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Children and young people's participation

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Contents

Introduction

Children and young people's participation is a complex and contested area. The theme of 'participation' infers a sense of involvement, citizenship and agency. Here we look at the multidimensional nature of children's participation and the many challenges that practitioners and children face. When thinking about these issues it will be important to reflect on your own assumptions and to critically evaluate relevant research, findings and theory.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of postgraduate study in Education.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- define the complexity of participation for children and young people
- compare and contrast different cultural perspectives and experiences of participation
- reflect critically on personal professional practice and assumptions regarding participation.

1 Children and young people's participation

This course centres on the core reading 'Children and young people's participation' by Mary Kellett and is further supported by activities and readings designed to explore and debate this theme in detail.

Reading

Begin your studies by reading 'Children and young people's participation' by Mary Kellett and consider the following questions:

- How does Kellett define participation?
- What are the implications of 'participation' for integrated practice?
- What are the potential barriers to children and young people's participation?
- What are the key features of Hart and Shier's model of participation?

[Children and young people's participation](#)

Mary Kellett indicates that listening to children's views – a first step in the participation agenda – is reasonably well established in the policy and practice arena. By contrast, enabling children to share in decision making processes, which is another crucial element of participation, lags some way behind. Mary emphasises that the adoption of an integrated approach to children and young people's participation by different sectors of the large children's workforce is of crucial importance. The reading includes a critique of Hart's and Shier's models of participation, and discusses the difficulties of trying to measure participation. Much of the criticism of Hart's model concerns the fact that it represents children's participation as a linear process when the reality is much more complicated and non-linear. The participation agenda emerged from the importance placed on children's rights, but such rights and entitlements have not been adequately translated into shared decision making processes. This course will ask you to think about the issues raised in this reading as they relate to your own experiences or views on participation.

1.1 Development activities

Development activity 1

Begin by taking an example from your own practice, or use Graham and Fitzgerald's Australian study discussed in the reading, which focused on 13- to 18-year-olds' views on participation. Then answer the following questions:

- Where would your own and others' practice be on the participation continuum?

- Is children and young people's participation genuinely meaningful?
- What impact, if any, is it having on policy making?

Development activity 2

Read the report

The National Child Participation Guide for Uganda: Creating an Environment for Children to be Heard, prepared by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, the Uganda Rights NGO Network, and UNICEF (Uganda Office).

When reading this document, consider the following areas:

- How does this approach compare with current UK policy and practice?
- What points of similarity and difference can you identify in relation to diverse cultural environments?
- Is gender an issue?
- Is girls' education singled out for special consideration?
- How does this approach compare with your own experiences of children and young people's participation?

On pages 10 and 11 of the *Participation Guide*, the authors identify what they think child participation is designed to provide and promote for Ugandan children. We have listed these in the first column of Table 1 below. In the second column, rank each of the statements from 1 to 5 according to how strongly you agree (1 being disagreement and 5 being strong agreement), and add any comment of your own in column 3. Then note any barriers that might get in the way of implementation in column 4.

Table 1 Expressions of children's participation

Participation	My ranking (1–5)	My comments	Potential barriers
Safe places for children in families, communities and institutions			
Openness and honesty			
Forum for children to think for themselves while expressing their views – shared decision making			
Information gathering and sharing			
Effective interaction among children and with adults involved in projects or activities in a positive way			
Empowerment for children as individuals and as members of society			
Spaces for children to have influence on actions and decisions that affect their lives			
Space and time for children to identify and analyse problems, and even suggest solutions to those problems			

1.2 Independent studies

Independent study 1

Read the article 'How children feel about their local housing estates' by Eleanor Frank, aged 11.

Eleanor Frank carried out this original research into views about her local housing estate when she was 11 years old. When reading her study, reflect on the findings that she presents and what contributions you think young people can make to policy decisions about local environments. Write notes on the following:

*   How many different sectors of the children's workforce might be involved in implementing some of her findings?
*   Would there be an integrated response, or do you think that some children's services are more willing to engage with children's research than others?

How children feel about their local housing estates

Independent study 2

Read the extract from the article 'Participation in practice: making it meaningful, effective and sustainable'. As you read it, reflect on the findings of the young people with learning disabilities featured in the WeCan2 case study in the Mary Kellett reading, and make notes on the following question:

*   How meaningful, effective and sustainable do you consider children and young people's participation to be?

This extract was taken from Chapter 3 'Children and young people's participation' by Mary Kellett. First published in 2009 by The Policy Press • University of Bristol Fourth Floor • Beacon House Queen's Road • Bristol BS8 1QU, UK Tel +44 (0)117 331 4054 • Fax +44 (0)117 331 4093 e-mail tpp-info@bristol.ac.uk • www.policypress.org.uk North American office: The Policy Press • c/o International Specialized Books Services (ISBS) 920 NE 58th Avenue, Suite 300 • Portland, OR 97213-3786, USA Tel +1 503 287 3093 • Fax +1 503 280 8832 e-mail info@isbs.com in association with The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, United Kingdom, www.open.ac.uk © 2009 compilation, original and editorial material, The Open University.

Participation in practice: making it meaningful, effective and sustainable

2 Personal practice

Childhood and Youth is a fast-moving sector with frequent policy changes and new legislative initiatives. It is important to keep up to date, so get into the habit of regularly checking government and local government policy websites. Make sure that you are familiar with the policy on children's participation in your own setting, and if you think that this is out of step with current legislation, then make this known and see if you can bring about change.

In relation to your personal practice, consider what your own perspective is. Has this changed in any way since you have engaged with the material in this course? A useful activity would be to create your own participation continuum based on the ideas first explored by Hart and Shier. Make it meaningful to yourself and your interaction with children and young people. Include where you have come from and ideals that you might be aiming for, as well as where you think you are now. Finally, think about your interaction with colleagues in other child and youth service sectors – how confident are you in an integrated approach to children's participation and shared decision making?

3 Conclusion

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the children and young people's agenda was dominated by their participation and its translation into policy and practice. This course has explored some of the main issues and debates, and encouraged you to reflect on your own position. You have considered how theory informs practice and the importance of an integrated approach.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of postgraduate study in Education.

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Acknowledgements

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Text

Independent Study 1: Frank, E. (2005) 'How children feel about their local housing estates', *The Open University Children's Research Centre*;

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