

Participation in practice

Participation practice has been given great impetus in recent years with the commitment to children's participation by the constituent governments of the British Isles. Ireland was the first to publish an overarching strategy for children in November 2000 (National Children's Office, 2000). The National Children's Strategy proclaims as their vision: '*An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own ...*' (p. 4) and a set of three National Goals, the first of which is: '*Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity*' (p. 30)

The governments in the constituent parts of the UK have also been working towards children's strategies (Scottish Executive, 2002; Welsh Assembly Government, 2002; Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (NI), 2002). In England the stated objective of the Government is clear:

The Government wants children and young people to have more opportunities to get involved in the design, provision and evaluation of policies and services that affect them or which they use. (CYPUP, 2001)

However the Government's contribution has to be seen in the light of the judgment of the UN Committee reviewing the UK Government's implementation of the UNCRC. While recognising the increased encouragement by Government for participation and consultation by children it was felt there was still more to do, especially in ensuring that participation does lead to change.

The Committee recommends that the State party, in accordance with Articles 12 and 17, take further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor systematic, meaningful and effective participation of all groups of children, including in schools ... The committee further recommends that procedures be formed to acknowledge publicly the views expressed by children and the impact that they have on developing programmes and policies, and reflect how they are taken into consideration. (Committee For The Rights Of The Child, 2002, p. 7)

Currently the picture is one of a great deal of very varied activity under the heading of children's participation. Willow sets out the range of government initiatives which provide opportunities for children to influence decisions at a local level (Willow, 2002). Similarly, the database on participation activity maintained by the National Youth Agency (www.nya.org.uk) and recent research for the Children and Families Directorate (Kirby and others, 2003a) identifies a vast array of participation activity, although this is by no means even across different sectors or subject areas.

In practice the term participation is often used simply to mean being 'listened to' or 'consulted'. In this sense the term takes on a very passive connotation. This is in contrast to

active participation, which could be taken to imply some presumption of empowerment of those involved—that children believe, and have reason to believe, that their involvement will make a difference. Here participation is undertaken with the very specific purpose of enabling children to influence decision-making and bring about change, whether this is in respect to decisions about individuals, or services, or decision-making structures, adult-child relationships or organisational cultures. And of course children's participation has to be by their choice, based on informed consent and respecting their right not to participate. As one large participation project has learnt:

...consultation is a rather sterile and unsatisfactory process. Young people's experience has been of consultation as an event, in which the powerful (adults) consult and the powerless (children and young people) are consulted. Being involved in a dialogue is a much more satisfying experience, and the potential rewards for everyone concerned are much greater. (Cairns, 2001, p. 357)

Despite, or perhaps because of, the way in which participation has grown there is some danger of over-simplification of what is a complex activity. Whatever the nature of that activity—be it research, consultation, informal day-to-day engagement, supporting membership of representative bodies or on-going engagement with policy makers—experience to date suggests there are a number of common issues that would benefit from considered reflection. Seven such issues are raised here, drawn from both the research and practice literature, and offered for discussion as a contribution to on-going learning in an area where theory and practice are still developing.

Clarity of purpose

Given everything that has been said about variation in participation, both conceptually and in practice, the first imperative for any participation activity is clarity about its purpose. Why are we doing it? What are we seeking to achieve, short term and long term? What is in it for children?

The complexities within the concept of participation were highlighted above. There is no single model to follow—the method or level must match the purpose and the context. The model of pathways to participation developed by Shier may help in clarifying the purpose (Shier, 2001). In this Shier poses questions around the motivations and capacities of workers and organisations to involve children. For example, at level 3 three questions are posed: '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?' The responses to these questions will give a guide to what can be achieved and what may need to change in an organisation.

Applying such a model may also force adults to check their own motivations and their preparedness to work in partnership and to recognise the validity of the child's agenda. Clarity of purpose also encourages honesty. Only when the purpose of the participation is clear can adults be honest with themselves and with children about what can be offered in terms of power sharing and a realistic assessment of the likelihood of the project or activity effecting change.

Which children are included?

Despite the growth in participation activity there is still limited evidence on who is involved, and more importantly, who is not involved. Projects rarely monitor which children are participating and in fairness it is often not easy or may not feel appropriate to do so. Nonetheless such information is important, not least to monitor the extent to which children are being afforded equal opportunities for participation. Most participation projects are open to all young people, although some will specifically target specific groups, such as minority ethnic groups or children in need (Kirby and others, 2003a). However some groups of children are less likely to be included, particularly younger children, children with communication difficulties and those with minimum involvement with local agencies.

Participation practitioners and researchers have to ask how the processes and mechanisms that they use influence who gets involved and who is excluded. For example there may be significant differences in who is involved depending on whether children are elected to participate, are self-selected, or selected by adults. Similarly different children may be involved if the method of participation requires access to certain skills or resources, depends on getting to certain venues, on coming out of school or being fluent in English.

It is also relevant to ask whether, beyond the issue of equal opportunities, representativeness matters. This of course depends on the purpose of the activity. If it is to give generalised representation to the views of children as whole then it is vitally important. If it is to broaden the range of perspectives that are informing decision-making, say in an on-going forum, then statistical representativeness may be of less relevance. Here it may be more important to focus on openness and inclusiveness, particularly the inclusion of more marginalised groups.

How do we interpret what children are saying?

Consideration of representativeness leads to others issues about how we represent the views of children. Who does the child or the child's views represent? Are children being asked to draw on their own personal experiences or do we expect or enable them to speak on behalf of larger groups of children? Are we always clear about this? How do we support children in representing the views of other children without the risk of them becoming 'professional children'?

The purpose of much participation activity is to give children a voice. But how do we interpret what children are saying? This is the very stuff of social science research and the kernel of those many texts on social research methodology. The recent ESRC programme Children 5–16 Growing into the Twenty First Century (www.esrc.ac.uk/curprog.html) has given a focus to questions of epistemology and methodology in respect of research with children (Christensen and James, 2000; Hallet and Prout, 2003). This has generated much useful discussion on the role of, for example, participatory research, reflexivity and ethnographic approaches in offering insight into the meaning of what children say. Christensen reports the careful tracing and re-tracing of her approaches in an ethnographic study of children and health (Christensen, 1999 and this issue). The time and patience needed for this sort of in depth study is rarely afforded to those undertaking

consultations with children. Yet the issue of interpreting what children say is just as relevant in other forms of participation activity as it is in research. This is highlighted by the commonly repeated phrase—'this is not research, it is consultation'. While research and consultation are different enterprises, this is most often said to imply that the standards appropriate to research are not being applied to consultation. There are now many publications which seek to set standards in participation work with children (for an overview see Cutler, 2003) but these are more likely to focus on processes and systems to make participation more effective and more respectful to children and much less on the interpretation of what children say.

One small example of the importance of understanding children's interpretation of words was evident in a study of children's views on the Government's proposed outcomes for children (Sinclair and others, 2002). Here children interpreted very differently the word 'protection' and the phrase 'being safe', which were used almost interchangeably in the Government document. To the children 'protection' implied over-protection and restrictions by adults and was seen negatively, whereas 'being safe' related to the generation of positive environments for children, free from bullying and crime, and was seen as desirable. All this points to the need for involving children at all stages of the process, of constant checking back with children, of getting to know them sufficiently, of spending time with them, of observation and where possible gaining information from several points of reference—all aspects of good practice that it would seem are not always understood by those commissioning participation work.

It feels that there is still work to be done in finding ways to remain true not only to what children say but to what they mean. Some of this is may be about transferring and learning across perspectives—to and from social science, community development, youth work, and children's participation. Some is also about gaining the necessary time and resources to construct consultation exercises more systematically. As with all the issues raised here it is about reinforcing the message that participation will be more effective when it is seen as a process and not an event (Cairns, 2001).

Locating children's views along the views of other stakeholder

Children's views will often represent only one of several sets of voices, so how are children's views located alongside these several perspectives? Again this can be viewed as a technical issue in terms of the social scientists' analysis of data, acknowledging the need to exercise diligence in the analysis of data however and whoever generates it. There are, however, other questions to be asked about the place of children's views within the wider policy process and the weight that is accorded to them.

At present there seems some danger that the wave of participation activity could be followed in short order by a wave of disillusionment among young people. There is considerable evidence, for example, from children within the care system that they had the opportunity to express their views but that they don't believe their views are taken into account (Danson and others, 2003). Similar stories of 'consultation fatigue' or despairing cries of 'What's the point' pepper responses from children when asked if they want to take part in yet another consultation exercise.

So are children right to say nothing comes from their involvement: that they see no evidence of change as a result of their participation? Have adults been too timid in sharing their power? Have they lacked the willingness and skills to hear what children say? Have they focused on participation as a process in itself, rather than an activity with a purpose? Have we been less than honest with ourselves and with young people about the realities of decision-making processes? There is probably truth in all of these. And each points to a need for change: for greater honesty about the purpose of participation activity and whose agenda it is serving and about the potential for children's views to influence change; for participation to become embedded within organisations, part of the mainstream, rather than an isolated or marginalised activity. This is very much the model developed by Investing in Children in Durham (Cairns, 2001; <http://www.durham.gov.uk/durhamcc/>).

Making participation more meaningful

As participation practice has grown so has the number of guides to support practice (Treseder, 1997; Cohen and Emanuel, 1998; Willow and Plowden, 2000; Wade and others, 2001). While much has been achieved there are many areas where change still needs to be pursued. The first important step was to win the case for children's participation and to see more and more young people being given the opportunity to influence decisions. The second was to make that involvement more meaningful for children. The next steps are to ensure that participation is more effective in the impact it has on decisions and on decision-making processes and ultimately on participation structures and cultures. In their overview of participation McNeish and Newman (2002) consider elements of effective practice under four headings:

- Addressing attitudinal barriers
- Creating more participatory structures and processes
- Achieving inclusive participation
- Motivating young people to be involved.

The involvement of children is important in its own right but if we are to see participation as not just an end in itself, but as a means to the end of effecting lasting change then consideration needs to be given to each of the above four areas. To many the objective is to reach the position where participation is not seen just as a desirable add-on but something that is firmly embedded. Kirby and colleagues draw on research from 29 case studies which indicates how organisations can develop the role of participation with their organisation and move from being consultation-focused to participation-focused to child-focused organisations. This study highlights ways in which organisations can start to build cultures of participation. (Kirby and others, 2003a, 2003b). *Hear by Right* also challenges organisations to achieve this objective of mainstreaming participation, by questioning their current structures and cultures (Wade and Badham, 2003).

Assessing the impact of children's participation

Despite the growth in children's participation activity and a growing literature that describes this, there is a lack of evaluation. There are only a few systematic evaluations of the process of participation (Shenton, 1999; Combe, 2002a, 2002b) and even fewer studies

that address the outcomes of participation, whether for children, adults, services or organisations (Kirby and Bryson, 2002).

For many, children's participation is a value- or rights- based principle much like democracy, not something that has to be justified by evidence or which needs to 'prove' that it works. This, however, does not diminish the need for monitoring or evaluation as part of a learning culture—how do we ensure the widest representation of children; what processes, in which situations, do children find most meaningful; and what approaches help to bring about sustainable change—answers to questions such as these can help children and adults alike to achieve their objectives from any participation activity. And indeed developing an evaluative framework can help in clarifying those aims and objectives.

In their overview of evaluation on young people's participation in public decision-making, Kirby and Bryson seek to identify studies that can shed light on the following six questions:

- Do young people influence public decisions?
- How are organizations improved by involving young people?
- How do organizations benefit from involving young people?
- How does the wider community benefit from involving young people?
- How do participating young people benefit?
- How do other young people benefit? (p. 15)

While robust evidence is light, there is a growing literature on evaluation of participation processes and perceived outcomes from a range of stakeholders (Kirby and others, 2003a). These have been summarised under the headings: better services; personal development of young people; and enhanced citizenship and social inclusion. Examples of change include more accessible services—more suitable venues, opening times, accessible information; better user support, improved relations between adults and children; increased practical and communication skills and increased confidence among young people. While such impacts are welcome, there is little evidence that participation is having an impact on major policy and resource decisions. More is known about how to support young people to make participation more rewarding for them—but less about how that participation can bring about change so there is a more balanced emphasis between the agendas of adults and those of children.

Appropriate ethical standards

Whatever the nature of the participation activity it is incumbent on those involved to ensure their practice reaches appropriate ethical standards. But what are appropriate standards? With the growth in participation activity has come much discussion of ethics or practice standards. The research community has examined their traditional ethical approaches to make them more relevant to research with children, focusing for instance on what is meant by 'informed consent' or on the limits to confidentiality that can be afforded to children where there are issues of child protection (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Harker, 2002; National Children's Bureau, 2003). Some have also addressed the issue of ethics as a wider or on-going process that considers, for example, the purpose, the benefit to participants, the use and interpretation of data (Alderson, 1995, 2000). Similarly practice

organisations have developed Principles and Guidelines and most organisations working with children will now have explicit Child Protection Policies (see Cutler, 2003).

Ethical and practice standards are developed partly in recognition of the different power relations that exist between researchers and subjects, between service users and providers, between policy makers and those affected by policies. It has been argued that as children are particularly vulnerable and lacking in power that explicit standards or ethical statements of practice are needed to take account of that. In reducing the power differential, others place emphasis on ways of working, such as participatory methods (O'Kane, 2002), reflexive practice (Davis, 1998) or developing appropriate approaches and cultures of communication that start from the position of the child and which recognise their differences (Christensen and James, 2000; Clark and Moss, 2001). Others adopt what has been called 'ethical symmetry' which takes equality of rights between children and adults as a starting point, recognising that:

Research relationships always take place within social relations and cultural contexts that fundamentally form the character of the research process and its results. (Christensen and Prout, 2002, p. 484)

This is equally true for participation practitioners; what is important is understanding the implications of this for the way in which we engage with children, whatever the context.

This argues for a move from one that has been called a child-focused approach to one that is child centred: which respects and values children; which treats each as an individual in his or her own right; which accords to them, not only rights as children, but full human rights, equal with all others; and which sees every engagement with children as part of a jointly negotiated process (Voice for the Child in Care, 2004).