Challenges of youth participation in participatory action research: methodological considerations of the Paamiut Youth Voice research project

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Paamiut Youth Voice (PYV) is a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project, exploring youth perceptions, experiences, and the promotion of well-being in Paamiut, Greenland. Active youth participation remained a key challenge in the development of the local community through the locally initiated community mobilisation programme Paamiut Asasara. The challenges of youth participation in PYV are investigated in order to explore the implications of youth participation in PAR projects. The discussion of challenges is based on a methodological account of experiences from the research process clarifying how youth participation in the PYV project took place. Results are presented, concerning the young people's understandings and experiences of engagement and participation.

Key words: resilience, young people, inuit, collective identity, participatory action research

Introduction

Current research has identified the need to examine and improve children's conditions in Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). The town of Paamiut, located on the west coast of Greenland with a population of approximately 1700 people, has during the last decades struggled with alcohol abuse, high rates of violence, suicide, crime, and child neglect. Addressing this, the town has

launched a 5-year community mobilisation programme, *Paamiut Asasara.*[1] The overall goal of *Paamiut Asasara* is to mobilise and strengthen the community and to enhance the well-being and quality of life of all its citizens, through business-, school-, and housing development, crime and abuse prevention, improved communication between citizens and the public system, and increased efforts to support children, adolescents and families. The programme is informed by the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child and the WHO principles of citizen participation. The development and implementation of the programme follow international guidelines for and lessons learned from psychosocial interventions (IASC, 2005, Anasarias & Berliner, 2009; Berliner & Mikkelsen, 2006; Berliner, Dominquez, Kjaerulf, & Mikkelsen, 2006). Documentation and research are closely linked to the programme as a means of providing relevant and applicable knowledge for the continuous development of the programme. The Arctic Human Development Report (2004) states that the solution to problems such as neglect, abuse, and suicidal behaviour, lies in strengthening the viability of Arctic communities and finding ways to allow the Arctic's residents to play active and effective roles in designing programmes to improve their own health (Young & Einarsson, 2004). The community is moving very fast towards achieving the set goals and the level of community involvement is high (see Berliner, Larsen, & de Casas Soberón, 2012, 2011).

During a public meeting in Paamiut Assasara in, 2008, community members stated a need for more knowledge on "*how to enhance the well-being of youth in Paamiut*" and "*how young people can become better integrated in the society*" in order to "*minimize social exclusion*". Subsequently, the Paamiut Research Council, consisting of local community members, expressed a preference for participatory action research, as it is an approach that can facilitate the capacity of youth to participate in research (Chen, Poland and Skinner, 2007; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Kral & Idlout, 2006; Levine, Perkins, & Perkins, 2005; McTaggart, 1997; Zimmerman, 2000). In Kalaallit Nunaat

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[1] The programme is funded by the Bikuben Foundation, the local municipality Kommuneqarfik Sermersooq, and the Greenlandic Self Rule Government.

there is a need for more research projects actively involving youth, i.e. there is an expressed need for more research projects on the conditions of youth, in which youth are actively involved in the research design and process portraying youths' own point of view (Christensen, Kristensen, & Baviskar, 2008; Larson, 2002; MIPI, 2005; Niclasen, 2009). Youth participation is defined as adolescents partaking in and influencing processes, decisions and activities in the community and in research on the community (Rajani, 2001; Davis, 2009; Eistrup & Kahlig, 2007; Hancock, 1994; Hart, 1992; Kalnins, Hart, Ballantyne, Quartaro, Love, Sturis, & Pollack, 2002; Kirby, 2004; Mustard & McCain, 2000; World Youth Report, 2003; White, Suchowierska, and Campbell, 2004). Based on these considerations Paamiut Youth Voice (PYV) was launched in March, 2009. The PYV research project explores the perceptions, understandings, and experiences of well-being of the youth in Paamiut. A central aim of PYV has been to support active involvement of the youth in their community, through encouraging participation, visibility and voice, as well as a focus on validation of their knowledge and experiences (as proposed by Minkler, 2000; Nelson & Prilentensky, 2005; McIntyre, 2008). Active youth participation remained a key challenge in the PYV research process, and the current article seeks to explore the challenges and implications of youth participation in the research process, to open for a more resilience focused understanding of participation (Barter, 2010; Leblanc, Talbot, & Craig, 2010; Rutter, 2009).

In the research process, we faced a number of challenges concerning participation of the youth. This article investigates the challenges and values of youth participation in Paamiut Youth Voice, with regards to exploring the implications of youth participation in Participatory Action Research projects. This is examined with PYV as a case study through a methodological account of the research process, clarifying how youth participation in PYV took place. The concept of participation is then explored, through results findings from PYV. Finally, factors influencing the challenges, implications and values of participation in PYV are discussed based on the empirical findings and our methodological experiences.

Methods

Design and research process

A research proposal was developed based on the community's requests, concerning enhancement of well-being of the youth in Paamiut. It was forwarded to the research council of Paamiut Asasara for approval and feedback, in order to ensure that representatives of the community agreed with the design and found it relevant and beneficial. No changes were suggested and council members accepted the preliminary research design. The study employed the following qualitative research methods: focus group interviews, semi-structured individual interviews, drawing, participant observation, and an open-ended questionnaire.

Participants

The total number of participants in the study was 61 persons. These participants included a representative sample of young persons in Paamiut aged 12-24. Invited to participate were 8th-10th graders from the local school, a total of 60 persons (aged 12-16), and six youths attending a preparatory school for secondary education (aged 16-24). Furthermore, 16 adults from the community, including teachers, parents, and sports-, club- and municipal employees contributed with information (they are not included in the total number of participants).

Introductory information sessions took place in each class, where students were informed of the nature of the study, the opportunity to anonymously voice their opinions and views on life in Paamiut, as well as the opportunity to contribute in shaping the research design of the study. Teachers were also informed during an introduction for all teaching staff, and a parental consent form was distributed to all of the students. The consent form contained a description of the project, and stated that if parents did not wish for their child to take part in the study, they were to inform the class teacher. No parents opposed, so all students were invited to participate. Five youths chose not to participate, and did not wish to elaborate on their reasons.

Research assistants

During the introduction sessions in the school, we asked for volunteers to act as research assistants and eight youth volunteered (they also acted as participants in the study, taking part in interviews and completing the questionnaire). Furthermore, an 18-year-old boy was hired as a main research assistant. His role was to facilitate during discussions and to interpret between Kalaalisut (a Greenlandic language) and Danish. He was hired based on his interest in the project, language skills, and availability, as he was finished with school and was not employed elsewhere. Being young himself and knowing all the participants personally were important assets, putting his peers at ease during interviews and making the setting less formal. He was the only one paid for his services, and he was asked to sign a letter of confidentiality. All of the research assistants were involved throughout the research process, including formulating a focus group interview guide, and giving advice on how to conduct the focus group interviews in a contextually appropriate manner.

Formulation of interview topics

Interview discussion points were based on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, with a strengths and solution-based focus. Prior to commencing focus group interviews, the six research assistants were consulted on what they considered important and relevant for the project to concern. Contributions and ideas from the research assistants guided the discovery process and the course of action throughout the research process. The youths' understanding of well-being was explored; situations and contexts in which they experience well-being; and when they feel happy, proud, and experience success. Part of the purpose of exploring these subjects was to encourage the promotion of well-being, as the reflection process initiated might assist the youth in discovering new ways and opportunities, activities and initiatives through which positive experiences can be enhanced.

Interview procedure

Interviews were conducted in a family-counseling center during March, 2009. As many felt shy speaking in large groups and in front of the opposite gender, and in order to encourage more active participation, research assistants suggested that focus group interviews should be held in single-sex groups for 8th and 9th grade participants, and in smaller groups of four to five people from each class. Each group participated in four interview sessions of one hour each, and a total of 19 focus group interviews were held, with between five to ten participants in each. Eight youths volunteered to participate in individual semi-structured interviews (mostly accompanied by a friend). These youths were all Danish speaking, and only two chose to have the main research assistant present to interpret.

Prior to commencing the first interview sessions, participants were informed of confidentiality and their right to leave if they did not wish to participate, and that their identities would remain anonymous. Lastly they were informed that part of the study's purpose is to bring their voice to the forefront of attention in Paamiut, enabling them to articulate their wishes, hopes, ideas and worries. Following each focus group interview, research assistants reviewed the main points with us, eliminating interpretative errors and enhancing validity.

Developing the questionnaire

Several participants expressed a will to write answers to questions, rather than express them verbally. Based on this, and aiming to gain a representative view, a questionnaire was developed in co-operation with research assistants. The questionnaire contained 22 open-ended questions on personal well-being, including questions on perceived life-satisfaction, when the person feels proud, safe, appreciated, coping skills, autonomy and level of influence, social- and community relations, future aspirations, and dreams for Paamiut. Questions were based on AI principles, and discussions with research assistants. An example of a contribution from the research assistants was their suggestion to include the question, "What is the most important thing in your

life?", as they wanted the project to convey to the community what occupies the youth and what they find important. The questionnaire was translated into Kalaallisut, and checked with several youths and adults before distribution. Forty-seven youths (17 boys, 27 girls and 3 not specified) completed the questionnaire. Questionnaire responses were summarised, distributed to participants, and discussed during interview sessions.

Participant observation

Participant observation was carried out in the school, youth club and during town functions, such as concerts and meetings.

Analysis

Throughout the research process, triangulation was employed to obtain a multiplicity of views: ours, the research assistants', and those of community informants. By using multiple data sources, subjective bias was checked as interpretations of the data were discussed with participants. Furthermore, the action research component in PAR provided an ongoing, spiral framework where the participants themselves evaluated the strength and the relevance of the research process (as proposed by Khanlou & Peter, 2005 and Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2001). To evaluate interpretations, participants were presented with a summary of the previous week's interview, and they were asked whether the information was understood correctly. Qualitative valida-tion was also sought during a communal meeting, in which community members were presented with preliminary findings.

Emerging themes in the interviews were coded and categorised, through a line-by-line coding and results were generated and grounded from the col-lected data (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Teram, Schachter, & Stalker, 2005; Willig, 2001).

Results

Participation in the sessions

More than half of the youth expressed that participating in PYV opened an opportunity for them to reflect upon their lives, community, strengths, future, dreams, and well-being. Many youth expressed that they had not previously reflected upon the questions asked. These young people stated that they had not previously considered the relevance of participating in the community. Adults in Paamiut supported this by saying that the project has brought to their awareness the importance of increasing the general participation of youth in the community.

In PYV the youth were offered an opportunity to influence the research process in all of its stages. This was demonstrated as some of the youths guided the research process, presented findings at a communal meeting and thus voiced their opinions on societal matters. The communal meeting was a first-time experience for the youths presenting, to speak in public and partici-pate in workshops in facilitating ideas and visions for Paamiut. When the youth saw the research results projected on a wall during the common meet-ing, they commented on how it felt powerful to see their remarks, and have the community listen to what they had to say.

Despite the general high level of participation and engagement in the re-search process, some of the participants were withdrawn and seemingly passive during interviews. Some of these expressed a preference towards written communication, instead of open discussion. This led to the develop-ment of a questionnaire. Drawings by the youths demonstrating 'social cohesion', 'communication', and 'the perfect Paamiut' were also used as an alternative method for the youths to communicate, and proved to be a good starting point for conversations.

Research findings

Participants were encouraged to share their dreams and visions for their own lives and the future of Paamiut, through questions such as, "What does your

perfect Paamiut look like?", "Are there things you would like to be able to do in Paamiut, but do not have the opportunity to?", "What could be better in your life?", "What are your wishes for the future?", "What would you like to do when you finish school?" One girl, 15, dreams:

> "When I have returned from traveling around the world, the grass is greener, the town is better, people are nicer, everyone has attended AA, nobody drinks anymore and alcohol is illegal. The town is clean, there is no trash dump and no police, and there are more opportunities, a better future, and a chance to get an education here in town".

Education is a central theme in the future dreams of many of the youth. Another girl, 15, dreams:

> "You have to have an education to live a good life! You can't live a good life without. With a degree, you can travel the world with your family. I want to travel to Thailand to learn the language and eat their food."

As there are no opportunities for further education in Paamiut following elementary school, the youths have to travel to other places in Greenland to pursue an education. Some hope to get a job when completing school (examples given: *"working in a store"; "as a hairdresser"; "police officer"; "stewardess"; "fireman"; "electrician"; "actor"; "singer"; "car mechanic"; "play on the national handball team"; and "managing a diner")*.

Interviews and questionnaire responses indicate that improving the quality of social relations, sense of cohesion and communication among family members, peers and members of the community, is considered essential to increasing the well-being of youth in Paamiut. Twenty-one percent highlighted social relations to the question on, "What could be better in your life?" Specific responses include *"respect from adults"; "communicating better with others"; "trusting each other"; "better friendships" and "no bullying"*. During an interview on what constitutes a good and happy life, and what conditions are needed to improve social relations, one girl, 16, suggested, *"Attending family therapy, the families become more open towards one another, eat dinner together and do activities together"*. This demonstrates the importance of communication and cohesion in the family and community. Another girl elaborates, and highlights the problem of lack of care and discipline from some parents, *"If parents were better at taking care*

of their children, Paamiut would be a better town to live in. Young people go around destroying everything because there is nothing to do, and they drink and smoke hash. Parents do not take care of their children and some of them do not have a clue about what their kids are doing. The parents should get help from a psychologist."

Suggestions on how relationships between classmates can be improved include, "*by being more open towards one another"; "trusting each other"; "more sense of cohesion"; "more communication"; and "helping each other".* Similar suggestions were given to the question of how their relationships to their families can be improved, including "*more respect"; "more communication"; "being more open towards one another"; "stronger sense of unity/cohesion"; "if I listened more to my parents"; "if we stopped lying to each other"; "more trust"; and "being more honest".* Twenty-six percent did not respond and 43% wrote, *"I do not know*".

Going through questionnaire responses with a research assistant, she stated that, "*The most important thing is that family members have a better relationship with one another…. this happens when the family communicates with each other*". Communication is defined as, *"talking with each other*"; it includes "*trust", "respect*" and *"being open to one another*". Talking about ways in which communication can be enhanced, one girl, 16, suggested: "*by making it more acceptable to talk openly about problems*". In an interview, one participant said, *"It's frightening to say your opinion, I feel too embarrassed*". A girl, 17, with an interest in working as a youth counselor, says it is difficult to establish a youth counseling unit, as many youth are reluctant to talk with anyone, because they find it shameful. In an interview with four girls, aged 14-15, one girl shared the following: *"In my family we talk about everything, then problems are solved and things become better.*" The other girls appealed for more openness in their families. Findings point towards the importance of improving family conditions, through increased communication and more care, attention and discipline from parents. Overall, the youth highlight a need for more support and social cohesion in their community, for the enhancement of well-being.

During PYV the youth introduced a number of ideas for activities and initiatives concerning the enhancement of their well-being. The following list

contains the most common responses concerning the youths' wishes and dreams for Paamiut.

Leisure and physical activities:
- Swimming pool, bowling alley, skateboard ramp, ice-skating area, fitness center, snowboard lift, basketball-, volleyball- and golf court
- Sports consultants and coaches
- More outdoor activities, such as hiking
- Outdoor and indoor music facilities, including easier access to musical instruments, and music teachers
- Youth-centre, cinema and discothèque, bigger and better youth club

Town renewal:
- Shopping centre, water fountains, cleaner town, renewal of the park

Education and future prospects:
- More opportunities for education in Paamiut
- More and better workplaces
- Better school (less substitute teachers, more educated teachers, newer books and better facilities)

Counseling, therapy, prevention and health:
- Drug-, alcohol- and abuse counseling, family therapy, youth-to-youth counselling, a women's respite center

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Dissemination of research results in the community

When asked what it would take to actualise their ideas many expressed a need for more support from adults in the community. This resulted in the idea to organise a communal meeting to present and share these ideas. The youth participated in planning and organising the meeting. The meeting had a high turnout of over 100 people. During the meeting many youth were listening with attention, heads nodding consensually, and many were smiling. Several of the youths commented that is was great to see their quotes being projected on the wall. One girl said, "*It felt really powerful, seeing our remarks on that big board, having the entire town watching and listening to what we have to say!*" Another girl said, *"It is weird to see that what we say really matters, and people are listening to us!"* There was also broad support from the audience. One person said, "*It is interesting to hear the youths' view.*"

Following the presentation, five workgroups were formed to encourage community participation of the proposed activities and initiatives put forward by the youth, including 1) sports and leisure, 2) a youth-center, 3) education, 4) counselling, and 5) town renewal. Attendees were invited to participate in a group in which they wanted to contribute, and adults in relevant positions were invited to facilitate the respective groups. During the meeting many participants responded positively, and volunteered to work together with the youth in debating, planning and organising their ideas for the town. We noticed that some of the young people left the meeting during the workgroup sessions. This happened gradually and we did not see it as a walkout, but more as a reaction to the fact that the process was started and going on without their participation. To leave the meeting was an active response, clearly shows that the PYV is a dynamic process and involving a variety of responses. When we asked them why they left, they responded with "*I don't know*".

Evaluation of the research process

Towards the end of the research project participants were presented with an evaluation questionnaire, containing ten open-ended questions, evaluating the experience of participating in interviews, the communal meeting, completing the questionnaire, and the general impact of the project. Half of the participants completed the questionnaire. 66% expressed that it had been "*a positive experience*" to participate in the project, 34% wrote, "*I don't know*", or did not reply. When asked what they had gained from participating in the project, 56% did not know or did not answer, the remaining included replies such as "*90%-95% has been achieved*"; "*we will make progress if it materialises*"; and "*I think more about my and young people' life than before*". Responses from the evaluation questionnaire showed that 53% of the respondents found it to be a "*positive*", "*fun*" or "*great*" experience to participate in the communal meeting, 47% did not answer or did not participate in the meeting. In regards to completing questionnaires, 50% replied that it was "*a positive experience*", 38% "*a neutral experience*" and 12% did not reply. Regarding the experience of participating in focus group interviews, 53% found it to be

"*fun*" or "*good*", 38% did not respond or wrote, "*I don't know*", 9% replied that it was "*an embarrassing*" or "*bad experience*". The evaluation also included a question on whether the participants felt that their ideas and opinions had been heard throughout the project. 25% "*felt that they had been heard*", and some specified "*during the communal meeting*". Nine percent responded that they did not think they had been heard. These replies show that more than half of the respondents experienced that participation in the different processes of the research project was positive and rewarding, and a large proportion of the remaining were unspecified replies.

Youth understanding of participation

Questions about participation i.e. what it means and how it happens, were challenging for many. Some youth expressed an interest in participating in actualising their proposed activities. During a discussion on influence, one girl, 14, exclaimed, "*Young people can also do something. Adults shouldn't think that we are lazy. I really believe they think we can't do shit!*" Others expressed more doubt about participation. A boy, 14, said, "*I don't know…I have never thought about it before.*" When asked "*how can you participate in actualizing the activities proposed at the communal meeting*", half of the respondents did not answer or did not know, and other responses were vague. Similarly, to the question of "*how can you participate in making Paamiut a better town*", 72% replied that they do not know, or did not reply. One person responded: "*No one will listen to what I have to say.*" Many expressed that they did not have previous experience with conveying information to adults.

The questionnaire included a scaled item on experienced level of influence in the community (1= very low and 10= very high). The mean of experienced influence among friends was 7; at home 6.6; at school 5.5; in the community 5.4 and in the youth club 4.8. In focus group interviews, the implications of these ratings were discussed as being satisfactory or not. Most of the youth told us that they had no previous experience with participating in organising events and activities.

According to the youth and adults working with children and youth in Paamiut, the timidity and modesty displayed by some of the youth may be

partly explained by a feeling of low self-esteem and self-confidence. One girl, 20, explained that low self-esteem is rooted in an upbringing that discourages taking responsibility and speaking up, "*I was not able to do anything on my own – my mother did not let me do anything. I was never encouraged to do anything independently or approach other people.*" According to an adult working with the youth, "*Young people in Paamiut are nursed and shielded from the world too much for their own good*". Social exclusion was also mentioned as a reason why young people do not participate in the community. In the school, youth from out of town are often bullied. According to the youth, social exclusion often takes place when one expresses an opinion that others disagree with. The fear of being judged negatively by others and thereafter bullied, ridiculed, and excluded from social networks, leads to fear of expression, passivity and social withdrawal.

Ideas for encouraging participation

In the focus group interviews the participants were asked what they believe is needed in order to promote and encourage participation in the community. "*Leadership*", "*adult support*", "*successful youth initiated projects*", and "*follow up on initiated projects*", were elements which the youth considered essential for increasing youth participation. A boy, 16, stated "*We need sports coaches!*" Several youths expressed a need for support from adults. Interviewing a girl, 16, about the prospect of a youth house, and taking initiative and participating, she said,*" It's difficult, we don't have anyone to go to. There are many people who want to do something.*" Interviewer: "*But what do you think you might be able to do to get it started?*" Girl: "*That's where it stops. We don't know.*" Other youth suggestions for increasing youth participation include "*organizing something exciting and interesting, for example an out-door concert*". Several youths explained that they would feel inspired by learning from successful events organised by other young people. Another aspect of increasing the prospect for youth participation, as explained by the youth, is the importance of "*following up on youth initiated projects*". At the communal meeting several adults expressed that they would like to involve youth in decision-making processes, but in order for this to materialise, they

said, the youth need to be ready to participate and take more initiative and responsibility.

Discussion

The idea of participation may in itself convey a particular focus in the social interaction between researchers and the youth. The participation in the PYV project was high, and the process included a high level of engagement of the young people. A community meeting involved a high number of the young people, and a lot of parents were active in the discussion and group work during the meeting. The process showed a high level of community engagement in the youth, and the young people contributed with an array of visions of factors that could sustain and promote well-being for young people in the community.

However, a number of the young people participated in PYV in a way that could be interpreted as a lack of participation, i.e. inactive and quiet. The programme "Paamiut Asasara" has made it possible to create new forums where this concern can be discussed openly, and new ways for promoting youth participation can be found and put into practice. This breaks with the discourse of pathologising and blaming the families, or the youth, and makes way for an understanding of the resources in the local community, which include the youth and their engagement in the process.

In the two years that have passed from PYV to now, a high number of cultural activities have been arranged for young people in the community. These activities include concerts, theatre, sports, and education. The school Piareersarfik, which opens an opportunity for young people to re-enter the educational system, had five students three years ago; it now has 35 students. Young people have been very active in creating theatre and in making a book with texts and photos showing their life, visions and hopes for the future. In interviews with four groups of young people in September, 2010 and March, 2011 (with 34 participants in total) it was found that the young people value a lot of activities in Paamiut and in their life, and that they have clear visions about how they would like to contribute to the community. According to the local police there has been a significant decrease in adolescent delinquency

from, 2007 till now (based on annually conducted interviews with the local Police Station Commander).

In, 2010 a group of young people made a theatre play with monologues of reflections on growing up in Paamiut, being young in Paamiut, and their dreams and visions. The play was shown in the community hall, and almost everyone in Paamiut came to see it. The play was facilitated by instructors from outside Paamiut, but the content of the play was created and performed by the young people of Paamiut. In, 2011 one of the participating young people said in an interview: "*It was a great thing we did in the theater group- that is to tell our stories. After we told the stories, many people asked us: "how did you get the courage to tell these stories? You touched something in my heart that made me cry". We got all sorts of comments. Eventually they all asked us how we felt or what I felt. I just felt that I was doing a normal thing. I felt that telling the story was what I had to do. I had to tell it to other people so it can help them to find hope, love, confidence, and give them courage. But I didn't feel joy or something like that. The important thing was just to tell the story to other people and to help other people. That's what really matters.*" This quotation shows that the building of support for others is seen as the most important in doing the performance. This understanding is also visible through the following citation: "*Young people need more self- esteem so that they can participate in activities with others. There is a need for promoters and entrepreneurs among us young people, somebody who says that we should try to start shared activities here and now. Somebody, who invites and encourages the others to participate in these activities, and then, little by little, a lot of young people will participate. It is in this way, confidence is built in everybody at the same time as a shared process.*"

Even though it is stated that there is a need for more activities, it is also seen that the young man expresses a collective understanding of support and self-confidence and also of hope, love, confidence and courage, and that he links the development of these capacities and virtues to shared activities. In interviews with the young people, who participated in other activities in Paamiut Asasara, the young people similarly expressed that the sharing of ideas and putting these ideas into practice: theatre, photography and sports, that can be seen and enjoyed by others is a rewarding experience.

Furthermore, the young man states that the mentioned capacities can be built actively. They may be understood as the product of a process, but also as components of the process itself (i.e. to start to speak in the theatre play). There is still a need for more activities initiated by young people, based on the understanding of collectivity, which the young people independently developed in their contribution to activities. The same impact, i.e. the development of locally based and embedded concepts and shared emergent frameworks of understanding, was seen in other Paamiut Asasara activities (for instance groups for young mothers, for families and hunting and fishing summer camps).

In this perspective it is important to compare the above mentioned framework of understanding from 2010 and 2011, to how the young people in 2009 in PYV explained that some of the youth were participating less directly than others. They explained that most of them had no previous experience with participating in organising events and activities in Paamiut, and had not thought about the relevance of participation. This could partly explain the "*I don't know*" responses in the questionnaire and evaluation. Regarding the question "*How can you participate in making Paamiut a better town?*" 72% of the respondents replied that they do not know or did not reply.

According to several of the youths, poor self-esteem was a main contributor to the lack of participation in discussions. Hart (1992) argues that self-esteem is perhaps the most critical variable affecting successful participation with others in a project. He shows how some children and youth with poor self-esteem develop coping skills, which are likely to distort how they communicate their thoughts and feelings. This makes group interaction particularly difficult to achieve. Thus, young people with low self-esteem are less likely to demonstrate their competence to think or to work in a group, and for this reason, in attempting to facilitate the participation of youth who seem less competent than might be expected, it is necessary to identify situations which will maximise opportunities for them to communicate. In PYV this was sought through consultation with the youth themselves, mainly the research assistants, who proposed more appropriate ways of communicating and conducting research. These ways included drawing, writing down an-

swers and completing a questionnaire instead of open discussion, and having smaller focus groups of four to five participants divided by gender.

The challenge of participating in a group has also been related to neglect and abuse, but this explanation is limited to a small number of the children, and thus more of clinical interest if it is not seen in a wider social context. Research reviews show that poor self esteem, depression, anxiety, feelings of isolation and stigma, and difficulties in trusting others, are some of the common symptoms or effects of sexual abuse (Browne & Finkelhor 1986; Kendall-Tacket, Williams, & Finkelhor, 1993). There is an extensive amount of descriptive studies on children and youth in Greenland, including studies on the prevalence of neglect, health, and social isolation (Bjerregaard & Curtis, 2002; ESPAD, 2003; Schnor, Pedersen, Alcón, & Niclasen, 2004; Curtis, Bøving Larsen, Helweg-Larsen, Pedersen, Olesen, Sørensen, Jørgensen, & Bjerregaard, 2006; Christensen et al., 2008). Through these studies it is documented that there are particular groups of vulnerable and at risk children. This should be included in the understanding of the challenge of inclusion of every young person in the local community, in education and in giving equal opportunities.[2]

Another explanation includes social norms embedded in the community's culture as a significant factor influencing how participation is understood and practiced. The youth and some adults explained that a fear of expressing one's opinion exists in the local community. According to the youth, the implications of expressing an opinion which others disagree with may result in social exclusion. This is in line with findings by Kirmayer, Hayton, Malus, Jimenez, Dufour, Quesney, Ternar, Yu, and Ferrara (1994), with Canadian aboriginal populations, where it was found that talking about problems among Inuit is often avoided. Furthermore, it is in line with studies in Kalaallit Nunaat showing that social exclusion is perceived as a quite common punishment for community members that are not in concordance with social

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[2] The objective of interviews was not to gain more knowledge of the prevalence of abuse and neglect (see Curtis et al., 2006 and Christensen et al., 2008), however in some individual interviews, participants spoke about negative past experiences and shared their stories with us in confidence. Those requesting professional help and support were informed of the opportunity to see a counsellor.

norms or are perceived as vulnerable (Lynge, 2000). In PYV we saw several examples of youth laughing at each other, and mocking one another during interviews. Perhaps fear of social exclusion and of being mocked was also the reason why several chose to participate in individual interviews. Response of quietness or non-confrontation (by saying "*I don't know*" or walking away) may thus be seen as respect for a cultural value of modesty on one side, and in some cases also as a way of avoiding. It is important to understand that quietness and modesty are cultural values and a resource in the community and do not just pose a challenge. Some young people and adults in Paamiut understand these values as prohibiting some young people from expressing themselves and from participating on equal terms. It is of particular interest to see this as an emergent understanding in the community, and not as an external discourse focusing on deficits in the young people (Cleaver, 1999). In line with the understanding of the young people and adults, participation is an interaction, i.e. a social process. In this interaction they can promote more resilient communities in which individual resources are invited in and welcomed, even though they may be diverse. A particular focus of research on resilience is on how social interaction, cultural norms and values, and democratic institutions promote a context supportive to all citizens, and give them equal opportunities for active participation. This type of context promotes community resilience (Norris et al., 2008; Ungar, 2010; Zautra, Stuart Hall, & Murray, 2010). Magis (2010) summarises the research on community resiliency by defining community resilience as the systemic interplay between eight key dimensions: (1) resources available; (2) the use of the these resources; (3) the extent of the use; (4) involvement of people in the use of resources; (5) the degree of cooperation; (6) the shared planning of the use of the resources; (7) the degree of equal access to the resources, and (8) the degree of adaptability to changing environments and conditions. Furthermore, Magis shows how community resilience is enhanced through a process of learning. Resilience is defined as a systems capacity to maintain and develop through a learning-based adaptation to new challenges. In this perspective the quietness of some young people may be understood as a resource and as a challenge in the wider system of developing community resilience. In the research process it is similarly important to create and sustain a system

that promotes equal access, by understanding diversity as a resource and not as a problem.

In PYV, the research assistants displayed a higher degree of participation and information sharing than the other participants. Hart (1992) examined programmes with street children in several countries, and argues that there is often a heavy reliance upon the leadership skills of a select number of children who are well respected by other children, and that the danger of relying too heavily on this strategy is that democratic processes amongst the children are not fostered. This was perhaps the case in PYV, where research assistants were significantly more active in the research process compared to the remaining participants. To compensate for this, the questionnaire was developed, which all participants could respond to.

Another important question is to what extent the youth participated because it was expected of them. A weakness in regards to the recruitment strategy, which took place in the school, is that participants may have felt group pressure to participate even though they may have wished not to do so. This may have had implications for the notion of voluntary consent, and the group consent may in effect have superseded individual consent (Khanlou & Peter, 2005).

Another issue is that we may have imposed a particular understanding of participation on the young people. There may be a variety of ways to express oneself, of interaction, and of being part of a process. The understanding of the process should not focus entirely on participation as verbal (Cooke & Kothari, 2002; Smail, 1994; Kelly, 1993; Lind, 2008; Mayoux, 1995). Despite this understanding of participation a significant number of young people who participated in PYV expressed that participating had an impact, as they reflected on agency and possibilities for acting in the world, and gained increased voice and awareness on issues related to youth life and well-being. Through this process the participants may develop a new understanding of their conditions, which may lead to a change of conditions (O'Donoghue et al., 2002), as the awareness may move outside the group and impact people in the participants' communities. This process enhanced knowledge about the local community and the possibilities to advocate social change (Boser, 2006). However, participation and action alone are not enough to transform

people's lives, and often other matters, such as organisational structures can stand in the way of social transformation. This complexity makes it difficult to evaluate the values of youth participation in PYV, and as Cleaver (1999) states, there is a need to conceptualise participatory processes more broadly.

The focus group setting may have been new to most of the young people. We found a higher rate of responses to the anonymous questionnaire, in comparison to focus group interviews, as well as 9% of respondents writing in the questionnaire, that it was "*an embarrassing*" or "*bad"* experience to participate in focus group interviews. Furthermore, during individual interviews participants were more open and talkative than during group interviews. Participants may have felt more comfortable talking in a setting without their peers present. Supporting this explanation is the finding that six out of eight participants in the individual interview chose not to have the main research assistant present to interpret.

Another significant challenge and limitation of PYV includes a limited time span of one month for the interviews, which posed a restriction in relation to the degree of action and participation which could unfold, particularly as many of the youth expressed that they had limited experience with active participation. A longer time span may have led to greater developments and the youth becoming more acquainted with the experience of active participation.

Power is central to participation opportunities and the relationship between research partners. The focus in PAR is often exploited or oppressed groups such as immigrants, indigenous peoples, and vulnerable women (Hall, 1981). Cooke and Kothari (2002) discuss the naivety of assumptions regarding the authenticity of motivations and behavior in participatory processes. Krueger and Casey (2000) suggest that focus groups with young people are characterised by expectations from the youth regarding adult control, and peer pressure influencing the opinions that are expressed. Normal assumptions about the roles adults and youth take on in a research project may lead to adolescents being silent if they do not trust their own reasoning in the presence of authorities (Lind, 2008). This may also have influenced the level of sharing throughout the research process.

Steps were taken in the research process to decrease the hierarchical power relation between the participants and ourselves as researchers, such as articulating that we were there to learn from them, that they were the experts on their own lives, and emphasis was placed on the value of their personal stories. Unequal power relations were also attempted to be equalised as we shared information from our lives with the participants. Furthermore, during the communal meeting the youth were encouraged to present the results.

Conclusion

Investigating the implications and values of youth participation in PYV showed that the concept of youth participation is a complex and contextual matter. Interview method, language, time-span, self-esteem, experience, social norms, and individuals' perceptions of level of influence and opportunities in the community, as well as the organisational structures in Paamiut, all played a role in how participation in PYV was understood, approached, challenged, and manifested.

The young people showed different levels of involvement and participation, but in general the involvement was high. Some of the young people expressed themselves through other means than active verbal participation in the group discussions. This can be seen as adherence to a social norm of modesty and quietness, or as a way of avoiding involvement and potential confrontation of others or the perceived group opinion. The mobilisation of the young people in making a community meeting showed a high level of engagement and of a will to engage in the development of the community. The shared concern expressed by youth and adults of excluding some young people from the process showed a shared intention of including all young people in the development of the local community and of giving opportunities to all young people. This intention should also be put into practice in the participatory action research approach applied in this study. We identified methodological challenges, including interview method, project time-span and the concept of participation in the research process which may have caused and sustained the fact that some young people were invited to participate more than others.

Recommendations

PAR projects with youth should include a number of means for communication, including writing, arts, physical activities and a variety of situations that open for dialogue between the participants and people in the community, as relying solely on verbal expression can be a restricting factor. The time-frame of the research project should be sufficient to create mutual trust between all involved parties and should avoid sustaining previously existing power structures into the research process. There should be options for individual interviews as well as focus groups. Including a component of skills development is advisable. An increased level of participation of the youth in the continued development of the community necessitates experiences that alter the young peoples' frames of what is possible. That requires involvement with real-world issues, and projects where they can see the larger community impact of their efforts. The youth in Paamiut could become directly involved in implementing their proposed ideas for community activities. This would help develop their skills, improve their self-esteem and alter their beliefs of perceived influence in the community.

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