Setting the Agenda: Social Inclusion, Children and Young People

This paper was prepared collectively by participants of the third seminar in a series with the title Challenging ‘Social Inclusion’: Perspectives for and from Children and Young People. Three 3-day seminars took place at the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Stirling in 2002–3 attended by academics, professionals from voluntary sector children’s agencies, young people, representatives from central government and postgraduate students. Funding was provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Children’s Society. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction

In their introductory article, the editors describe the articles in this issue as ‘moving the participation agenda forward’. This article takes that conversation one stage further. It reflects the dialogue at the end of the seminar series, where participants looked back on the collective papers, conversations and events and attempted to summarise the agenda that had emerged. The series as a whole set out to explore the social inclusion of children and young people by bringing together not only a range of participants including young people but also an array of differing perspectives of theory, research, policy and practice. Exploring the interaction between participants and perspectives was a crucial part of the conversations. For example, theory informs and inter-relates to research, practice, and policy and the reverse applies in each case. These dialogues have already created networks of contacts across disciplines. The final seminar involved four workshops that enabled participants who were researchers/theorists, practitioners, and/or policy makers to collaboratively develop this written account of their views, conclusions and recommendations.

It was unanimously agreed that our conclusions concerning children and young people’s participation and social inclusion should be shared with others, whether they are engaged in theory, research, practice, or policy making. This paper contains not only proposals for moving forward the
agenda, but an invitation to readers and readers’ own networks to join with us in developing this agenda. Each section should be read in the context of the other articles in this volume.

**Social inclusion, children, young people and theory**

Theory is not something that should be seen as separate from social action around children and young people’s participation. Theory is basically a set of ideas and knowledge, which helps us to explain how things work, why things are as they are and what might happen if we try to do things differently. These ideas can be produced by children and young people themselves, by practitioners and by researchers. Ideas are never finished and complete, nor is there ever a single answer; instead, people are always coming up with new and different ways of thinking about participation.

Theory does a number of things. First of all, it helps our understanding, by making things clearer (for example our understanding of the meaning and purpose of inclusion or participation) but also by unsettling assumptions that are taken for granted as the ‘truth’ (such as those about what children and young people are capable of). Secondly, theory can provide a shared language for understanding. Thirdly, theory can provoke new questions rather than provide completed answers. Without theory there may be either prejudice (that is bias or jumping to conclusions) or particularism (ignoring the bigger picture and the needs of others). However, we should also recognise that theories concerning childhood have often encapsulated the prejudices of the times and places where they have been developed. In order to avoid particularism we suggest that a key principle of childhood studies should be the recognition of the centrality of the lived experience of children and young people.

There is a need for a wide range of theoretical work in relation to children’s participation, but here we have identified two key questions which seem to require urgent attention.

*How do we create the conditions for full participation by children and young people?*

Work in this area involves looking at the power relations between children, young people and adults, as well as the power structures in different settings (for example, home and school). A key question is whether children’s and young people’s participation always means taking power from adults (zero sum) or whether both can be empowered (variable sum). What are the conditions that lead either to mutual empowerment or to redistribution of power?

Theoretical work must also take account of how understandings of diversity and inclusiveness lead to more or less participation. We can learn a lot from other social movements such as those led by women and minority ethnic groups, but it is important also to acknowledge the distinctiveness of age compared with gender and ethnicity in signifying children and young people as a social group. There is a need to study the effects of poverty and lack of material resources on the ability of children and young people to participate effectively.
What is the relationship between age and competency for children and adults?

Work is needed to increase our understanding of the capacities of children and young people and this means questioning assumptions about continuous development (including the assumption that humans simply get better as they get older). It also includes looking at ideas of autonomy, interdependence and invisible capacity, how people judge the competence of children, young people and adults and how levels of support are determined. These are issues on which a number of theorists hold different positions, for example on the usefulness of the distinction between child and adult. Rather than trying to resolve these disputes, we should aim to make them more visible, so we can improve our understanding of the views of other people.

Recommendations

This section has briefly examined the role of theory and illustrated this with outline ideas concerning power, participation, children’s competence and adult-child distinctions. It is recommended that such concepts be explored in the cultural contexts in which they are found and in relation to the attitudes and motives of people who make judgements and decisions about other people. A related question here concerns the degrees of altruism, mutuality and individualism among those acting on behalf of others. More broadly, there is a need for theorising on the conditions that lead to discrimination and for an examination of the relationship between rights and citizenship.

Finally, we would like to stress the importance, in undertaking theoretical work on children and young people’s participation, of asking how, as well as why, things are as they are. For example, where did the children’s rights agenda originate? How did current forms of children and young people’s participation emerge? Whose voices shaped the kinds and levels of participation, and, perhaps more importantly, whose voices have not been heard? These are difficult questions, but ones that we think should be asked in order to increase our understanding of participation.

Social inclusion, children, young people and research

Research is concerned with ‘a systematic way of asking questions’ using ‘methodical processes to add to knowledge, facts and insights.’ (Drew, 1980). In this context, the value of learning from research for children and young people, practitioners, researchers and policy makers has been identified as both motivating this seminar series and the research agenda we have explored together (A. Prout, paper presented at the ESRC Children and Social Inclusion Seminar, University of Edinburgh, 2002).

In particular the guiding principles of a future research agenda require a commitment to:

- A collaborative partnership between children and young people and adults engaged with research, practice and policy.
- Working within an ethical framework.
- A rights based approach to enquiry.
Key issues in research

The main thrust of an agenda for future research is to explore links between social inclusion and participation, asking questions around diversity and difference, while exploring the implications of relationships to the ‘mainstream’, interpreted in social, economic, civil and political terms (Hill and others, this issue). There is a need to review existing research findings, draw effectively on what is known and not involve children and young people unnecessarily in research that duplicates previous studies. Yet, we also recognise that duplication may be appropriate in the case of participatory research projects where children and young people can learn as much from the process as adults do from the research output/data, while offering perspectives on their unique relationship to the topic in their specific location and context.

It is important to value data based on children’s and young people’s own perspectives, while recognising that research on adults’ decisions, actions and relationships with children is also essential. Questions need to be developed collaboratively in order to establish their interconnections. They might include:

- The extent to which ‘adulthood’ represents the norm from which children are usually excluded, or in relation to which children are defined negatively or in an idealised fashion;
- The extent to which children, young people and adults with minority identities are excluded unless they conform to what is seen as the ‘majority’ culture;
- How children and young people define circumstances in which either exclusion or ‘enforced’ inclusion may close off opportunities and freedom.

The principles outlined above require an exploration of research processes with the key stakeholders, to look at how to carry out collaborative research and examine some of the issues around research agendas, time frames and research objectives. The research agenda and process both need to be carried out within an ethical framework. Among other things this framework needs to encompass the basis on which participation of children and young people occurs, a rights based approach to collaborative research practice and accountability and transparency to key stakeholders.

While respecting children’s and young people’s wishes not to divert their time into adult initiated activities, there are numerous areas of limited knowledge and understanding that could be illuminated by collaborative research. The current trend towards interdisciplinary research (for example, among sociologists and geographers) is to be welcomed. The seminar participants were largely positive towards the convergence and blurring of boundaries between the methods and (to some extent) personnel involved in evaluation, consultation and research. It was argued that academics and practitioners in particular should be encouraged to learn and benefit from each other’s skills, techniques and position with regard to children and young people. Within this context, it was also suggested that it is important to include children and young people in determining the topics that research should explore and as active contributors to different stages of research processes.

Recommendations

Four mechanisms are suggested to take forward the research agenda:
• The development of a collaborative research programme on children’s and young people’s social inclusion and participation: through a dialogue between researchers, children, young people, practitioners and policy makers that will establish the key questions, process and framework.
• The development of a network of practitioners and researchers: to identify and recommend guiding principles and an ethical framework for research.
• A continuing dialogue between researchers, children, young people, practitioners and policy makers about the progress of this research, and the impact and effectiveness of research on improving social conditions for children and young people.
• The creation of a forum where this dialogue can take place to promote a framework of accountability with all key stakeholders.

Social inclusion, children, young people and rights: priorities for UK-wide policy making

The policy priorities proposed below are directed at Government within and across the four nations of the UK. There are also evident implications for local government and NGOs. Three issues inform these priorities:

1. The reality of children and young people’s lives in the UK, with shameful levels of poverty, physical violence, imprisonment and treatment of asylum seekers.
2. The lack of status and respect afforded to children and young people.

The policy agenda must incorporate both substantive change, dealt with in this section, and procedural change, considered below under political process. Substantively, a considerable list of legal and policy changes is required. This ranges from the explicit incorporation of the UNCRC into all areas of domestic law, consistently and without qualification, to undertaking a full review of the criminal justice system for children. It must take on the messages from children: for example, consultations and research repeatedly document the barriers to participation caused by lack of accessible and relevant information and young people’s frustration at the lack of safe, affordable and enjoyable leisure and recreation opportunities locally. The list includes attention to groups of children who risk particular marginalisation, such as disabled children, children who are looked after and asylum seeking children. Much more needs to be done to enable children to take an active part in local and national decision making and embed their participation within organisational priorities.

The legal priorities can be divided into two sections: changes that will promote a reduction in injustice and inequality and changes that will promote the decision-making abilities of children and young people.

Recommendations for reducing injustice and inequality

• Ensure children and young people have access to affordable/free play and leisure activities (UNCRC Article 31).
• End child poverty (UNCRC Articles 26, 27; CRC, 2002).
• Undertake a full review of the criminal justice system to ensure compliance with the full provisions of the UNCRC (UNCRC Articles 6, 15, 37, 40; CRC, 2002).
• Ensure children and young people are protected from violence and abuse (UNCRC Articles 19, 34, 35, 39; CRC, 2002).
• Ensure respect and equal access to services for specific groups of excluded children and young people:
  (a) asylum seeking children (UNCRC Article 22; CRC, 2002);
  (b) disabled children and young people (UNCRC Article 23);
  (c) children and young people with mental health difficulties (UNCRC Article 24).

• Ensure quality and choice for children and young people who are looked after (UNCRC Articles 20, 21, 25; CRC, 2002).

**Recommendations for promoting decision making**

• Incorporate the UNCRC and the legal implications of the Concluding Obligations into domestic law (CRC, 2002).
• Enable children and young people to take an active part in local and national (four country and UK) decision making (CRC, 2002).
• Ensure children and young people’s equal access to a high quality education and training and right to participate fully in school and college decision making (Articles 28, 29, 12; CRC, 2002).
• Ensure free and accessible information is available to children and young people.

These changes should not be viewed as threatening to adults. The new democratic processes that will be developed by promoting the above agenda will also have benefits for adults who are excluded from decision-making processes. Indeed, it is important that those developing this agenda learn from the experience of other countries (for example, Children’s Clubs in Nepal, see Rajbhandari and others, 1999) and adopt a holistic approach that does not alienate adults (for example, neighbours, parents and professionals) (Lansdown, 2001).

**Social inclusion, children, young people and the political process**

While such substantive policy and legislative change is essential, it will represent a piecemeal approach unless there are fundamental shifts in the system of policy-making and practice. These include the following requirements:

• Promote and value children and young people as citizens now.
• Embed children and young people’s participation in the identification, design, delivery and evaluation of policy and ensure it is valued, resourced, accessible and celebrated.
• Promote an understanding and practice of participation among politicians and policy makers that is safe, sound, relevant and effective for children and young people.
• Promote the inclusion in policy development of children and young people most often left out, including because of age, disability, race and culture, sexuality, gender and poverty.
Ensure and support a qualified, valued and skilled workforce in order to promote the rights and dignity of children and young people (CO, 2002).

Ensure all policy development includes a strategy for attitudinal change.

Ensure the effective linking of policy, practice and theory/research, with children and young people at the centre.

For this agenda to move beyond the status of fine words, theory, research and policy will have to be relevant to the practical lived experience of adults, children and young people. It is important that we learn from recent attempts to promote inclusion through participatory projects.

**Social inclusion, children, young people and practice: issues in the practice of children and young people’s participation**

It has almost become an article of faith that the participation of children and young people is a ‘good thing’ and has a key role in the process of challenging social exclusion. However, there is considerable confusion, both about what counts as participation, what participation is for, and exactly how participation impacts upon social exclusion. Often this is glossed over by casual statements that allow for the widest possible variations in practice to be described as participative and result in a confused debate littered with ambiguity and misunderstandings. We prefer to develop a more precise definition. We realise that this will not be uncontested, but our intention is to create a more focused debate through which greater clarity might be achieved. The definition and implications are developed in the following points:

- Participation is about ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard. Practice needs to be focused upon creating opportunities for engagement in dialogue between children and young people and decision-makers. For example, as part of the Keeping the Children in Mind project in Liverpool, a group of young carers produced a hard-hitting documentary about the defects in the services they and their families received (Wardale and Troake, 2003).

- Participative practice should be concerned with the lived lives of children and young people. Practice needs to be concerned with issues that young people agree are important to them. This is illustrated by the Diversity and Difference initiative through which disabled children and young people opened up a debate about access difficulties to public buildings in Liverpool (Davis and Hogan, 2004). The issue of relevance is crucial here, because what children and young people bring to the table is their expertise in their own experiences.

- Participation needs to be understood as a means to a political end. As with any other group in society, children and young people will participate in political debate in order to make things better. Participation is part of a process of seeking to take effective action, as when young people created a new music facility in County Durham through the Club Idol project (Cairns, 2003).

- Participative practice needs to be inclusive. The key is to create opportunities for children and young people to participate on their own terms, and not simply to satisfy the expectations of the adult community. The two Liverpool projects mentioned above and the Juve Sieglo XXI project in Granada (Vollmer, 2003) show that, with a little imagination, the participation of young people from different backgrounds with
different skills, can be facilitated. These contrast with more conventional models, which often demand language and organisational skills that effectively exclude many children and young people.

- Participation needs to be transformative. In other words, it needs to challenge the dominant discourse that represents children and young people as lacking the knowledge or competence to be participants in policy debate. For example, the Scottish Bust Card project promoted the argument that the police should be more accountable to children and young people (McCarthy, 2002).

Our argument is that best participative practice needs to address all of these areas, if it is to be part of the process of challenging social exclusion. Practice that creates opportunities for children and young people to participate in debates that they identify as relevant to them, in pursuit of effective action, challenges the dominant view that sees them as incompetent and unable to take part. Developing imaginative processes which include groups who are often excluded challenges traditional political approaches that effectively marginalise whole communities.

**Recommendations**

We recommend that policy-makers, researchers, theorists and those working with children consider carefully the resources of money, time and skills that are crucial to enhancing participation and seek to ensure these are adequately available. The seminar participants were clear that all children and young people should be given a voice, not only a select or accessible few. For participation to be meaningful, it must be considered as something bigger and more holistic than a ‘project’, ‘performance indicator’ or pseudo democratic institution (as has sometimes been the case for school councils, see Alderson, 2000). It has to operate across domains and levels of social life in ways than enable all children and young people to be influential and serve to empower all of the participants.

**Conclusions**

The social inclusion agenda facing children and young people needs to be taken forward by a network comprising young people, practitioners, those involved in theory and research, and policy makers. The seminar series has created the beginnings of such a network, and these articles provide the first steps in sharing this agenda. Participants hope to take the ideas and proposals in this article forward both through a document which explores the inter-relationship between theory, research, policy and practice in more detail, as well as through dissemination events, email and internet networks during 2004 and after.

**References**


**Contributors’ details**

This paper was prepared collectively by participants of the third seminar in the series Challenging ’Social Inclusion’: Perspectives for and from Children and Young People. Four workshop groups contributed to the Agenda, which was drawn together by Rosie Edwards and John Davis. Liam Cairns and Thomas Vollmer edited the Practice Group’s contribution to the Agenda, Bill Badham edited the Policy Group’s contribution, Ginny Morrow and Malcolm Hill edited the Research Group’s contribution and Julie Allan edited the Theory Group’s contribution.

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