

Evaluating children's participation: seeking areas of consensus

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Introduction

The subject of children's participation in decisions that affect their lives, as provided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and explored in this issue, is a complex one. Participation means different things to different people, and the form of participation that is most appropriate varies with circumstances, including culture, age, gender, setting, political conditions, available resources, and participants' goals. It follows that one of the questions that brought child researchers and community development experts together in Oslo for a symposium on "Children's Participation in Community Settings" is equivalently complex: *how can participation be evaluated in ways that will encourage best practices?* This article will review some of the areas of consensus and debate during the symposium, with the hope that doing so will indicate some productive ways forward for research and practice in this area. (For the definition of participation adopted at the symposium, see Box 1.)

Box 1 A definition of participation

Participation is a process in which children and youth engage with other people around issues that concern their individual and collective life conditions. Participants interact in ways that respect each other's dignity, with the intention of achieving a shared goal. In the process, the child experiences itself as playing a useful role in the community. Formal processes of participation deliberately create structures for children's engagement in constructing meaning and sharing decision making.

As the overview to this issue, by Nadia Auriat, Per Miljeteig and this author, has explained, the Oslo symposium brought people together to review the forms of participation that characterise children's involvement in different community settings in different regions of the world, to review research to understand children's own beliefs and attitudes about their participation, and to identify outcomes of engagement for children themselves and the groups to which they belong. Symposium members presented papers or posters on these subjects, and there were small and large group discussions to identify areas of consensus and controversy, as well as the most productive questions for future research.

This article begins by reviewing some general issues surrounding the evaluation of participation that emerged

from the symposium. It then examines opportunities and constraints shaping children's participation in different settings. In the end, it reviews areas of agreement among symposium members in terms of the qualities that characterise good settings for participation and how evaluation research should be conceptualised.

Evaluation: Who does it? For what reasons?

Childwatch International and the MOST Programme of UNESCO, the two organisations that sponsored the Oslo symposium, both seek to foster policy-oriented research in all regions of the world, in low-income as well as middle- and high-income countries. Therefore the symposium brought together people who do research in countries characterised by distinct research cultures, varying levels of resources, and different questions of urgency. It also convened representatives of non-profit organisations that work on community development and children's rights. These different backgrounds were reflected in different approaches which people brought to the practice of evaluation.

The academic researchers were primarily interested in research about participation: using established qualitative and quantitative methods, how can various forms of children's participation be documented, children's own beliefs and attitudes about their involvement be understood, and outcomes be measured? Symposium members who were anchored in community development tended to be more interested in participatory monitoring and evaluation, in which children and adults in communities work collaboratively with facilitators to design project evaluations that will monitor outcomes of importance to themselves. The philosophy underlying participatory monitoring and evaluation is an extension of the basic concept of participation itself: if community members have a right to self-expression and self-determination in decisions that affect their lives, then the choice of outcomes that will improve their lives, as well as processes of monitoring their achievement, should also rest with the community. As valid and important as this conclusion is, there is a risk inherent in this approach that evaluation may become a series of one-time only project

reviews, each unique, noncomparable and confined to its own boundaries, with no coordinated programme to synthesise results and share processes that work most effectively under specifiable contexts. The two approaches are not, however, necessarily incompatible; and therefore people at the symposium came together to seek areas for collaboration.

A risk to coordinated research is also inherent in the popularity of social constructivism in contemporary child research. This philosophy holds that people mentally structure an otherwise unstructured world, so that there are as many independent constructions of the world as there are individuals – or at least as many as there are cultures which socialise their members to perceive the world in certain ways. One consequence of this philosophy can be the position that there are no universal standards with regard to children's well-being, or corresponding project goals, which can be promoted and compared from site to site.

Andrew Dawes of South Africa advocated a compromise that most symposium members accepted: that evaluation should combine universal criteria of children's well-being with local criteria determined by children and their communities. As Gary Melton argued, if participation is a right, then it is worth doing it carefully. This requires thoughtful analysis to determine the most important dimensions and how to assess them in terms that children, child development experts and other adults find most meaningful, through coordinated research programmes that can transfer useful knowledge from site to site. (For a further analysis of these issues, see Chawla and Heft, 2002.)

As a whole, symposium members brought many different questions to the table, which would need to be explored through different research approaches. Some people were interested in overviews of existing legislation and structures of governance that provide channels for children's participation at national and local levels – topics which would require reviews and surveys, combined with more qualitative methods to identify best practices. Questions about cultures of childhood and existing community practices, including children's spontaneously organised actions, require ethnographic methods, as do questions about what happens during participatory processes in different settings. Efforts to understand children's and adults' perspectives involve interviews, focus groups or questionnaires, as well as participatory monitoring and evaluation. Questions about outcomes under different conditions invite quasi-experimental designs: questions about long-term outcomes, longitudinal designs. To give adequate attention to cultural contexts, cross-cultural and multidisciplinary research networks are needed on all of these fronts.

Setting constraints and opportunities

The symposium sought to evaluate what is happening in different spheres of children's lives by gathering overviews of typical forms of participation in different community settings and parts of the world. It began with the basic question: *What channels are being created for children to participate in shaping their communities and making decisions that affect their lives? When they exist, what form do these opportunities typically take?*

These reviews of practice revealed a constraint that is not surprising: that most areas of decision making that affect children's lives, where children have the most to gain from participation, are traditionally areas of strong adult control and authority. Therefore adults face the challenge of learning to listen to children and respect their ideas and potential to contribute to their communities. The more that adults feel that serious outcomes are at stake, the more limited children's opportunities tend to be: as in schools, health care settings, substitute care, and municipal planning.

Karen Nairn, for example, reported that a nationwide survey of high school students and staff in New Zealand indicated that students were only allowed to have an influence over relatively inconsequential decisions. Barry Percy-Smith noted that, at the neighbourhood level in the United Kingdom, children tend to be segregated into participating in the design of playgrounds or other youth spaces, or they are given a voice in youth councils which have only tokenistic influence. Nittaya Kotchabhakdi of Thailand observed that children are usually treated as passive recipients of health care, despite some model programmes which have demonstrated the active role they can play in promoting healthy living in their families and communities, and the importance of their partnership in their own care. Jo Boyden gave reasons why refugee settings are an especially difficult arena for participation.

Robin Moore and Nilda Cosco, who work on schoolyard design projects in the United States and abroad, observed that there is often less adult control and more opportunities for children's involvement in design and change in the schoolyard. Per Miljeteig of Norway described how child labourers in the South, who have gained some independence through their work, have created especially dynamic examples of young people's initiative and competence in organising themselves and making their voices heard. More problematically, Robin Kimbrough-Melton and Gary Melton of the United States reported that community institutions that frequently reach out to children and youth to engage them in community service are churches, temples and mosques; yet there is very little research on this area of children's lives. In terms of the philosophy of children's rights, these settings present the paradox that the more engaged that children become with religious settings, the more they are

becoming indoctrinated into their faith, whereas the CRC emphasises children's right to express their own independent views.

On the level of government accounting, Jens Qvortup and Anne Trine Kjørholt of Norway argued that there is a great need to make children's existing participation in their societies more visible by identifying their contributions in official statistics. This should include the contribution of their labour in school to human capital accounting, as well as their role in household economies and the paid labour force.

The look and sound of participatory settings at their best

There was general agreement among the symposium's diverse members about the characteristics of participatory settings that provide children with optimal scope for positive development.

Build upon existing cultural norms

Participation occurs in informal as well as formal settings, and adults who seek to facilitate children's participation need to begin by understanding where it already occurs. They need to ask: *how are children already participating in their everyday lives and settings?* Children may already play responsible roles taking care of the home or younger siblings, or working in family enterprises or other workplaces. They may be inventive and self-organising in their play and the creation of play settings. In extreme cases, they may already be surviving on their own on the street or as orphans. These arenas where children already take responsibility can be built upon in several ways. They can be made visible, to make children's competence appear more acceptable and legitimate. They can indicate the most promising settings for investing in participation, where resources can be extended by enhancing opportunities in areas where children already take the initiative. They can also serve as models of processes that can be integrated into new settings, so that participatory processes will appear familiar and acceptable to children themselves as well as adults in their culture.

An implication of this principle is that advocates for children need to work for settings of everyday life that will support participation. Gary Melton noted that this means not only increasing access to participation in as many settings as possible, but also encouraging children to make use of this access, regardless of class, gender or ethnicity.

Recognise different forms of participation

Several different forms of participation were defined, depending on children's level of involvement and degree of initiative. These distinctions are shown in Box 2. Children may move from one form to another as they

increase their competence: for example, when a child who has helped its parents grow vegetables ("assigned participation") organises with other children to create a garden on school grounds ("collaborative participation"). Typically, however, at one and the same age children will practice different forms of participation in different settings, depending on their level of interest, the degree of skill required, and the opportunities available.

Box 2 Forms of participation

Prescribed participation

The child feels a moral and cultural obligation to participate and considers the opportunity to do so a privilege. There is some choice, but conventions within the culture are strong for this to happen.

Assigned participation

Adults such as teachers and parents provide opportunities for training in participation. This involvement is directed by adults, but the child experiences it to be meaningful.

Invited participation

It is adult initiated and controlled, but the child has the right to withdraw without feeling disadvantaged.

Negotiated participation

The child is assigned a participatory role, but has opportunities to negotiate how to carry it out and the level of involvement.

Self-initiated negotiated participation

The child initiates it and controls it, negotiating the level and type of involvement and how long to continue.

Graduated participation

As the child increases in competence, he or she has opportunities to practice new types of participation, assume new levels of responsibility, and find new occasions for meaningful involvement in the community.

Collaborative participation

It is initiated and supported by a group, which collectively negotiates the level and form of involvement.

Note: These forms of participation are not necessarily exclusive of each other. For example, a child could be invited to participate, and then negotiate the process.

Prepare for participation from birth

In keeping with the emphasis on understanding settings for participation in everyday life and increasing the opportunities they provide, symposium members agreed on the importance of early childhood as a foundation for formal channels of democratic decision making in later life. Malfrid Flekkøy, former ombudsman for children in Norway, argued that respect for infants' and toddlers' interests and initiatives, the treatment of young children as persons of worth, and young children's inclusion in social activities form a prototype and precondition for later forms of participation. This principle has been embedded in recommendations for programmes to foster these parenting practices by Fuglesang and Chandler (1997).

Foster positive outcomes through meaningful participation

Members of the symposium agreed that, to be authentic, participation must appear meaningful to the children involved. It should engage them around issues that concern their individual and group lives, in interactive ways that respect the human dignity of the participants and that seek to achieve a shared goal. As a result, children experience themselves to be playing a useful role in their community. To understand what will engage children actively, it is necessary to know their own motivations and interests and how they themselves perceive issues. This concept of “meaningful participation” implies a developmental perspective that will change depending upon children’s interests, goals and sense of their own capabilities, as well as their societies’ expectations regarding appropriate tasks and accomplishments.

Look for indicators of effective participation

Symposium members concurred that participatory settings at their best exhibit common characteristics across settings; these are listed in Box 3. These characteristics serve as indicators of underlying principles of respect for children’s dignity as persons, mutual respect among group members, access, and support for growing levels of competence.

Symposium members also believed that positive forms of participation, defined by the preceding indicators, can foster a range of positive outcomes for children themselves, their communities and facilitating organisations (see Box 4.) Some of these outcomes can be quantified, such as the construction of new community facilities or the cost effectiveness of programmes that community members appropriate and maintain. Roger Hart of the United States, however, cautioned that evaluation should not focus on these quantitative measures to the exclusion of more qualitative expressions of the contribution of participatory projects to human development and human rights.

Assume competence, and build in supports for its development

The developmental psychologists at the symposium opposed any universal, age-based assumptions about children’s competence – such as that children are capable of certain forms of participation at given ages but not others. They noted that the past two decades of research in child development have demonstrated that competence is highly contextualised, depending on how familiar and meaningful an activity is to a child, as well as how competence itself is defined and measured. The best rule, they proposed, is to assume competence in some degree, and to ask at every age: *what support can be provided to enable children to participate to the best of their ability?*

Box 3 Characteristics of effective projects for children’s participation

Conditions of convergence*

- Whenever possible, the project builds on existing community organisations and structures that support children’s participation.
- As much as possible, project activities make children’s participation appear to be a natural part of the setting.
- The project is based on children’s own issues and interests.

Conditions of entry

- Participants are fairly selected.
- Children and their families give informed consent.
- Children freely choose to participate or decline.
- The project is accessible in scheduling and location.

Conditions of social support

- Children are respected as human beings with essential worth and dignity.
- There is mutual respect among participants.
- Children support and encourage each other.

Conditions for competence

- Children have real responsibility and influence.
- Children understand and have a part in defining the goals of the activity.
- Children play a role in decision making and accomplishing goals.
- Children are helped to construct and express their views, and are provided with the information necessary to make informed decisions.
- There is a fair sharing of opportunities to contribute and be heard.
- The project creates occasions for the graduated development of competence.
- The project sets up processes to support children’s engagement in issues they initiate themselves.
- The project results in tangible outcomes.

Conditions for reflection

- There is transparency at all stages of decision making.
- Children understand the reasons for outcomes.
- There are opportunities for critical reflection.
- There are opportunities for evaluation at both group and individual levels.
- Participants deliberately negotiate differences in power.

*“Convergence” is used here in the sense of the coming together of people, ideas and resources to establish new programmes or settings (Wicker, 1987).

For example, children who may be hesitant to express themselves in words alone may be expressive in drawing and talking about pictures. Or young children who may have trouble reading two-dimensional plans for the redesign of their school may thoughtfully manipulate a three-dimensional model.

In this respect, Anne Smith of New Zealand noted the usefulness of Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the “zone of proximal development” that children can be enabled to reach through role models and guided practice, Rogoff’s (1990) concept of apprenticeship, and the metaphor of

Box 4 Expected outcomes of children's participation

For children themselves

- More positive sense of self
- Increased sense of competence
- Greater sensitivity to the perspectives and needs of others
- Greater tolerance and sense of fairness
- Increased understanding of democratic values and behaviours
- Preparation for a lifelong pattern of participation
- New social networks
- New skills
- Enjoyment

For the organisations that serve children

- Programme and policy development that is sensitive to children's priorities
- The establishment of processes for participation
- Increased commitment to children's rights
- Innovation

For children's communities

- Public education regarding children's rights
- More positive public attitudes and relationships to children
- Increased social capital
- Improved quality of life

"scaffolding" developed by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976). These concepts emphasise the creation of opportunities for the practice of graduated levels of competence.

Balance protection and participation

Gary Melton noted that, in the history of children's rights, the tradition of child protection has been stronger than the tradition that emphasises children's agency and rights to self-determination and personal expression. One of the great achievements of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is that it integrates these two premises: that, as persons, children deserve opportunities to be heard, at the same time as they are recognised to be vulnerable and dependent persons who require special protections and entitlements if they are to be prepared for fully functioning lives in society. On one side, protection preserves the integrity of the child. On the other side, participation preserves the child's dignity. One of the fundamental principles of the CRC is that these different rights are intended to operate together.

Melton observed that children's rights to self-expression and participation in decision making with parents and other adults can usually be a cooperative venture. When adults believe that protection is necessary, they can negotiate with children so that young people understand their reasons. He also advocated a "learner's permit" model, which focuses not so much on the establishment

of threshold ages for activities, as on the creation of formal structures that facilitate young people's participation in society by balancing guidance and independence in step with young people's demonstrations of growing levels of competence (Melton, 1999).

In summary, symposium members believed that there is no "one size fits all" model for children's participation that can be applied across all community settings, social groups and cultural contexts. They advocated that participation needs to be fostered across a broad range of formal and informal settings. Nevertheless, they believed that the qualities that characterise participatory processes that respect children's dignity and competence can be specified and documented, and that creating processes of this kind benefits not only children, but also their communities and societies.

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Note

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