

# Making children's participation in neighbourhood settings relevant to the everyday lives of young people

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## Introduction

Local environments are socially and developmentally important domains in children's everyday experiences (Chawla 2001). Yet so often young people's views and experiences of neighbourhood settings are characterised by conflict with adults, alienation from community life, environmental hazards or neglect, and limited opportunities. At the same time there is ample evidence to suggest that, despite parental restrictions, increasing control of public space use and the competing forces of leisure practices that focus on consumerism and information technology, children continue to value outdoor place experiences (Chawla 2001). However, the value of local place experiences for children goes beyond issues of place use and provision, yielding also potential opportunities for developing a sense of belonging, identity, self-worth and advocacy as fellow citizens within neighbourhood communities.

Promoted by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Earth Summit, the search for more effective and child-friendly planning and development in local neighbourhoods has given rise to increasing emphasis being placed on the participation of children. A growing number of projects provide rich insights into children's experience of local places, but there are fewer examples of studies concerning the participation of children in neighbourhood development processes. Nevertheless, a culture of involving children in neighbourhood development appears to be evolving, led in particular by children's charities and nongovernmental organisations (see for example the work of Save The Children, The Children's Society's Children in Neighbourhoods project in Britain, Action Aid and UNICEF). While there are examples of good practices in involving children in neighbourhood research and development processes (Johnson *et al.*, 1998; Adams and Ingham, 1998; Save The Children, 1997; Cannan and Warren, 1997; Hart, 1997; Malone 1999; Chawla, 2001), these often remain on the fringes of mainstream development initiatives. As a result, children's views and interests continue to remain relatively marginalised in neighbourhood landscapes, in the everyday practices of local communities, and in local governance structures and procedures. There are, however, few studies that evaluate

children's experience of participation in neighbourhood settings. When we talk of "evaluating children's participation", we are not necessarily referring to whether initiatives "get children's participation right" or meet programme targets, but rather about whether, by being critically reflective and learning from experience, the achievement of a culture of children's participation may become increasingly more realisable.

The ideas presented in this paper are based primarily on our work with children in neighbourhoods in the United Kingdom (Percy-Smith 1999; 2001) and Australia (Malone & Hasluck 2001, Malone 1999, Chawla & Malone, in press), two of the four industrialised nations researched in conjunction with the international Growing Up In Cities programme (Chawla 2001). Despite this emphasis we believe the paper raises issues and questions which cut across geographically, socially and culturally diverse neighbourhood contexts.

## Children's participation in neighbourhood settings

Discussions about children's participation are dominated by references to children's involvement in decision making processes. Yet if one of the goals of children's participation is inclusionary and democratic citizenship for children, we should extend our understandings of children's participation to include children's cultures and social practices in everyday life. Children are already participating in their neighbourhoods but often in worlds apart from adults. One of the challenges for research, planning and development in neighbourhoods is to incorporate the cultural practices and expertise of children into decision making and management of local places within the context of their everyday lives, to ensure that children feel a sense of ownership, belonging and inclusion within their communities. It is insufficient to simply provide opportunities for children to have their say or participate in adult structures and processes. They should be provided with an opportunity to challenge and change these structures and processes by negotiating their own forms of participation, and consequently, be instrumental in improving their neighbourhoods. We argue that authentic participation involves *inclusion* – wherein the system changes to accommodate the



**During a neighbourhood tour, these young boys showed Growing Up in Frankston researchers the cycle track they constructed. They lobbied the City council to keep the track open.**

participation and values of children, rather than *integration* – wherein children participate in predefined ways in predefined structures.

Increasingly, research and consultation exercises have derived rich insights into children's views and experience of their neighbourhoods. Many have been conducted under the guise of participatory research with children, but all too often, they are introduced by bodies external to the neighbourhood and fail to involve children in the identification of research problems, in the design of the research or development process, or in taking action on emerging insights. In these cases children act as benign participants rather than active co-researchers or social inquirers. There is little evidence as to children's experience of participating in these projects, the value of what they have learned, or whether these initiatives have sustained the involvement of children beyond the lifetime of the projects. Children have also participated in local decision making through central and local government and development agency initiatives, including Local Agenda 21 forums, youth forums and neighbourhood regeneration programmes (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 1998). While these contexts go some way in involving young people in the democratic process, there is a danger that the token participation of a few young people may appear to legitimate the decision making of adults. The participation of young people appears to work best when a range of channels for participation exists, especially those rooted in neighbourhood issues of direct relevance to the lives of young people, rather than just generic mechanisms for participation in local governance.

In both the United Kingdom and Australian Growing Up In Cities projects, young participants said that they wanted to be more involved in making improvements to their neighbourhood. Despite this agreement, there was uncertainty as to how this might best happen. For the majority, local youth projects were seen as the most suitable venue for ideas to be exchanged. In spite of these

suggestions, being involved in local decisions may not be appealing for some young people, especially those termed 'disaffected.' "The thing is, the kids round here don't want to talk to adults, they just want to go around in their gangs, they don't want to have anything to do with adults" (U.K. study, 13 year old boy). As a consequence, initiatives for participation need to address problems of disaffection, cynicism and cultures of non-participation among some young people, and to pay serious consideration to developing new modes of participation which bring processes of local governance into their everyday worlds. These concerns are illustrated by the following case study from Australia, which describes how one of the authors (Malone) attempted to create a participatory environment for young people.

### **Case study: Frankston Youth Safety Management Team**

A Growing Up in Frankston Youth Needs Assessment, conducted by the Growing Up in Cities research team in conjunction with the Frankston City Council, found that young people felt marginalised and disadvantaged in this suburban city of greater Melbourne, where many adults viewed youth with suspicion and distrust. Therefore when the Mayor and the Community Safety Management Team (CMST) launched the Community Safety Plan in late 2000, the development of a Youth Safety Management Team (YSMT) was included as one of four priorities for the period 2000/2001. Their goal was to: "establish and provide ongoing leadership and support for a Junior Community Safety Management Team, to contribute to the development and implementation of policies, programs and projects related to community safety and crime prevention" (Frankston City Council 2000). The YSMT had its first meeting in late December 2000. Membership in the group was decided through a call for nominations from each of the local secondary colleges, the local university and further education college, the Yellow Ribbon project group (a youth-run volunteer group

supporting youth in crisis), in CYNC (a youth support group run by council youth services with the Frankston Town Centre Management), and through public media. Youth members of the team and the council YSMT administrator gave the following responses when asked about their participation in YSMT and its role.

*Adults stereotype young people too easily. They are only 'visible' when they do things that adults don't do. For example, young people enjoy hanging around with their friends, but that doesn't mean they are going to break into a store or sell drugs. Most young people are doing fantastic things but adults don't see this, concentrating on a small group making trouble who'll probably grow out of it anyway. I hope to represent young people in my community while I am in the YSMT. – Amy, youth member of YSMT*

*The purpose of this group was to provide a connection between young people living and working in Frankston with the local council. The YSMT can provide the council with a direct consultation link between young people and the council on a range of issues. I joined to gain a greater understanding of the decision-making process and other community issues. I think youth participation is important. – Scott, youth member of YSMT*

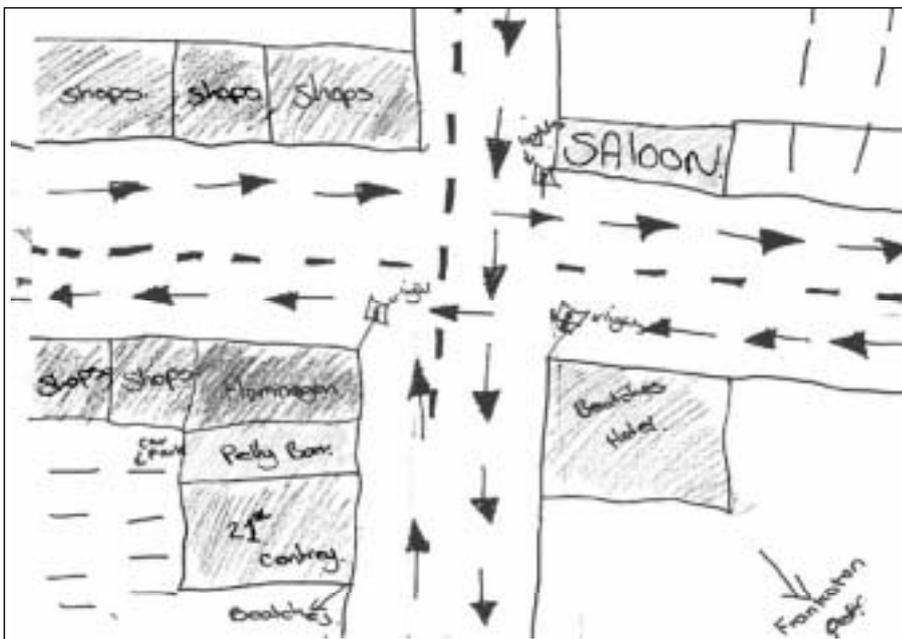
*YSMT was developed as an action under the Community Safety Plan as a result of the Growing Up In Frankston work. I get to listen to people who think I'm really old and for some reason get to make other adults in the 'youth' fields feel really nervous/angry/threatened. This is probably a good sign! They're giving us a perspective that we didn't have before. – Philippa, council administrator of YSMT*

At the time of writing, the 10-member group had met eight times. Their accomplishments during this time included:

- publishing a survey on the concerns of young people who use the skate ramp facility in the city
- developing an action subcommittee to submit a proposal for a long-term facility management plan for the skate ramp
- conducting a "youth-specific places" audit of the city
- developing a media release focusing on positive images of youth, to counteract the current plethora of negative portrayals of youth in local newspapers.

Representatives of the group attend the monthly meetings of the City Council Community Safety Management Team and provide regular input on youth concerns. They are an evolving group, who because of their brief time together are still deciding on directions for their own development. A month ago, at their July meeting, they had a heated discussion about their role, particularly whether or not they felt able to make as valuable a contribution as they had intended when joining. From this discussion, they decided to develop a discussion paper on the prospect of initiating a youth council. Part of their frustration stemmed from the fact that they were the ONLY youth representatives in the city council. The investigations they undertook meant that they made contact with youth council members across the globe – some with success stories, others with failures. The discussion paper was presented to the CSMT and the Mayor and has been picked up by the Youth Services department, who in collaboration with YSMT is developing a proposal for the Mayor. The youth council model the group are supporting would include members of the YSMT and other youth groups operating in the area.

Picture by Sarah, age 12 years



**Sarah's drawing of downtown Frankston shows some of the reasons why young people didn't find it a friendly place – a heavy traffic flow and a lack of public meeting places.**

Additionally, stemming from the discussion at that meeting in July, the young people decided to address issues about their role and responsibility with the CSMT and vice versa. The YSMT members were apprehensive about the reaction of adults when they announced that they had concerns about their role in representing youth and their concerns that their ideas weren't being acted on. When they spoke to me, as the researcher who had put forward the idea of the YSMT, they were concerned particularly that I might feel challenged by their demands. But in actual fact I was pleased they spoke out, because it illustrated a very important point, and that was that these processes are always evolving. Nobody on the CSMT had worked with youth committees before, and therefore many didn't know what the expectations were or how the young people felt. Unless they told us (and we valued them enough to listen) then how would it work? These young people wanted to be taken seriously and make a difference, and they were holding the group and the city council accountable to that. They weren't happy about being token youth, and we inadvertently, through our lack of experience, made them feel that way.

At the next CSMT meeting, they gave out a questionnaire to the adult members of the committee, asking them to articulate their expectations for the YSMT. They collected the forms at the end of meeting and are currently developing a report, which also includes their ideas on how to make the process more inclusive and participatory. The important issue was that, when the group reached a point where it needed to evolve, would they have support from the adults? The key to an equitable participation process was being willing to listen and learn from the young people. The following comment by Emma, a young member of the YSMT, sums up what can be achieved if adults attempt to create equitable, evolving and responsive processes for children's participation:

*I think we've achieved a lot. I like the 'equality' with adults I've experienced since joining the YSMT. We can tell the adults exactly what we want – exactly what is going on. It's a lot different when you are on the same level as adults. No one asked us before 'what do you think?' It's hard to have a voice in a community unless someone asks you. – Emma, youth member YSMT*

This case study highlights the importance of opening up an 'opportunity space' for meaningful participation to evolve and develop reflexively as an organic, relational process built on equality, dialogue and mutual respect, rather than providing a fixed mode or structure for



Photo by courtesy of Lindsay Hasluck

**One of the first initiatives of the Youth Safety Management Team in Frankston was to compile a report on safety and security on the skate ramp. Here skaters take a break to participate in the research.**

participation. It also brings to the fore the importance of treating young people's participation seriously and providing the necessary support to ensure that, through action, young people are able to have a real impact in neighbourhood development processes.

### **Outcomes of participation: impacts on professionals, children and neighbourhoods**

There is limited evidence as to what impact children's participation has on neighbourhood settings. In the Growing Up in Cities projects (Percy-Smith 2001, Malone & Hasluck 2001) the majority of young people involved in the studies stated that they felt good about having the chance to say what they felt and be listened to. "I hope something can be changed now, but it's nice to be able to give your views to somebody that can listen, 'cause most people just aren't bothered" (U.K. study, 15 year old girl). Positive feedback is one way of feeling good about being involved in a participatory process, but what of those young people who don't want to be involved? Three broad reasons have emerged from these studies concerning why young people have not previously been involved. First, young people do not expect participation to be available to them, so they don't acknowledge that it includes them. Second, young people are not aware of their rights and procedures and don't demand opportunities to participate, so unless they are invited, they don't realise that they can contribute to community projects. Third, some young people feel an underlying apathy and cynicism toward participation, arising in many cases from the assumption that their ideas or views will not be taken seriously and acted upon.

Underlying moves to enhance children's role in the development process appears to be an expectation that

the process of participation is positive and benefits both young people and neighbourhood communities. Yet while many young people want to express their opinions and have these taken seriously, this does not mean they necessarily want to be involved in the whole decision-making or development process, such as sitting in a council chamber or doing a survey. The prospect of becoming key players in local development processes also may not be high on their agenda in light of other priorities (to play or spend time hanging out with friends). The dilemma is how research, policy objectives and political processes can be converted into child-friendly practices. This has implications for the nature and extent of children's involvement in neighbourhood development processes, as well as for the role of education in young people's developing capacity to participate.

There is a clear need for children's participation to be rooted in community contexts, but at the same time community development initiatives need to be enabled by support structures at the level of central and local government. However, long-term, qualitative outcomes of community development are often at odds with the tight time lines and target-driven restrictions imposed by funding and political priorities. As a result, what often happens is that the rhetoric of policy intentions and the reality of experiences and outcomes at the grass roots level do not coincide.

## Towards a whole community approach to neighbourhood participation

Hart (1997) notes that it is unrealistic to expect children to participate if they have not had the chance to develop the capacity to participate. Children's participation in neighbourhood settings is an important forum in which to develop the skills of responsible citizenship. However, the divisions between the lives and values of children and adults and the lack of structures for community participation pose significant stumbling blocks for progress in children's participation in neighbourhood settings. This was a critical point in the Streetspace project reported on by Malone (1999: 23): "If neighbourhoods are to become youth-friendly, young people need to be part of the planning process. However, to participate constructively, they need to be skilled". As Fitzpatrick *et al.* (1998: 25) observe: "Adults as well as young people require training to ensure effective... participation can take place". At the same time, there is a need for a cultural shift in values and attitudes between adults and young people, so as to provide opportunities for social learning and development rather than conflict and disharmony.

In conclusion, we need to look not just at young people's capacity to participate and the provision of opportunities and structures for participation, but we also need to direct our attention to the dynamic interaction between these

two sets of considerations. In this way we can come to understand how, why and in what ways young people respond to opportunities for learning and participation in neighbourhood settings.

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