Theorising participation as a socially contextualised practice: Lessons from an (EU) study (and post-positivism?!)

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Starting points: considerations & challenges

Struggle for meaningful participation – what it is and how to do it.

Increasing concern about impact and effectiveness of participation

but ...fundamental issues:

Ongoing challenges for participation:

• Systems / lifeworlds - whose agenda, what’s meaningful and effective and for whom/based on what assumptions
  – prevalence of adult/professional agenda ...but life does not revolve just around formalised decision making processes

• How do we develop participation as an effective social (& organisational... and democratic) practice?
  - Challenge of achieving participatory outcomes in hierarchical systems

• Problem of how participation understood: – aspiration of participation as a democratic process often not realised in practice.
  - Defining Participation in terms of ‘having a say’ reinforces rather than challenges the hierarchy in research & decision-making (‘voice’ can lack power and influence)

• Different interpretations - Children participating in adult decision making is different to participatory decision making (different paradigm of research and decision making)
Participation and Participatory practice: epistemological disjunctions?

PARTICIPATION: The right or act of being involved / making a contribution/having a say
[Participation in ....]

PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE: Concerns the way in which people are involved
- An ethic defining the democratic way in which people may engage in a process of learning for change with others as equal partners on issues of mutual concern
  [Participation with ...]

Important to make the distinction, but also potential of learning from participatory theory (as a post positivist paradigm) for developing theory of children’s participation.
This paper

- Addresses dilemmas and challenges with participation e.g. How it is understood and enacted
- Draws on key findings from EU Evaluation of Children’s Participation
  -> State of play? .... Trends and issues?
- Reflects on issues arising from findings
  -> How do the findings challenge our thinking?
- Consider how we might re focus our understanding of participation
  .... And raise some thoughts and questions.
EU Evaluation of children’s participation

Context:
EU agenda for the rights of the child (2011) – sets out principles to ensure Children’s rights are upheld across the EU. (Emphasis on consultation and providing information)

But concern about uneven progress in developing participation across EU

-> Evaluation of children’s participation in legislation, policy and practice (Nov 2012- Dec 2013)

Evaluation involved:

i) Country mapping across all MS
ii) Child peer research element in 5 countries
EU Evaluation: Barriers/Challenges

- Lack of public awareness about children’s rights/participation
- Cultural issues: paternalism, constructions of childhood
- Lack of clarity and understanding about what participation means/involved in practice
- Limited skill set amongst professionals (need for training)
- In spite of legislation, systems and procedures for enabling (and monitoring) participation are frequently missing
- Low political priority – lack of resources/capacity.
- Participation is variable across sectors
Reflections on findings – a no. of key strands

i) **Gap** between children’s rights discourse & experiences of participation in practice

iii) Continuing to understand participation in terms of Article 12 (having a say) in adult decision making may symbolise **fulfilment of rights** ... But does not necessarily imply an effective participatory process or meaningful inclusion of children and young people.

iv) Why is that? Structures and processes for participation abstracted from children’s everyday lives.
   - problem with representative structures
   - problem with understanding participation in terms of voice rather than a democratic (participatory) process of engagement

vi) Findings reinforce growing body of evidence that participation is most meaningful in context of everyday life and involve active roles
   – what does participation mean in terms of active citizenship?
   - information and structures are not enough ... Also need a culture of **participation in practice** (reflected in relationships, etc.) in everyday settings

V) Need for a more elaborate theoretical framework for understanding children’s participation that addresses context and process .. As well as ideal outcomes.
Theoretical influences – Critical realism (1):

**Critical realism**: concerned with underlying causes and mechanisms of change

**Realist evaluation**: Approach concerned with theories of change involving understanding: *Context, Mechanism and Outcome* (Pawson and Tilley 1997)

We know what we want the outcome to be (Improving children’s childhoods), but are confused about the mechanism and pay insufficient attention to the context

**Context**: Participation happens within social and organisational systems, characterised by power, values and relationships. We might refer to this as the ‘cultural politics of participation’ characterised by:

Pre existing social and organisational culture/norms (values, attitudes, and expectations)

But also: Ways of being, learning and problem solving

Young people participating as outsiders to professionals in the system and need to negotiate and learn their way into full participation or exercise of power within the system.

Lave and Wenger see this as ‘**Legitimate peripheral participation**’ in which participation is understood as a situated social learning activity .. Involving the negotiation of knowledge and meaning in any given context (of values and power) Participation therefore not about predefined structures and voice, but a **relational learning process** in which principles of (democratic) engagement define the quality of participation.
Critical realism (2)

Mechanisms of children’s participation:

Participation discourses increasingly focus on relationships, leadership etc. (eg as researchers) but in practice children’s participation continues to be understood in terms of collecting children’s views (through consultation etc) to input them into adult decision making ... But ... as evidence shows, children’s views have limited impact on decision making. And children seem to value the process of participation (being included etc) as much as/more than the outcome

Following Lave and Wenger: ... we cannot rely on universal structures for participation rather have to think about principles to guide the process of participation in any given context.

... Value and effectiveness of participation are not defined by structures but by the process and negotiation of meaning and
What constitutes effectiveness?
(from EU evaluation – adult perspectives)

- Commonly characterised by the existence of one or more of the following variables:
  - inclusivity;
  - opportunities for dialogue with adults;
  - respectful relationships;
  - whole project /ongoing involvement;
  - children taking the initiative;
  - children developing skills of active citizenship;
  - integrity and consistency;
  - when change happens;
  - when children can provide solutions;
  - informal and rooted in children’s lives.

..... Emphasis on roles, relationships and social situatedness
And from children ....

- Despite mechanisms for participation children generally still do not feel heard/involved.
- Children tend to have a very limited understanding about ‘participation’ and their rights.
- But do feel strongly about being heard/involved.
- Most commonly for children ‘participation’ means simply ‘taking part’ or being part of something.’
- Participation is more meaningful within the context of everyday life issues eg: Mental Health,
Children’s experiences of participation

(Other evidence, incl. Children in Care Council Evaluation, NYA Participation evaluation)

- Young people having control over their lives / confidence to manage personal circumstances and make informed choices
- Two-way communication with others / listening and being listened to
- Collaborating with others / mutual support / doing together
- Taking part, joining in and belonging
- Being valued and respected / celebration
- Ability to say what you think and feel and ask for help
- Having responsibility
- Understanding others
- Being equipped with skills for participation and knowledge of how things work
- Being involved in making things happen / making a difference
- Gaining experience / learning

These are all more about the agency and participation of children as competent social actors and active citizens than passive respondents to professional agenda.
How does this challenge our thinking about participation?

Participation is about a **democratic process of how decisions are made** and problems solved, and how groups relate; not just a right to a view or instrumental mechanism for data collection.

Participation as the **social practice of active citizenship**: “the democratic action and involvement of individuals and groups in the production and reproduction of their lives and communities” (Percy-Smith 2006)

Emphasis on ‘process’ places focus on ‘learning’ and ‘relationships’ between groups when children participate. “Learning (and therefore participation) is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.35) and therefore more conducive to supporting change.

Need a paradigm shift: What can we draw from Post-positivist (participatory) research? (see Gibbons 1994, Reason & Bradbury 2001 etc)
Principles of participation from a Post-positivist perspective

i) **Collaborative/inclusive** – involves all ‘stakeholders’ .... joint ventures (doing together) with respect to issues of mutual concern

ii) **Learning process** – through dialogue, reflection and co-inquiry; puzzling together rather than just collecting views, Research, Practice and decision making are brought together in one process “harnessing the problem solving potential of stakeholders” (Wildemeersch et al’s 1998 social learning theory of participation)

iii) **Emergent** - choices and actions for change arise out of co-inquiry and reflection in response to questions arising from experience (in-depth accounts from multiple perspectives)

iv) **Critically reflexive** – dynamic process of learning and change - challenges assumptions (theories) & practices

v) **Action oriented** – involves active roles in learning that brings about change

vi) **Outcomes** – primarily have validity for those involved .. Improving the human condition (public value / rights based) changes to lived realities
Participation as social learning

The learning through participatory systems such as groups, networks, organizations and communities, in conditions which are new, unexpected, uncertain, conflictual and hard to predict … when solutions have to be found for unforeseen contextual problems. … emphasis is on the optimal use of the problem-solving potential of which a group, institution or community disposes.

Social learning is action- and experience-oriented, it is critically reflective, meaning that actors question the validity of particular opinions, judgments, strategies, actions, emotions, feelings, etc. It is cooperative and communicative, which means that the dialogue between actors is crucial, continually involved in implicit or explicit processes of negotiation (adapted from Wildemeersch et al. 1998).

How can we develop participation as dialogue and collaboration between children and adults?
Post-positivist understandings of participation

- “Problem-centred action oriented inquiry carried out with people not on people that challenges and change those involved including ourselves and the systems and practices of which we are part” (Susan Weil 1999)

- Looking critically at the world in a dialogical encounter with others ... Within which individuals gradually perceives personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, deal critically with it .. and discover how to participate in the transformation of the world (Freire)

- The idea is simple: fundamentally it is that people work together as co-researchers in exploring and changing their world”
  
  (Peter Reason 1988: Human inquiry in action)

How can we rethink participation in terms of the extent to which young people feel and enact a sense of agency and empowerment in their lives in relation to others?
Conclusions

1. If we are seeking to understand participation as active citizenship rather than just a right to have a say, we need to pay more attention to ‘social’ participation of young people in everyday community settings – home, school, neighbourhood – through the actions, choices, relationships and contributions they make, rather than being preoccupied with participation just in political and public decision making processes.

2. The outcome of effective participation can only be realised through confronting the inherent contradictions in seeking to advance participatory mechanisms in non participatory contexts and systems. ... Participatory research (as a post positivist paradigm) arguably provides a more robust and relevant basis for developing and evaluating (theories of) participation as an inclusive democratic social practice.
Seeing participation as ‘social’ as well as ‘political’

“there is a great deal of activity going on which is much more genuinely ‘participatory’ .. that is often experienced ... as exciting and dynamic, but that does not connect in any clear way with ‘real’ politics ... with the result that there is little sign of young people participating in processes that actually produce important political decisions or define the terms of policy debate or even expressing their common interests as a social group”.

(Thomas 2007)

“There is a discourse of ... participation that is predominantly social – that speaks of networks, inclusion, adult-child relations, and of opportunities for social connection ... . Alongside this there is an alternative discourse that is more or less overtly political –that speaks of power and challenge and change”

What might we benefit from learning across these two domains for developing theories of participation and active citizenship exploring wider interpretations of participation for developing theory?
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Some key findings

- Legal provisions for participation vary across EU, often not aligned to Article 12
- Gap between legislation and realising participation in practice is a major problem
- Variation across sectors and settings with most progress in everyday settings of children (education, care and justice) and local planning, but variation in quality and extent of participation
- Emphasis on formal (representative) ‘democratic’ structures and consultation with children, rather than active participatory roles.
- Limited engagement and impact on policy/ adult decision-making
- Impact more likely at local rather than national level but limited systematic monitoring