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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Aldridge, J. (2017). Introduction to the issue: "promoting children's participation in research, policy and practice". *Social Inclusion*, 5(3), 89-92. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v5i3.1157>

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Editorial

Introduction to the Issue: “Promoting Children’s Participation in Research, Policy and Practice”

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Submitted: 5 September 2017 | Published: 26 September 2017

Abstract

It is more than twenty years since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child gave governments and states an international mandate to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and young people and to promote their participation in decisions that affect their lives. Considerable advances have been made since that time that have, in some but not all instances, seen transformations in the status, roles and responsibilities of children and young people and in the ways in which they are perceived and treated. These advances have included greater inclusion of children’s voices in research, policy and practice underpinned by children’s rights to participation and ‘best interests of the child’ decision-making. Bringing together a unique collection of international articles from authors with considerable expertise in researching and working with children and young people, this thematic issue explores some of the ways in which facilitating constructive dialogues with children and young people, and engaging them more directly in consultation about their lives, has led to genuine improvements in the way they are treated and understood. It also considers some of the barriers that exist to prevent children and young people from full participation in public life, some of which occur as a result of structural or systemic factors, while others are the result of the decisions adults make on their behalf.

Keywords

children; children’s rights; inclusion; participation; participatory research; vulnerability; young people

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Promoting Children’s Participation in Research, Policy and Practice”, edited by Jo Aldridge (Loughborough University, UK).

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1. Introduction

The articles included in this thematic issue describe constructive and innovative methods and strategies (in research, policy and practice) for promoting children and young people’s social and political inclusion and participation in agentic decision-making, many of which are reflected in the principles set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; OHCHR, 1989). Some authors focus specifically on these—see, for example, Sandland’s (2017) examination of the UNCRC and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with respect to the participatory rights of children with disabilities—and on law and policy in national and international contexts. Horgan (2017), for example, considers Ireland’s strategy for consulting with children and

young people and their participation in decision-making, and concludes that different levels of participation are required for different purposes, which points to the need for a more nuanced interpretation of Article 12.

2. Children’s Rights and the UNCRC

Article 12(1) of the UNCRC (OHCHR, 1989) confers a duty on states parties to ensure that where they are capable of forming their own views, children have the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them and that their views ‘will be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child’. Of course, the latter proviso inevitably raises questions about how the age and maturity of children and young people are to be judged and, more importantly, by who and in what con-

text? While acknowledging that there is no universally agreed definition of what constitutes a child or the phase of childhood, and that these are socially (and culturally) constructed concepts, nevertheless, and as a number of authors discuss in the articles included in this thematic issue, children and young people are not always afforded opportunities to decide whether they are either old enough or sufficiently mature to express their views in a range of settings, including in law, in education, in health and social care and so on. While what constitutes a child in different nations or states is often defined formally, in legal terms, and is most often determined by age, other contexts see children taking on paid work, or domestic or caring responsibilities, for example at different (sometimes very young) ages that may be in direct contravention of the law or of adult perceptions about what constitutes ‘appropriate’ childhood responsibility (from a practitioner perspective, Phelps, 2017, explores some of these issues in his consideration of ‘young carers’ contributions to and participation in policy and practice in England and Wales). Some children may choose to do this while others will have no choice and even where and when children are considered ‘old enough’ to decide, they still may never be given opportunities to express their views and opinions.

3. Enhancing Children’s Opportunities to Be Heard

In their analysis of children’s competence and competencies, Le Borgne and Tisdall (2017) argue that these are not intrinsic but ‘situated and relational’ (p. 6) and also often ‘under-recognised’ (p. 7). For many children, this is too often the case. Of course, some children and young people may prefer not to participate or engage at decision-making level even when they are given the choice, but it is critical for all children and young people to be afforded ‘the opportunity to be heard’, as is stated in section 2 of Article 12 of the UNCRC (OHCHR, 1989). As some of the articles in this thematic issue also show, too often domestic policies such as those in public health and in health and social care policy and practice, pay lip service only to children’s voices. In her article on Norwegian child bullying cases with respect to Article 12, Clark (2017) describes this as ‘voice-over’ (p. 15)—where children appear to have a voice but are not actually being heard. This apparent tension in formal responses to children’s participatory rights is reflected in other areas of their lives too; in Birnbaum’s (2017) research, for example, she demonstrates the value of children’s participation in post separation disputes in Canada and how this can have a positive effect on children’s resilience when dealing with parental separation, but also highlights the need to understand further ‘the balancing of potential harm and benefit to children who are invited to speak to professionals about their views and preferences’ (p. 6). Similarly, Banham, Allan, Bergman and Jau’s (2017) examination of child inclusive conferences in Family Courts in Western Australia reveal that Courts need to

balance the benefits to children of being involved more directly and the potential risk to them of participation and that ‘it is not always in the child’s best interest to give their views’ (p. 6). Sundhall (2017) argues that, in Sweden, it is precisely the influence of these kinds of decisions—of what she describes as ‘adulthood norms’ (p. 1)—that limit young people’s involvement in democratic processes, and that ultimately make her question whether it is possible to create dedicated political spaces for children and young people. In Scotland, there is a legal obligation to provide additional support for learning in schools and yet, as Swanson, Hong-Lin and Mouroutsou (2017) show, mathematics education is too often underpinned by ‘social constructions of ability’ that have led to inferior education for some children and limited opportunities for their voices to be heard.

These apparent tensions and contradictions in the ways in which children and young people are perceived and treated in different cultural contexts are reflected to some extent in the tension between the ideal of (universal) children’s rights and what is achievable or achieved in practice (i.e. nationally or domestically). With reference to Article 12(1), while children’s right to participation is fundamental to the international mandate of the UNCRC and its signatories (as long as children are able to express their views and in accordance with their age and level of maturity), part 2 states that children’s opportunities to be heard should be ‘consistent with procedural rules of national law’. In which case, how do children and young people themselves exercise their right to express their views if they have no legal standing or agency in their own country, that is, according to domestic policies and laws? Arguably, this can only be achieved through the actions of both adults and children/young people, that is, by continuing to promote children’s right to participation in decisions that affect their lives, and by states and governments *hearing* their voices and acting according to children’s expressed views and wishes.

The voices and perspectives of children and young people are in evidence throughout many of the articles included in this thematic issue and in a range of different settings. Hoadley, Smith, Wan and Falkov (2017), for example, show clearly how effective the voices of children and young people can be in family based interventions in children’s mental health services in Australia and that despite the challenges and complexities involved, mental health clinicians were better able to engage with children and families when children and young people were given opportunities to express themselves and their needs. Julie Rudner’s (2017) article on the need to better inform and educate planners in working with children and young people also considers education and practice in Australia, drawing on an evaluation of the delivery of a ‘designing children’s environment’ undergraduate course. In their article that explores the ways in which children and young people can contribute to the development of child-friendly resources in justice proceedings, Stalford, Cairns and Marshall (2017) employ

innovative adult-free ‘agenda days’ in order to provide space and opportunities for children and young people to contribute on their own terms.

4. Children and Young People’s Participation in Research

Including and listening to children’s voices in research studies that use different kinds of innovative and ‘child-friendly’ methods can help facilitate and advance children’s participation—on their own terms and in ways that are meaningful to them—as well as encourage researchers to reflect on their own research praxis. This kind of critical reflexivity is the focus of Catherine Wilkinson and Samantha Wilkinson’s (2017) article on representation and responsibility in participatory research (PR) with young people and in which they make a number of recommendations for promoting children and young people’s roles as the co-producers of research. These arguments have been well rehearsed in the field of PR (including in my own research with children and young people—see Aldridge, 2014, 2015) but they are important nevertheless, particularly with respect to advancing both participatory and emancipatory research methods with children and young people. As Davidson (2017) acknowledges in her ethnographic study with young people living on a ‘disadvantaged’ housing estate in the UK, PR has benefited from greater status and theoretical analysis in recent years. Her own reflections on the ways in which the participants in her study, ‘simultaneously embraced, contested, subverted and refused’ (p. 1) strategies of enablement, are both insightful and illuminating, as well as demonstrate the value of a critical and reflexive PR approach.

Input from children and young people in these kinds of studies is vital in advancing PR and in emancipatory research approaches that see them take on the roles of researchers in their own right. But not all children and young people may be able to or even want to participate in research at this level—ascertaining their views and wishes is vital in any research involving children, including in PR. As Ergler (2017) demonstrates in her examination of children’s roles as co-researchers in New Zealand, these roles are often idealized and overlook the ‘messy realities’ of becoming and being a child researcher (p. 1). Furthermore, what do the relationships between participants-as-researchers and academic researchers look like? And how transformative can these roles and relationships be for children and young people? These, and other critical, reflexive questions are asked by Maclure (2017) in his examination of youth participation projects in Senegal.

Children’s contributions to research in projects such as these, including the roles and responsibilities they take on as co-researchers and the challenges therein, need to be incorporated in models of PR that can help both advance young people’s status (as researchers, as contributors in their own right, if that is what they want

and the PR field. Currently, it is too often the case that researchers who lay claim to methodological approaches that purport to advance children and young people’s participation, fail to explicate the nature, extent and limitations of their PR approach. In the main this is due to a lack of reference to tried and tested models of participation, and yet a number of these are available to researchers (see, for example, Aldridge, 2015; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Hart, 2008).

One of the challenges of working with children and young people in research (as well as in policy and practice), including in PR studies that are intended to enhance their inclusion and more *active* participation, is the need to reconcile children’s participatory rights with their ‘vulnerable’ status. All children and young people under the age of 18 are defined or categorized as ‘vulnerable’ in research governance and ethics protocols, and researchers (and policy makers and practitioners too) must, all the time, work within these frameworks in order to safeguard and protect children from the potential risks involved in taking part. This is always going to be a challenge and it is one that is reflected in the discussions in many of the articles included in this thematic issue. Despite this challenge, it is critical that children and young people continue to be included in research—and in policy, practice and decision-making—about their lives and in ways that address and meet their expressed wishes and needs and that also respect and enhance their right to participation.

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