

# Chapter 4 Activities

## Activities

The following activities are designed to help reflect back on some of the key concerns over the chapter as a whole.

### Chapter activity 1

One of the individuals who worked within one of the service areas examined by the children and young people involved in 'Ask Us!' summarized the benefits from his perspective, particularly the importance of the following:

- Sustained contact
- Build up of trust and recognition
- Recognition of mutual benefit
- Time to move from general issues to specific actions and plans
- Being allowed the freedom to access the work
- Don't be afraid of the message back
- Continue the dialogue; be clear about what can and can't be done and what we can do together
- Implement the changes and let people know what you have done.

(Badham, 2004, 16)

Reflect on the relevance of this worker's perspective to the examples discussed in this chapter.

### Chapter activity 2

Dalrymple's review of advocacy services draws on research into young people's experience of the provision. A number of the findings were positive, speaking of how with an advocate 'you're treated like an adult' and shifting from a position in case reviews where 'not having an advocate in the review I didn't get in what I wanted to say. It gives you confidence' (Dalrymple, 2005, 7). Others, however, saw the process of being supported to have their voices heard in a different way:

Personally I don't feel I can influence things. Even now everyone has closed ranks. But at the last meeting having an advocate in the room meant I felt I could (influence things) and I wasn't taking the whole lot on my own.

(Dalrymple, 2005, 8)

I wouldn't say its useful 'cos it ain't – it makes it uncomfortable for kids 'cos staff want to know what's going on. They're all sweetie sweet for when Inspectors or the psychiatrist comes to the house but then they change.

(Dalrymple, 2005, 9)

Each of these examples, in part, shows how adult attitudes can sabotage attempts to enable children and young people to have their say. Consider any of the research examples in this chapter and

- (a) reflect on how adult attitudes might sabotage the work to enable children's voices to be represented,
- (b) review what processes could help reduce or stop this occurring,
- (c) in the light of your reflections and review, examine the importance of the points made by the National Youth Agency in their guidance on 'Avoiding the traps' regarding children's rights, voice and participation:
  - involve children and young people in the earliest stages of planning;
  - start slowly, proceed carefully and draw on pilot projects;

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- take time and ensure there are the relevant resources;
- recognize and enable the wider changes in attitudes, behaviour and power required;  
and
- provide consistent support and staff development for steady progress to spread.

(The National Youth Agency, 2005)

# Chapter 4 Example of research

## Example of research: school and voice

Kilkelly et al.'s (2005) research with children revealed that having a say in decisions made about them was the most important rights issue identified by them. Nearly a substantial amount of the children's comments related to school (90%), and many of these concerned not having a voice in decisions within school life. Typical comments included the following:

Sometimes school can get on my nerves cause I don't think children get enough respect from teachers and caretakers and I think some children are scarred [sic] about speaking their mind in case they get shouted at.

(Girl, aged 11 years; Kilkelly et al., 2005, 186).

The following presents some of the conclusions from the research with illustrative quotations:

Research conclusion	Sample of children's comment from research
Pupils acknowledged power and status were problematic in having their views acknowledged	'Pupils don't really have a say in school. Teacher's opinions always come first' (Girl, aged 14; Kilkelly et al., 2005,186).
Children's views were not listened to	'Some teachers get on to you without listening to what you are saying' (Young person in focus group; Kilkelly et al., 2005, 181)
Participation was often perceived as tokenistic with a gap between views expressed and any action or feedback	'As soon as you got in it was just like you got handed the minutes from the last meeting and you had to talk about this and this and it was mainly about the canteen and stuff and you didn't really get the opportunity to bring anything up' (Kilkelly et al., 2005, 187)

## Reflections on the research

### Activity

The research's findings, on a small scale, reflect the much larger-scale recent criticisms made by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding the UK government's relationship to rights and children's participation. In its reports the Committee has criticized the United Kingdom for issues relating to its lack of compliance to the Convention. The following areas related to the gap between rhetoric and actual practice in terms of voice and decision making in education and parallel the quotes from the children in Kilkelly et al.'s (2002, 5) research findings:

The committee commented on:

- a. the failure to solicit school children's views in relation to issues such as sex education and school exclusions.

(2002, 3)

a. the lack of action 'in education, school children are not systematically consulted in matters that affect them'.

(2002, 7)

a. the government's need to 'take further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor systematic, meaningful and effective participation of all groups of children in society, including in school, for example, through school councils'.

(2002, 7)

Reflect on your perceptions of the relationship between Kilkelly's research and the areas noted in a, b and c.

## Example of research: child's voice and age

Flewitt (2005) looked at how 3-year-old children use a range of 'voices' during their first year in pre-school. The study worked with the children at playgroup and at their homes. The research identified the following:

- The children make sense of their world through means other than speech.
- They express themselves 'multimodally' through combinations of talk, body language, facial expression and gaze.

The conclusion was that there were distinct patterns and that children used different communicative strategies. These related to the dynamics of the institutional and immediate contexts in which they were situated.

The findings implied that the current focus on talking in early years provision may be detracting from children's capability to communicate and be involved in their world, as it does not reflect the diversity of the ways children make and express meaning.

Within this research the idea of the child's voice relates to representation in that it argues that the children in the study, due to their age, are representing themselves not through verbal speech but through other means. Hence, the adult conception of how an individual represents him or herself and his or her wishes, needs or wants, are challenged by the child's broader and different ways of communicating. In addition this approach starts from a view that looks for capability and as much involvement as possible, rather than looking at deficits in verbal communication and comprehension.

Hence the impact of children's voice is reduced until adults alter their way of approaching 'valid' communication and look to maximize a child's involvement. From this, it follows that these children can have more impact on what happens to them by the difference of their voices being acknowledged.

This challenges the power relations of communication and opinion where adults deem small children to have no capacity or capability. Traditional adult views of how old a child can be before they are seen to have *any* capacity to judge or communicate their judgements are shown to be based on questionable preconceptions about age and voice. The research shows that looking at child-based ways of encountering communication can allow these aspects of a child's voice to be seen and acted upon differently. This research asks at what age should children have a right to be heard? In addition, it challenges ideas that there can be a notion that a child 'comes of age' at a certain point, or to be deemed 'capable' of being heard, and advocates the position that there are differing degrees of being heard and different kinds of competency.

## Reflections on the research

### Activity 1

This research originates in ideas that value engaging with children in ways that are rooted in children's capacities to communicate and to be involved rather than adult ideas about what is valued. How do you see the following in relation to the research contained in this box?

- The worth of children's voices,
- The ways that social exclusion silences children,
- The dominance of adult orientated ways of communicating and decision making.

### Activity 2

Franklin and Sloper have discussed the UNCRC's Articles 12 and 13, rights and worth in the following way:

While it is arguable that Article 12 is limited by reference to particular attributes of the child, namely their capacity, age and maturity, Article 13 grants children the right to express, seek

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and receive information in any medium they wish. This emphasis on provision of appropriate means of communication is of particular significance to younger children and disabled children, especially those with communication related impairments.

(2005, 21)

The following is a quote from the UK's Department of Health statement regarding this issue, that, for example, a child who is learning disabled should not be assumed to lack competence: 'many children will be competent if information is presented in an appropriate way and they are supported through the decision-making process' (Department of Health, 2001, 4).

They draw these together to conclude that

Parents and health practitioners have a clear duty under Article 12 to ensure that the child has been given both the time and information they need to be helped to make an informed choice.

(2005, 21)

How do you see Franklin and Sloper's points concerning children with disabilities in relation to the conclusions of the research contained in this box?

## Example of research: 'Ask Us!'

'Ask Us!' involved work in several different sites in the United Kingdom. The project involves disabled children and young people, led by The Children's Society with joint funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It developed from the UK's Department of Health's National Disability Reference Group for a programme called 'Quality Protects'. Its objectives include improved involvement and services for disabled young people and their families (Badham, 2004). Some of the key aspects of the work are described as

- being centred on active involvement and consultation with disabled children and young people and
- including children with a wide range of abilities and disabilities including some with severe and multiple impairments. Some, for example, were described as not using 'speech or sign language; they express their wishes and feelings in other ways.'

The project examined the ways in which multimedia methods could be used to make the consultation more inclusive. Hence children and young people were supported in choosing their own means of communication. The consultation happened over three months in order to allow time adequate to explore and develop the variety of communication processes used, and to enable relationships to develop. Children and young people identified five basic questions:

- What do you enjoy?
- What do you want more of?
- What are your experiences of consultation?
- What are your experiences of participation and of services?
- What do you understand by inclusion?

An example of the use of multimedia to establish and communicate concerns involved the use of images, such as graphics and cartoons to express issues; video; and songs devised by the children and young people and distributed on CD ROMS on areas looking at exclusion in play, education and leisure, for example. Badham notes that the work was rooted in ideas expressed at the beginning of the of the CDROMS made to record and communicate the work:

with disabled young people declaring that participation is manipulative if it does not lead to improved services. 'Know Your Rights!' calls out one young man (Ask Us! 2003). They go on to show the practical changes needed to fulfil their rights.

(Badham, 2004, 148)

The project involved ascertaining the practical impact of the research into what the children and young people wanted changed, and the impact of the initiative on those involved and the people and organizations involved. The conclusions from the young people included the following:

- Changes in adult attitudes that enabled them to see young people as active agents and as capable experts in their own lives;
- Reframing the consultation processes of organizations to include appropriate engagement of young people, using methods that recognized the different capabilities of the young people and that had adequate resourcing to permit the methods to be used, adequate time to conduct the research at a pace appropriate for the young people and disseminating the findings in ways that were accessible to the young people;
- New training to enable new methods to be developed and used;
- Change in priorities that focused on the involvement and ideas of the young people.

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A summary described issues emerging as including:

Some disabled children relied on communication aids and/or people who know how they communicate. But these aids and people were not always available in all parts of their life (e.g. leisure time as well as at school) or when they moved or left school. Young people felt this denied them their right to speak.

([www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/741.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/741.asp))

Specific projects looked at particular issues that concerned local children and young people. The following is a summary of some of the work in Solihull:

St. Christopher's Solihull: three young people led their own research on the usefulness of helplines in local authority complaints leaflets. They got some training on basic research methods, and led the research at all stages. In the same project, four disabled children and five of their non-disabled friends did an access audit on eight local parks over one weekend. They called it "Can we go to the park, mom?" and used videos, digital cameras and pictures to record the results. The audit highlighted the inequalities experienced by disabled children in accessing everyday opportunities and local facilities.

([www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/741.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/741.asp))

In analysing the effectiveness of this work the following factors were identified:

- It is important to give each project resources to use flexibly and creatively.
- Young people were often involved in all stages of the consultation.
- Giving appropriate tools and support to all children, including those who were labelled as having 'severe or profound disabilities' and 'challenging behaviour'.
- Using the multimedia approach enabled the children and young people to communicate their views to a wider number of people, nationally and in the areas they live.

Young disabled people who were paid as researchers described feeling valued and responsible; they enjoyed the work and felt they benefited from meeting other disabled people and hearing their stories.

([www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/741.asp](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialcare/741.asp))

## Reflections on the research

### Activity 1

How do you see each of the following in relation to the research contained in this box?

- The worth of children's voices,
- The ways that social exclusion silences children,
- The dominance of adult-orientated ways of communicating and decision making.

### Activity 2

In reviewing this research Badham has concluded:

This is a long way from participation as empty consultation rhetoric. Participation becomes the means of achieving change on issues raised by young people, with adults joining in rather than taking over, and Government implementing specific changes as a result, through improved play resources locally and, through national policy development, promoting accessible play provision across the country.

(Badham, 2004, 150)

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Review this description of research by Badham and consider the relationship between his comments and the work of 'Ask Us!', particularly concerning the following:

- Participation and change,
- Adults joining in rather than taking over,
- Local and national change.

## Example of research: consultation with young children

MacNaughton, Smith and Lawrence (2003) initiated a consultation exercise with young children from birth to eight years. They used an action-learning model to assist 23 early childhood staff to consult children about their experiences of their education and care services.

This drew on a combination of methods designed to enable a child to work with the language or process the child wanted to and could express themselves through. These included pictures, photographs as well as words. Most children were in the age group of 3 to 5 years, with 8 of the 173 children aged less than 2 years.

The researchers worked with key questions:

- What do children think they need for their well being?
- What do children wish for and value in their lives?

The children's views covered three arenas of their life: their experiences of family and home, of education and of care. In relation to their family and home, for example, the children's priority was to have a safe and caring family with whom to spend time, and most children felt safe with key people in their families. Many children also wanted a home in which members of the family have time together and time apart. The findings included the following:

- Girl – 'I feel special when I'm with my family';
- Boy – 'I feel safe when I live in a house so the rain and thunder don't get you';
- Girl – 'My family is special because they are always there for me';
- Girl – 'Home is a place where I can be myself'.
- Girl – 'I'm happy in this picture at the lucky, lucky preschool because it's not noisy there. There aren't too many kids. The teachers sit down and talk to you all the time. They let you decide what to do all the time. They don't tell you what to do'.

The authors argue that this kind of approach reinforces the growing body of research evidence that young children

- are quite capable of expressing their views on things that affect them and that they value;
- enjoy the opportunity to do so;
- can be worked with in ways that encourage and assist them to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to become active citizens who can participate actively in public decision-making.

(2003, 465)

They conclude that honouring children's rights to express themselves and their lives creates more effective policy; it results in a more inclusive community and moves towards healthy democracy. However, they note issues concerning power and voice are both crucial to engage with and form a key challenge to young children's voices being heard and empowered (2003, 466).

Research in Norway with slightly older children offers insight from children and young people on what they thought was effective within school systems on their views being engaged with through the schools council system.

The qualitative interviews revealed that staff-pupil relationships were considered by the children to be crucial to the success of participation. The pupils cited a number of examples of good groundwork by teachers:

- At lower secondary schools the pupils' council had a greater say; the teacher who assisted them was very good. She listened to what we had to say and took the matter up with the school board. We exerted a lot of influence compared with pupils at upper secondary school.

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At lower secondary school the teacher left the classroom for maybe half an hour, so we could discuss in class any problems we had concerning the teacher, or with anything else. It wasn't always easy to talk about these things with the teacher present.

(Sandbaek and Hafdis Einarsson, 2008, 24)

## Reflections on the research

### Activity 1

Summarize the key points about important issues regarding children's voices being engaged with from the UK research with young people and the research with the Norwegian pupils.

### Activity 2

How do you see the quotation from the UK Research, 'honouring children's rights to express themselves and their lives create more effective policy' (2007, 466), in relation to the points made by the Norwegian pupils?

# Chapter 4 Key points

## Key points: voice and participation rights

- Representation – creating processes and spaces that allow children to represent themselves, or to have their position represented without adult bias;
- Impact – the idea of that a child's voice -their opinions, choices or ideas – should have an impact by being engaged with, responded to and acted on;
- Judgment – to view children as capable of judgement and encouraging processes that inform children, give them information and support them to make judgements about issues that affect them;
- Validity – the idea that a child's voice has validity and meaning, that their perceptions are as valid as, or, in certain contexts, more valid than, adults' opinions and ideas.

## Key points: consultation, participation and impact

### Approaches and methods

One theme concerns the search for approaches and methods that can be used by adults and children to communicate in ways that enable children to participate effectively. An example of this might be how to enable children to be given information and how to empower them in understanding information and responding to it, communicating their ideas and thoughts. This is an example of a rethinking of children's participation informed by a rights agenda.

### Acting on them

Another theme focuses upon whether children's ideas, suggestions and decisions are actually acted on or allowed to have any impact or whether adults and adult organizations pay lip service to the idea of participation, while only acting on the children's input that fits what adults wanted to hear or what they wanted to do. An example of this might be a school that asks for children's views in a school council, but then is either highly selective about what children are asked about, or ignores their input when it contrasts with what adults want to do. This can be seen as an illustration of challenging the response to the idea of children's rights that creates a 'rights veneer', rather than a full engagement that acts and responds to children's rights to provision or participation.

### Challenge/impact

The third area tends to challenge the idea of involvement and participation in relation to the dominance of adult-created structures and ways of operating. This challenge argues that children's points of view and position in society offers a radical challenge to adult approaches: proposing that children should be at the heart of setting up and devising all child services. This approach argues that setting up a new school, for example, should involve children from the very outset in the devising of the building, employing staff and setting up the school's structures. This can be seen as an illustration of rethinking how adults and children work together: a rights-informed way of relating to children and their spaces.