

Youth activism in Newham; working as a Co-Research Team on the Nothing About Us Without Us research project

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Youth activism in Newham; some reflections on what we learnt from a co-produced research project undertaken in the middle of a global health pandemic

In [part one](#) of our blog, we shared some of our learning about observing youth activism in the London Borough of Newham. As a [research project](#) taking a co-production approach, we also wanted to share some of our reflections on working together as a co-research team. We are especially keen to share things that might be useful for other co-research teams to think about when setting up and doing co-research projects that include young people. We have done this by sharing our individual perspectives, Ishrat and Amanda as co-leaders of the research team, and Sarah and Laurie as adult supporters from HeadStart Newham.



Ishrat's role and reflections:

In the past, I participated in other research projects but this one was very different. Rather than working alongside young people from my borough, I was working with someone older who lived in Northern Ireland! Initially, I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to connect with Amanda due to how different we were, but her warm and friendly personality made me feel comfortable. It was a real "co" project – we worked cohesively and every decision was made together. I didn't feel like the grownup was taking the lead like they naturally would in any other environment. My opinions and contributions were valued rather than brushed off, which made the project run so smoothly. Laurie and Sarah's support also helped maintain the success of our co-research project. It was truly amazing working alongside people who were genuinely

interested in young people's participation in local activism. At first, I was nervous about observing and interviewing other young people although I had done it before. However, Amanda's presence really helped as it reminded me that I wasn't the only one asking questions. We learned so much from conversing with the young people that were involved in local campaign groups. It gave us an insight into the issues affecting young people today, activism during the pandemic, and digital disadvantage. As well as gaining a deeper understanding of youth activism, we also had a lot of fun. Interacting via a virtual reality platform during our observations was hilarious! Teams meetings were filled with laughter and smiles. I got to know my colleagues better through a laptop screen, while enjoying the snacks from the care packages that Sarah would send us. The co-research project was a wonderful, enlightening experience that allowed me to explore and learn, while also giving me the opportunity to have fun.

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Amanda's role and reflections:

Being fairly new to youth co-research I was initially worried about how uncool and out of touch I might appear to my co-research colleagues. I was conscious of how long it had been since being a young person and how different my experiences of growing up in 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland may be to current day young people experiences. It was the sharing of some of our written work on our respective experiences of being young people in very different contexts that really helped Ishrat and I to connect in the very early stages of our co-research relationship. Being open, honest and respectful throughout our working alliance meant that we had, what felt like, a very even working relationship. Ishrat was generous with her advice and knowledge of young people. We made all decisions together and supported each

other as we navigated our activist group observations, our field notes and the data analysis. Another really valuable aspect of this co-research experience was the support and reflections of Laurie and Sarah – who provided ongoing feedback on how we were working together. Sarah recreated the hospitality one would often enjoy as part of working meetings, by sending us out some drinks and nice snacks in advance of our sessions. Laurie brought her experiences as a researcher in a young people's organisation, which really helped us stay on track. We have learnt lots about young people's activism throughout this project. I think it is fair to say that we have learnt a lot about what makes a good and helpful co-research working alliance: to be open, honest and as curious as possible; to each own the work and to consult on everything about it; to be comfortable asking questions and unafraid of the answers; to have as much fun as is possible.

“Being open, honest and respectful throughout our working alliance meant that we had, what felt like, a very even working relationship..”

Sarah's role and reflections:

I am the Co-Production Practitioner within HeadStart Newham. This project has been my first real step into research and what a way to start! From the very first session with Amanda and Ishrat, everything slotted into place and felt like we were really all in this together. It felt like being given permission to leave my 'adult professional ego' at the door, knowing that we are all equally enthusiastic, invested, responsible and valued each

other's insight and uniqueness, as well similarities. Amanda's infectious abundance of energy, curiosity and honesty, perfectly paired with Ishrat's thoughtfulness, enquiring mind and passion for positive change; to create a strong research team that has been a pleasure to support. Connecting in Laurie and Ysabelle as Researchers within our team and other young people where they could, added the final magic ingredients.

I've seen my role within this project as a facilitator, connector and resource; facilitating connections between young people, academics and professionals and providing local knowledge of systems in the borough. I also wanted more than anything for everyone to feel valued and 'at home'.... I have been called a 'feeder' on more than one occasion.... Hence the care packages I guess lol!

It's been so interesting to experience other 'activist' spaces, in a different role; participant or observer, rather than facilitator and to really be able to take time to hear what others are thinking, feeling and passionate about. I've loved the opportunity of seeing these experiences through the eyes of Amanda, Ishrat, Samir, Ysabelle and Laurie and step into someone else's shoes.... even just for a little while.

What stands out for me the most from this experience?

- The warmth, respect and passion of the research group and the impact of levelling power dynamics; being open and honest about how we are all feeling and what we are experiencing.
- The importance of flexible ways of working, taking into account everyone's availability and time pressures outside of the work; using synchronous and asynchronous communication.
- How passionate and motivated the young people in Newham are about moving forward positive change and the importance of these spaces, opportunities and support to make this happen.

Each time we have come together it has never felt like 'work' more an opportunity to see everyone, hear and share thoughts and reflections and work towards a joint passion. Going forward, this will be a shiny example of what co-production can look like. I have gone away with these questions: How can 'professionals' empower young people's voice whilst also just getting out the way when they need to? And, how can we connect these people and spaces across Newham to strengthen that voice? Now to find answers....

“Going forward, this will be a shiny example of what co-production can look like.”

Laurie's role and reflections:

I am a Data and Research officer within HeadStart Newham, and have previously supported youth-led research projects (exam stress project and “this is my home”). I was invited to support the co-researchers, Ishrat and Amanda, with undertaking research activities in novel digital spaces. It

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has been a real honour to support this work. As a partnership, they created a warm, friendly, stimulating space that puts you at ease. They are both so articulate, curious and eager to learn about the experience of others and complimented each other when co-interviewing young people about their activism work. I noticed they made others feel relaxed and comfortable enough to disclose thoughts on emotive topics. Ishrat had a knack for bringing interview questioning back to the original topic guide, and Amanda asked some brilliant follow up questions! Through the process I have learned a great deal about what matters most young people right *now*. I have been struck by the passion, creativity and solution focused conversations shared by young people during the course of our observations – despite the challenges and adversity what I have witnessed gives me a sense of hope, that young people in Newham are not just demanding change, they are driving it and the impact will be felt in relation to tackling racism, inequality and climate change.

We hope these reflections offer some helpful tips about things to consider when planning and doing co-production, and maybe even inspire those who haven't tried it before to give it a go! Thank you for reading our blog post and please do reach out to us if you want to learn more about how we worked as a co-research team, we would be happy to give a talk to your organisation or to talk to you about our co-research experiences. You can find out more about us and our wider Nothing About Us Without Us project team on the webpage for our [Resilience Forum](#) which was held on 22nd July 2021.

Thanks for reading, Ishrat, Amanda, Sarah and Laurie

See also:



Resilience Forum: Sharing learning from 'Nothing about us without us'





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