all different schools.

Again the adult co-researcher's hunches were correct, "let's not split up the groups according to age or grade, the student co-researchers can work as one team".

Building a Team – Online and Offline

A team environment was quickly fostered both inside and outside the training and meeting sessions. Inside the boardroom students had an opportunity to work together as one large group or pair off and make decisions in smaller groups. Outside the boardroom a *62 Ways to Change the World* facebook group was created. All eighteen student co-researchers connected virtually by joining the facebook group and continue their boardroom conversations using the social networking platform.

The research team is in the midst of branding themselves and several logos have been developed. The team needs to make a final decision about the logos, the t-shirt colour and finally where the logo will be placed on the t-shirt. No decisions have been

made inside the boardroom so photographs of the logo are uploaded on facebook and a wall message is posted by Sue.

Sue: Hey gang, we need to make a decision about the logos and t-shirts. Anna has used all your ideas with a few different colour and design options for the front and back design. Can you please let me know which design you like for the front and which design you like for the back, choose only one front design and only one back design. Please vote on the design by writing your name in the photo comment box. We need to make a decision by Monday - April 20, 2009. Good luck :-)

The team members know what they like and more than fourteen facebook comments are posted, prior to the deadline:

Morgan: LOVE THIS! I think this should go on the front of the T-shirt over the heart.

Mary: This is good. Why not put it on the back with "you tell us" beside it?

David: This one = awesome!!! It's a must

Jordan: Ya I love this one! But more pink!!!!!!! Hahahaha see you guys on Friday.

Throughout the project student co-researchers and adult co-researchers continue to use facebook to communicate, upload photos and videos, and request feedback. A group photograph was recently posted and a conversation quickly surfaced:

Morgan: Such an amazing team!

David: indeed Morgan!

Sam: perfect memory shot, I love it!

Getting Involved – In Research?

The training sessions and meetings have been going well. The students are attending the scheduled meetings, the pizza arrives on time and Jessica acknowledges the

adults intuitive nature: *“the adults learned quickly that this food is the way to win our hearts over.”* Sharing, eating, reflecting and laughing have become a weekly ritual for this group and one that has impacted the students tremendously. What may have started off as a foreign idea that was presented to the students by their school councillors or teachers, has turned into a rich learning experience that has inspired the students to act and ignited a desire to make a difference in the school system. Jordan remembers when his school councillor approached him to take part in the project:

Jordan: Well the school councillor came up to me in the hallway and said, “Ummm... what are you doing? Do you have a job?” ... He said I would be good in this project, I didn’t know what it was but I went to the meeting anyway – he said money – my brain said money and then, I dunno it was actually really good, I learned a lot from this project, a new experience I guess.

In an effort to clarify my understanding about Jordan’s motivation I asked him the following question: *The councillor motivated you and I guess the money was a big motivation?* He responded *ya, but it’s not all about the money cause we aren’t getting any now and I’m still here so its okay.*

Back in the boardroom a training session begins with student co-researchers individually reflecting on the activities that they believe facilitate positive youth development. Forms are filled out and submitted to one of the adult co-researchers and a large group discussion follows. The forms are quickly reviewed and tallied and more than forty activities are identified. Activities range from writing and reading to horseback riding to attending mass and hitchhiking. Although there were a variety of activities listed research was not mentioned by any of the student co-researchers. Since the student co-researchers continued to participate in the research project I was curious

what attracted them to the research project? During one of our meetings, Maria, Mary, David and Debra shed some light on my question.

Maria: I really got into youth advocacy because I really had a lot of people that helped and I figured that sometimes youth that have lots of issues in their lives don't have the support that they need, in a lot of ways they don't have the people in their lives to help them. I figured this project would shed some light on why youth are dropping out of school and maybe give some youth that didn't have support in their lives some support.

Mary: I had friends who were going to drop out or were looking at it and it just seemed like instead of doing the nagging and making them angry with me, it makes it seem more positive to try to help them and it also is something that seemed really important to me something I thought strongly about.

David: Earlier in the school, like elementary and middle, I always got bullied and stuff and at one point I wanted to drop out of school because I couldn't handle it. When I heard that this project was coming to the school I really wanted to help people stay in school cause even though I wanted to drop out, when I stayed in I started making friends and doing better in school and I felt really happy.

Debra: What attracted me was that we were going to be learning about why people don't drop out of school and I wasn't doing to well in school myself and I thought it would help me see what everyone else's view was on it.

Clearly, this research project was an avenue for student co-researchers like Maria, Mary, David and Debra to reflect on their personal experiences, learn about the issues at hand and use their knowledge to impact change.

The research team has met on several occasions already, a team code of conduct has been established, purple t-shirts with a logo have been ordered and the team is finally ready to begin preparing for their key informative interviews and focus groups. David, Jessica and Debra are not sure what to expect since this will be their first introduction to qualitative action research.

David: Well I wasn't experienced in research very much. Mostly I thought of research projects where you look up facts on the Internet and try to make a little presentation.

Jessica: When I thought of research before I just thought a lot of work and lots of thinking and stuff, I instantly thought research is computer and books.

Debra: My view of research was that you go on the Internet and kind of like Google things – that's if you do a research project I just go – you know what I mean – and Google stuff.

For some students like Jordan this upcoming experience was an extension of his previous knowledge.

Jordan: I understood quite a bit of research – I've been part of a bunch of different projects. Usually it's more about the subject of the project versus the researcher but I understood that it was you know – you had discussions and you talked and calculated data and made an opinion on it but it is a lot of work to do a research project, it's just not a matter of going out and talking to people.

Conducting Interviews

In an effort to connect with the interviewees the research team drafts and redrafts interview questions and prepares an interview script. Sections that were prepared by the adults are scrutinized by the students and often changed; students want to make sure the interviewees understand the information. Sylvia who may have not felt comfortable sharing her suggestions during the group meeting e-mails her recommendations to Anna.

Sylvia: Hey Anna, Just wondering if this script is the same as the one that we reviewed last Friday? I like this one, but I do think it is repetitive and the kids may get bored easily. As well, I think as researchers we should try and hold more of a conversation with the youth we are interviewing. If someone wanted to interview me I would want to feel as though we had open communication and trust. Also, I don't know how I would feel about someone handing me a sheet of paper and filling it out. On a positive note, I do like the base of the questions; it's just that I think the interviews need to be more one-on-one.

Discussions surrounding the research questions are ongoing. However, one question in particular gets more attention than the rest and in order to include everyone in the discussion the facilitator invites the group back to the round table and poses the question “why do people drop out of school?” Before the facilitator can say anything

else the students begin to shout their answers out. Sue writes frantically on the flipchart and captures sixteen responses, some of which include: *“it is just them, they have a lack of motivation”*, *“they do not fit in at school”*, *“ongoing family pattern”* and *“some don’t see the relevance – where am I going to use this”*.

The interview scripts are finalized and the student researchers pilot their questions with one another. It is during the pilot phase when the team has an opportunity to be both an interviewer and an interviewee. Jessica, when asked to think about what helped her learn during the project, feels the pilot phase was her biggest learning experience.

Jessica: ...I think when we did interviews with each other that taught me the most. When I did an interview with Debra and Morgan you learn from just pretending to be someone else. When we interviewed each other I think we learned a lot.

Each student is responsible for conducting a minimum of ten interviews and it becomes clear that some students go over and beyond their goal of ten interviews whereas other students fall short of their requirements. Regardless of the outcome Jessica and Maria deem the group meetings integral to the data collection process; they feel the reflection process contributes to their research practice and use the opportunity to share interviewing strategies.

Jessica: Once you go into the field it is smart to have meetings – it’s good to see what is working and what’s not. If this isn’t working for you well why do you think that is? Do you think it’s because you’re coming on too harshly or do you think maybe because you’re losing that innocence of being a student co-researcher or are you more of an experienced co-researcher.

Maria: There was concern about the low representation of males in the study and so I went back in the field. I found that for boys it works well to get the information while they are moving as they are more comfortable talking while being active. I interviewed a boy during lacrosse practice and got another interview with a male while he was cleaning up the band room.

While conducting the key informative interviews student co-researchers are also preparing for their focus groups. All five schools will host one focus group and student co-researchers, if available, will act as the facilitators in each school.

Conducting Focus Groups

Similar to the group norms and “team code” that was developed at the onset of the project the facilitator suggests the research team takes some time to discuss focus group guidelines. The floor is open and student co-researchers contribute to the discussion spontaneously. Once all the ideas are recorded Laura reads from the flipchart and summarizes the discussion. She reminds the co-researchers that during the focus groups:

Laura: All co-researchers will wear their t-shirts, co-researchers will arrive one hour before their scheduled focus group to set up, we will be modest and sincere throughout the focus group session and we will build a trusting environment so that participants feel safe.

The facilitator thanks Laura for her contributions and then addresses the floor by asking a follow up question “how can trust be built during a focus group?” Again, contributions are spontaneous but Sue captures the following on chart paper:

In order to build trust with other students we will: smile, not act psychotic, not assume we are better than the participants and we will relate to other students by sharing stories.

Although general focus group guidelines have been established Debra, Maria and Morgan are still concerned about making the other students feel comfortable throughout the focus groups. As a result they come up with strategies that they believe will help create an environment where students will feel more comfortable participating in a focus group.

Debra: We will not use a scripted introduction, we will introduce the group as 62 Ways to Change the World and then state our names.

Maria: When discussing what supports and motivates youth to stay in school we would like this answer to be done in small groups. A co-researcher will be at each table facilitating and encouraging the students. The optimal group size is 6 to 10 students per table.

Morgan: Don't use the term elements but use the term factors when discussing the factors that support youth to stay in school – elements sounds too formal.

Reflecting on Practice

Mary, Debra and Maria have conducted their interviews and have attended several focus groups. When I asked them to reflect on their role as a student co-researcher they each take a few minutes to think about their practice and begin sharing their thoughts with me.

Mary: The youth co-researcher is a student who pretty much has the same role as the adult, is on an equal playing field, is able to contribute in everyway like with the work and also the ideas and is able to give a more unique perspective – like closer to what you are researching.

Debra: As students we go out and interview youth to get the answers but in our own way – almost like we reach out better, I see it as youth to youth.

Maria: To do the research that is being assisted by the adults and to go out and do the research with a student on more of a peer-to-peer basis versus an adult to youth basis. It's more of a youth to youth peer to peer basis, its more like connecting sometimes more understanding them because they can relate a lot better, especially when like you're talking to somebody in your school, you can really relate to them...

I think to myself that the three young women value their role as a student co-researcher and they want me to understand that an adult, such as me, may never experience what they have had.

In between final and provincial exams the research team has successfully completed their interviews and conducted five focus groups. However, this experience

was not as seamless as one would imagine. Jordan exhaustively addresses the demanding priorities that he had to juggle and Debra mentions how she had to keep a close eye on her school responsibilities.

Jordan: We are so busy in our lives, we have school, we have work, we have home, we have lives and have basically two jobs and juggling homework and juggling other problems, we have our lives, this is always a hard thing.

Debra: It takes a lot of time to be able to do it – you definitely have to be able to have a good standing in your school with your teachers cause it does sometimes when it comes to presentations and conferences and things like that it does sometimes mean missing classes here and there.

In an effort to alleviate some of the research pressures the mounts of collected data is entered into a qualitative computer software (NVivo) by the adult co-researchers. Although the research team continues to analyze the data during the team meetings Mary feels disconnected from the research process and wishes she was more involved in the analysis.

Mary: It would have been interesting to see how we found –how it became all the information – that part that we kind of missed, we just saw the whole thing-we didn't see how that happened, even though it sounds like the hardest part to do and the most tedious part but it would have been interesting to see.

With over 350 student voices captured there is a sense of excitement among the group. However, trying to make sense of the data is a bit daunting and the research team feels overwhelmed since there is no protocol that tells you where to begin. Maria breaks the ice and begins the conversation by talking about the data collection process and what she experienced when she was in the field.

Maria: What really stood out to me for this project was how many youth actually finally opened up to us when we sat down and made that connection with them and how much data we managed to collect.

Debra is also eager to share her experience but says her story is a bit different. During the data collection phase Debra was in middle school and she felt the focus group sessions helped her transition into high school.

Debra: Just getting out of middle school is a bit step and I kind of knew more about everything going into high school. It made me feel more comfortable going into high school and also knowing a few people that go to Belmont.

Before anyone could interrupt Debra continues to share a personal story about how she began to rethink some of her decisions during the data collection phase.

Debra: Last year I had a problem attending school regularly and honestly felt like I was going to drop out myself. Then I was put into this group and I talked to many people of all ages and it really made me wake up and realize I need school, its important.

Debra's experience is very personal and the research team acknowledges her courage by clapping after she finishes. The team feels inspired and both Jordan and Maria want to address some of the changes that they too experienced. Jordan begins by sharing his experience with the interviewees and how they personally impacted him. Maria follows and speaks about how she was able to inspire someone close to her.

Jordan: I'm just feeling from other students that I interviewed that they're going through the same thing sort of what I am. Me being actually in it and being involved and trying to change things has helped me go to school and have a voice which I never had before-ish and maybe a better person because back in tenth grade, before I even knew about this project I skipped liked everyday and I didn't go to school but now I'm going to school everyday – it changed basically.

Maria: The results of this project have a really special meaning for me. My boyfriend of almost two years dropped out of school when he was seventeen, which was like eight years ago, and until September of 2009 every time you talked to him about school he shut down on you. I got him to do this survey with me finally and I got some information about filling it out the right way which allowed me to have the tools I needed and gave him enough that he actually registered it. He is now going to a learning centre on adult education and he is actually set to graduate with his high school diploma that was eight years in the making. I assure that greatness to this project.

Learning through Practice

I meet with the students individually and we begin chatting about the weekend or what they did the night before. David tells me about a new movie he just watched and Maria tells me about her work politics. I usually share something about the University, the story of my life. We meet in the food court of a mall or at a local coffee shop. Sometimes we have a bite to eat and other times we just order a beverage. Before we begin discussing the interview questions Jessica laughs and says, “*I think it’s funny that I am now getting interviewed.*” I smile because I was thinking something similar. We begin and I pose the question “what did you learn by your participating in this project?” Maria says “*a lot*” but focuses in on problem solving, Jordan, although quite outspoken already, mentions communication, David who is rather shy speaks about his boost of confidence and Melissa shares her new goals with me.

Maria: Learning the data and everything lets me now go into my classes and see the classes in a different way like when students are not interested or when things are weird in the class – I almost see it and I can almost problem solve it in a way.

Jordan: I definitely learned how to talk to people better – walking up to people, communicating with people you don’t know well.

David: I learned that we actually have a voice and that someone is actually listening to us. We have a voice that we can change things in the world and we actually make a difference.

Melissa: Throughout this project I had a great experience and it was a lot of fun. I met new friends and even learned new things and this project helped me set new goals in my life to finish school and get good grades and I’m really glad this project is still continuing today and I’m grateful that I got an opportunity to work with these guys.

I follow up by asking who or what helped you learn? Debra and Jessica sit in silence before they begin speaking about the various skills they learned when they had an opportunity to apply them. It was through the “doing” that they felt they were learning.

Debra: It wouldn't be the same if you just talked to us about the interviews and the results. I would've understood it as much as I do now – it wouldn't be the same, I don't think.

Jessica: I think it would be actually meeting with people and doing the stuff that I think probably taught me the most about researching and stuff because even though you train for it, for a couple of weeks, once you actually go and do it you learn okay this technique doesn't work and think this one works and you have to do this and you have to get their attention faster and the you have to explain to them this question better so that taught me a lot. Doing interviews compared to learning how to do interviews. I guess the hands on was a lot more important.

There were many surprises from the data collection phase including: the number of voices that were captured and the active participation during the focus groups. Particularly I was impressed by the way Morgan, Jessica, Donna and Mary generated a number of ideas about what motivates and supports youth to stay in school.

Morgan: I learned that – a lot of it was different things I thought people just drop out because they were bad kids and stuff but I saw it was because lots of youth have family problems – they have bullying problems, there's a whole list of things why youth actually drop out of school and if I didn't participate in this project I probably still see it that way but now I see it in a totally different view.

Jessica: I learned a lot about other people and why people drop out of school. I think before I maybe had a view that they were lazy or that they couldn't or just that they didn't want to do it but then I learned a lot about people that okay they had so many family issues and I think being a student co-researcher they would of told me more – it wasn't just like “I have family problems” they kind of went in depth about “well I have no support” or “I got pregnant when I was sixteen” or that type of thing. I think you get that realization that oh they're not just lazy, you actually get to know their struggles and you realize that you are similar.

Donna: Um before I joined this project I was like pretty closed minded about why kids drop out. I always thought it was just them and a lack of motivation but this really showed me that its not just the kid, there is a lot of other factors of why kids drop out and it just really opened my mind a lot.

Mary: You realize wow I didn't know I though that about people, I didn't know I was judgmental like that. I didn't know I viewed drop outs as whatever you make them as.

Data Dissemination – Preparing and Presenting

Preparing for the Presentation

The research team returns to the boardroom to make some decisions about the town hall meeting that has been scheduled. Morgan suggests we hold it at one of the schools “*it's about staying in school so they should come to us*”. Before an action plan is developed Mary, Debra and Melissa discuss the goals of the research project and what they hope to accomplish during the knowledge-sharing phase.

Mary: I think it's about not only helping youth but about opening the eyes of other people and getting rid of stereotypes – opening the eyes of teachers, administrators, different people that maybe don't see every aspect of the whole thing.

Debra: It's about getting people to see kids point of view almost on why they drop out of school and try to prevent it. Asking for some help you know.

Melissa: Um. To make school a better place.

Jessica, adding to Mary's comment thinks that important people should be invited “*I think presenting to important people so they can get an eye on it, I think that is really good*”. The team has decided that a meeting will be held in one of the high schools and adults who can respond to the results will be invited to attend the meeting. The students request that the adult-co-researchers prepare an initial list of invitees and then the group will add to it.

Since there are only a few days left to develop a presentation and rehearse the script, preparation for the town hall meeting is intense. The school cafeteria has been

transformed and serves as the team's meeting place. Each workstation is covered with snacks, laptops and papers and Melissa, Mary, Maria and David are quite pleased with how the team is utilizing their unique skills and continuing to work as team.

Melissa: When everyone works together I guess we can do a lot.

Mary: Um we put all our research together and stuff that was really good.

Maria: Everybody helped a lot in the project and helped put things together so having that support helped.

David: Well I know that normally we all contributed cause normally when I am in groups I have to do all the work. We were all there because we wanted to be there so it was fun.

The Day of the Presentation

The day of the presentation arrives and Debra recollects how she was feeling before she had to present.

Debra: I was so scared I remember our first presentation I was like my heart was beating so fast and I was like oh my God I'm going to mess up what do I say. But then I come back to reality and think its okay. It definitely gave me confidence for sure.

When the room begins to fill up Melissa and Jessica are surprised by the broad interest within the community. Mayors, school trustees, an MLA, an MP, superintendents, the teachers' union, school staff, parents, NGO reps as well as other community leaders arrive, sit at their designated seats and begin to listen attentively.

Melissa: What really stood out to me was how much different people wanted to know about our project. All the people that asked questions and how much they liked our project...

Jessica: I think lots of people are touched by our project, I think we accomplished our goal.

When the presentation is over and the audience has left the building the group reconvenes and takes a moment to breathe. The facilitator begins by saying "you did it"

and congratulates all the student co-researchers. When the facilitator asks how the students felt presenting David and Melissa share their thoughts; while listening to them I can almost feel their sense of relief.

David: I found it more comfortable to speak in public which I am normally terrified of presenting things.

Melissa: I am not so shy in front of big audiences anymore and I was really shy before I started this project.

I was a bit worried that the town hall meeting did not go as planned but, I was not too concerned. When the research team should have been discussing the next steps I noticed the student co-researchers took charge and began engaging in a bi-directional spontaneous conversation with the audience and adult partners. Anna, one of the other adult co-researchers recollects what she experienced during the presentation.

Anna: The students surprised us with their ability to articulate the results of the study and the impact of this process upon them personally and also upon the youth they interviewed.

After the Presentation – Back to the Classroom

When Jordan, Maria and Mary return to the classroom on Monday morning their hard work is acknowledged by the school community. Teachers, school administrators and staff take a genuine interest in the research project and the three students are impacted by this support. Jordan's teachers are proud of him, Maria is being consulted by her principal and teachers and Mary visits the office for the first time.

Jordan: Lots of teachers are proud of me, oh when I say I can't go to class because of meetings with UVic and going to conferences – they're like "oh we're proud of you, we understand".

Maria: The support of the project of the schools is really great – all the teachers and principals are really great about listening and letting us out of classes, supporting us when we needed it... the principal and teachers are really going

okay, lets meet with co-researchers and ask what can we can do. I have teachers in my classes that realize that I'm part of this project and their asking me, their throwing questions at me, about different data and wanting to know little things that I've noticed in their classes, little things that could be done differently or little things that could be added to just make it sort of one step closer to being more interactive. They want to know things that they could do better, things they can change, things they do really well.

Mary: I spend a lot more time talking to administration and getting me excused. I got to know the principal better, someone who I've probably would've never met if it wasn't for the project... it is valuable because I've never really known anyone in the office or any of the real decision makers in the schools. I've never been in the office talking to anyone before this project.

However, Debra's and Melissa's experience in the classroom is a bit different than Jordan's, Maria's and Mary's. Both Debra and Melissa are concerned about the lack of support that their teachers express.

Debra: I guess if my teachers were more understanding about it sometimes cause I guess sometimes I would have to attend the meeting and they would be like "well you already missed so much school and stuff" and I would be like well I have to go you know, so I guess more support from my teachers would have been better but its wasn't that bad.

Melissa: School support? Maybe teachers mostly because of the homework we miss sometimes.

Summer Holidays – What? A Break?

The summer holidays are ahead of the research team and some adult and student co-researchers are planning to go on vacation. The team has not scheduled any meetings throughout the summer months but some research members continue to engage in the project. Sylvia who has been keeping in touch with town hall attendees sends a message to the research team to update them on her progress.

Sylvia: Hey guys! How are things? So I know we all have gotten into the summer mode and what not, but I am getting emails from a few people from the life cycles project and wondering if anyone was still wanting to work throughout the rest of the summer! If anyone is interested let me know, and if not I'm sure that is cool

to. I kn...ow how things are so busy right now for a lot of people, so its totally understandable if people aren't down. Anyway get back to me, thank you :)

Sylvia does not get any feedback from the group and as a result no further actions are taken throughout the summer, it seems the majority of the research team has taken a significant break.

September is back to school and everyone has returned from their holidays but the research team has yet to schedule any meetings. When the research team finally meets in October there is a sense of frustration and disorientation in the room. It is clear from Maria and Morgan that a pause in the research project is associated with feelings of confusion.

Maria: I think because its our first time you get a bit lost sometimes cause you don't completely understand the process, obviously we lost some student co-researchers and we were very confused about how things stopped. You're kind of in the dark about things because it's so new to you – but if you catch on and stick through it then you just learn that much more.

Morgan: We didn't know that things pause and start and pause and start so much. Just having that communication about the basics like that.

To alleviate some of the disorganization Jordan thinks the team needs to set a consistent schedule. Jessica agrees and takes on the responsibility of sending out weekly meeting reminders.

Jordan: I think the whole set schedule thing, cause I'm a scheduled kinds of person, I like to know what's going to happen on Thursday at 4 o'clock – so no one will have to skip a meeting.

Jessica: Hey all World Savers, There is a meeting tomorrow! 3:45 at Belmont (either the cafeteria or the couches outside of it).

Mary who did not attend a meeting follows up with the research team on facebook and sets a new standard; from now on if a student or adult co-researcher cannot attend a meeting they send a text message to a team member or post a message on facebook.

Mary: Hey sorry I couldn't make it I was doing some post secondary stuff at Camosun.

Moving Forward – The Future of the Research Team

The research team has been meeting weekly but David and Jessica acknowledge that less student co-researchers have been participating in the project. While this change has not negatively impacted the team it has influenced the group dynamic.

David: Well there is a lot less of us. So that was not very interesting but that sort of could be a good thing as well.

Jessica: I think that kind of break we had maybe divided us a little bit how we broke up we then lost a lot of people but at the same time when we got together we had a core group that was really committed to it.

It does not take long before the research team realizes that it has a lot of work ahead of them. Calendars begin to fill up with a conference presentation, meetings with stakeholders, and a follow up town hall meeting and recruitment target deadlines. When Jessica, Morgan, Maria and Debra discuss their role and project activities they deem public events important. Debra mentions that she feels empowered when she has an opportunity to present, Morgan is happy with the interest from various stakeholders and both Maria and Debra are impacted by the reactions they receive from the audience.

Jessica: Doing the conferences empowered me. We just got up and spoke and we felt so good, everyone felt a kind of high after we spoke and feeling like wow. Maybe you actually changed some people or maybe impacted someone more than you thought.

Morgan: I think speaking at conferences and finding people who want to hear what we were saying is cool and we make our information interesting so that people really want to listen, I think that definitely helped.

Maria: What I like most about the project was when Kristina at the Healthy Youth Today Healthy Youth tomorrow conference when she got up and cried like you know just all the memories of like how much good we've done and how much we

touched and impacted people. A lot of people that I have talked to and stuff they think about a drop out in a whole new way...

Debra: I liked it when I saw that girl was really touched by it; that made me feel like we really accomplished something finally – Oh my God we actually made someone really cry, like sweet. It make me feel like we are actually going to do something, it confirmed – it was really good experience.

Although Mary and Jordan also enjoy the public presentations they say they like the exposure for different reasons.

Mary: I liked our trip downtown and I like that I got to meet a lot of different people.

Jordan: You get recognized in some places and you get that it's a good experience I think like we – like the presentation are like cool I got to meet a lot of different people doing it.

There is still a lot of work to be done but Jordan, Mary, David and Jessica are optimistic about the future of the project. They affirm their commitment by continuing to take part in the project and identify steps that need to be taken in order to see some action.

Jordan: Ah honestly I want to see this project go really really far, I actually want to see the school system change and say oh ya I was part of that and we are getting there. We were on the news, on the paper, radio – we are getting there.

Mary: As the project is still ongoing I don't think we've quite finished the goal of changing the school system but I think if we were to keep going then we would be able to do it if we kept meeting with people, going to conferences.

David: ...we are starting to meet with like principals in schools which if the principals are interested they can start maybe facilitating small changes like within their own school that would make students more aware of stuff which would ultimately help our cause.

Jessica: I don't know it just would be really sad if it had to end and I think that hopefully it will keep going – I think I'm going to be really sad if I have to not do it so I think it would be really cool if it would keep going and that more students would be impacted. Even if the schools weren't changed – even if people the community wasn't affected by it – even if just the fact that those 18 co-researchers and the four supporting adults were involved I think its enough just the 18

students changed. Even if we don't change the world we still have 62 ways to change each other, so I think that hopefully if students keep going as long as it still impacts someone I think its worth it.

Chapter 5 – Discussion, Limitations, Implication for Practice, And Recommendations for Future Research

It was important for me to conduct research that includes the perspectives of student co-researchers on what they consider the benefits of participating in research from their experience. I sense that the benefits that I will discuss below are much more real and meaningful in young people's lives and, through my understanding, I hope to provide adult co-researchers and other project partners with new ways and depths of understanding as to how to engage with young people in research, which is mutually beneficial or at the very least provides a positive engaging experience. However, I acknowledge that what follows reflects primarily my thoughts, my analyses and my interpretations which may reflect the experiences of the student co-researchers in a subjective manner.

This chapter will begin with a discussion that addresses the three questions guiding this study. Emerging themes from the narrative analysis will be highlighted and I will provide a brief overview of their significance. This will be followed by a discussion that highlights the limitations of the research, the implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Discussion Related to Question 1: What personal changes did student co-researchers experience?

The research project required a commitment on the part of the student co-researchers to engage at each stage of the research process, from brainstorming and prioritizing ideas, to planning the activities, and making decisions, to engaging in action, and finally to reflecting on the experience.

Having been trained in various research techniques it would be assumed that the student co-researcher would discuss, in greater detail, the technical skills they acquired throughout the data collection and analysis process. However, the primary skills and attributes the student co-researchers acquired throughout the project included: problem solving skills, communication skills, teamwork, confidence and goal setting. The skills and attributes that the student co-researches acquired throughout the project will not only contribute to their current development but will serve them well later on. For example knowledge acquired throughout the research process can be of great use in future academic pursuits and/or career goals. In short, young people learn a great deal about themselves that will become a basis for future decisions and actions (Delgado, & Staples, 2008, p. 154).

In addition to the above skills and attributes, important changes occurred at both the individual and the community levels. By involving various groups of people in the research project (students, school staff, university researchers, and community members) student co-researchers felt more comfortable engaging in the school and local community. In the school community one student co-researcher mentioned that she met

with decision makers in her school for the first time as a result of this project. Another student mentioned that he was more inclined to volunteer for other school activities because he knew more people. Outside the school community one student became more involved in youth advocacy as she felt she now had the skills to make a difference.

Jones, & Perkins (2006) believe that,

By providing training and incorporating youth-driven approaches, youth may have more affirmative belief that they are not just consumers of services but full partners contributing to their own development and that of the community.

(p.105)

Clearly, establishing strong social connections and a network base that reflects positive group contact contributes to feelings of belonging and results in engagement.

The impact of the experience varied for each student co-researcher but the underlying theme was that student co-researchers participated in the project because they believed that they had the capacity to effect change. Some students felt the school system needed to transform whereas other students believed that if the project can positively impact one person it was worth the effort. By raising awareness through public appearances the student co-researchers felt they were able to achieve the group's immediate goals and this sense of achievement did wonders for young people who previously have not experienced significant success in their lives. In a number of instances student co-researchers commented on how surprised they were by audience reactions. The external support and "validation" motivated the student co-researchers to continue to participate in the project and work toward achieving the group's long-term

goals. Delgado, & Staples (2008) add that when achievements are accomplished within a group context, positive feelings are intensified (p. 151).

Finally an important theme that came out of the narrative analysis was that student co-researchers experienced a transformation in how they understood the question “why do young people drop out of school”. At the onset of the project the research team discussed the question in detail and the students blamed the individual for their actions. It was through the research process, specifically during the data collection phase, where the student co-researchers began to perceive individuals who were thinking about dropping out or have dropped out in a different light. The student co-researchers began to discuss the various pressures that the students faced and no longer blamed the individual for their decision. Developing a greater understanding of the research issue helped student co-researchers eliminate their stereotypes and resulted in further questions; which I believe is pivotal to any research experience.

In light of this discussion it is important to build capacity and support initiatives where young people are participating in research that is relevant to their needs. By strengthening young people’s understanding and by engaging them in the whole research process young peoples’ voices are strengthened, meaningful relationships are built that are based on mutual responsibility and respect, and knowledge is generated that contributes to greater understanding.

Discussion Related to Question 2: How does a Co-operative Inquiry approach contribute to youth engagement and positive youth development?

Smith (2003) reports that we now know that everyone learns in a different way and authentic student engagement in the community offers an alternative learning

experience. She adds that the benefits of student engagement not only offers an alterative learning experience but students become more involved in the school and community, they have an opportunity to experience real-world learning and students become more motivated and committed to learning. Throughout the research project student co-researchers had an opportunity to participate in decisions that affected their lives. From a youth development perspective, this means encouraging young people to participate in all aspects of a project, from idea to outcome and all the challenges that lie between (Hohenemser, & Marshall, 2002, p. 160).

A Co-operative Inquiry, as a method, is based on people examining their own experience and action carefully in collaboration with people who share similar concerns and interests (Reason, 2003). Furthermore the methodology of Co-operative Inquiry draws on a fourfold extended epistemology: experiential knowing which occurs through direct face to face encounter with a person, place or thing; presentational knowing grows out of experiential knowing and provides the first form of expression (i.e. story, sculpture, drawing, etc.); propositional knowing draws on concepts and ideas; and practical knowing consummates the other forms of knowing in action in the world (Reason, 2003). To gain a better understanding of how a Co-operative Inquiry approach contributes to youth engagement and positive youth development the logistics of a Co-operative Inquiry will be outlined below, specifically the four phases of reflection and action will be addressed. Although the research team repeated the cycles of reflection and action several times only one cycle will be used as an example.

Phase 1: a group of co-researchers come together to explore an agreed area of human activity.

In this first phase the student co-researchers developed and agreed upon group norms and a “team code”. A team logo was created and the student co-researchers began branding the project. Next the student co-researchers explored in depth their understanding of the research issue and how they were going to approach the inquiry. It was in this phase where student co-researchers agreed on the focus of the inquiry and developed together with the adult co-researchers questions that they wished to explore. The modes of knowing that were primarily evident in this phase included propositional and presentational knowing. Drawing on various ideas and concepts students created graphics and slogans to help clarify what they wanted to inquire about.

Phase 2: the co-researchers engage in the action agreed upon. They observe and record the process and outcomes of their own and each other’s experience.

Prior to going into the field the students were not certain how their peers would respond to their questions nor were student co-researchers certain about their level of preparation. Once the student co-researchers engaged in the actions agreed upon the team felt it was important to meet and reflect on their project experience. By reflecting on their experience student co-researchers had an opportunity to discuss their progress, ask questions and strategize. For example when there was concern about the low representation of males in the study one student shared her data collection strategies. The mode of knowing that was primarily evident in this phase was practical knowing. Reason (2003) states that practical knowledge is about knowing how and how not to engage in

appropriate action and co-researchers begin to notice how practice does and does not conform to their original ideas.

Phase 3: the co-researchers become fully immersed in and engaged with their experience. They may deepen into the experience so that superficial understandings are elaborated and developed.

During the key informative interviews and focus groups students had an opportunity to go beyond their circle of friends and connect with students they may have not spoken to otherwise. It was clear from the data that students formed relationships with interviewees and developed new skills and attributes. When student co-researchers put their learning into perspective they acknowledged that their views of the research issue changed. It was through the application process, the face-to-face encounters with other students, that student co-researchers developed new insights and began thinking creatively about the issue at hand. The mode of knowing that was evident in this phase was experiential knowing which is described as “that kind of in-depth knowing which is almost impossible to put into words” (Reason, 2003, p. 207).

Phase 4: after being engaged in phases 2 and 3, the co-researchers reassemble to consider their original propositions and questions in the light of their experience. As a result, they may modify, develop or reframe them; or reject them and pose new questions.

Once the student co-researchers collected and analyzed their data they began presenting their results to various stakeholders. It was clear from the presentations that there were additional questions to address. Not only did the audience members generate new questions but also student co-researchers began to think about the next steps of the project and what questions the group needed to focus on.

A Co-operative Inquiry provides opportunities for authentic student engagement in the school and local community. Engaging young people in research fulfills a genuine need in the community of interest while maintaining a connection to academic content. In the project *62 Ways to Change the World* student co-researchers got involved in creating interventions to deal with real issues affecting the school district and local community. Clearly, engaging young people in research and/or evaluation is an excellent way for students to have a true experience of decision-making and learn about issues that are relevant to their realities. Nevertheless, opportunities for knowledge generating and developing creative solutions to long-standing problems will be constrained if group members do not have the ability to share their expertise and opinions (Mitra, 2008, p. 236).

Beyond providing a means for power dispersion in the project *62 Ways to Change the World* the participatory process tapped into the unique perspectives, wisdom, information, and lived expertises of the student co-researchers who did not hold positions of leadership in the local community or in the school administrative hierarchies (Delgado, & Staples, 2008). Taking the time to get it right by involving those most impacted by decisions usually is more efficient in the long run, with the ideas, insights, and initiatives of the “amateurs” transforming both the process and the product of resolving social issues (Delgado, & Staples, 2008, p. 98).

Discussion Related to Question 3: What adult skills are evident in building a strong youth led research project?

Youth spend an incredible amount of time during their first eighteen years of life in school, which with rare exceptions is when they are completely under the control of adults (Delgado, & Staples, 2008, p. 66). Jones and Perkins (2006) add that:

Many youth programs fit into the traditional program structure wherein youth are receivers and adults are the providers. As youth enter their middle-adolescent (ages 14-17) years, they become identity seekers and need to have more decision-making power. Thus, traditional programs may perpetuate the impression of adult-authority, ignoring the identity-seeking nature of adolescents and in turn discouraging motivated youth. (p. 92)

However, strengthening local youth and adult relationships could potentially be a successful strategy for addressing community issues and a tremendous learning process for both youth and adults (Jones, & Perkins, 2006).

One factor that may potentially strengthen relationships among young people and adults is frequent contact. Frequent contact among student co-researchers and adults was deemed an important factor in the project *62 Ways to Change the World*. However, it was crucial to use means of communication that young people use on a daily basis. Facebook and text messaging were more effective communication modes in this project than e-mail. This was an important lesson for adult co-researchers because it eliminated lag time in between activities. Throughout the project both the adult and student co-researchers needed to receive feedback in a timely manner. The adult co-researchers found that student co-researchers did not respond to e-mails as frequently as they did to a

facebook message so this became the preferred communication method. Since not all adult co-researchers had a facebook account student co-researchers sent text messages to those adults who they could not reach over facebook. By remaining flexible and by respecting the needs of the student co-researchers, young people became more engaged in the project and felt more comfortable communicating with adults. Taylor (2009) found that frequent contact does not appear to be unwelcome by young people. She found in her study that with less frequent contact, the events and participants' subjective experiences might not have been captured. She goes on to say that because of frequent contact many young people express a desire for their participation in a project to continue beyond its conclusion.

When young people work with adults to organize for various initiatives, this activity serves to build community and establish connections across age groups, pooling resources and experiences, and increasing the likelihood of sustained social change (Delgado, & Staples, 2008, p. 66). In the project *62 Ways to Change the World* not every young person wanted to assume total leadership roles but the student co-researchers still wanted to contribute to the project's outcomes. One student co-researcher mentioned that he felt comfortable attending the training sessions and meetings because he was not being judged. He also acknowledged that he did not always have ideas to contribute but he liked attending and listening to the other students. Although adults may assume young people may want to experience a "leadership" role this may not be case for every student co-researcher. However, it is important that adults create an environment where every participant is given an opportunity to exercise decision-making skills and are encouraged to learn from their successes and failures.

Two additional key factors that were critically important for the student co-researchers participation in the research project included: *recognition and transformation*. Student co-researchers wanted to be respected, they wanted their views be taken seriously and that recognition was most deeply experienced when they were invited to talk directly with decision-makers. The importance of being offered the opportunity to have a say, be listened to and be asked for a viewpoint was mentioned several times throughout the research process. Although many of the student co-researchers expressed their nervousness about presenting in front of a large audience all students wanted an opportunity to present. Getting in front of a group of strangers instilled a sense of confidence and when the students reflected on their experience they associated public speaking with positive feelings. By working with adult co-researchers, meeting with school administrators and presenting to large audiences of stakeholders students began to view their knowledge as worthwhile and were motivated to continue in the research project.

Unfortunately, most young people have been socialized to think about knowledge as only worthwhile when imparted by adults (Delgado, & Staples, 2008, p. 171). However, this case study has served as an example that adults can and should be receptive to learning from young people and engage in an ongoing dialogue. In the case of this project a Co-operative Inquiry facilitated learning between student and adult co-researchers and clearly impacted how the young people in the project perceive their relationships with adult partners and their community. Consistent with The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (2002) findings one of the most important characteristics of a successful program is the young people's feeling toward the adults

that work with them. Young people need competent, stable adults who care about them, listen to them, and respect them (as cited in Hohenemser, & Marshall, 2002).

Limitations

As I reflect on the limitations of this research study three items are considered in greater detail. First, the issue of resources, second, implementing an adult initiated research agenda and third, the scope of the project.

Resources

The research project – *62 Ways to Change the World* was extremely resource-intensive and the original budget did not realistically reflect the amount of time and effort spent on the project. The principal investigator along with the student and adult co-researchers invested a number of unpaid hours that were crucial to the sustainability of the research project. Students requested additional support during and after the data collection phase and it was crucial to add training sessions. Although these meetings were not initially accounted for it was important to hold them so that the students were adequately prepared and research standards were maintained. In addition to the time invested by project participants the following financial items were incurred: weekly meeting food bills, student co-researcher stipends at the onset of the project, transportation as the onset of the project, adult co-researcher stipends, administration and accounting and project resources.

Due to the principal investigator's generous contribution I had a limited pool of funding for my phase of the research study. Although it was enough to cover the costs of the students' lunch or dinner and a gift certificate, of their choice, I struggled with this

financial strain. Delgado (2006) reminds us that “payment of salary or wages symbolizes recognition of knowledge and skills, conveys worth, serves a powerful motivator, and increases youth participation in decision making” (p. 217). Although this was not an issue for the student co-researchers I understood that I was potentially engaging in contradictory practice since I was not recognizing their work.

Implementing an adult initiated research agenda

Due to limited resources and the timing constraints the initiated research and the students’ participation was sought only after the research agenda had been decided by the adults. Although the student co-researchers were aware of the research prior to the development of the proposal, their contribution was limited. The students had an opportunity provide recommendations and make changes to the research questions but in a limited capacity.

Although a Co-operative Inquiry would have been the preferred research approach, in my phase of the project it was not considered due to the time constraints and limited funding. Since the student co-researchers were already engaged in various project activities, without stipends, I did not think it would be appropriate to request their time for a collaborative project that was time intensive.

Scope of the project

Of the initial eighteen student co-researchers eight students participated in this phase of the project. In an effort to capture the young people’s diverse backgrounds, expectations, perspectives, experiences and understandings the students who were no longer participating in the project may have significantly contributed to further understanding the experience of student co-researchers. As a result it is important to note

that students who may have been more comfortable engaging in research do not represent those students who may have not been comfortable or interested in engaging in research.

In an effort to manage the scope of the project this report solely focused on students who continued to engage in the project *62 Ways to Change the World*. In addition to co-researchers who are no longer participating in the research project other project participants were not included in this phase of the research, including: adult co-researchers, school staff, community members and parents.

Implications for Practice

Although this was a rewarding experience there were several challenges that, I believe, are critical to further understanding research initiatives that are in partnership with young people. Delgado (2006) reminds us that the “identification of challenges represents the initial step to finding solutions, regardless of how arduous it is to do, and sets a stage for engagement in constructive dialogue across professions and audiences”. In the project *62 Ways to Change the World* two issues will be discussed in greater detail: first, the issue of sustainability and second, the issue of institutional support.

Sustainability

Research involving young people cannot be dependent on the good intentions of the primary investigators or other members of the research team. The research process “requires considerable time, effort and preparation to accomplish its tasks in a manner acceptable to a wide community, including the scientific world” (Delgado, 2006, p, 242). Although funding commitments are made at the onset of most research projects having access to additional resources, once the funding is used up, should be considered by

funding agencies and other project sponsors. More often than not opportunities are created as a result of the research that has been conducted and it is important for the young people that were involved in the research to continue to use the skills they have learned.

However, once research projects are coming to an end it is important to consider how this will be communicated to a research team. The student co-researchers in *62 Ways to Change the World* were negatively impacted by the ‘pause’ in the research project although all the project obligations have been met. Researchers and project sponsors need to consider exit strategies to ensure student co-researchers are not negatively impacted by the research coming to an end.

In addition, researchers and project sponsors need to consider why a project is coming to an end. Is it because it is convenient for the adults? Is it because the “researcher” has collected the necessary data to fulfill their funding obligations? Or is it because the funding has run out? There are a number of reasons why a project comes to an end but it is crucial to reflect on the potential impact the principal investigator’s actions may have on the young people who were engaged in the research project.

Institutional Support

As this project was a partnership between the University of Victoria and the Sooke School District No. 62 a number of institutional challenges need to be addressed.

Research in partnership with young people opens the door to unexpected rewards and opportunities for innovation. It is important that both institutions are prepared to embrace both the dynamic and challenging nature that is associated with research that is completed by young people. In this particular project, *62 Ways to Change the World*, the

University of Victoria's accounting department would not administer the stipends that were being given to the student co-researchers. This decision was based on the premise that all individuals receiving money need to have a Social Insurance Number (SIN) in order to process the payment. This was not a viable option for a number of the young people as some student co-researchers did not have a SIN. This lack of administrative support resulted in adult co-researchers spending a significant amount of their time on administrative aspects associated with the project. Unfortunately, this additional responsibility took away from the time that could have been spent on other project priorities. If institutions are interested in supporting creative approaches to research a commitment to value the needs of those outside the academia need to be respected and accommodated.

Along the same lines Delgado (2006) reports "youth-led research has emerged as a field precisely because of the failures of established research practice, which has almost totally excluded youth from positions other than research subjects" (p. 244). However, institutions continue to subscribe to adult-centred research models where they control the right to determine who is a "researcher" (Delgado, 2006). Student co-researchers and the research that they conduct and the views that they bring to the table need to be taken seriously. Young people's interests and needs differ from those of adults and by listening to young people's voices the impact on policy and practice may be more representative of their realities. Allocating seats to young people on ethic committees may be one strategy to make sure their voices are being represented from the onset of a research project.

If research projects are carried out in the school setting key consideration must be given to the potentially major influence of gatekeepers such as teachers, principals and

counsellors in influencing which student will be allowed to participate and how the students will participate in a research project. Research with young people emphasizes respectful engagement, trust and relationships, choice, flexibility, transparency and accountability and it is crucial these values are emphasised at the onset of the research project and throughout the research process. Most student co-researchers from *62 Ways to Change the World* found that their schools supported the work that they were doing however, there were others that found their school to be a barrier to their participation. A conscious and genuine effort needs to be made by school decision makers to support the efforts of student co-researchers not only in theory but also in practice. Delgado (2006) reminds us that the process of undertaking youth-led research is of equal importance as the product outcome (p.247).

Recommendations for Future Research

To further understand young peoples participation in research the following recommendations may be considered for future research.

Project Impact

Experience suggests that funders want evidence of the economic and social benefits of a 'project'. Generally "evidence" of the short-term benefits is favoured since projects are funded for a limited amount of time. Although there is growing evidence of the benefits of participation for young people such benefits are difficult to measure, particularly within the timeframe of most funding schemes (Fitzgerald & Graham, 2008, p. 71). Although quantitative research may appear appropriate qualitative research, such as case study research and program evaluations, has the potential to capture the

immediate “evidence” that shows the worth of young people’s participation and its positive influence on policy and practice, including in research settings (Kirby & Bryson, 2002).

Social Media & Technology

Many websites and software are developed to allow for social online and offline interaction. Beyond written text young people frequently use photography, games, video and audio clip applications. As a result there is a need to address how social media and other technologies can be used to maximize a young person’s experience on a research project? Having an understanding of the technologies that are often used by young people can result in the creation of research environments that are more conducive to young peoples needs.

Transitioning

As noted in the previous section, implications for practice, young people are generally impacted when a research project is coming to an end. Although exit strategies are recommended and are likely effective it is important to understand the extent of the impact on a young person’s life. By engaging in a research project student co-researchers have acquired a new set of skills that they may want to apply immediately. By understanding their concerns and needs appropriate action can taken and further opportunities may be fostered and/or supported.

Research “Quality”

The impact of applying the research was a significant learning opportunity for the student co-researchers in the project *62 Ways to Change the World*. Although it is imperative to maintain data quality we need to be asking ourselves “what are we willing

to sacrifice to maximize young people's participation in research, either the robustness of the research methodology or the impact that the research can achieve post completion?

(Moore, 2008, p. 15).

Final Thoughts

The past year has been a very enriching learning experience and I am forever indebted to those student co-researchers I have described in this report. Like Delgado (2006), I feel that "research, particularly when it is socially focused, cannot be considered boring or irrelevant if it is true to its social mission" (p. 260). I acknowledge that this case study represents only a small fraction of the important work that is currently being undertaken in the field of youth engagement and research and evaluation but I hope it has served as an example of the many benefits young people experience while engaged in the research process. However, in an effort to engage and support young people in research we must acknowledge and address the challenges that lay ahead of us; it is only then that we can make progress.

In reflecting on the important aspects of the case study, it is important to build capacity and support initiatives where young people are participating in research that is relevant to their needs. By strengthening young people's understanding and by engaging them in the full research process young people's voices are strengthened, meaningful relationships are built that are based on mutual responsibility and respect, and knowledge is generated that contributes to greater understanding.

In addition to the important skills and attributes (problem solving skills, communication skills, teamwork, confidence and goal setting) that the student co-

researchers gained throughout the research process important changes occurred at both the individual and the community levels. By involving various groups of people in the research project (students, school staff, university researchers, and community members) student co-researchers felt more comfortable engaging in the school and local community. It was the strong social connections and the establishment of a support network that contributed to the students' feelings of belonging and engagement.

Developing a greater understanding of the research issue was an important theme that was highlighted in the case study. A deeper understanding helped the student co-researchers eliminate their stereotypes, develop further questions and contributed to their belief that they had the capacity to effect change.

A Co-operative Inquiry provides opportunities for authentic student engagement in the school and local community. Engaging young people in research and/or evaluation is an excellent way for students to have a true experience of decision-making and learn about issues that are relevant to their realities.

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Appendix B Ethics Approval

ethics application not required--but note from PI is Inbox | X

☆ **Jen Kyffin** to me

[show details](#) Sep 29

[Reply](#)

Hi Agata.

I've confirmed that you will NOT be required to submit an **ethics** application since you are working on Dr. Miller's project. However, Dr. Miller will need to email us and indicate that you are to be added as a Research Assistant (or whatever your title is) so that your name is on record for when you apply to graduate. Best of luck with your interviews with the youth!

Cheers,

Jen Kyffin, M. Ed. | Human Research **Ethics** Facilitator | Office of Research Services|University of Victoria | Room B233, Administrative Services Building|3800 Finnerty Road| PO Box 1700 STN CSC| Victoria,BC| V8W 2Y2 Canada| (250) 472-5555 | Fax (250) 721-8960 | Email hre@uvic.ca | Web www.research.uvic.ca
We've Moved! Human Research **Ethics** has moved to the new **Administrative Services Building** on Ring Road - **2nd floor B wing**. <http://www.uvic.ca/buildings/ssb.html>

Staying in School Inbox | X

☆ **Gord Miller** to hre, me, Catherine

[show details](#) Sep 30

[Reply](#)

To Jen Kyffin

Hi Jen

As per your conversation with Agata Stypka (Graduate Student), please add her name as a Research Assistant to my **ethics** application "SD62-Developing a Framework for Engaging Youth to Stay in School".

Thank you

Cheers,

Gord Miller, PhD
School of Child and Youth Care
Faculty of Human and Social Development
University of Victoria
Co-Chair, Community Youth Development Coalition of BC www.youthbc.ca
250-658-4739

Appendix D

Interview and Focus Group Questions

1. Why did you decide to participate in this initiative/project? (What attracted you? Who motivated you?)
2. What do you think the project “62 Ways to Change the World” was about? (i.e. what were the goals/vision)
 - a. Do you think we were able to accomplish the goals?
 - i. If yes, how were we able to accomplish these goals? What do you think allowed that to happen?
 - ii. If no, what would have helped us to make that happen?
3. I’m interested in understanding how your thinking about research was modified, changed or if your thinking about research stayed the same throughout the project. Can you think back and tell me how you understood research at the beginning of this project? What do you think now?
 - i. (*If thinking has changed*) Is there one thing that happened that really made a difference in how you thought about research?
4. In your own words can you tell me what the role of a student co-researcher?
5. What do you think are the benefits of being a student co-researcher?
6. What do you think are the problems of being a student co-researcher?
7. What did you like most about this project? (general comments and personal insights on the project) – What was the most fun? (i.e. memorable moments)
8. What did you learn by your participation in this project?
9. Who or what helped you learn? How did they help you learn?
10. What did others learn from you?
11. *Agree or disagree with this statement:* Adult co-researchers were learners too. Tell me why you believe this statement to be true or false.
12. What were some changes that you experienced throughout this project?
 - a. Individual
 - b. As a team player

c. As a community member

13. What did you like least about this project? What were the lowlights of the project? What was the least fun?
14. Imagine you are in charge of developing a new project proposal: What would you say would be your top recommendation for doing another project like this one?
15. What would you tell another student who was thinking about participating in a similar project?
16. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experience on this project.