

A scaffold for participation in agency work

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The following summary of a literature review on children and young people's participation in the welfare sector was written in response to a need to understand this concept within the context of human services work in New South Wales. This need became apparent through work being done at UnitingCare Burnside around children and young people's participation. Examination of the literature on participation revealed an increase in discussion around the issues. While this has included exploration of definitions, history, practice, models and factors enhancing effective participative practice, there has been a dearth of writing linking these. The literature review attempted to provide a scaffold that could be used to support agency workers as they attempt to build meaningful, effective, strong and reciprocal partnerships with children and young people. This concise summary of the literature review has sought to highlight the major supports found to provide a scaffold for participative agency practice with children and young people.

A copy of the complete literature review is available from:

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MEANINGS AND PARAMETERS

In the same way that safe scaffolding requires a strong base, useful social welfare practice requires a sure and stable foundation. A clear definition provides an excellent place from which to develop ideas and practice systems.

Throughout the literature reviewed, participation has been defined both as a general concept and as specific to children and young people. Some writers argue that notions underpinning children and young people's participation can be generalised (Henderson 2000), while others argue that it is important to consider the specific context in which participation takes place (Healy 1998; Mason & Urquhart 2001).

Participation has been linked to disciplines such as community development and social planning (Hart 1992; Henderson 2000; Kjørholt 2002), and social movements such as the women's movement and rights movements (Hart 1992; Healy 1998). Definitions have also come from the children's rights sector (Hart 1992; Long 1999, Henderson 2000), discussion on children and young people as consumers (O'Brien 1997), the child protection sector (Healy 1998), and researchers (Henderson 2000; Mason & Urquhart 2001). Furthermore, definitions have come from children and young people directly (Henderson 2000), although little attention has been paid to these on most occasions (Cashmore & O'Brien 2001).

Where some have defined children and young people's participation as a process (Hart 1992; Crowley 1996; Healy & Walsh 1997; O'Brien 1997; Long 1999), others have linked participation to 'having a voice' or 'a say' in matters related to their lives (Hart 1992). It has also been described in terms of adults learning about and respecting children and young people by listening to them (Long 1999; Roberts 2000) and by being involved with them (Henderson 2000). Still others have argued that participation is about children and young people being involved, in a meaningful way, in decision-making on matters affecting their lives (O'Brien 1997; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001).

It seems clear that, even before a scaffold for participation can begin, there are difficulties. The reviewed literature reveals that there is no clear definition. Agencies must be aware of what they mean by participation before they can even begin to build partnerships with children and young people.

HISTORICAL MOVEMENTS IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

Just like the need for horizontal and vertical beams (struts and plates) in scaffolding, so too is a historical context necessary for social welfare practice. Four movements in history have been significant to the development of children and young people's participation in the welfare sector.

DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

Foundational to developmental theories, and highly applicable to children and young people, is the idea that greater value is attributed to individuals as they move along the developmental lifespan towards the 'pinnacle' of adulthood (Butler & Williamson 1996). Childhood is viewed as a state of unfinished development and children and young people are seen as incomplete adults, merely on a path to adulthood (Hill 1997; Mason & Steadman 1997; Mason 1999). This framework implies that children and young people are not valuable in their own right and in effect have not reached a social status where they deserve a voice, or deserve to participate in decision-making about their lives.

THE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The rights movement has been very influential on the current state of children and young people's participation. It arose towards the end of the nineteenth century when children and young people were increasingly recognised as requiring protection. After an extended period of community pressure by adults, children's rights and welfare became legal and political considerations, and state policies began to change, albeit extremely slowly (Sidoti 2000).

Since the advent of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC), there has been growing support for children and young people's rights, including their right to be heard, to participate in, and to influence society (Hart 1992; Head 1998; CREATE Foundation 2000; Kjørholt 2002). Rights arising out of UNCROC include the rights to actively participate in community life, to be central players in decisions about their own welfare, to express their opinions freely, and to be listened to and taken seriously (Hart 1992; Rayner 1992; Taylor & Henaghan 1997; Head 1998; Newell & Robinson 2000; Sidoti 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001; Mason & Urquhart 2001; Nicholson 2001; Robinson 2001).

Broadly, there are two strands coming out of this movement. One is usually adult-directed and works towards changing legislation to improve conditions for children and young people. This has manifested in legislative changes that seek and value children and young people's participation and decision-making in relation to child protection matters (Rayner 1992; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001; Mason & Urquhart 2001). The child-directed strand of the rights movement, like other civil rights movements throughout

history, advocates for the elimination of oppression and exploitation experienced by minority groups around the world, in this instance children and young people (Mason & Urquhart 2001). Unlike other civil rights movements, this one is controlled and directed by children and young people.

THE CONSUMER MOVEMENT

The consumer movement has also contributed to changing the manner in which children and young people are viewed and treated, albeit not to the same extent as the other movements mentioned (Corsaro 1997; O'Brien 1997; Mason & Urquhart 2001). For example, early literature on participation in out-of-home care adopted consumer and market notions (O'Brien 1997), arguing that since children and young people are recipients of services, it would be respectful, logical and beneficial to engage them when evaluating and reforming those services.

THE 'NEW' SOCIOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

An emerging branch of sociology, known as the 'new' sociology of childhood, or 'new' childhood studies, has been very influential in recent debates. This movement challenges 'commonsense' views and dominant theoretical perspectives about childhood that are taken to be truth, arguing that these are social constructs (Ochiltree & Edgar 1981; Corsaro 1997; Mason & Steadman 1997; Taylor & Henaghan 1997; Long 1999; Kjørholt 2002). It aims to expose what is considered to be mistaken and offensive conceptualisations of childhood, children and young people (Oakley 1994; Corsaro 1997; Long 1999; Kjørholt 2002). The underlying assumption is that children and young people are actively creating their childhoods and contributing to a 'shifting' within all of social life (Corsaro 1997; Mason & Steadman 1997; O'Kane 2000). This perspective claims to take the views of children and young people seriously, consciously pushing to engage children and young people as competent participants (Hill 1997; Taylor & Henaghan 1997; Long 1999; O'Kane 2000; Kjørholt 2002).

The literature examined suggests that the ways in which children and young people were regarded during various eras in pre-modern times are similar to ways in which they have been viewed throughout most of the modern era. It appears that children and young people have been consistently ignored, conceptualised as passive and weak, blamed for all manner of social problems, and marginalised (Ochiltree & Edgar 1981; Head 1998). It also appears that although some moves to develop participative practice have been visible within the last 10-15 years, it would be misleading to imply that a genuine movement to engage children and young people, and to take their views seriously, is any older than 3-5 years. The overall consensus of the literature analysed is that there is still much to be achieved in terms of participation.

DEVELOPMENTS IN PARTICIPATION

Examination of any developments in practice is required, much like scaffolding braces, in order to strengthen the framework.

WHAT CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SAY ABOUT DEVELOPMENTS IN PARTICIPATION

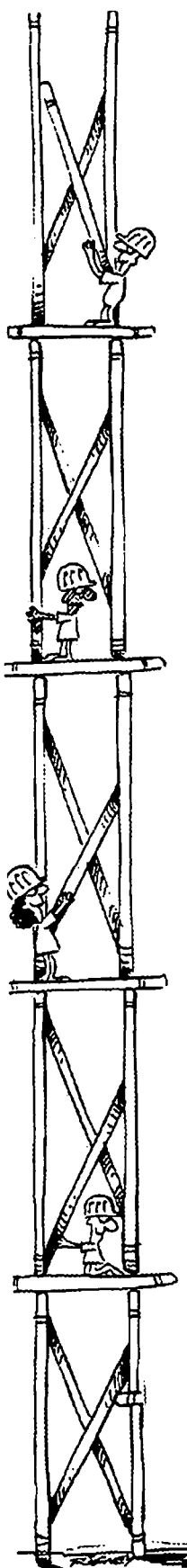
Literature outlining the views of children and young people on participation in an 'unadulterated' way is small in comparison to the volume of literature on adult perspectives of children and young people's views. Despite differences of opinion, the overall feeling is that children and young people want to be allowed to participate and want their opinions to be valued and respected, implying that this is largely not the case presently (Spall, Testro & Matchett 1998; CREATE Foundation 2000; Community Services Commission [CSC] 2000; Bunce 2002). In the literature reviewed, it is also noted that children and young people's feelings range from cynicism and lack of faith in the process and adult concern for their opinion, to appreciation of the process and adult efforts to listen and to try to take them seriously (CREATE Foundation 2000; CSC 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001; Bunce 2002; Roxon 2002).

WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS ABOUT DEVELOPMENTS IN PARTICIPATION

There is a range of opinions in the literature on the degree to which participative environments are developing. A substantial selection of the literature reviewed indicates that efforts to engage Australian children and young people are increasing, as is recognition of their rights (Nyland 1999; Singleton 2000). Unfortunately there is also much evidence to suggest that children and young people's participation is 'often exploitative or frivolous' (Hart 1992: 4), and that effective participation is constrained by structural issues (Taylor & Henaghan 1997). The six significant themes which have emerged within the literature reviewed are outlined below.

1. General changes in the actions and opinions of adults

Examination of the reviewed literature shows that although there have been some changes in adult conceptions of children and young people, generally there is still a negative, controlling and paternalistic view taken of them (Rayner 1991; Moore 2000; Mason & Urquhart 2001).



Cartoon courtesy of Scott Rigney

2. Developments in hearing, listening to and acting on the voices of children and young people

There is an indication in the literature selection of an increase in recent times in the emergence of children and young people's opinions being sought on issues in the social welfare context. Despite this, the bulk of the literature sourced agrees that children and young people are still generally devoid of genuine opportunities to be engaged in meaningful participation.

3. Performance of the NSW Government

Although the NSW Government has undertaken various programs and initiatives to increase the level of engagement with children and young people, the overall consensus is that they have not done particularly well across the board or in a way that children and young people consider to be genuine.

Throughout the 1990s a number of significant research reports were completed in NSW. For example, the NSW Child Protection Council commissioned the 'Having a Say' report (Spall, Testro & Matchett 1998), Cashmore & Paxman (1996) completed the 'Wards leaving care: A longitudinal study' project, and the Community Services Commission (2000) completed the 'Voices of Children and Young People in Foster Care' report.

In addition, a number of agencies were established in NSW to monitor the situation of children and young people, and to advocate on their behalf. This has included the Commission for Children and Young People, a Youth Liaison Officer position at the NSW Ombudsman's Office, and the Office of the Children's Guardian.

In relation specifically to young people, the NSW Government policy, 'Focus on Young People', includes principles of participation, and contains statements to guide practice so as to make sure that participation occurs (NSW Cabinet Office 2002).

4. Legislative reform

Some writers commenting on legislation note that although moves have been made to engage children and young people, and to recognise their right to participate in decision-making in matters regarding themselves, there is still a long way to go (Rayner 1992; Taylor & Henaghan 1997; Nyland 1999; CREATE Foundation 2000; Nicholson 2002). Some argue that an underlying factor constraining participation is the ongoing

refusal by adults, most prominently within the Federal government and judicial system, to take children's rights seriously (Rayner 1991; Taylor & Henaghan 1997; Long 1999; Mason 1999; Nicholson 2002).

Changes to improve participation have occurred in the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 (NSW) (NSW Government 1998), the Family Law Reform Act 1995 (Cwlth) (Commonwealth of Australia 1995), as well as the Commission for Children and Young Persons Act 1998 (NSW) (NSW Government 1998), and the Young Offenders Act 1997 (NSW) (NSW Government 1997). The Children and Young People (Care and Protection) Act 1998 outlines a number of points to guide how practitioners can make sure that participation occurs, although these are not enforceable at law. This legislation has been a positive step towards providing genuine opportunities for children and young people to participate. Unfortunately any intent to increase participation inherent in this Act is hamstrung by the ongoing failure of the NSW Government to complete proclamation and appropriately fund social welfare programs whereby children and young people can participate in effective and meaningful ways.

- **Progression in research**

There is a great deal of social research that engages children and young people as well as a growing body of research exploring issues associated with the inclusion of children and young people in research in ethical and viable ways. A common message coming out of writings from a research perspective is the argument that adults continue to control the research agenda, processes and ways in which the outcomes of the research are expressed (Hill 1997; Roberts 2000; Mason & Urquhart 2001).

5. Changes in welfare practice, particularly child protection and out-of-home care

Most of the literature sourced on the participation of children and young people in the welfare sector refers to decision-making in relation to out-of-home care matters, and some to child protection. The argument generally follows that although there are claims that participation is a principal factor, it is not actually performed well. It is argued that children and young people, through no fault of their own, are usually either excluded from the decision making process or do not understand it (Butler & Williamson 1996; Healy & Walsh 1997; Mason & Steadman 1997; O'Brien 1997; CREATE Foundation 2000; CSC 2000; Newell & Robinson 2000; Wilkinson 2000; Mason & Urquhart 2001).

Although there has been much improvement in the extent to which children and young people are able and encouraged to participate in various ways throughout society, there is still much to be done. Generally it is felt that changes in systems, structures and cultures have to precede changes in practice.

This is indeed a huge task but there is good evidence to indicate that it is possible and that, indeed, it is happening.

MODELS OF PARTICIPATION

Models of practice, like good scaffolding design, are important. It is also crucial to use a model that suits the situation. The five models of participation described in the literature review were chosen because they have been specifically designed for use with children and young people. Another factor considered in choosing them was the extent to which they vary from each other.

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THE LADDER OF PARTICIPATION

Roger Hart (1992) has designed what has become possibly the most influential model of children and young people's participation (John 1996; Singleton 2000; Mason & Urquhart 2001; Shier 2001). Adapted from Arnstein's social planning participation model (Healy 1998), Hart designed a ladder, the rungs of which represent the degree of power throughout the participation process. There are eight rungs, each step 'up' representing a 'step up' in power for the child or young person. At the least powerful position, children and young people are being 'manipulated' whereas at their most powerful position, the eighth rung, they are assisted by adults as they bring their own ideas and projects to life (Hart 1992).

THE BRIDGE OF PARTICIPATION

Mary John (1996) claims that her 'bridge building' model is more dynamic than Hart's model. Criticising the focus that Hart places on power, she argues that the hierarchical representation is actually disempowering for children and young people because the power comes from adults and is given to children and young people. Her view is that the political 'world' of children and young people is separated from the adult political world by a seemingly impassable, politically oppressive and disempowering 'chasm'. By actively engaging to bridge the chasm, children and young people take up their true place with adults as full citizens in

the democracy, a position from which John argues they are currently excluded.

Based on Steve Biko's work in relation to the African-American rights movement, the pillars that assist in bridging the chasm focus on the participants' responsibility and unity as well as their involvement in the creation of a people's movement. There are individual and collaborative activities between children, young people and adults that are part of the process of participation for those involved in the struggle as they actively build the bridge and span the chasm. These activities are based on the work of Penny Townsend (cited in John 1996: 18), and are the 'ropes' spanning the 'chasm'. They can be:

- peer pressure activities – which arise when some peer-aged children and young people put pressure on other members of the group, expecting that internal group politics determine activity;
- peer education activities – which result when more knowledgeable peers teach other group members. In this instance peer pressure is not a factor and adults have designed the focus and material;
- peer-led activities – which arise out of situations when children and young people in the group have concerns and ideas they tell other group members about. Assistance for resourcing, skills and training is sought from adults so that the activities can be carried out. It is claimed that in these instances children and young people guide and focus the activities, other group members and the adults' responses and thinking.

Despite differences of opinion, the overall feeling is that children and young people want to be allowed to participate and want their opinions to be valued and respected, implying that this is largely not the case presently.

THE PARTICIPATION ORB WEB

Corsaro (1997) has created a model for children and young people's participation that is described as being constructed in much the same way as an Orb spider builds a web. The child or young person is like the spider, constructing their life around threads that extend outwards from the centre. These represent elements and institutions within social and cultural life. The profile of each individual's life 'web' will depend on the size, number, shape and stability of the cultures, institutions and other elements that make up the scaffolding. There are four peer cultures through which

people pass, that is, preschool, pre-adolescent, adolescent and adult. These are not stages, as they cannot be left behind once they have been passed through. Rather they are embedded in the individual's life and remain an integral part of it.

Corsaro's (1997) model is based on the notion of interpretive reproduction. According to this concept, developing membership in social and cultural life is multi-dimensional rather than linear. This means that the child or young person coexists with other children, young people and adults, interpreting the interactions as they create their own individual and peer culture. Furthermore, the participant relies on these others because they, and the institutions of which they are members, form part of the scaffolding around which the participant is constructing their life web. The weaving of the web (that is, culture) is a dynamic and collective activity. The person must interact with these in order to keep building their web. One of the most important elements of this concept is that children and young people are interdependent members of the 'adult' world, along with every individual across the lifespan, and they are already participating in the design and construction of this world. Additionally, because of the elaborateness of the social web, the social and individual web of those they are interacting with affects the children, young people and adults involved.

A MODEL OF PARTICIPATION SPECIFICALLY FOR CHILD PROTECTION

Butler & Williamson (1996) argue that child protection workers do not typically seek input from the children and young people they are working with. They have outlined a model showing various stages of participation in relation to power which indicates varying degrees of autonomy experienced by those involved throughout the process relative to the amount of power they hold over the situation. The point at which children/young people and adults work together at an equal power status is the point of collaboration and partnership. An interesting aspect of this model is that the adult always has some level of power over the situation, even when it is less than that of children/young people.

A COLLABORATIVE MODEL OF PARTICIPATION

Mason and Urquhart (2001) have developed the 'Collaborative' model for children and young people's participation in research. One significant factor is power. Fundamental to this model is recognition of children and young people's rights as competent participants in social life. Unlike traditional models, competence is measured against life experience rather than age.

The challenge for adherents of the Collaborative model is for children, young people and adults to work together to balance the issues and roles. This involves reflection on, and challenge to, notions such as power, competence, rights and traditional ways of working with children and young people.

Another important factor of this model is that the fulcrum of the participation 'see-saw', that is, the conditions and other features that the interaction relies on, is not fixed. Rather it is to be moved in the direction of either the adults or children/young people participating, as deemed necessary by all participants.

WHAT SUPPORTS EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION?

Perhaps the most crucial part of scaffolding is the material used to hold it all together. This final section describes essential elements of practice highlighted throughout the literature selection as supporting effective participation.

HOW CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL

According to some of the literature reviewed, participative practice must be such that children and young people feel that they are respected, valued and taken seriously (Rayner 1991; Lindsay 1995; Healy & Walsh 1997), and that they are listened to in a genuine way (Mason 1999; CREATE Foundation 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001; Bunce 2002).

CHANGES IN ADULT ATTITUDES

Many of the authors reviewed argue that in order for participation to occur, there needs to be a change in adult attitudes. This means that the culture of children and young people needs to be valued, having as much to contribute to social life as adult culture (Corsaro 1997; Healy & Walsh 1997; Nyland 1999; Moore 2000; Newell & Robinson 2000; Sidoti 2000). Another argument is that the adults seeking to engage children and young people in participation must have an attitude of respect towards children and young people themselves, valuing them and recognising each person's uniqueness, competence and knowledge about their world (Taylor & Henaghan 1997; CREATE Foundation 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001).

COLLABORATIVE AND EQUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Many of the commentators in the selection argue that involvement must occur on an equal footing, meaning that children and young people must be participating as equal stakeholders with adults, where power is shared and hierarchies levelled (O'Brien 1997; CREATE Foundation 2000; Moore 2000; Singleton 2000; Nicholson 2001). There is a strong feeling throughout the literature reviewed that the practice framework must be one of collaboration (Davie & Galloway 1996, Corsaro 1997; Healy & Walsh 1997; O'Brien 1997; Long 1999; CREATE Foundation 2000; Mason & Urquhart 2001).

KNOWLEDGE

One of the most important factors is a high level of access to knowledge. It is argued that children and young people must be prepared for their role and informed about the purpose,

role and intentions of organisations and adult facilitators (Hart 1992; CSC 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001). They must also be informed about issues related to history, structures, prior decisions and anything else that might impact on the participative process (Lindsay 1995; Spall, Testro & Matchett 1998; CREATE Foundation 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001). Additionally it is argued that they must be included in decision-making, informed of outcomes of the decisions and project as a whole, and given the choice to participate in an ongoing manner throughout the process (O'Brien 1997; Healy 1998; CREATE Foundation 2000; CSC 2000; Henderson 2000; Moore 2000; Singleton 2000). Some also argue that there needs to be ongoing review and examination of models of participation and practice to ensure that policies and politics, research, social commentary, theory and practice about participation are changing as knowledge becomes available (Healy 1998; Henderson 2000; Mason & Urquhart 2001).

It seems clear that changes in hierarchical systems of power, increased levels of respect for children and young people and greater acknowledgment of the value that children and young people bring to human society and culture are fundamental to increased participation for children and young people.

COMMUNICATION

It is argued throughout the reviewed literature that there must be realisation that children and young people communicate differently to each other, and to adults, and that although this often results in difficulties, it need not be so (Hill 1997; O'Kane 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001; Nicholson 2001; Robinson 2001). According to the literature reviewed, adults should be prepared to consider context, attentively observe, actively listen to and be genuinely interested in children and young people when they are attempting to involve them in participation (Hart 1992; Nyland 1999; Henderson 2000; Moore 2000; Robinson 2001).

CHOICE

Another significant issue related to engaging children and young people in participative practice is about choice. In much of the literature examined, the argument presented is that participation is maximised when there is increased and flexible choice for children and young people to decide themselves on how and when they participate (Hart 1992;

Crowley 1996; O'Brien 1997; CREATE Foundation 2000; CSC 2000; Moore 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001; Nicholson 2001).

SAFETY

It is argued in some of the literature reviewed that an important factor to ensure maximum participation for children and young people relates to the participative environment and the process of feeling safe and comfortable (CSC 2000; Robinson 2001). This includes relevant, open and safe access to feedback, opportunities, processes and communication, and decision-making structures (CSC 2000; Newell & Robinson 2000; Singleton 2000).

RESOURCING

It has been maintained in some of the literature selection that an important factor in maximising participation relates to the provision of a realistic level of resources, supplied on the basis of various factors. These factors include appropriateness and relevancy, the extent to which participants will have educational opportunities, time and space to organise, promote and maintain children and young people's participation (Moore 2000; Newell & Robinson 2000; Singleton 2000; Cashmore & O'Brien 2001; Nicholson 2001), and the extent to which more than just a few representatives can be involved (O'Brien 1997).

SUMMARY

There are many and varied issues and factors to be considered when attempting to create structures and processes where participation of children and young people can be maximised. These issues are not only related to practicalities such as resourcing and participatory environments, but extend far deeper into the very attitudes that adults have about, and towards, children and young people. It seems clear that changes in hierarchical systems of power, increased levels of respect for children and young people and greater acknowledgment of the value that children and young people bring to human society and culture are fundamental to increased participation for children and young people.

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