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# **Reflecting on children and young people's participation in the UK**

By E. Kay M. Tisdall, John M. Davis and Michael Gallagher.

The collective participation of children and young people is not a new phenomenon in the UK. Histories of childhood have drawn out numerous examples of very public engagement of children and young people in matters that affect them. For example, in 1889 and 1991, children from schools across the UK picketed and marched with demands such as abolishing corporal punishment, shorter hours, free school meals and better teaching (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2002; Hendrick, 1997).

Children and young people have never stopped participating in their schooling and in their communities. Their very behaviour – going to or absenting themselves from school, their activities in public space, their everyday actions within their families, with peers, with others in their communities – are all forms of participation, of influencing change, of expressing their views. But the formalisation of such participation, the roles of adults and institutional structures, the public recognition of such participation, have differed over time. In the UK, there has been a renaissance of children and young people's participation in collective decision-making, over recent years, and a corresponding respect of children's role as active members of society.

The Carnegie Young People's Initiative (CYPI) provided a significant boost to evidence-gathering on children and young people's participation throughout the UK. Surveys in the late 1990s found:

- Enthusiasm for children and young people's participation, amongst responding statutory and voluntary organisations.
- A specific worker tended to have allocated responsibility for the participative initiative (e.g. in Wales, 89% of respondents from organisations).
- While there were examples of involving young children, most organisations focused on children and young people aged 10 and above.
- More organisations involved children and young people in internal decision making, than in external decision making. (CYPI, 2001; Dorrian et al., 2001; Green, 2001; Save the Children, 2001)

A subsequent English survey in 2003-04 (Oldfield and Fowler, 2004), funded this time by Government, reported an increasing level of participation activities. Of responses, 79% of statutory and 81% of voluntary sector organisations reported that they currently involved children and young people in decision making. Children and young people were most likely to be involved in generating ideas about existing and new policies or services (4/5 respondents) and less likely to be involved in service delivery, monitoring and evaluation, and issues that were not considered child-specific -- such as regeneration, transport or housing. The most common approaches to reach children and young people were researching their needs and views, informal

discussions, and youth councils or fora. Despite these activities, a national English survey of 1387 children and young people found only 20% thinking their local council was good or very good at listening to them, and only 18% thinking that the Government was (2002 survey, reported in Kirby et al., 2003).

This article examines how children and young people's participation has been promoted in the UK, considering how it has been grafted onto other policy drivers. It continues by discussing current trends and dilemmas in such participation, particularly given the top-down nature of children and young people's participation in the UK. The article concludes by drawing on Prout's questioning of past childhood studies orthodoxies, to consider ways forward.

### **Arguing for children and young people's participation**

A number of reasons are typically put forward, to advocate for children and young people's participation. These are captured by Sinclair and Franklin's (2000) list:

1. to uphold children's rights,
2. to fulfil legal responsibilities,
3. to improve services,
4. to improve decision-making,
5. to enhance democratic processes,
6. to promote children's protection,
7. to enhance children's skills,

8. to empower and enhance self-esteem.

The first two reasons appeal to the international and national movement promoting children's rights, as articulated in the UNCRC and slowly being integrated into domestic law throughout the UK. A moral claim is made to recognising children as citizens, or at least having rights, along with a reminder that children and young people do now have certain rights in domestic law and their participation is supported by various government initiatives.

Reasons three and four appeal to consumerism and service user involvement.

Under the Conservative Governments of the 1980s and 1990s, these were seen a productive means to improve public services; children's advocates argued that children and young people should be recognised as consumers and service users, just as much as adults. These arguments continued with New Labour's emphasis on modernising government, which also asserts that service user involvement will improve services and decision-making more generally (Cabinet Office, 1999).

Reason five – enhancing democratic processes – addresses the panic that the public as a whole is not engaging in formal politics and that young people are not engaging in particular (Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995). Training up children and young people in more formal democratic processes will hopefully lead to more engagement when adults. Citizenship education was (re)introduced in the 1990s, to assist with training children and young people

into 'good citizens'. Citizenship education, though, also contains a discourse of responsibility (Lewis, 2003), where rights are conditional rather than inalienable.

Reasons six to eight appeal to children's well-being and development. As Sinclair and Franklin (2000) explain, successive child abuse inquiries repeatedly find that the child was not listened to. More positively, personal development in skills and self-esteem are perceived as potential rewards for children and young people themselves, typically as assets they can take into their adult lives. This feeds into the 'social investment' approach to children (Churchill, 2006) now well entrenched within Government policy, where an early investment in childhood will improve adulthood – and therefore societal – outcomes later on.

Each of these reasons, then, can appeal to particular agendas of policy-makers, professionals and other influential adults, to provide room and support for children and young people's participation. Arguably, they have been very successful in doing so given the growth of children and young people's participation over the past fifteen years. But, inevitably, each reason has certain advantages and disadvantages, which are in turn seen in the participation activities undertaken and the experiences of those involved.

For example, teachers and schools may feel comfortable with reasons seven and eight, as these fit into a teaching and learning model, an emphasis on

individualised learning, social and skills development. But they can lead to such an emphasis on the *process* of participation that impacts are irrelevant. Research with children and young people consistently shows that the process is important to them and that they do value the skills and positive feelings that result. Research also shows that many children and young people feel frustrated when their participation results in little or no change, and a frequent criticism from them is of tokenism (Kirby et al., 2002).

Another example is the promotion of international conventions and domestic legal rights, which are arguments frequently used by non-governmental organisations. These have been differentially successful with governments (both politicians and civil servants) across the UK, with the UNCRC articles being gradually and inconsistently incorporated across legislation. The most recent English children's services initiative – *Every Child Matters* – for instance may well be congruent with much of the UNCRC (UNICEF, 2006), but the discourse of children's rights was explicitly denied by Government ministers as the Children Act 2004 went through Parliament (Fortin, 2006a). Wales, in contrast, more comfortably orients itself around the UNCRC, setting it out as the framework for its children and young people's strategy. Northern Ireland has a final outcome in strategy: 'living in a society which respects their [children and young people's] rights' (OFMDFM, 2006). The Scottish Executive and now Government has waxed and waned on its commitment to – and indeed memory of – children's rights. For example, the Scottish Executive had to be reminded of its own Child Strategy Statement, which

should ensure that children's rights are considered in both process and outcome elements of policy development (Hughes et al., 2001).

Legalistic approaches have had certain advantages. Legal changes, combined with training and information aimed at professionals, have resulted in increased attention to children's views in numerous service settings – sometimes wider than legally required, as professionals can think they must consider children's views where in fact they are not required to do so. But rights in law do not always translate into rights in practice, and even the most carefully drafted legislation is not always implemented to the intended extent. Most children are unaware of their rights (Willow et al., 2007) and seldom access legal assistance on their own behalf.

Courts have not consistently moved forward children's rights and, as legal commentators have noted, the increased attention to the European Convention on Human Rights – due to its incorporation into UK domestic law through the Human Rights Act 1998 – has not led to a blossoming of decisions taking full account of children's rights (Fortin, 2004). Decisions continue to focus on parental rights, for example (Fortin, 2006b), with presumptions that the paramountcy of children's welfare will adequately consider children's position. Sometimes even very senior adjudicators seem ill-informed on children's position and rights: for example, Shabina Begum eventually lost her case to wear the jilbab to school, because the majority of the House of Lords argued she could choose an alternative school (*R (SB) v*



*Governors of Denbigh High School* [2006] UKHL 15). This ignores that, at the time when the school did not accept her clothing choice, she had no legal power to choose her own school – it was her parent who had the power of school choice in English educational law. Further, King (e.g. 1997, 2007) has consistently reminded us that law and legal discourse exclude and include, they frame the ‘problem’ in particular ways and value certain factors and ignore others. Appealing to children’s legal rights and relying on legislation and court enforcement mean that other matters – such as socio-economic inequality or environment quality – are side-lined.

The eight reasons above have been so-oft repeated in the children’s sector that it can be productive to consider what is *not* included. Commentators from Asia have criticised the use of children and young people’s participation as performance, where participation is equated to an artistic display of children dancing or playing music (Theis, 2007; West et al., 2007). Yet we might worry in the UK that at times children and young people’s participation is indeed used as a performance. The demand for such participation is such that local or national Governments or other organisations are aware they need to be *seen* to have consulted with children and young people. Not doing so can lead to negative media attention and, more positively, involving children and young people can lead to photo opportunities and media coverage; organisations may receive funding or other support. Being consulted does not mean that children and young people influence the result – be it legislation, the research project or the service (e.g. Tisdall and Davis, 2004).

Equally, the hard edge of political mobilisation and political emancipation is absent. Enhancing democratic processes is mentioned above (although, notably, this reason is one less frequently made than the others), but not campaigns for voting rights nor a political campaign for particular candidates or manifesto commitments. Children and young people's participation is neatly bracketed off from political campaigning and, indeed, frequently separated out from encouragement of adult participation in their communities and other governance mechanisms so favoured in the past ten years (Morrow, 2005). Little consideration is given to age-discrimination and that children are frequently excluded from participating by blanket assumptions and practices that would be considered unacceptable for other groups; indeed, the Westminster Government has refused to apply the latest equality and anti-discrimination legislation to children, on the basis of age (CRAE, 2007).

### **Trends and dilemmas in UK children and young people's participation**

The dynamics between the demands for children and young people's participation and wider governmental concerns, have resulted in particular trends within children and young people's participation activities – and certain dilemmas.

Children and young people's participation – at least as recognised and supported by adults (Prout, 2003) – has largely been a top-down development rather than bottom-up (Badham and Davies, 2007). It has been promoted by Government in various ways, with strong support of devolved administrations at various times (again, with Wales being more consistent, Northern Ireland

hampered at times by its political problems, and Scotland with some oscillation) and the hey day of the Children's and Young People's Unit in Westminster. There was an attempt by the Unit to 'mainstream' children and young people's participation in the work of government, by requiring annual action plans. However, Tisdall and Bell (2006) report that this attempt to mainstream met with variable success, due to competition with other agendas and policy 'chimneys'. Participation has been incorporated into indicators, in various sectors, and guidance and planning requirements. Government at all levels in the UK have financed a range of activities, from one-off consultations on particular policies, to grant-giving to particular participative activities, and charities have been notable funders as well (e.g. Big Lottery, Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund).

Regularisation and institutionalisation of children and young people's participation have also grown, primarily through two structural mechanisms: school or pupil councils; and youth fora or parliaments, at local and national government levels. School councils are now mandatory in Wales, in all maintained primary, secondary and special schools. While there is no equivalent legal requirement (yet) in England and Scotland, school councils have grown in number: around 85% of secondary school students in both countries report having school councils in 2007 (Tisdall, 2007; Whitty and Wisby, 2007). School councils may or may not have a relationship with youth fora / parliaments, but the latter have definitely grown in popularity as well (O'Toole and Gale, this journal). There are now youth parliaments in Scotland, Wales (Funky Dragon) and a UK-wide Youth Parliament.

Children's rights commentators have regularly been highly critical of such formal structures, as they have developed in the UK (Alderson, 2000; Badham and Davies, 2007; Cockburn and Cleaver, 2008). Cairns (2006) writes that these kinds of structures lead to: children behaving like mini-adults; fora being dominated by the most resourceful children in a local area; and agendas being set by adults. He suggests that children often do not know who their representative is on a local youth forum and there is little evidence that such fora stimulate long-term changes in the life conditions of children.

Evidence from children and young people suggests some similar perceptions. For example, the Children and Youth Board was set up in 2003 to provide direct advice to Ministers, in the Department for Education and Skills. An evaluation (Neary and A'Drake, 2006) finds that the experience was beneficial for individual young members and officials were positive, but the board's impact on decision-making was not evident. A recent survey of Scottish secondary school pupils (Tisdall, 2007) found that 40% did not think their pupil council had given them a say on how their school was run. Yet a higher proportion (44%) of children and young people strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "I think school councils are a good way of listening to pupils". It would seem that the young people were hopeful about the potential of such structures, even if they were not always delivering in practice. While only 8% of pupils were currently a pupil council member, over one-third reported having been one previously. A minority but sizeable proportion of young

people thus did experience this formal structure, although the *quality* of that experience is not known.

While there is a very active non-governmental sector for children in the UK, there are very few stand-alone organisations of children and young people (Badham and Davies, 2007). Even those that do exist (such as the very successful Who Cares? Scotland, which is the representative organisation of children and young people who have experienced local authority care) must deal with the barriers blocking them from setting themselves up formally as an organisation: children cannot be directors under company law (for charities that register as companies, under the Companies Act 2006) and more generally lack legal capacity to contract. More young person-led initiatives – such as Article 12 in Scotland, or Investing in Children in Durham – can face struggles for financial survival and attention by decision-makers. Cairns (2006), for example, reports a long list of problems Investing in Children has faced when working to children and young people's own agendas, including: lack of funding/ time; rigid bureaucracy; adult decision-makers' lacking training, experience and positive attitudes towards such participation; a shortage of information for children; inaccessible language and practices; staff cynicism; a dearth of commitment and leadership from senior management; inaccessible locations; and a lack of results. But it is not only statutory organisations that produce barriers. Children's non-governmental organisations themselves have often struggled with including children and young people in their own internal governance, despite being strong

advocates externally for just such participation (Gabriel, 1998; Badham, 2000).

Organisational change has been strongly promoted and influenced by such leading advocates as the National Youth Agency. Respondents to the 2003-04 survey (Oldfield and Fowler, 2004) overwhelmingly identified senior management commitment as the most important action that organisations could take to promote participation (71% of statutory organisations and 60% of voluntary organisations). Another popular option chosen by respondents (approximately two-fifths of both respondent types) was specific staff supporting participation. It was clearly an organisational response already taken by reporting organisations: approximately three-quarters of organisations reported providing some dedicated staff time to support participation.

The growth of 'participation workers' is evidenced by the popularity of the Participation Worker Networks, funded initially by the Carnegie Young People's Initiative. Over 2300 people have now joined these networks. Research and interrogation of this role is still in its infancy. There are obvious parallels with other occupations that seek to 'empower' people such as community development workers (see Taylor and Percy-Smith, this issue) and youth workers more specifically. Participation work grows both as a particular employment opportunity and an expectation of how all children's professionals work, creating potential tensions and realignments between occupational

groups (Parker, 2000) – with implications both for children and for impact. The combination of Participation Worker Networks and increased job opportunities suggest that the participation worker may be an emerging occupation and a potential occupational identity.

But whether organisational change is advocated, or skilling and employment of participation workers, generally the formal promotion of children and young people's participation has a technocratic quality. As New Labour has moved forward its policy agenda through standards and targets, advocates of children and young people's participation have sought to insinuate such participation into these mechanisms: to set up 'kite marks' for children and young people's participation, to set out standards that organisations can judge themselves against, to create performance indicators within publicly funded programmes that require children and young people's participation. There has been an explosion of skills training and toolkits for participation (e.g. see <http://www.sccyp.co.uk/>). Such activities arguably have had very positive effects in fostering change at all levels, creating opportunities for change, and rewarding those who seek to mainstream children and young people's participation. But they have also been criticised for creating the 'tick the box' syndrome, tokenistic forms that actually turn children and young people off from participating and focusing on processes rather than outcomes. Badham and Davies (2007) suggest a holistic system for organisational change, which involves changing staff attitudes as much as structures. In order to avoid technical rational approaches to participation, a number of writers have argued we need to enable discursive spaces where children and adults work

through what participation and inclusion mean in local contexts (Cockburn, 2002; Moss and Petrie, 2002).

These debates, however, risk setting up a false or at least unhelpful dichotomy between more open processes and more technical rationalist approaches to participation; one might argue that, for societies to be 'truly' participative local people must decide what approaches best suit their life contexts and local circumstances. Multiple approaches may well be required, as children and young people are hardly a homogenous group and no one approach will be attractive to all children and young people. School councils and youth fora/ parliament have garnered much criticism for advantaging the already advantaged, for being dominated by articulate middle-class children and young people and for excluding the more marginalised children and young people. Nairn and colleagues (2006) from New Zealand suggest that actually it is the quiet, relatively advantaged children and young people who in fact have few mechanisms to have their views considered, whereas the efforts to include 'harder to reach' young people seem to have had some success.

### **Moving forward?**

Prout (2005) encourages childhood studies to move beyond polarisation of ideas. For example, we must avoid creating a dogma that formal and technocratic forms are 'bad' and that less formal approaches are all 'good'. This encourages us to ask questions concerning the dynamic nature of these systems and about what approaches best suit different types of locations (e.g. a voluntary organisation short of cash, a local authority moribund by political



dogma or a youth parliament dominated by children who attend independent schools). Indeed, it raises questions as to the utility of carrying out projects within systems that are chaotic or, alternatively, in organisations that are too rigid.

Children's participation, and how it is generally understood and carried out in the UK, can also be seen in relation to its wider political culture. The dominant models of participation in the UK make sense in the context of a parliamentary liberal democracy, with a relatively stable recent political history. Youth fora and school councils mimic, and sometimes feed into, the hierarchical structures that govern UK society as a whole. The devolution of control of youth issues to young people can be seen as a parallel to the recent movements to devolved administration of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Even where youth councils and their representative models of democracy are questioned, the critiques generally invoke standard liberal-democratic ideals of reasoned debate, rights to citizenship and so on (e.g. Cairns, 2006). In the UK context, political activities such as passive resistance, boycotts, protest (both violent and non-violent), campaigning, strikes, direct action, self-organisation, civil disobedience and other anarchic and revolutionary practices have yet to be widely recognised in the formal discourse around children and young people's participation.

The political context of the UK can therefore be seen as placing limits on how participation is understood. For example, the notion of 'voice', and the

centrality of representation through spoken dialogue in the UK political tradition, excludes those children and young people who cannot, or do not, communicate through speech (Komulainen, 2007). Most debates concerning participation in the UK show some awareness of European experiences and occasionally draw from work carried out in other continents (see Davis, 2007). However, much more comparative work is needed to consider what can be learnt from participatory processes carried out in different political contexts, such as those with recent histories of revolution or warfare. Whilst political action through dialogue may be effective for some, it seems important to remember that debate and representation do not exhaust the possibilities of the political.

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