

Abstract

The study on “The power of community in the protection of children through participatory action research: A project to create a secure environment for the children of Watpracharabuetham community, Dusit District, Bangkok”, aims to (1) study and analyze the power of the community in the protection of children by creating a secure environment for the children through conducting participatory action research project; and (2) examine the principle researcher’s learning process and lesson learned from this project. The research period was 2 years. Participatory action research was the method chosen. Major data collection techniques included a review of related documents, participant observation and in-depth interviews. Recruitment and participation of community researchers were conducted jointly by the center for the protection of children’s rights foundation (CPCR) staff and the principle researcher. Capacity building of community researchers in techniques of data collection, analysis and reporting occurred throughout the research.

As a result of collaboration in the participatory action research project, two outcomes were found: (1) Knowledge outcome consists of deeper awareness of community researchers on the issue of creative and non-creative space for children based on the findings of their field survey. In addition, their intellectual power enables them to use research as a means to solve community problems; (2) Action outcome includes the design and implementation of safer space and environment for the children and concrete achievement in getting children and youth to take part in community development activities.

The researcher’s interpretation of community power points to two aspects of power, namely concrete power and abstract power. Concrete power involves collaboration and coordination among community researchers and people with the same concern for and interest of children’s problems. Abstract power covers intellectual power which can be seen in community researchers’ ability to analyze situations relating to risk factors and threats in the livelihood of the community.

Through methodological reflection, I myself as a researcher was able to overcome several challenges in the researcher process. In the pre-research phase, the issue of “new identity as researchers” was dealt with. A change of view and belief from “research is too big for community people” to a feeling that “research is what community people can handle” was apparent. Other challenges include difficulties in helping community researchers to systematically plan and learn reflection skills. Gender perspective and analysis which received little attention at the beginning of the design became an important issue in knowledge building, as the majority of team members are women. Problems during the implementation phase include maintaining a collaboration between community units and researchers, conflict management resulting from differing ideologies. In addition, a challenge on the multiple meanings of “participatory action research” was found and debated.

Recommendations for community researchers and community change agents include: (1) enhancing knowledge and skills of participatory action research as community empowerment tool; (2) investigation of knowledge and understanding of local languages in pluralist cultures of urban communities; (3) gender awareness and analysis in the research process in order to promote gender equality; (4) ethical consideration in all stages of research. Lastly, (5) consistent consultation with research participants, community researchers and the community at large on research progress and results. For the Watpracharabuetham community to achieve self-reliance in child protection and child development efforts, deeper skills, knowledge and commitment to participatory action research must be continually strengthened.