



OVERVIEW

Research for action



CAPEJ

Research and Action
for Emancipatory Policies
for Youth

In this overview we propose to set out in detail some fundamental principles for the use of research methodologies intended to transform real-life situations, in a word, for “action”. But to establish some reference points for our work within the CAPEJ project, we first need to return to a few definitions generally used in the social sciences, including exactly what “action-research” means. Those concepts will help us clarify both our own stance and the conception of action-research as we understand it within the CAPEJ project. We will conclude this overview by addressing the question of how to centre young people at the core of an action-research set-up, by offering a few examples of research or projects that we analysed in the capitalisation stage.

1. Research ... for action

« RESEARCH » ...

Research in social sciences is intended to advance our understanding and give us insights into social realities through study and analysis of social phenomena, whatever they may be. It proposes to identify a research topic or problematic, to test hypotheses through inquiries, and to offer useful conclusions for the interval before other research arrives to bring nuance to, disprove, or strengthen those results.

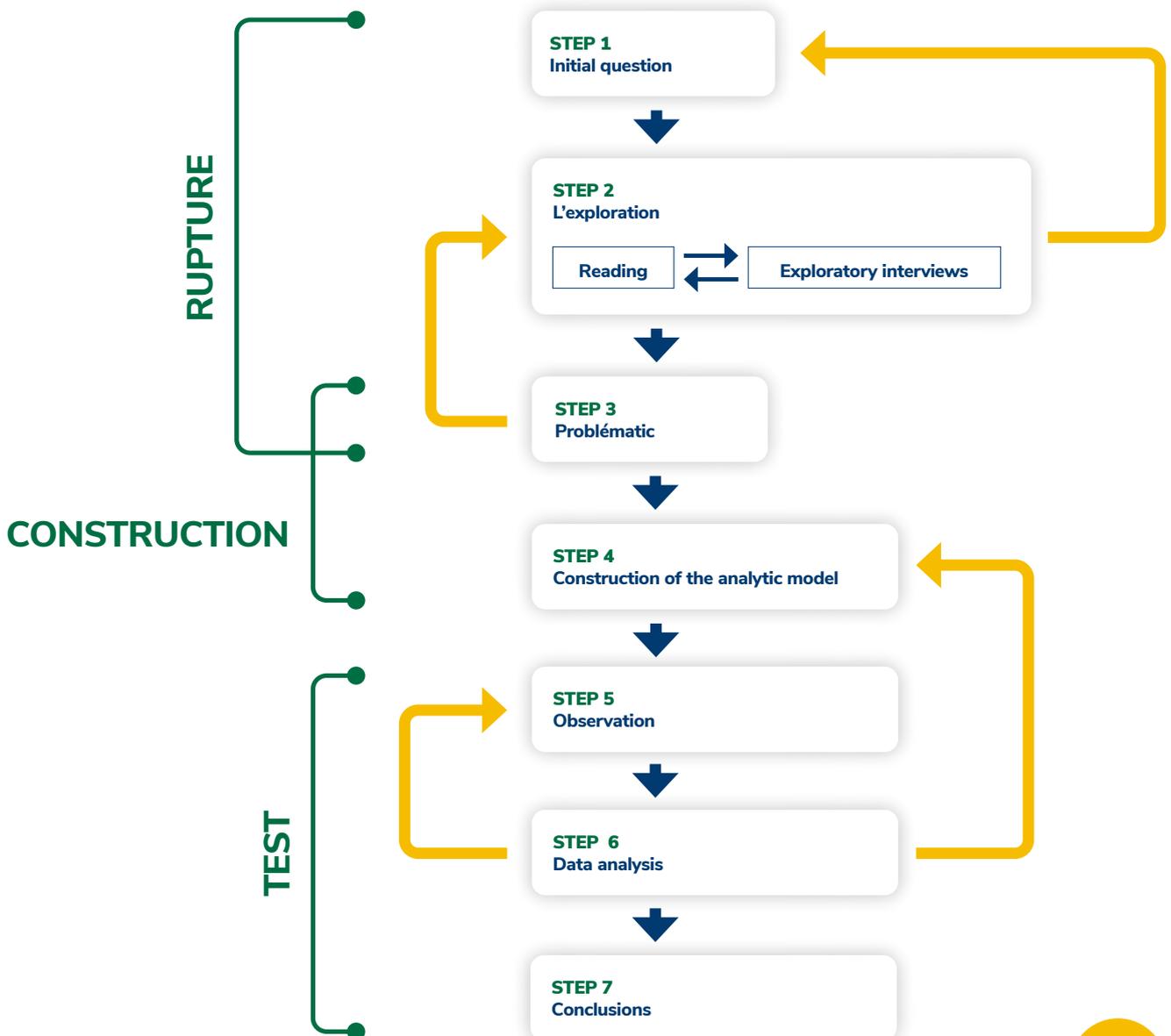
Research projects therefore follow precise protocols and are meticulous in implementing their preferred methods (qualitative and/or quantitative) and analysing the data collected. The results of that research, along with “trustworthy” data and metrics, improve our comprehension of social issues, levers and obstacles.

When doing research, it is important to conceptualise things before collecting data, and to anticipate the stages the researcher will go through. Van Campenhoudt, Marquet & Quivy (2017) propose a description of the social science research process in 7 steps, which can be classified in 3 distinct “stages” (see Figure 1).

First, there needs to be what they call **rupture** between the researcher’s preconceived ideas and the scientific consensus on the subject, although it is equally important to mobilise the researcher’s own knowledge and competence, in strict adherence to a methodology. **Second**, you need to **construct** inquiries around an **established conceptual framework**. Third, the researcher will have to test the validity of the hypotheses et and challenge them in the face of reality.

The schematic below shows that feedback loops can exist between steps and are naturally to be welcomed. The research process is not always linear and may require some back and forth. For example, it often happens that after some enquiry into the subject the researcher must reconsider the original topic.

Figure 1. The steps in the research process (Van Campenhoudt, Marquet & Quivy, 2017)



... FOR « ACTION » :

Research may strive to meet a variety of objectives. They may be to better understand the importance of an event or conduct, to intelligently take stock of a situation, to more subtly grasp the logical foundation on which an organisation functions, to reflect accurately on the implications of a policy choice, or simply to more clearly understand how certain people perceive a problem and give some insight into the foundations of their representations. (Van Campenhoudt, Marquet & Quivy, 2017).

Over and above aspects of comprehension, research can also aim to propose solutions for a problematic situation, to improve living conditions, to develop public policy and practice, etc. In general, research can help find concrete answers to problems encountered by the actors in a field and by young people. Protagonists in this type of research are therefore working toward change and action.

The goal is to propose “science-based solutions”: to postulate that the actors in the knowledge production process are engaged and are working towards social change. Participation and transformation are therefore at the heart of the process.

2. The purpose of action-research

Action-research as envisaged in scientific literature has a rightful place among the various approaches that may be considered. Many authors, from different fields, have theorised the approach, which explains the diversity of ideas scientists may have about action-research.

Consensus has nonetheless emerged around the definition proposed by Hugon and Seibel. They define action-research as a scientific methodology characterised by “**deliberate action to change reality; research has a dual objective to change reality and raise awareness about those changes**” (Hugon & Seibel, quoted by Barbier, 1996; Allard-Poesi & Perret, 2004).



In other words, when a situation arises in a given field, the partners in the research will try to change some of the parameters of the situation while taking into account the implications of the changes, all through a strict process. Although there are variants in action-research, we can highlight **the following shared elements** (Morrissette, 2013):

- the primary objective must be a positive change in professional practice;
- the field actors concerned by the practice must be actively involved, both collectively and individually;
- the research process operates through cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

This research method stands apart from other types of research because of the continuous and collaborative implication of both research scientists and actors in the field (e.g., Morrissette, 2013). The latter are in fact entrusted with an important role, given their knowledge of reality in the field and their construction of a network. So they can be considered ‘co-inquirers’ due to the responsibility they share with researchers throughout the action-research (Morrissette, 2013). The approach helps them learn to identify needs while remaining in contact with their field, and to craft an approach to attain their goal of change (Catroux, 2002). As for the researchers, thanks to their knowledge of the methodology and their objectivity, they accompany the practitioners in their search to clarify issues and seek out solutions. **In practice, field actors may even become researchers themselves, through training and eventual mastery of methodological criteria, with or without the support of a scientific advisory committee focused on the challenges confronting them.**

So action-research is a methodological structure that unites research and action. Its essential postulates are that all actors are equals and that there are different types of knowledge and expertise, which may evolve over time (i.e. field actors must not be considered useful only for their professional experience, as their knowledge may grow during the process). Doing this means **building a framework for collaboration between researchers and the people who are directly concerned with the situation, always bearing in mind that the latter are the authorities on how situations will change based on the knowledge produced** (Morvan, 2013). Again, depending on what options and methods are chosen by the scientific researchers, their degree of involvement (from occasional to total) will vary widely.



During the research process, the researcher may also change his or her stance: from that of an “objective outside observer” (although complete objectivity does not exist and the researcher will always have an impact on the field, whether intentional or not) to that of an active participant in an experimental process. However, if researchers or other accompanying actors really want to support an emancipatory process, they need to find the right balance between contributing existing knowledge to “orient” the action, and empowering young people by mentoring them as actors in the research.

3. Within the CAPEJ project what action-research are we trying to develop?

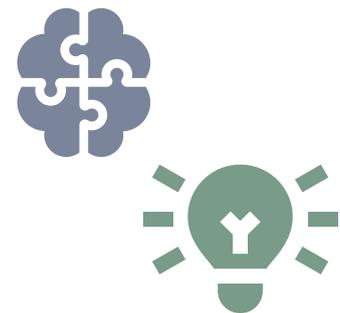
Within the CAPEJ project, we consider that action-research tools and processes can help to offer actors a participatory and self-reflective framework to improve and fine-tune public policy and practice. However, those tools and processes may not always be suitable for the specific audience that is youth, and especially those young people with the greatest difficulty in expressing themselves. In addition, academic methods may be of limited application for actors in youth policy: often incomprehensible, too complex to implement, or insensitive to the challenges in the field, they are rarely evaluated and capitalised.

For this reason, we believe that it is a necessary preliminary to reformulate those methods and processes and to build suitable tools. Our general objective in the CAPEJ project is to empower actors in youth policy (including young people themselves) by giving them the skills they need to take action to design new educational practices/policies.

So the goal is to develop a research culture, i.e. critical thinking and skills for both young people and practitioners in youth policy, to be able to achieve change. It is our ambition to put forward participatory action-research with, or even by, young people, in order to act on a situation or situations of concern to them. We do believe that action-research, as we conceive it within the CAPEJ project, can help support the process of emancipating not only young people, but also practitioners, researchers, and elected representatives.

To that end, we have identified through knowledge capitalisation¹ some methods and tools for action-research, based on analysis of reports on other research projects. Using the toolbox proposed by CAPEJ, we will develop ingredients in those methods to make them intelligible and usable for young people, including those in the greatest difficulty, and also appropriable by field actors in youth policy so that they can develop their own action-research with the public they serve. More specifically, the goal is to provide actors in youth policy (or youth social workers), young people themselves, and even public policymakers with the resources to implement participatory projects based on research methods, tools, etc.

In this context we use the term “researchers” to mean the professionals involved in the research, whether academic or not, including action-researchers, the young people involved in such processes, youth social workers, and any professionals accompanying the action-research process.



4. On the ends and means of action-research

Within the framework of action-research, the heart of the process is always the emancipation of the protagonists², but ends can still differ. One of the first stages in the work is deciding exactly what accompanying professionals want to achieve, in discussion with the young people involved:

- Problem-solving on a local level,
- Transforming or driving action on the situation of young people,
- Improving the operations and organisation of professional services and practices,
- Establishing and/or developing public policy,
- and so on.

¹ Knowledge capitalisation on action-research was conducted between September 2020 and January 2021. Each partner in the CAPEJ project called on their own networks, popular education communities, university contacts and action-research initiatives to collate all the projects CAPEJ members were aware of. Sixteen projects were identified. Then individual interviews were held with actors in that action-research to construct a framework for reflection.

² On this subject see the CAPEJ overview of the concept and processes of emancipation.

Depending on the end goal, the research set-up will need to be adapted and constantly called into question. Similarly, the implication of the young people themselves, how they are included, the time spent and even the geographical perimeter of the project will vary³.

The chart below is provided as an aid in decision-making, i.e. evaluating what set-up to put in place or, over the longer term, analysing how it is developing, in order to adjust the action-research process. From orange to green, the colours indicate how fully young people are implicated in the change.

Metrics	1	2	3	4
Role of young people in the research	Absent	Occasionally present	Full partners	Leaders
Topic chosen by	Partners/ researchers	Partners with support from young people	Young people with suggestions from pros	Young people
Role of public officials	Absent	Informed	Solicited	Associated
Impact, changes observed	None	Occasional actions	Change in living conditions / attitudes of pros/of elected representatives	Structural change in local policy/local conditions/young people's lives
Other				

To illustrate some action-research processes according to the factors listed in the chart, the following are some elements gleaned from research/projects analysed in the knowledge capitalisation phase of the CAPEJ project.

Example 1 : Révolte des étudiants

This project was not originally defined by its protagonists as action-research, but some 40 young people were involved with 8 youth social workers from different youth centres in the province of Liege, Belgium. Although this participatory project was launched by a **collective of youth social workers**, the young people themselves identified the problematic they wanted to work on from the start (dissatisfaction with their schools, and more specifically bullying, homework and disparities in treatment by teachers) **and carried the project from beginning to end, accompanied by the youth social workers (support, tools, methods, etc.)**.

³ On this subject see the CAPEJ overview of issues related to participation.



The project lasted a little more than a year. Notably, it concluded with the drafting and publication of a report by the young people involved (content, images, opinions on graphic design, etc.). The young people were able to present their project/report at a press conference, and were granted an audience by the **Minister of Youth and Sports** as well as the Parliament, to discuss the results and hear their opinion on various topics of concern to youth. **School administrations** also seized on the results in taking measures at their schools.

Role of young people in the research	Duration	Choice of topic	Role of public officials	Impacts, changes

Example 2 : Housing and autonomy in the field of public assistance to youth

The goal of this study, initiated by **public authorities** (Ministry of Youth Assistance and General Administration of youth assistance), was to analyse the problem of access to housing in the context of young people leaving the youth assistance system to enter adult life, with all the demands and difficulties that entails. In this study the young people were encouraged to express themselves directly in interviews focused on this issue. Methodologically speaking, the interview canvas itself was conceptualised in part based on feedback from young people in an exploratory stage. Young people therefore played a **considerable role**, but never became full partners as they were neither at the origin of the project (i.e. definition of the subject of the research) nor involved in conceptualising the stages in it. The study was based on strict research methodologies (notably special attention to how the interviews were conducted and sequential analysis of the data obtained), and in terms of **impacts** it led to partnership projects between the structures involved. However, those projects remained on a local level, not a regional one as originally intended.

Role of young people in the research	Duration	Choice of topic	Role of public officials	Impacts, changes



Example 3: PEER Project⁴

In this researcher-led European action-research, the researchers developed a methodology to help young Roma people and travellers develop skills and resources to solve **the problems they were confronted with themselves**. So the young people were at the heart of the action-research process, which ran on an **approximately 4-month cycle**. They were accompanied by researchers who supported the methodology behind the approach, interfering as little as possible in the process. Among the subjects the young people worked on were mobility, violence in places of learning, positive discrimination, etc. For each of those subjects the young people sought to understand the complexity of the situation and tried to take action to change it. Here the young people **were the main actors in the action-research**, and researchers, resource persons and elected representatives were solicited when needed, to answer precise questions.

Role of young people in the research	Duration	Choice of topic	Role of public officials	Impacts, changes

Illustration 4 : Projet AJIR

The original question in this project, **“How to create an innovative organisation in the territory to make young people actors of their trajectory in rural life?”** was proposed by researchers from the University of Grenoble-Alps, in collaboration with local professionals in youth policy and elected representatives. In this action-research, the methodological procedure was strict and the researchers played a major role both in construction and in data collection and analysis. Young people were only occasionally involved to contribute and analyse data; they were not at the heart of the process. Still, the impact on the territory was significant in terms of crafting youth policy and transforming professional practice. In particular, the experience of implementing the research methodology and steering the project served as a basis for its actors in replicating those methodologies **and thus developing a research culture**.

Role of young people in the research	Duration	Choice of topic	Role of public officials	Impacts, changes

⁴ For the project and its methodology see : <http://www.peeryouth.eu/>



Resources and reports on all these projects are available on request to understand the methodologies implemented in each.

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