Participation in perspective: reflections from research projects


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Abstract

**Aim** This paper seeks to add to the debate regarding children as researchers by exploring the reality of their participation in research.

**Background** As the role children and young people play in knowledge building is recognised, their position as social agents is evolving. This has led to a shift in the ways in which children and young people participate in research, and in particular in their roles as researchers alongside adults.

**Data sources** Two participatory research projects involving children and young people.

**Review methods** The paper critiques existing models of children’s participation and is followed by an account of observations made during the research projects.

Discussion

Existing models offered a variety of criteria against which to measure participation. However, none of the models allowed for the multidimensional nature of participation that emerged from the data to be fully described.

**Conclusion** A dual-axis model of participation is more useful than the other models described in the text for reflecting on participatory processes.

**Implications for practice/research** The model can be valuable in guide planning and implementing participatory research with children and also as a tool for evaluating the process.

**Keywords** Young people’s participation, children as researchers, participatory research, model of participation

Introduction

THE PROFILE in the social and political world of children’s and young people’s participation is at an unprecedented high (Kellett 2010, Lansdown 2010). Young people are starting to take advantage of this change in thinking and want to be part of the decision-making processes that govern their lives (Kirby and Bryson 2002, Stafford et al 2003, Hill et al 2004). However, what constitutes ‘participation’ by young people is interpreted in different ways, and the degree to which they are able to participate often depends on the attitudes of adults around them and the interpretation those adults place on the term ‘participation’.

Various authors have offered definitions of children’s participation that demonstrate a degree of confusion and overlap. Cutler and Taylor (2003) used ‘participation’ and ‘involvement’ interchangeably – defining them simply as ‘taking part in decision making’. They recognised a spectrum of degrees of ‘taking part’, from giving opinions on a predetermined issue for adults to decide on to choosing the agenda and taking decisions. Lansdown (2001) gives no clear definition of participation but distinguishes between ‘consultative processes’ (where children have no control, and activities are initiated, led and managed by adults) and ‘participatory processes’ (involving collaboration with adults, which necessitates the sharing of power). Hart (1992) stated that participation referred to sharing in decisions that affect a person’s life and the community in which that person lives. Hanley et al (2004) talked about ‘involvement’ rather than participation, giving three levels on a continuum from ‘consultation’ to ‘user-controlled’.
Participatory research is a process of systematic inquiry in which researchers and participants actively collaborate (Bernard 2000). Studies that involved children as researchers were rare before the 1990s. Now there is a substantial body of literature reporting on a range of projects undertaken, and by, children (Alderson 2001, Clark et al 2001, Coad and Lewis 2004). However, there is limited evidence of exploration of the participatory process (Naylor et al 2002).

This paper explores the reality of participation as it occurred in two research projects with young people aged eight to 16 years old. It begins by critiquing a number of models of participation and then describes the early development of a model of participation that was used to reflect on the participatory processes in the two studies.

Models of participation
In preparing for the projects and to identify a model against which to judge the degree of participation that was achieved, we explored a number of models of children’s participation. The most widely referred to is Hart’s (1992), which is an eight-level ‘ladder of participation’. Although the usefulness of this typology has been recognised in many settings, it has also been the focus of critical scrutiny (Thomas 2000, Lightfoot and Sloper 2001, McAuley and Brattman 2002, Reddy and Ratna 2002).

The main criticism of Hart’s approach is that it uses a linear model – and, in particular, a ladder – to present the eight levels of participation: this suggests the relationship between the levels is static and hierarchical, which ‘belies the dynamic and porous relationship that can exist between the different levels,’ according to McAuley and Brattman (2002). It also suggests that initiatives at level four are worse than those at level eight, whereas it is possible that ‘assigned but informed’ (level four) done well can be more meaningful than activities done badly at level seven or eight. The implicit assumption is that being at the top of the ladder is the ultimate aim and that there is a degree of shortfall from the ideal below this.

In reality, one level may not necessarily lead to the next. Lightfoot and Sloper (2001) suggested that the model is too simplistic for application to practice as it overlooks the importance of context. The level of power and control held by participating children might be less important than its ‘fit’ depending on the circumstances.

Similar criticisms can be applied to other linear models in that they do not take into account the many ways in which the nature of participation can vary. Shier’s (2001) ‘pathway to participation’ model consists of 15 ordered questions based on five levels of participation. Shier asserted that there are ‘three stages of commitment to the process of empowerment’ at each level of participation. The questions are aimed at individuals and organisations so they can assess at which levels and stages they are; consequently the model is useful for practitioners. However, Shier’s model also implies a hierarchy in which levels one, two and three must be achieved before active participation can be said to have arisen; it also does not acknowledge the different degrees to which children and young people can be involved in participatory activities.

Chawla (2001) supported the idea that when trying to help children to participate in research, it is important to understand the level at which participation already occurs and build on children’s existing life experiences. She asked us to acknowledge that the form of participation that is most appropriate varies with the circumstances and identifies seven forms of participation that depend on the child’s level of involvement and degree of initiative. Children may move from one form to another as they increase in competence and the model gives scope for a mixture of these forms to occur in one project. The model also recognises that children and young people are not a homogeneous group but will want different things from any opportunities for participation.

So, while this model is linear, it goes further than the previous two models in stressing that the forms of participation are not necessarily exclusive of each other. There is no indication that one form of participation is better than another and the reader feels free to move between the levels. This model would seem to encourage a more flexible approach to analysing different degrees or levels of participation.

Treseder (1997) offered a model based on a circular presentation. He suggested that although Hart’s ladder is an excellent metaphor, it limits the choices for those wishing to involve children. He promoted an understanding of different degrees of involvement, with each degree having the potential to be most appropriate for a given set of circumstances – he concurred with others (Abrioux 1998, Chawla 2001) that the nature of participation is complex and contextual. He presented the degrees of participation as the spokes of a wheel, with no

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form of participation deemed better than another. As Treseder (1997) explained: ‘It is therefore preferable to regard the five degrees of participation as five different, but equal, forms of good practice and to choose the one which will have the most benefit in a specific environment.’

However, although this model goes somewhat further in displaying the complex nature of participation, the implication is that the degree that will have the most benefit in a specific environment should be chosen. This may narrow the flexibility of the model in a participatory activity such as research.

From these models, it is possible to deduce that participation can mean different things in different contexts and that no one model or form can be applied across all settings and to all situations. Each model has its strengths and limitations, and each may be appropriate for use in different contexts and situations.

The studies
The first study explored the role of children and young people in monitoring the quality of care in hospital. The young researchers in this study were all of secondary school age. The second study was an evaluation of the use (or otherwise) of Children’s Fund Services and involved a group of young researchers aged between eight and 15 years of age. The two studies (Moules 2004, O’Brien and Moules 2007) used a participatory research approach and had ethical approval (the first from an NHS local ethics panel and the other from a university ethics panel), consent being gained from children or their parents as appropriate. The young people worked as researchers alongside adult researchers in the studies, taking active roles in all stages of the research process, from setting the research agendas through to disseminating the findings of the studies (Moules 2004, 2009).

Data analysis
From an analysis of the models discussed earlier, we identified two dimensions of participation: ‘decision making’ and ‘initiation and direction’. During the projects, the balance of each could be with either the adult researchers or the children, giving four codes for data analysis. These are:

- Initiation and direction by adult.
- Initiation and direction by children.
- Decision making by adult.
- Decision making by children.

A fifth code, ‘shared’, was added to cover those instances where there was no clear bias. Using these five codes, we analysed data from reflective diaries, notes from meetings and children’s evaluations. From this analysis, we drew up matrices that enabled us to identify those occasions where decision making and initiation and direction lay with the adults, those occasions where the two dimensions lay mainly with the children, and those occasions where they were shared.

Observations on the participatory process
We observed a collaborative partnership between the adults and the children in which the interplay between decision making, and initiation and direction produced a variety of ways in which the balance of these dimensions changed during the study while still enabling the children to have critical roles in the process (Moules 2005).

At times during the projects, the balance of the two dimensions lay with the adults. For example, the adults chose the original research questions and methodologies in the two projects. Adults initiated research team meetings and they also took decisions about research training. In the study exploring quality of care, the adult researcher had to take decisions about accessing samples of children, because the young researchers were in the middle of exams and did not have the time to liaise with the relevant head teachers.

At other times, the balance was mainly with the children. The reasons for this change were unclear, but once one young person initiated a decision, others began to take on more of a role in decision making. On some occasions, the children took direction out of the adults’ hands completely. This was particularly evident in the first study when data was being analysed and the young researchers took over analysis of the ranking exercise. In the same study, initial ideas and suggestion for further research came from the young researchers and they directed decision making about how the research should proceed. At the end of the second study, the children decided how they wanted to disseminate their findings and directed the seminar presentation, having had the initial idea of using drama to present their findings.

On some occasions, the balance of the elements moved between the adults and the children from day to day and sometimes during group meetings. Sometimes the children initiated an activity but then the adults had to take decisions on how to progress.
the research. This happened in both studies when the authors started collecting data. In the first study, the children wanted to carry out a survey with nurses on a number of different children’s wards where they had been inpatients. This was not possible in the timeframe of the project because of ethical considerations, so the adult researcher had to take the final decision to publish the survey in a paediatric journal.

In the second study, the adult researchers made some decisions about where and when a ‘fun day’ data collection event should be held. Data would be gathered by a variety of means including T-shirt painting, collages, a roving reporter and a diary room. Then the children took over by directing the planning.

There were times when the balance of elements moved between the children. In the first study, the girls – particularly the older girls – tended to initiate ideas and lead more during data collection activities than the boys. One girl took control by taking responsibility for producing a PowerPoint presentation for use during data collection. Then control moved to one of the boys when he took charge of organising the videoing of the event. In the second study, the youngest researcher often directed meetings by encouraging others to come up with ideas and to take decisions when the discussions seemed likely to end with no firm way forward.

Although the models considered above offered a variety of useful criteria against which to measure participation, none allowed for the full description of the complex, multidimensional character of participation that emerged from the data. The authors could not identify the projects as belonging solely to any one of the levels of any one of the models, so they used an alternative way of describing the nature of participation in the two projects.

Dual-axis model of participation

Each of the dimensions of participation identified above could be placed on a continuum. Figure 1 shows the first dimension – decision making. At point A, decision making lies predominantly with the adults; at point B, decision making is shared; at point C, decision making lies predominantly with children.

Figure 2 shows the second dimension – ‘initiation and direction’: at point A, it is mainly adults who initiate and direct activity. Moving along the continuum, this balance shifts away from adult control towards shared initiation/direction at B to the other end at point C where children initiate ideas, direct activities and determine the extent to which they are prepared to participate.

Where the two continuums are joined at right angles at point B four possible types of participation are revealed (Figure 3).

Activities in quadrant A are predominantly initiated and directed by adults, and adults tend to lead decision making. Activities in quadrant B are predominantly initiated and directed by young people, but adults tend to lead the decision making. Activities in quadrant C may need to be initiated and directed by adults but the young people take the lead with decision making. Finally, activities in quadrant D are mainly initiated and directed by young people, who take the lead on decision making.

The authors then used the model to plot participation during the life of each of the projects. In each case, at the beginning of the projects, the authors observed that they could place most of the activities in quadrant A. Adults initiated each of the projects, directing much of the activity and leading on the decision making. However, the young researchers gave their views and were always party to the decisions being made. As each of the studies progressed, activities could be plotted in quadrants B and C, showing evidence of collaboration and, in particular, a sharing of roles in the projects. As the young researchers became more confident with each other and with the adults, activities could be sited in quadrant D more frequently because the researchers increasingly took decisions, initiated activities and directed the process.

Discussion

In reality, the participatory process was more complex than could be typified using one of the linear or circular models discussed earlier. Kirby and Bryson (2002) concurred with this view, pointing out that although these models are useful
The participation observed and experienced in these two projects was multidimensional, with continual shifts in the balance of decision making, initiation and direction. White et al (1994) used the analogy of participation as a kaleidoscope: ‘Participation… changes its colour and shape at the will of the hands in which it is held and, just like the momentary image in the kaleidoscope, it can be very fragile and illusive, changing from one moment to the next.’

The dual-axis model described starts from the position that participation is happening and is planned, and sets out to give some structure to the different ways in which adults and young people can work together to achieve the aims of research projects. It differs from other models in that it does not offer different levels of participation, which often depict the varying roles that adults play in relation to children’s participation (Reddy and Ratna 2002). Instead, the dual-axis model conveys four different types of participation, all of which can occur at different times and to different degrees in a project, and focuses on the roles played by children and adults in the participatory process. In this model, participation in participatory research can be conceptualised in terms of the degree to which young people and adults - as individuals and as a group - make decisions, initiate action and direct the project.

The dual-axis model seeks to convey that there is no single right balance to be achieved, which appears contrary to the suggestion by Chawla and Kjørholt (1996) that ‘the main challenge is to find the right balance between giving too much or too little assistance’. In fact, we need to acknowledge that the balance will shift according to the situation and the stage of the research process, giving young people the opportunity to make some choices as to the degree to which they take on directing, initiating or decision making. Their choices will be those that best suit their unique situation and concerns, and enable them to participate on their own terms. It is the context that determines the nature and intensity of the participation, but at no time is it necessary to be aiming for a particular level of participation as described by the models previously discussed.

In the first study, two members of the participatory group found it difficult to attend the weekly meetings. They chose to support the project from a distance, sending in comments and maintaining contact. Their role in the decision-making process was therefore limited, as was the degree to which they could initiate and direct activities. However, they retained a sense of ownership of the findings and attended the final meeting, in which recommendations for practice were drawn up. Thus, they shifted to a more peripheral role but continued to make a valuable contribution to the project, even though they did not participate in some aspects of the process.

According to Richardson (1983), participation is not synonymous with the activity of decision making but is about taking part in it in various ways and to different degrees. It can be concluded therefore that participation can be occurring even when young people are not the main decision makers.

We used the model at the end of the projects to assess the process of participation. However, we identified a number of limitations and further work is needed to develop and test the model. Although we used children’s written evaluations to gauge where different activities should be plotted, we were unable to discuss them in detail because we only developed the model after the projects had finished and the research teams disbanded. Additionally, it could be valuable to compare the perceptions of different stakeholders.
of adult researchers with those of their young co-researchers.

Plotting participation might be better done at different stages of a project to focus on ratings at one point in time rather than at the end. Naylor et al. (2002) found a similar problem in their evaluation of participatory research, in that a variation across time was a principal theme and it was sometimes difficult to reflect accurately on past activities.

The authors did not reflect specifically on the age group of the young researchers and whether this influenced the model in any way. This is a potential issue for consideration in future projects.

Consideration may also be given to dividing the second dimension - ‘initiation and direction’ - in two to further elaborate and distinguish between types of participation.

Conclusion

The evidence presented here paints the participatory process with young people as complex and multidimensional, and is framed by a variety of types of participation. Although using this dual-axis model does not give a simple definition of participation, it provides confirmation that participation evolves. (Naylor et al. 2002), beginning with participatory intent and building on this within the limits set by participants and context (Greenwood et al. 1993).

Despite the limitations of the initial use of the model described here, reflections on the participatory process have provided us with an insight into how adults and young people can work together in participatory research. The model could be used to guide the planning and implementation of participatory research with children and also as a tool for evaluating the process.

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