Three

Children and young people's participation

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Introduction

The term 'participation', at its simplest, means to become actively involved in something. Davies et al (2006: 11) more specifically refer to it as 'involvement in a collective decision-making process with a recognisable social and/or educational outcome'. This definition implies agency and encapsulates its theoretical origins embodied in the UNCRC (UN, 1989). Historically, participation has been linked to active citizenship (Arnstein, 1969). Herein lie some of the tensions around the concept in relation to children because most adult constructions of child participation do not connect with child agency or active citizenship but are wedged in more passive agendas of listening and consulting. In this chapter I examine the multidimensional nature of children's participation from a UK perspective, exploring the myths, challenging the rhetoric and evaluating the impact on children's lived experiences. I conclude with a case study about a group of young people with learning difficulties who undertook their own research into barriers to their meaningful participation in youth decision-making forums. In this chapter the term 'children' is sometimes used for brevity but it also includes young people.

Theoretical frameworks

Participation has long been a contested concept in contemporary political and social dialogues. The reality of children's participation is neither singular nor simple and requires a process of continual adjustment to the changing needs of the societies that children inhabit. The shift towards increased involvement of children, in a variety of social and institutional contexts, not only in the making of decisions

that affect them but also in research into their lives, has been driven by three main influences: the recognition of children as social actors, their concomitant recognition as consumers or 'users' of products and services and the increased attention paid to children's rights (Kirby et al, 2003; Coad and Lewis, 2004; Cairns and Brannen, 2005). To have an understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of participation, it is necessary to examine how the theoretical frameworks have been constructed.

Historically, children have been denied the right to make decisions about matters that affect them, being viewed as morally incompetent, inexperienced and incapable of making rational decisions (Cunningham, 1996). This is epitomised in the paternalist stance of so-called 'child savers' (Archard, 2004) who took decisions on children's behalf as a protection against them making potentially harmful mistakes (Mayall, 2002; Cockburn, 2005). This perspective has been robustly challenged by liberationists who argue that even young children can make rational decisions (Hyder, 2002; Lansdown, 2004). Wyness (2001) takes a broader view, arguing that children's right to involvement in decision making threatens to destabilise the adult paternalist stance since it requires a shift of power and may openly conflict with adults' claims that they have the child's 'best interests' at heart. Franklin (2002: 24) further weakens the paternalist argument by claiming that children need to be given opportunities to gain experience and points out that adults, who are deemed to have the necessary experience, often make the wrong choices but are not excluded from doing so on the same grounds. In response to some of these theories, it is worth noting that the age of participation has been lowered from 12 to 7 in Norway. It is a legal requirement that at 7 years of age, children must be given the opportunity to express themselves and at 15 years of age they can make decisions about their own education, religion and membership of organisations in addition to being recognised in their own right in legal cases (Skivenes and Strandbu, 2006).

The rise of liberationist, and wane of paternalist, theories set participation on a rights course, which culminated in the UNCRC. In the years since this edict, the concern has been on how to translate its articles into meaningful practice. Hart's (1992) 'Ladder of children's participation' was the first real attempt to do this and his work is cited and criticised in equal measure. He refers to the first three rungs on his ladder – *manipulation*, *decoration* and *tokenism* – as non-participation and describes four further rungs – *assigned but informed*, *consulted and informed*, *adult-initiated shared decisions with children* and *child initiated*

and directed – before the eighth and top rung of the ladder – *child-initiated shared decisions with adults.* Some (for example, Pridmore, 1998) have found it to be a powerful evaluation tool. Others (for example, Reddy and Ratna, 2002) criticise the implicitly sequential nature of the model. John (1996) asserts that Hart's ladder is a bestowing of rights to the powerless and passive child by the powerful adult, an outdated model of rights. A further criticism of Hart's ladder is that its structure implies a 'hierarchy of values' (Hart et al, 2004: 48), which is likely to lead to participatory activities being unfairly and misleadingly judged against particular levels. Treseder (1997) critiques the failure to acknowledge cultural contexts. His own model of participation takes the top five levels from Hart's ladder but arranges them in a circle, demonstrating that they are different, but equal, forms of good participation.

   Shier is the other seminal author of participation frames of reference. Shier's model (2001) focuses more on the adult roles than the status of children within projects. From the lowest level – children are listened to – to the highest – children share power and responsibility for decision making – Shier frames questions for adults to consider when planning or evaluating participatory projects around 'openings', 'opportunities' and 'obligations'.

Level 1: children are listened to:

■   Are you ready to listen to children?

■   Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children?

■   Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to?

Level 2: children are supported in expressing their views:

■   Are you ready to support children expressing their views?

■   Do you have a range of ideas and activities to help children express their views?

■   Is it a policy requirement that children must be supported in expressing their views?

Level 3: children's views are taken into account:

■   Are you ready to take children's views into account?

■   Does your decision-making process enable you to take children's views into account?

■   Is it a policy requirement that children's views must be given due weight in decision making?

Level 4: children are involved in decision-making processes:

■   Are you ready to let children join in your decision-making processes?

■   Is there a procedure that enables children to join in your decision-making processes?

■   Is it a policy requirement that children must be involved in your decision-making processes?

Level 5: children share power and responsibility for decision making:

■   Are you ready to share some of your adult power with children?

■   Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions?

■   Is it a policy requirement that children and adults must share power and responsibility for decisions?

Shier places a lot of emphasis on the collaborative activity of adults and children to bring about the most effective participation, reflecting a Vygotskian approach to scaffolded outcomes. Participation in joint activity with more knowledgeable adults or peers can support children in developing particular areas of competence through a bridging of that gap. This was what Vygotsky (1962) referred to as the *zone of proximal development*, or ZPD, the gap between a child's existing and potential levels of performance. It is the experiences that children

encounter that determine their personal trajectories of development and the acquisition of particular competencies.

Kirby and Gibbs (2006) criticise both Hart and Shier's models on the basis that each participation initiative or task cannot be assigned a single level of participation when, in reality, levels of decision-making power constantly shift within projects and within tasks. Other criticisms of the models centre around the absence of any guidance on how adults can support children in participation work to make decisions and take action, or any problematising of different levels of empowerment that children might experience. In stark contrast, the stance adopted by the National Youth Agency (NYA, 2005) focuses on advocacy and outcome by adopting two core principles of participation: first, children have the right to have their views heard *and taken seriously* through a process of *dialogue*; and second, this dialogue should lead to *tangible* change (my emphases).

Political frameworks in the UK

The UNCRC was a catalyst for change, charging its membership with ensuring that children were listened to and consulted on matters affecting their lives. However, the UNCRC was not an initiator of participation, as some myths appear to perpetuate – participation existed as a human right long before this – but the UNCRC did throw a spotlight onto the concept and bring it into the political arena. Despite ratifying the Convention, the UK government entered a number of reservations and no new legislation was initially drawn up to support its undertaking. Instead, the government retreated behind the 1989 Children Act, claiming that this was sufficient to address the issues. Rights activists were unhappy with this stance (Freeman, 2002) and Mayall (2002) pointed out that the Act only required local authorities to take account of the views of children in their care – a small minority. The UNCRC recommended increased attention to Articles 3 and 13 about listening and consulting and charged governments to establish further participation mechanisms in state, family and community (UN, 1995), but it was not until 2002 that the UK government finally adopted a new approach and a commitment to listen to children. This was the start of the *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003; Children Act, 2004; DfES, 2004). Five outcomes were identified as being important to children leading happy lives ('being healthy', 'staying safe', 'enjoying and achieving', 'making a positive contribution' and 'achieving economic well-being').

The participation agenda in the UK evolved in three phases: listening, consulting and ultimately involving children in decision-making processes. With the roll-out of *Every Child Matters*, several initiatives mushroomed, such as the Children's Fund, targeting children aged 5 to 13 years at risk of social exclusion (Coad and Lewis, 2004); Participation Works (2006), an online facility to help adults and children access and share information about children's involvement in decision making; and *Hear by Right* (Badham and Wade, 2005), which provided standards for both statutory and voluntary organisations to help improve the ways in which they involve children in decision making.

Article 42 of the UNCRC required state parties to make public the principles and provisions of the Convention. The UK government complied with this in the creation of an *Every Child Matters* website (www.everychildmatters.gov.uk) but fell short of the 'fundamental rights and freedoms' expressed in the Article, drawing attention only to 'the need for children to have special assistance and protection due to their vulnerability' (DfES, 2006). The right of children to express those views freely in all matters affecting them was not made explicit. By taking this entrenched protectionist stance, the government set itself on a collision course for conflict between adults' and children's priorities where the needs felt by children were at risk of being supplanted by the needs attributed to them by adults – a reflection once again of children's perceived incompetence and inability to make rational decisions. However, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2005) did acknowledge the difficulties in transforming this rhetoric into long-term 'meaningful' participation for children, which could bring about institutional change. If the outcomes identified in *Every Child Matters* were to be effective, organisations had to be clear what this meant in practice and how progress towards this could be measured. Middleton (2006), drawing on her own experiences of Youth Councils, confirms that while targets can instigate the setting up of projects, they alone cannot guarantee good practice. This situation is compounded by confusion about what the aims of children's participation are and by the fact that any expectations about these are likely to vary according to the roles of those involved in participatory initiatives (Murray and Hallett, 2000).

Impact and meaningful outcomes

Listening to children's views is not the same as sharing decision-making processes. The rhetoric belies the reality that children's participation, as yet, is having little or no impact on policy making (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). Skivenes and Strandbu (2006: 16) have outlined four procedures they consider essential to facilitating effective child participation, and which ensure that children participate in the same decision-making process as the adults involved:

■   Children have the opportunity to form their opinions in the first place – this requires adequate, age-appropriate prior information, including details of the consequences of any decisions they take for themselves and for others.

■   Children have the opportunity to express their viewpoints in a decision-making situation – being invited to voice their opinions, and having the choice to express these for themselves or through a trusted adult.

■   Children's arguments must be taken seriously – with equal opportunities to voice their views and sound reasons given if those views are not to be acted on.

■   Children are informed after a decision has been taken – what result has been reached, how it has been reached and what the result actually means, including opportunities for questions and appeals.

This ideal is rarely implemented in practice, however, and while it is possible to find some pocketed evidence of improvements in services attributable to children's participation (Sinclair, 2004), there is much less evidence of substantial impact and long-term benefit for children's lives. Indeed, there is a danger that the current wave of 'participation activity' may lead to a bigger wave of disillusionment among children. For participation to be meaningful, it has to be accessible and there are instances where adult language and behaviour can exclude children from participating at the outset, as can lack of sensitivity to culturally appropriate contexts. The case study at the end of this chapter addresses some of these issues. The point is also usefully illustrated in an example from South Africa cited by Moses (2008). In 2002, Save the Children Sweden commissioned the *Children's Poll: A South African*

Child Rights Survey (Save the Children Sweden, 2002) to investigate South African children's views and experiences of their rights and violations of those rights. The South African constitution is among the highest advocates of children's rights (Moses, 2006) yet participation was ranked by the children as the third highest rights violation. The reality, rather than political rhetoric, is that cultural norms, not political edicts, are dictating actualities. Here, power relationships between adults and children undermine any decision-making activity, as expressed in simple terms by one boy who said: 'adults make the decisions because they have the power' (Save the Children Sweden, 2002: 10). Children also reported being unable to make informed decisions because adults deny them access to relevant information for cultural or religious reasons. This is particularly common in relation to information about safe sex.

There are differences between outcomes for organisations and/or adults and outcomes for children. Moreover, there are differences between outcomes for children as individuals and children as a social group and these differ further according to the social and cultural compositions of those groups. Children are not a homogenous group. Like adults, they differ from one another in terms of their physical, emotional and cognitive make-up. They have different histories and different lived experiences. Varying degrees of self-development are often cited in the literature as important outcomes of participation for children (Roche, 1999; Shier, 2001; Kellett, 2005a). However, unless activities are truly participatory, involvement might just as likely lead to disempowerment and disillusionment as self-development. A note of caution needs to be heralded because, despite all this debate, a substantial body of evaluation literature on participation impacts and outcomes is as yet only embryonic (Percy-Smith, 2006; Skelton, 2007).

Deconstructing children's participation

What is participation? Can we 'do' participation? Is children's participation different from adults' participation? How do we measure their participation? Confusion still abounds as to what children's participation really means. It is interpreted both passively and actively. The former suggests taking part in the sense of 'being present at' and the latter suggests taking part as knowing one's participation may be acted on (Morrow, 1999), exposing a wide gap between rhetoric and reality. As Cairns (2001: 357) argues, 'young people's experience has been of consultation as an event, in which the powerful (adults) consult and the powerless (children) are consulted'. Children have

grown tired of endless tokenistic consultations that lead to no measurable change for them (Stafford et al, 2003). Power held by adults seeking children's views is evident in their control over topic, the methods used to ascertain their views, the timeframe in which consultation takes place and the impact of the consultation (Miller, 1997). Thus, children are still, to a large extent, dependent on adults to interpret and represent their perspectives. Processes of consultation, involvement and participation become blurred. It is possible, for example, to *participate* in consultation or to be *involved* in participatory activities. Some methods used to elicit children's views may be participatory or not since it is entirely dependent on the context and way in which the views are used. Lansdown (2001) groups approaches to participatory work with children into three broad categories: consultative processes, participative initiatives and the promotion of self-advocacy.

The semantic debate about what we mean by participation is fuelled by words like 'empowerment', 'agency', 'negotiation' and 'partnership', which are often used interchangeably. Clark and Percy-Smith (2006) consider that there are two important areas for debate: (1) critiques of the impact and efficacy of participation activities and processes and (2) a wider questioning of participation discourses. The first addresses how children's participation is impacting on services, structures and organisations. This embraces diverse economic, cultural and political issues. Differences within multicultural contexts raise some challenging dilemmas. For example, cultural, gendered and/or religious expectations in the family may be at odds with some state service providers' approaches to participation, engendering conflict between different values and agendas. The second requires a widening of discourses to include more critical reflections on participation. Criticism is levelled at the rhetoric of agency and the danger of exaggeration where too much responsibility is placed on those who may not have the power to implement change. Other critical reflection claims that children's involvement merely provides a vehicle for 'tick box' managerial approaches.

Putting the child at the centre of the participation debate

Amid all the rhetoric and debate, we are in danger of forgetting the child. What do children think about participation? Graham and Fitzgerald's (2008) study in Australia sheds some light on this. The

children in their study (aged 13-18) view participation as a status issue. To them, participation is about being recognised, for who they are in the here and now, for their place in social and cultural life. Such recognition is accompanied by increased levels of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Graham and Fitzgerald maintain that due recognition of children should not be a 'bolt on', it is a vital human need and core to any rights agenda.

A coda to the recognition assertion is aspiration to citizenship. This is another hotly contested concept in the UK. Can children with their minority legal status genuinely enjoy citizenship status? Is citizenship the ultimate embodiment of participation? Does the current practice of positioning children mainly in the private arenas of family and school rather than the public arenas of policy and decision making render such questions redundant? Increased citizenship is frequently cited as a beneficial outcome of children's participation – but is the reality yet another semantic fudge? While the present English Children's Commissioner, Al Aynsley-Green, might insist that children are citizens, the UNCRC briefing document interprets the status of 'child' as having no political rights (John, 1996). The concept of citizenship in the UK seems closer to notions of responsibility and control than participation. Setting the age of criminal responsibility in the UK at age 10 is a prime example of this (for further details, see Chapter Eight). Children are among the highest users of state services in minority world societies, yet one of the most governed groups (Hill et al, 2004) and participation sits uncomfortably within such a paradox.

Participation facilitated by children as researchers

A recent initiative from within participation activists is the empowerment of children as researchers in their own right (Sinclair, 2004; Kellett, 2005b). The UNCRC is commonly cited in relation to listening and consulting children about matters affecting their lives; much less common is reference to the clauses in Article 3, which uphold the right of children to high standards of research about their lives. Outlawed is research where adults misinterpret data collected from children. Equally rejected are studies that claim generalisations about children's lives with supposed authentic children's voices when close scrutiny reveals population samples that are tokenistic and dangerously unrepresentative (Ennew, 2008). One way to privilege children's voice, minimise adult filters and ensure meaningful participation is to empower them as researchers in their own right (see Chapter Fourteen). Much participatory

research is still adult-led, adult-designed and conceived from an adult perspective. It is not uncommon for children to be involved in data collection but play no part in design, analysis or dissemination. Children are party to the subculture of childhood, which gives them a unique 'insider' perspective critical to the design of methods that will generate appropriate data. Insight into their peer culture is just as valuable in the analysis of these data.

In a similar way to children's meaningful participation in South Africa being curtailed by parents restricting their access to information, access to quality research training is an example of another such participation gatekeeping. A genuine barrier to children engaging in, and leading their own, research is their lack of research knowledge and skills. Reflecting on the skills needed to undertake research, it is apparent that these attributes are not necessarily synonymous with being an adult; they are synonymous with being a researcher, and most researchers have undergone some form of training. Many, perhaps most, adults would not be able to undertake research without training. The task of distilling the complexities of the research process for children without compromising its core principles is extremely challenging but has been shown to be possible (see Kellett, 2003, 2005a; Kellett et al, 2004). The Children's Research Centre (http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk) at The Open University is a centre dedicated to supporting and promoting research *by* children. There is a similarly empowering school-based initiative in Hungary (Jaeger and Zsolnai, 2004; Zsolnai, 2004) where 51 schools in Hungary have research methods as a taught part of their national curriculum for 10- to 14-year-olds and students are given dedicated curriculum time to undertake their own research. Six countries in Europe and one in the Middle East are currently piloting children-as-researcher projects.

Power dynamics are at work at a number of levels. Adults still control which children access research training and there is a danger of articulate, middle-class children getting a disproportionate slice of the cake. Marginalised groups and the less cognitively able are at risk of being excluded. Concerns about inclusion extend to children choosing to opt out as well as in. If we accept participation as an integral part of a rights agenda, we also have to respect the right of children to opt out. Not all children want to engage in participatory activity, not all children want to engage in political decision making and not all children want to engage in their own research. However, what all children would appear to want is a level of self-determination and control over the immediacy of their environment.

On a positive note, there have been some very successful outcomes where young people have undertaken their own research and effected political or institutional change across the globe and these instances are growing in number and global scale. Ghanaian child researchers investigating transport and accessibility problems were invited to share their findings with the Ghanaian Cabinet Minister for Transport (Lolichen, 2006) in the same year that a group of 11-year-old researchers in the UK were presenting their findings about mobility issues for young people to the Department of Transport (Patil, 2006). This chapter is not the place to discuss such projects in depth but it would be remiss not to refer readers to an initiative that is taking participation into pioneering territory (see http://childrens-research-centre.open.ac.uk).

Case study: WeCan2

Taking due note of earlier allusions to marginalised groups of children, this case study will focus on participation by young people with learning disabilities. Between 2005 and 2008, young people in Blackpool and Devon, assisted and funded by Mencap, researched some of the difficulties they faced when seeking meaningful participation – difficulties in translating theory into practice and rhetoric into reality. For this project, called WeCan2, Allan Aoslin, Ross Baines, Alice Clancy, Lizzie Jewiss-Hayden, Ryan Singh and Josh Strudgwick looked at some of the barriers and problems faced by themselves and other young people when trying to participate, wrote a report on what they had found and suggested solutions to some of the difficulties they encountered. For an account of the project in their own words, and to see video clips of the children speaking, go to the Children's Research Centre web page.

Before they started their research, these young people undertook training in research methods, shaping their proposal and deciding on the best methods to carry out this research. They then went on to examine the barriers they faced when trying to participate. Although they, and other young people like them, were very keen to participate, they found that it was not always easy. Based on 70 hours of attendance at youth meetings (young people's councils, anti-bullying meetings and Youth Opportunity Fund panels) and interviews with young people, Youth Parliament Members and youth participation workers, they found that difficulties occurred when:

■   people spoke too fast;

■   minutes of meetings were not sent out in advance and had to be read during the meeting;

■   minutes and agenda papers were produced with small print and no pictures and were hard to read;

■   people used too many 'big words': for example, in one youth council meeting one of the researchers drew attention to the example of the phrase 'ethnically diverse';

■   meetings were often scheduled straight after school and the young people were hungry and tired, which affected how well they could participate;

■   meeting places frequently did not have good disabled access.

Having carried out this research the young people then designed a toolkit giving the adult organisers of youth group meetings simple practical solutions to some of these problems, such as big writing and pictures on the papers, breaks for food and drinks and a set of traffic-light cards for young people with a disability to use in meetings to let people know when there was a problem. If people spoke too fast or if a young person did not understand something, they could hold up a red card. If a young person needed to ask a question, they could hold up a card with a question mark on it. The red, green and yellow cards could also be used as voting cards for no, yes and unsure.

   The WeCan2 group then went on to evaluate these measures and found increased levels of understanding, participation and a sense of being listened to. They found that, in general, people were taking the time to explain things more clearly, were giving out simplified information and were taking their views on board. Young people were sometimes asked to co-chair meetings, were consulted about the recruitment of adult workers and when they suggested changes to leaflets or web pages, they were made (Aoslin et al, 2008).

Conclusion

It is only relatively recently that the concept of children's participation is being comprehensively addressed. Article 12 of the UNCRC introduced a radical and profound challenge to traditional attitudes

(Lansdown, 2001), which many governments have struggled to accommodate. Much has been at a tokenistic level, since there is no onus on those who organise initiatives to produce evidence that children's participation has led to successful outcomes, only that participation 'has occurred' – at least at the minimum level of children being listened to. Children are under no obligation to participate, indeed some children do not want to participate. Stafford et al's (2003) research showed that children are often reluctant to spend time taking part in consultation exercises or in decision making that they regard as either futile or an adult responsibility. The extent to which this is due to disillusionment is still unclear. What is abundantly clear, however, is that participation is a multifaceted and complex process predicated on a human right, integral to which is children's right to informed choice about participating in participation activity. The crucial factor is that when children do make that informed choice, power dynamics, gatekeeping and mediated interpretations are not mobilised to undermine them. The new sociology of childhood celebrates children as social actors and agents in their own lives. Facilitating meaningful participation is a further endorsement of this position, finally laying to rest sepulchral perspectives of children as 'adults in waiting' or 'human becomings'.

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