

A Participatory Approach to Research with Migrant Working Adolescents

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Abstract

Child-centred approaches focus on the children's perspective and on participation. Participatory action research can be a fruitful methodology for investigating delicate topics such as child labour in migrant communities. This article presents a peer research project conducted in Rome (Italy) which actively involved a group of foreign working young people over two years and employed a variety of methodologies. Research methods will be illustrated and critically discussed, with a particular focus on the benefits for the migrant youths involved and ethical questions arising from this type of research. A brief summary of the main findings will also be provided.

Keywords: research methods, participation, migrant young people, working adolescents, peer research

The increasing attention towards children's and adolescents' rights and the involvement of minors in issues directly concerning them have led to a gradual methodological shift from research carried out 'on' children to research carried out 'with' children, and most recently, research carried out 'by' children (Brownlie et al. 2006; Wilkinson 2000; Laws and Mann 2004; Liebel 2008; Kellett 2005). There are now many international studies on child-centred research that present empirical results and explore ethical and methodological issues (Laws and Mann 2004; Wilkinson 2000; Jones 2004; Kirby 2004; Boyden and Ennew 1997; The Concerned for Working Children 2002 and 2006; Liebel 2008; Kellett 2005; Brownlie et al. 2006; Bennett and Roberts 2004; Alderson and Morrow 2004).

In this article, I will present a participatory research project on working migrant young people in Rome.

Ethnic minorities are often included in the category of vulnerable persons, and they are often prevented from actively participating in research due to a variety of problems (Steel 2001). The same holds true for working children and adolescents who, especially in some cases, run the risk of social exclusion.

The topic of working migrant minors is an intricate one due, on the one hand, to their relative invisibility and, on the other, to their vulnerability. The picture is further complicated by the need to take a number of cultural, economic, social and legal variables into consideration, given that migration

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projects, models of inclusion, different representations of childhood and inter-generational relationships can all affect decisions about work (Bertozzi 2007). During the nineties, research on child labour in Italy focused exclusively on Italian minors. Migrant minors were overlooked, due to the difficulty of exploring the most marginalized jobs in which they were involved and entering the tightly knit immigrant communities (Istat 2002).

This paper presents a study on migrant young people using participatory research. Participatory research approaches arose out of efforts in East Africa in the 1970s as an alternative social science research methodology (Clark 2004). They include participatory action research, community research, participatory learning and action, peer research, and participatory rural appraisal (Laws 2004; Hart 2006). The key features of participatory research include methodological eclecticism and a different relationship between researchers, their subjects and topics of inquiry, all of which requires the active involvement of community members in the presentation, analysis and interpretation of their own reality (Clark 2004).

The participatory approach may be a promising methodology for investigating migrant children's labour and social life. Enabling working migrant young people to be researchers themselves means for them, firstly, to claim the right to express their opinion and participate in the life of their community, and secondly, to claim the right to influence their public image and the decisions and policies concerning them, thereby avoiding and eliminating situations of invisibility.

However, one should also be aware of the possible limitations of participatory research approaches. A common concern is that these approaches may not always meet the standards of scientific research¹. At the same time, there is the risk that the research outcomes may not be utilized by the participants in order to promote social change. A considerable amount of time, energy, and other resources are required if participants are to become part of such a project in an appropriate and ethically respectful way. Finally, especially when delicate issues are at stake, young people do not necessarily wish to be interviewed by their peers. Thus, the choice of this approach should be carefully weighed against other possibilities (Laws and Mann 2004).

1. A Peer Research Project with migrant working adolescents

The peer research project presented here was part of a larger research project on migrant children's work in Rome, developed by Save the Children Italy in collaboration with the Research Centre of CGIL, one of the most important Italian trade unions, in 2007 and 2008. The project included other

¹ More specifically, participatory approaches may produce results with relatively low internal reliability, as peer researchers may collect data in a variety of ways in order to respond to questions that 'academic' researchers might not have included in a standardised research project. However, data thus collected have a very high ecological validity as they are grounded on the participants' views and provide deep insights on the phenomena under investigation.

more conventional methodologies such as surveys. The aim of this peer research project was to analyze migrant youth's work, its meanings and characteristics. We investigated the work of children under the age of fifteen (whose work would be considered illegal according to the International Labour Organization Convention n.138) and the experience of youths aged 16 to 18. The focus of the research was on the working activities and the illegal economic activities that young people defined as work².

The unique feature of this two-year research project was the pivotal role played by the young people themselves, which informed the entire research process and contributed to its definition, revision and ongoing re-adjustment.

In peer research, young people are considered part of the research team, so that investigators share with the participants their age, present and past experiences, life contexts and cultural heritage. Peer researchers may take on a variety of roles, such as supporting adults in making decisions about research agendas, approaches and methodologies, collecting data themselves, or being involved in data analysis and report writing (Laws 2004; Kirby 2004).

In peer research, participation and action are intertwined. Participation is a fundamental concept in this approach, which aims to involve research subjects and to promote a "democratization of the processes leading to the construction of social knowledge" (Cannarella et al. 2007: 170). Action, on the other hand, may be one by-product of the research or may be intimately connected to it, but it is not a necessary condition. In other words, peer research is always participatory research (although the nature and degree of participation may vary)³, which may, in turn, become action research when it aims not just at knowing reality but also at solving problems and promoting good practices.

1.1 From participatory peer research to participatory peer action research

Table 1 summarizes the main elements of the peer research carried out in 2007 and 2008 in Rome.

The research had two main goals:

- understanding the characteristics of the minors' jobs and the forms of exploitation of child labour in Rome, focusing primarily on migrant youths and, in the second year, also on young Italians at risk of social exclusion;
- enabling these youths to speak with their own voice, in order to understand their perspectives on the phenomenon and to promote their training and participation as active participants, rather than treating them as passive

² In accordance with the official position of Save the Children, *Position Paper on child work* (www.savethechildren.it).

³ The two variables of participation and action are to be separately analyzed for both researchers and participants.

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research subjects. This also implied advocating for and with the young people involved in the project.

Table1 – Main features of peer research ‘with’ and ‘by’ migrant young people

	1 st year	2 nd year
Goals	Gaining knowledge on: - Characteristics and meanings of migrant youth’s jobs	Gaining knowledge on: - Characteristics and meanings of migrant youth’s jobs - Forms of exploitation of child labour Experimentation of a micro-observatory Devising possible practical interventions
Methods	1. Individual semi-structured interviews 2. Photographs	1. Individual and group semi-structured interviews 2. Internet 3. Analysis of job offers on newspapers and websites 4. Save the Children front desk
Research products	1. Final <i>peer researchers’ report</i> 2. Final adults’ report	1. Joint participatory report 2. <i>Peer-to-peer information materials</i> 3. Employers’ information material 4. Audio-recording of 10 interviews

During the first year, only in a few cases did young researchers spontaneously make their peers aware of their rights on the workplace. In the second year, adult facilitators and peer researchers took a more action-oriented approach, establishing a micro-observatory connected with street-units and planning strategies for intervention. This implied more involvement and greater commitment on the part of peer researchers and a more extensive collaboration with other peer groups.

1.2 Methods and Stages of the peer research project

A number of ethical issues arise in connection with children’s participation in research (Laws and Mann 2004; Wilkinson 2000; Alderson and Morrow 2004; Camacho 2007). In our case, these included telling the participants explicitly about the purposes of the research, the costs and benefits of their involvement, issues surrounding confidentiality, the recruitment of researchers and related compensation, the use of flexible methods, respect of the migration projects, and their possible involvement in dissemination and advocacy activities.

From the very beginning, we chose to acknowledge the educational value of the activity (in terms of skills acquisition) with a financial reward for the time spent on the research. An advertisement was published in order to locate the six young participants who were awarded scholarships for the two years. After being fully informed about the research project, each youth was asked for his or her personal consent to participate in the project, as well as the consent of his or her parents or legal guardians.

For each of the two years, the research group consisted of 6 peer researchers aged 15 to 18, each of whom had work or work-like experiences as a minor. There were 3 girls and 9 boys. They came from Ecuador, Romania, Afghanistan, Morocco, Moldavia, India, the Republic of Guinea, or were a gypsy who came from Bosnia or Romania. Participants were contacted among the most represented ethnic minorities in Rome at the time of the study. Another criterion for inclusion in the research group was a good command of Italian. Some of the young people lived with their families; others lived in hosting communities because they were unaccompanied minors, while still some others lived in 'gypsy camps'.⁴

Two peer tutors and three facilitators from Save the Children supervised the young researchers and were in charge of institutional relations. The participants interviewed were migrant working young people from 8 to 18 years old.

The research group discussed the aims of the research and the field of inquiry, starting from the members' personal experiences, and decided to use a variety of methods. During an initial brainstorming session, the facilitators invited the peer researchers to reflect on the reasons that had led the young people to work. Discussion was stimulated through the use of photographs depicting working minors, which opened up the debate on the concept of work, its conditions and varieties. The group also collected and discussed newspaper articles in order to gain a better understanding of minors' work in Italy and, more specifically, in Rome.

A training course took place during each of the two years, focusing on research methods. A jurist and a media educator informed the researchers on workers' rights and precautions for the use of new technologies.

After this initial training, the peer researchers selected the research tools and, together with the adult facilitators, worked out how they would apply them. The main research method was the semi-structured interview. These were adapted by peer researchers to different contexts and situations, in an attempt to facilitate contact with the interviewees, to make them feel comfortable, and to respect their point of view and their rights. For example, in the "gypsy camp," the peer researchers decided not to make any recordings. Some interviews were conducted while walking, such that researchers had to write down their interviewees' responses afterwards

⁴ Social policies towards immigrant families vary greatly across local and regional contexts, and they also tend to change rapidly over time. General reviews can be found in Donati (2009), Zanfrini (2007), Ambrosini (2005).

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Interviews were carried out in the youths' mother tongues and in Italian, both face to face and at the Save the Children front desk. The interviewers also used some of the stimuli developed in the preparatory phase, such as photographs or newspaper articles, to elicit their respondents' experiences, opinions and attitudes. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, although some youth had already met each other before. Anonymity and confidentiality were also maintained in the subsequent phases of interview transcription and analysis. The young researchers started the interviews in their local areas, working initially with their friends and people from the same country of origin.

Over the two years of the project, 105 young people from 18 different countries were interviewed and 120 working experiences were analyzed. At the end of each year, the peer researchers analyzed all of the interviews and discussed what they felt they had learned from their respondents, suggesting possible strategies for intervention.

The peer researchers proposed additional information sources, such as Internet social networks. These networks were used only to disseminate information on minors' rights and to promote discussion among youths who knew each other and who were informed of the research project's aims. In no case were the social networks used to collect data without participants' informed consent. Another important resource suggested by the young researchers were job offers in newspapers.

The front desk of the Save the Children was another important source for gathering information and enhancing participation. It was a well-equipped meeting place for young people, connected with street units and street workers that facilitated contact with many working migrant youths for research purposes.

Peer researchers contributed significantly to writing the research reports, with adults and peers as their target readers. The convention between the two project partners (Save the Children *Italy* and Ires-Cgil) included the publication of a book reporting the project outcomes (Ires Cgil and Save the Children Italia 2007). The youths wrote their own report in the first year⁵. Some of them asked for help with Italian grammar, although they were all encouraged to draw on their own expressive means. Writing the report allowed them to reflect upon their own experience as research participants, to acknowledge the project's potentials and limitations, and, in so doing, contributed to raising their self-esteem and valuing their work. During the second year, researchers and adults drafted a joint participatory report. Video recordings and information files on youth rights in the workplace were written for young people and employers and were later translated into four languages. Research materials were disseminated through press conferences in which the young people directly participated, and through publications.

⁵ Cfr. *Ragazzi ricercatori. Una ricerca partecipata sul lavoro dei minori migranti*, 2007, www.savethechildren.it.

In addition to monitoring during the process, peer researchers evaluated the work done at the end of each research cycle by means of a questionnaire. The facilitators also produced a final report on the process and its possible effects. Save the Children Italy included the proposals made by the young migrants among its advocacy initiatives.

1.3 Main research findings

The research revealed that migrant youths are employed in a wide range of jobs, sometimes for a significant number of hours, the majority in the “non-conventional” labour market (table 2).⁶

Among these activities, we included every job that the minors defined as work. For example, petty theft or begging were included as work activities, and young people were interviewed about them, because, as some peer researchers told us, the youth involved had considered them as jobs. This was one of the positive outcomes of this approach. In fact, we were able to compare the formal definitions of work activities (as stated by the law) with the experiences of working youths and, in so doing, adopted a broad category of ‘child work’. Then, in the data analysis stage, the peer researchers and facilitators initiated a discussion about what we could define as working activities and in what ways they could be distinguished from illegal activities or informal money-making activities. In this way, the peer researchers and participants could understand the discrepancy between law and reality as well as the benefits of holding a regular job.

Some young people managed to combine school and work activities, although the majority of them did not attend school. They had little knowledge of their rights and obligations, as prescribed by the Italian educational system. Many young people who had arrived in Italy at the age of 14 or 15 gained illegal access to the job market without first completing their compulsory education.

These youths also had little knowledge of the rights and conditions under which a person from 16 to 18 years old is allowed to work in Italy. Their main concern was to earn money, and exploitation was usually perceived only in connection with the remuneration. Despite this lack of awareness, however, there were several situations of exploitation, due to long working hours, demanding duties, and the absence of a work contract or security. Building, farming jobs and prostitution were the more exploitative working situations described. Youths who were unaware of their rights, who were poorly protected and had a relatively low quality of life emerged as those more vulnerable and more open to exploitation.

Several discussions were conducted on this topic with the research group in collaboration with the jurist. This topic stimulated some critical observations by the peer researchers during group interviews, as a result of their new-found awareness. For these reasons, among the final products,

⁶ A full presentation of the research findings can be found in Bertozzi (2007 and 2009).

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peer researchers decided to produce peer-to-peer materials on the rights of working young people, as stated in Italian law, as well as an information kit for employers.

Table2 – Jobs of respondent aged 8-18 years old that were analysed within the research⁷

Job types	Number of minors
Catering <i>(cook, pizza maker ,confectioner, waiter, barman, dishwasher)</i>	32
Building <i>(bricklayer, hodman, painter)</i>	11
Home care	4
Services <i>(hairdresser, decorator, Internet point attendant, librarian, cultural mediator, porter, filling station attendant, parker, car-washer, cleaning staff, herbalist, bathing attendant)</i>	28
Crafts <i>(mechanic, tailor, satellite-dish maintenance worker)</i>	6
Arts <i>(photographer, actor, lap-dancer)</i>	4
Trade <i>(greengrocer, market seller, fishmonger)</i>	3
Farming	4
Street seller	2
Begging	8
Illegal activities	10
Prostitution	2
Illegal parker	6
Total	120

2. Benefits and challenges

The inclusion of peer researchers promoted equal relations with young people and the choice of the most effective methods for understanding their issues and concerns. Peer interviewers, who shared similar experiences and languages, were able to access invisible and irregular working situations, which were otherwise inaccessible to Italian adults. Being a peer fur-

⁷ Some of the young people had more than one working experience as a minor. During the second year of the research, each experience was analyzed as a different case; therefore, 61 working experiences were collected, although there were only 42 participants in the study.

ther enabled trust and openness in young people, particularly in some delicate situations, as with stigmatized social groups. The young researchers' point of view also provided additional insights into the interpretation of the influence of cultural variables and of changes related to migration. Peer action-research also allowed for more effective and targeted actions of the groups of interest.

The main benefits of this participatory approach can be seen in peer researchers' empowerment. The peer researchers developed a greater awareness of work-related matters and their own conception of rights changed. This led some of the researchers to look for non-exploitative jobs. Others became more aware of their rights in negotiations with their employers. Some even initiated discussions with their peers about work and related issues. The experience, thus, enhanced their conscious self-confidence, through a continual exchange with adults involved in the project and in the actions which followed.

As one girl remarked: *"All of this gave us the opportunity to read the society in which we live in a different way and to gain knowledge for our own future"* (Tatiana, 17 years old).

Young people's involvement in the research also raised particular ethical concerns.

A fundamental concern was that of informed consent, understood as the expression of free choice to participate in the research. Consent is usually asked of minors, parents or legal guardians. This leads to a series of issues: Is parents' consent necessary for young people? Where there are differences, should we take into consideration the youths' consent, or do we bide by the adults' consent (Alderson and Morrow 2004)? How can participation, protection, and informed consent be solicited at the same time, when participants live in irregular situations or when they come from families whose cultural models deny children significant decision-making power? The involvement of the peers made it easier to obtain consent based on trust, but it was important to ensure that such consent was actually informed and that there was no exploitation. Peer mediation mitigates the power and cultural imbalance of the relationship where consent is asked, and it can help lessen mistrust in youths and adults. Parents' (or legal guardians') consent was asked for the peer researchers involved in the project. More often than not, however, immigrant parents are in a position of lesser power when negotiating in the host society. Efforts were thus made to ensure that parents understood the informed consent form by simplifying its language and, through cultural mediation, explaining to them the goals and methods of the research project. The peer researchers themselves were responsible for gaining informed consent from the participants they interviewed.

Another dilemma which we faced was in making sure that participation in the research did not pose risks for the young people and, at the same time, that the protection of the youths did not inhibit or limit their participation. For this reason, great care was taken in handling possibly irregular or illegal

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situations, in order not to expose the researchers to risks and dangers, even when this meant losing the opportunity to further explore emerging topics. Anonymity was guaranteed in interviews with prostitute minors, and the young researchers limited themselves to sensitizing their peers in order not to breach the agreement of confidentiality that had been established in the contact phase. Save the Children has a number of street education projects in Rome that also involve prostitute minors.

Another controversial issue that arose was whether young people should be remunerated for their work. In our case, we chose to award scholarships to emphasize the experience's formative qualities. This incentive motivated the participation of immigrant youths as they were all responsible for supporting themselves or their families.

The trust that peer researchers gained from their interviewees raised the issue of how information that is confidentially elicited should be utilized. All of the data were read together with peer researchers in order to exclude from publication the most sensitive personal information, while at the same time preserving an overall picture of the phenomena being observed.

Research carried out by migrant young people serves as a way of expressing their participation, and the participation "of minors involves the development of their rights, the encouragement of their action in society, and the expression of their needs and interests" (Ruggero 2007). In the context of a multi-method approach to a phenomenon as complex as migrant children's labour, peer research provides a qualitative focus grounded in young people's point of view.

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