

## **Book Chapter: Participatory Research – Principles and Practice**

### Good Practice: Aspirations and Challenges

There are many ways of carrying out investigations into the lives of children and young people, but until relatively recently participatory approaches have not gained much prominence or been accorded legitimacy. However, the picture does appear to be changing, and as children's perspectives and voices have become more prominent in a range of settings (Smith, 2010), so it has also been acknowledged that they can and should have a place in the process of exploring and accounting for key aspects of their lives. This is reflected in a growing body of work which seeks to translate these aspirations into sound and valuable research inquiries.

There is no doubt that there has been considerable progress in terms of involving children and young people in research in recent years, in parallel with the wider social movement towards increased recognition of children's rights. As this body of work has developed, there has also been considerable evidence of a critically self-aware ethos which has ensured that 'good practice' has been a continuing aspiration of such research activity (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008; Uprichard, 2010). Research has moved steadily along the path from identifying and taking account of children's perspectives towards a greater emphasis on models of inclusion which ensure a more fundamental level of involvement, in planning, preparation, conduct, analysis and dissemination of investigative projects. Despite these welcome developments, it is important to retain the critical edge already mentioned, and to be ready to acknowledge where things may go wrong.

In particular, we should be sensitised to the possibility that a pre-occupation with achieving the pre-conditions for good inclusive or participatory research may tend to override the requirement to ensure that the work undertaken is sound and meaningful. If participatory research becomes routinised or rule bound this may in the end be detrimental to the quality of its outputs, mightn't it?

If, for example, young people decide that they do not wish to be centrally involved in the design and conduct of a research study, but merely want to be respondents (see Smith et al, 2002), does this fall within or outside our working definitions of participation in research? This kind of question highlights the continuing challenges of incorporating flexibility in our approach without compromising the underlying principle of seeking and supporting active engagement of children and young people at all stages of the process. Participatory research is believed to be an effective means of representing children's and young people's perspectives directly in our means and processes of inquiry; but this, in turn, necessitates the adoption of a principled approach to its realisation. In other words, we must 'practice what we preach'.

These observations prompt further consideration of how such principles can be embedded in inclusive research practice in ways which enable them to be adapted to the needs of the specific inquiry in hand. What are the benchmarks against which we can judge whether or not and to what extent particular research investigations meet the necessary criteria of participation and inclusiveness; and how do we ensure that such considerations are balanced against more formal and standardised expectations that we should demonstrate adherence to recognised criteria of quality and legitimacy in research?

## Where Have We Come From?

A series of parallel developments has prompted a greater sense of openness and 'possibility' around the choice and implementation of social research, especially in applied settings in the recent past. In the world of policy, for example, the UNCRC pushed children's rights to the fore, with the result that this has become an area of significant progress since 1989. At the same time, and from a very different starting point, it is apparent that the recognition of the value and validity of a much greater variety of research practices has followed a similar trajectory. Thus, acceptance of the worth of qualitative research strategies has been paralleled by an increasing emphasis on children and young people's 'voices', in both policy and academic debate. In the public sphere, for instance, developments have included the government-sponsored Children and Young Persons Unit, and the creation of Children's Commissioners for each of the constituent countries of the United Kingdom. At the same time, it is well-documented that the academic world has taken an increasing interest in 'listening to children: and hearing them', as Roberts (2008) puts it. As these strands have converged, a change in the manner in which research is conceptualised and carried out has also been a predictable consequence. As a degree of legitimacy has been achieved for the idea, the challenge has shifted to become a matter of effective implementation, firstly through the conduct and acknowledgement of pioneering research studies, and then through subsequent attempts to rationalise the emergent messages for consistent and high quality practice.

Following the acknowledgement of children's 'agency' (Corsaro, 1997), and as Alderson (2001) has demonstrated, early steps involved recognising the 'normality' of children and young people's own 'research' activities, as a day-to-day feature of their schooling, for example; or, as a way of articulating concerns about health and safety in developing countries. Historic limitations to their investigative roles have resided not in their own lack of competence, but in: 'Western adults' limiting attitudes, in constraints and concerns for protection over participation rights' (p. 150). Not only are these paternalistic attitudes problematic in that they limit children's access to and contribution to processes of inquiry, but it also appears that the investigative field has in the past been implicitly restricted to those areas in which children and young people are expected to have an interest. Thus, their views have only been sought in relation to matters which are recognised as affecting them directly, such as play or family life. Their 'issues' are therefore seen and addressed as specific to them; the wider social world is not their concern, apparently (Uprichard, 2010, p. 7). So, participatory research involving children and young people has faced and continues to face a number of concrete challenges in establishing its scope and legitimacy, both in methodological terms and in relation to those subjects or areas of inquiry which it is entitled to consider.

As we might expect, in facing these challenges there are demonstrable stages through which the project of developing participatory research with children and young people has progressed. Thus, for example, the emerging recognition of children's distinctive interests and needs, perhaps associated with the UNCRC and the Children Act 1989, led to a greater emphasis on finding out about their experiences directly. This point was underlined by Hill (1997), who contrasted such approaches with earlier studies drawing on recorded data and adult assessments of children's needs (p. 180). At this point, the concern was mainly to elaborate a range of methods which would do justice to children's perspectives, whilst respecting ethical safeguards concerning informed consent and confidentiality (p. 179), and addressing practical concerns such as the 'desirability' of matching researchers with children and young people according to their characteristics, such as gender or

ethnicity. It was only as a concluding observation that the idea of involving children in 'the planning and dissemination phases of research' (p. 180). And yet, within a relatively short period of time, the centrality of children and young people to the entire research process has been established much more strongly.

As children's rights have begun to occupy a more central place on policy and practice agendas, so has there been evidence of a greater willingness amongst organisations and practitioners to seek to give substance to good intentions, driven to a considerable extent by the voluntary sector. At the same time, and in parallel, legitimacy has been accorded increasingly to research 'from below' across many aspects of social life, especially in areas in which 'minority' interests have been identified (Alderson, 2008, p. 276). Children's capacity to act 'as researchers' is now recognised accordingly. Indeed, the argument is now advanced that children and young people may be better placed than others to carry out certain types of research activity, especially concerning their own lives (Alderson, 2008, p. 278).

Increasingly, too, there has been an emphasis on the importance of including children as researchers irrespective of age, circumstances or characteristics (see, for example, Davis et al, 2008). The experience of carrying out research with young children, for instance, has itself contributed to the recognition that they have the capacity to engage in complex and difficult subject areas on equal terms. As Alderson demonstrates (2008, p. 283), children have a very wide range of skills, techniques and insights to bring to the research process, and this has been consistently under-acknowledged. This leads us to observe that participation is not only a matter of principle, but also a key aspect of improved research quality. In some cases, she suggests, the involvement of children is probably crucial to the achievement of the desired results (p. 284).

Inevitably, though, as research with and involving children and young people has developed in scale and scope, new questions have also emerged quite rightly as to the ethics and principles which should inform this area of activity (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Powell, 2011). At the same time, of course, it has also become increasingly important to try to establish quality criteria, and to understand better how to make judgements about the quality of the research undertaken. As Spyrou (2011) suggests, it is no longer enough to seek justification in the simple fact of obtaining 'children's voices'. Inclusive and participatory research approaches need to be able to establish appropriate and distinctive mechanisms for evaluating and assessing methods of inquiry which may bear very little relation to conventional approaches, in order to support their claims to legitimacy or moral superiority.

### The Rules of Engagement: Standards and Expectations in Participatory Research

It is certainly the case that as children and young people have become much more fully recognised as research participants, so has there been considerable effort expended on developing principles and guidance to ensure that their involvement is based in sound ethical and methodological foundations. Some of these principles are understandably grounded in established concerns about safeguarding and the avoidance of risks of harm and exploitation; and some are similarly concerned with demonstrating the quality and value of the research undertaken; but others have come to prominence more recently, and concern the extent to which participation is central to the process,

how far young researchers control both the process and its products, and what are the fundamental aims and intentions of the research exercise (see Smith et al, 2002).

An inclusive orientation to research practice has the potential to enhance the quality of the findings generated, precisely because it offers stronger guarantees of effective and ethically sound engagement with participants, and is likely therefore to lead to deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. In other words, demonstrating the value of participatory research as claimed depends critically on 'getting it right' in practice, and ensuring that those principles on which it is based are developed and applied throughout its implementation and dissemination.

To illustrate this point, even a relatively 'obvious' consideration such as the need to avoid risks of harm or exploitation becomes increasingly complex when we try to unravel its implications. It is, in the words of Alderson and Morrow (2011, p. 23) a problem which 'is often invisible and elusive' made more challenging because of the tension between different perspectives and alternative judgements of the nature and extent of any risk identified. These issues are further complicated by virtue of the fact that much participatory or inclusive research is carried out with groups who are potentially vulnerable, almost by definition; in other words, it is this very aspect of their lives which is the focal point of the investigation. Thus, for example, attempting to promote research led by children and young people who have been victimised in some way might be problematic if it raises the possibility of duplicating previous 'risky situations' or evoking uncomfortable memories. As Alderson and Morrow illustrate (2011, p. 25), this problem relates in part to the question of who is involved in judging the level of risk; that is to say, it could be the participants, it could be research partners, it could be an external body such as a research ethics committee, or it could in some cases be a statutory or other agency which retains a level of responsibility towards the young people concerned.

Participatory models of research could adopt the view that it is proper to leave the determination of risk and the judgement about what safeguards are needed to those at the heart of the inquiry process. They are likely to be more aware of the kind of issues which might affect participants, and which may not be so obvious to professional researchers, to whom 'some risks might not occur' (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p. 27), and who may similarly take a rather monolithic and 'top down' view of other risks (p. 29). In Alderson and Morrow's view, this suggests that there may have been a prior tendency to 'skew' decisions about the dangers (or otherwise) of some forms of participatory research, where an implicit conflict has been assumed between the 'protection' rights of children and young people and their 'participation rights' (Powell, 2011, p. 2). Nonetheless, formal decision-making bodies, such as project funders and ethics committees, may have difficulty in accepting that participatory research can also incorporate its own mechanisms for identifying and safeguarding those involved who may be at risk of harm: 'To contrast welfare with participation could imply that participation can only be risky and non-beneficial to the child, (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p. 29).

This argument is helpfully elaborated by Skelton (2008) in her account of an inclusive (rather than participatory) study carried out with young lesbians and gay men. In this case, choices over the engagement and recruitment of research participants necessitated an approach which did not draw attention to young people's sexuality, and so it became necessary to adopt a 'snowballing' approach to the task of obtaining a sample, using voluntary and public sector organisations as the conduit for

this task. In this case, the ethical framework for the study was clearly informed by the experiences and interests of the young people concerned, and, in fact, applying participatory principles enhanced the safeguards available, ensuring privacy and a sense of confidence in the research process. Skelton contrasts this outcome with what the formal rules of an institutional ethics committee might have demanded, in terms of securing 'written consent from parents or guardians' (Skelton, 2008, p. 32).

Despite this, we must also acknowledge that it is not axiomatic that a participatory research exercise will necessarily promote or guarantee the safety and security of those involved, whether as researchers or participants. Indeed, the ethical standards to be applied are likely to be very similar to those which operate in conventional research practice; differences of implementation do not diminish the underlying importance of these principles.

As with the case of protection from harm, participatory research is also inevitably concerned with the question of quality. The preceding example from Skelton also seems to offer pointers in this respect, too. She argues that the 'ethical' recruitment process adopted had significant implications for the conduct of the subsequent fieldwork as well:

The method of snowballing became important as we tried to reach young people who still remained outside of the voluntary and public 'support' structures. For many young people these interviews were the longest period of time they had had the chance to talk with an interested listener about themselves, their identity and their socio-spatial experiences. (Skelton, 2008, p. 32)

This point is further supported by another example from the same article, where Skelton describes the processes whereby a study of the experiences of young women in South Wales *became* participatory as it evolved. This developmental trajectory 'was an unforeseen benefit.... The project evolved in situ and the methodology was driven by the young women themselves' (Skelton, 2008, p. 31). Here, it seems, the argument in favour of this kind of approach rests on claims of enhanced relevance, sensitivity and 'fit' between the initial research question and the investigatory methods ultimately employed. In this way, participatory studies are, in principle, able to claim that they incorporate inherent advantages in terms of the direct representation of the realities of children and young people's experiences. Clearly, though, there is work to be done in translating these in-built potentialities into practice, and in demonstrating that the research process does not simply take assumed advantages for granted. Quality claims must be substantiated.

The third area to be considered here is more specific, in the sense that it concerns the capacity for participatory research to demonstrate coherence with its own internal demands; that is, the extent to which it complies with what are by now recognised participation standards. The initial question to be considered here is 'how participatory is it, or could it be?' This is, however, a distinct question from 'how participatory should it be?' By now, there are a considerable number of tools, templates and evaluative mechanisms available to support the implementation and assessment of participatory methods. UNICEF, for example, has developed a set of 'useful tools' to support young people's participation in evaluation exercises (Gawler, 2005), as have Molina et al (2009) and Horwath et al (2011). These, though, appear to reflect a degree of confusion over a necessary distinction between 'participation' and engagement in research processes and a more fundamental 'participatory' approach which necessitates the application of rather different criteria of

effectiveness. Pain et al (2002) suggest a different set of strategic principles which should underpin 'participatory action research' with young people:

- Use of a range of methods likely to 'engage young people' and reflect their 'priorities and concerns'
  - Facilitation of 'whatever level of participation young people wish to have'
  - Recognition that 'difficult issues' will arise, which may challenge established interests
  - Creation of mechanisms by which findings will be disseminated and turned into action
  - Inclusion of young people in change processes
  - Establishment of sustainable mechanisms for replicating participatory inquiry
- (adapted from Pain et al, 2002)

In this framework, it might appear that the distinction between 'participation' and 'participatory' approaches is blurred, and that 'inclusion' does not amount, of itself, to a guarantee that young people will be able to exert any degree of control about either the conduct or the outcomes of the research process. On the other hand, the determinant nature of young people's involvement is more clearly reflected in the reference to the choices they are entitled to make about their 'level of participation'.

Others have suggested an even smaller number of over-arching principles which should be observable in participatory research practice. Boeck et al (2008) suggest three key elements, for example:

- The project was, as far as is possible, defined by the young people
  - All work carried out was based on equal partnership with the young people
  - Everyone had a unique contribution to make. Everyone was able to learn from everybody else.
- (Boeck et al, 2008, p. 2)

### Taking Control

From the young people's point of view, it appears that crucial determinants are the level of 'agency and power' they are able to achieve in the research process and the quality of communication and resources available to them to support their involvement. The aspirational nature of these criteria is also captured in the phrase 'as far as possible', and this is significant in the sense that it does not impose unrealistic or unachievable demands on participatory forms of inquiry. Any initiative is likely to be subject to external constraints, such as funding limits and commissioners' demands; and at the same time, the initial impetus for 'research' will rarely originate unprompted with children or young people themselves (Franks, 2011). Thus, in a project with which the present author was involved, the concern to investigate the 'health needs of socially excluded young people' (Smith et al, 2002) could only indirectly be attributed to pressure from that source, and was certainly not the original idea of the specific groups who became involved as participant researchers. However, they were able to take part in shaping the next stage of the process, and influence the emerging focus on the subject of 'stress' and emotional well-being.

Similarly, we might argue that the suggested criteria do not go far enough in certain respects, such as the need to demonstrate a participatory approach at each point on the research timeline. It has been acknowledged previously that this has been easier to support and embed in some aspects of the research project than others. Thus, it may be possible to demonstrate compliance with participatory principles when involving children in the fieldwork phase of an inquiry, without necessarily either embedding that from the outset or sustaining it subsequently, in terms of analysis and dissemination, say. Franks (2011, p. 20) suggests that it is quite common in research involving children and young people for them not to be involved at the design stage, for example. But, she argues, 'total ownership' would depend on them taking charge at every stage, from initial idea all the way through to dissemination and subsequent use.

However, as Alderson (2008, p. 279) points out, there may well be conflicts of interest as to which 'stage' of the research is most important:

Research in schools and universities, which mainly aims to add to knowledge, tends to concentrate on the middle stages of projects: collecting and analysing data and writing reports. In contrast, young researchers are usually keen to produce findings that will achieve changes in, for example, provision of services and respect for their rights.

So, another important test of the level of participation achieved is, quite simply, whether or not children and young people got what they wanted out of the exercise. In one instance I can recall, involving young people who were 'looked after', this was simply to present the video recording based on their consultation exercise to a group of elected representatives. To attempt to use the material generated for any other purpose would have undermined the 'control' they had over the process; despite the fact that what we saw showed young people who had been in care in a very positive light, the recording was then destroyed.

Ceding overall control has implications at the level of detailed implementation, too, as children and young people would then be expected to make (informed) choices about methods, sampling, data collection and analysis (Alderson, 2008, p. 283). They may, of course, need support to develop the necessary skills, as would any researcher, but this is rather different than conceding control of the research activity itself to an expert 'from outside' (Kellett, 2009). This relationship between young researchers and the inquiry itself has ironic consequences, too. In the case of the investigation of young people's health needs referred to earlier (Smith et al, 2002) one group of young women involved exerted their 'control' by deciding that they did not want to play a full part in constructing and carrying out their component of the study; rather, they opted instead for the adult project researcher to interview them according to standard schedule in a very conventional manner. This finds echoes, too, in Franks' (2011, p. 21) observation that young people engaged in research might in fact 'be more empowered by being given the option to have an experienced interviewer ask their questions on their behalf....'

This paradox helps to highlight some of the challenges we face when we come to evaluate the questions raised earlier both of the extent to which research activities can be judged to be participatory, and of how far they should be expected to comply with a pure model of participatory research. Further complexity is added by the additional considerations of ethical compliance and quality, as we have already observed. Franks (2011, p. 22), for example, points out that we cannot necessarily assume that a participatory approach will lead to 'better' data, such as when young

people might be reluctant to share 'their experience of being bullied' with their peers. Clearly, unequal power relations are not just restricted to the inter-generational dimension. As she helpfully observes, it may be helpful to think 'in terms of pockets of participation, which may not necessarily be evenly dispersed throughout the [research] project'.

We must conclude, then, that aspirations to promote participatory research on the part of children and young people need to be informed by a recognition that there are risks in making over-simplified judgements of what is the best way to go about achieving this. Idealised assumptions may, indeed, be somewhat misleading, and may impose expectations which are, in the end, unhelpful and counter-productive. Achieving participatory goals inevitably involves a process of negotiating the tensions between competing principles and between ideals and reality. Franks (2011, p. 23) argues that 'total participation is in all probability a false goal', and suggests that one way to address this is to 'develop participative ownership of specific parts of the research process'. This means of reaching an accommodation with real world factors may improve outcomes, seemingly. Both 'quality' and 'ethical issues' can be addressed, by ensuring that participation principles are mediated by other important considerations, such as the need to include different interests 'where research is cross-cultural'; and to avoid imposing excessive expectations and thereby 'putting [young researchers] into difficult situations' (Franks, 2011, p. 23).

#### The realities of participation: the value of a principled approach

Perhaps we can conclude by noting that the 'rules' of participatory research necessarily extend beyond the requirement to demonstrate that children and young people are enabled to play a full part in the process. Whilst we can stipulate a number of important conditions to be met in initiating and delivering inclusive and participatory investigations, these are not enough in themselves to guarantee either that the products of these activities will be of good quality or that they will safeguard and promote the interests of those concerned (either direct participants or children and young people from the wider community). There are perhaps two distinct, but necessarily overlapping sets of questions to be considered:

Firstly, we will need to apply tests of the extent and integrity of 'participation' by young researchers, such as:

- Were young researchers involved from the start, and throughout the process?
- Did they lead/take responsibility for key decisions, such as specifying research questions, methods, sampling, analytical approach and use of outputs?
- Were they responsible for making choices about task allocation and the division of labour?
- Were they able/enabled to make informed choices and exercise relevant research skills?
- Were they fully representative of the group/interest that was the subject of the inquiry?
- Did the research achieve what they wanted?
- Were they able to retain control of its dissemination and subsequent use?

But, alongside these run other significant questions too. As we have already observed, a participatory approach has the capacity to enhance quality and introduce greater ethical sensitivity



into the process. However, there are no guarantees in this respect, so we must also consider a number of further key questions, including:

- In what ways was the quality of the research enhanced through participation?
- How might it have been compromised, for example, because of limitations in the kind of methods available?
- How did a participatory approach support good ethical practice?
- What ethical challenges were encountered, such as the sharing of personal details or the generation of unrealistic expectations?

Sinclair (2004, p. 114) has suggested that 'the growth in children's participation activity' has not been reflected in a substantial body of evaluation, and that despite the view that participation is an unqualified good, there is still a need to monitor and evaluate such activities to improve, rather than to challenge, their achievements. Similarly, the inherent features of equality and justice built into the notion of participation do not, of themselves, guarantee fair and non-exploitative outcomes in a world where inequalities and oppressive treatment are deeply embedded in human relationships.

Despite these notes of caution, its proponents argue that participatory research is a positive and desirable project because it offers direct and undistorted access to children and young people's perspectives and experiences and allows them to take the lead in shaping and articulating the research process and its messages. In order to demonstrate the validity of this claim, we must therefore also recognise and act on the practical obligations following from our assertions of principle. In other words, the validity of the initial claim is revealed (and indeed, has been revealed on many occasions) by the quality of the work undertaken with and by children in many and diverse settings

We can conclude, then, that it is not contrary to the spirit of inclusion and participation to remain concerned about conventional research questions to with validity, quality and ethical integrity. The important task is to ensure that these questions, themselves, are framed in the same spirit; and that we raise them in order to enhance rather than derail participatory research activities involving children and young people.

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