

Social Capital, Community Cohesion and Participation in England: A Space for Children and Young People?

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BACKGROUND

Recent changes in social policy in England require local authorities to focus on 'community cohesion', and the Home Office has made suggestions as to how community cohesion can be defined and measured (Home Office, 2002). Briefly, a cohesive community is one where there is a common vision and a sense of belonging for all; diversity is appreciated and positively valued; those from different backgrounds have similar life opportunities; and strong positive relationships are developed between people from different backgrounds, in workplaces, schools, and neighbourhoods. The documentation on community cohesion recognises that older children and young people are crucial to 'community' life: for example, it highlights the 'Disengagement of young people from the local decision-making process', 'Inadequate provision of youth facilities and services' and suggests that 'young people must be enabled to contribute fully to the development of cohesive communities and to have their own, distinctive voice' (Home Office, 2002).

There are a number of obvious criticisms that can be made of these suggestions: firstly, we must question whether children and young people were ever 'engaged' in the first place; secondly, there are very good reasons for inadequate youth facilities and services related to the privatisation of leisure and cuts in spending on youth services; and thirdly, the suggestion that young people must be 'enabled to contribute' is not only patronising, it ignores the fact that many young people already 'contribute' to their communities in various ways, but that their contributions are relatively invisible because they aren't measured. Further, the proposed indicators of community cohesion are largely adult-oriented, and the only indicator that relates directly to data from children and young people is the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at A*-C. Presumably this is based on an assumption that areas with high levels of community cohesion have higher educational outcomes, but it gives

an indication of how children are conceptualised in these debates that I'll return to later in this paper.

Embedded within the concept of community cohesion is the concept of social capital, defined in many ways, but in the recent Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU) material as:

the 'social glue' between people, organisations and communities that enable them to work together to pursue shared objectives; the social networks characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity (NRU, 2003)

'Building social capital' is one aim of the strategy for improving deprived inner-city areas (NRU, 2003). Many elements of social capital relate to or overlap with the broader concept of community cohesion, and while social capital is a complex concept and difficult to define and measure, it can be argued that it is useful as a 'tool' for social policy research, because it asks questions about the quality of social relationships within specific areas or neighbourhoods in the here-and-now (in a way that individual measures of, say, exam results quite clearly cannot) (Morrow, 1999a).

Briefly, policy documents identify three types of social capital: these are bonding social capital (i.e., strong relationships and networks within a community); bridging social capital (weaker relationships and networks across social groups); and linking social capital, which consists of connections and networks between communities, and agencies or institutions with resources (i.e., power). 'Elements of social capital thus include connections between people: participation in local community neighbourliness; social networks - family and friends; work connections; and the conditions needed to make things work: social support, trust and safety; pro-activity in a social context; valuing diversity; valuing life' (NRU, 2003). Bonding and linking social capital are also recognised in some of the social policy literature as being particularly pertinent in neighbourhood renewal initiatives, for example, 'strong bridging and linking social capital may be needed in areas

in need of neighbourhood renewal, that lack access to resources beyond the community' (ibid). Links between 'social capital' and 'citizenship' are often combined in policy documentation, for example, the Office of National Statistics suggests that 'While definitions of social capital vary, the main aspects are citizenship, neighbourliness, trust and shared values, community involvement, volunteering, social networks and civic participation' (ONS, n.d.). An extract from a speech made by the former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, in 2002, is indicative of some of the rhetoric used:

we must think about building social capital in the wider context of citizenship. The two weave together. Those who volunteer in their communities tend to be more likely to vote. Conversely, those who have a sense of citizenship tend to work with others to improve their communities (Blunkett, 2002)

Generally it is agreed that 'social capital' remains a very nebulous concept, and it is important to note that it was never intended to include children and young people as active citizens, who are by definition excluded from civic participation because of their age. Existing research on 'social capital' doesn't adequately define 'community', and is in danger of assuming that children and young people's 'social capital' is derived simply from their parents'/carers' social capital, for example, 'bonding social capital is important in health for children, families and the elderly' (NRU, 2003). This is undoubtedly the case but too limited: children in middle childhood spend much of their time in their neighbourhoods, close to their homes, playing out in the street, many older children have part-time jobs or undertake marginal economic activities, are members of sports clubs, and they also come into contact with local authority services, and spend a large amount of time in school (and schools can be important sources of identity and belonging in their own right).

Largely unrelated to this wave of work on community cohesion and social capital has been a body of consultation work with children and young people that has been undertaken in UK by a range of organisations, including voluntary and public sector bodies, over the past decade; this has recently been reviewed by Kirby, et al. (2003). The review has found that there are some successes and examples of positive change, particularly at small-scale, local level, but much

needs to be done in expanding children's participation to make it meaningful and effective at a wider, national level. In particular, I would argue that more work needs to be undertaken to identify contradictions and tensions in policy spheres relating to children, childhood, and families, and the everyday practices and processes of what it means to be a child, and how these everyday experiences affect children's participation.

This paper draws on two research projects carried out by the author that explored (*inter alia*) children's accounts of participation in decision-making. The paper makes three interconnected arguments: firstly, that the concept and practice of 'participation' for children and childhood is not straightforward and needs to be not only clearly defined but also seen critically; secondly, that social context is crucial in understanding how, why, or if children 'participate'. Children are not a homogenous category: age, gender, religious/ethnic background, make a difference to children's willingness to 'participate'. The third suggestion is that adult models of childhood (in other words, how children are conceptualised, viewed and treated), and adult practices relating to children, are key to understanding children's participation. An examination of these models and practices may be the next stage in promoting (effective) children's participation. In other words, there is a need to explore the extent to which 'participation' is on adult terms only, and to what extent is 'participation' redefined as 'resistance' when children try to change things or express their views in ways that adults find problematic.

What is 'Participation'?

As many authors have noted, the concept of participation is not straightforward, even in relation to adults: for example, 'participation has proven difficult not only to define, but to practically initiate and sustain' (Zakus and Lysack, 1998: 7). Most work on children's participation draws upon Roger Hart's (1992, 1997) adaptation of Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation', and this has been unquestionably useful, because citizen participation does indeed have various levels and meanings. However, there is a danger of abstracting children's participation as an end in itself and thus losing sight of the way in which children and adults are interconnected, and the ways in which adult structures and institutions constrain and control children in important ways.

In other words, there is a danger of children's participation becoming, in a curious way, too 'child focused', and I suggest that it might be helpful to return to basic questions about what children's participation means in the context of hierarchical structures in which their lives are conducted. Boyden and Ennew (1997), in a manual outlining participatory research methods with children, note that there are two definitions of participation, participation in the sense of 'taking part in', or being present, and participation in the sense of 'knowing that one's actions are taken note of and may be acted upon' (p33). Chambers 20th Century Dictionary also has two definitions: the first is 'having a share in, taking part in'. In an earlier paper, I referred to this as 'latent participation' (Morrow, 2000)¹. The second definition uses the example of 'worker participation', defined as 'the involvement of employees at all levels in the decision-making of a company' - i.e. '*active participation*'. ...these two aspects of participation are inter-linked, and it is difficult to achieve the second without the first. In other words, to what extent do children and young people feel they participate in (= are part of, by default) their neighbourhood, community or school, and how does this relate to the extent to which they feel they 'actively' participate, i.e. have a say in decision-making in their neighbourhoods or institutions? These communities and institutions are, of course, established by and controlled by adults. The assumption I'm taking for granted here is that participation in both senses is a good thing that leads to increased self-efficacy, and self-esteem, which in turn lead to an increased awareness of choices and an increased control over social life, all of which contribute to increased 'well-being' and in turn health. However, this is problematic for children, given that until the age of 18 they are excluded from one of the key markers of citizenship, the right to vote.

The paper draws on two empirical research projects to develop and explore some of these issues.

Project 1 Children's Views on 'Having a Say in Decisions'

Data from Project 1 come from a research project that explored children's understandings of family, with 184 children aged between 8 and 14 in rural and urban schools. Data were collected

in 1996 and 1997; 99 of the children were in Village schools. A proportion of the urban sample (n=52) were Muslim children of Pakistani origin. The rationale for selecting these samples was related to the overall aims of the project, one of which was to explore stereotypical assumptions about kinship and family with a minority ethnic group assumed to be very different from the majority culture. The research also aimed to redress an imbalance in that the experiences and perspectives of children from ethnic minorities are under-represented in social research in general. The samples were selected to reflect age and gender differences, and schools were chosen because their composition reflected a range of socio-economic circumstances. The research used a number of qualitative data-collection techniques including small group discussions on a range of topics including media images of families, children's rights and 'being listened to' (Morrow, 1998b, for discussion of methods and ethics).

Study 2: Children and 'social capital'

Study 2 consisted of a research project conducted for the Health Education Authority that explored the relevance of Putnam's (1993) concept of 'social capital' in relation to children. 'Social capital' in this piece of research consisted of the following features: social and community networks; civic engagement or participation; community identity and sense of belonging; and norms of co-operation, reciprocity and trust of others within the community (Putnam, 1993). The premise is that levels of 'social capital' in a community have an important effect on people's well-being. 'Social capital' is a concept that has been contested at a number of levels, conceptually, methodologically, and theoretically (discussed elsewhere, see Morrow, 1999a, 2001a, b).

The research was conducted in two schools in relatively deprived wards in a town in South East England (disguised as 'Springtown'; children chose their own pseudonyms; the site was chosen to match another HEA study on adults and social capital). One ward (West Ward) consisted of 'suburban sprawl' on the outskirts of the town, with post-war housing and factories; the second (Hill Ward) consisted of a mixture of industrial development, and Victorian, inter-war and post-war housing development. The sample comprised 101 boys and girls in two age bands:

12-13 year olds and 14-15 year olds, with a significant proportion from minority ethnic groups. The project used a combination of qualitative research methods and structured activities to explore young people's subjective experiences of their neighbourhoods, the nature of their social networks, and their experiences of participation in decision-making in schools and neighbourhoods (for full details of methodological and ethical considerations, see Morrow, 2001b).

The paper now draws upon children's discussions from these two projects about "being listened to" and "having a say" in relation to three arenas: family, school and neighbourhood.

Family

Project 1: A broad range of topics, from the length of the working week, caning in schools, the state of school toilets to security measures in school were discussed. On the whole, the discussions about participation were much fuller with the older children, though younger children were able to engage meaningfully with notions of decision-making and participation. There was however a possible cultural and/or linguistic difficulty for the youngest children of Pakistani origin for whom English was a second (or third) language, and I explained them briefly (by talking about "who decides, chooses" about "what you can and can't have/do") if they did not appear to be familiar with the terms.

Most of the younger white children expressed the view that their opinions should be heard, though they did not necessarily want to have full control over decision-making. Some were quite clear about this, as in the following extract from a discussion with a group of 9 year old Village children:

Sam (a boy): I think mums and dads should listen to children so children can get what they want when they want, go where they want, all the time, and they never have to do what their mums and dads have to do.

Keri: [that's] not fair, what about the grown-ups? ...when you grow up, you want to do what you want, when you want, get what you want, and its not gonna be like that, you've got to do what your children say, you've had this all your life, and your children are going to feel like left out, you're going to be taking care of yourself all the time, when you want, going where you want, [interrupted]... you'd get selfish, and you

wouldn't have any respect for any other people, you'd just have respect for yourself and nobody else..

Other children interjected but she continued "but we can't always get our own way, we should get our own way sometimes, but not all the time...".

The younger children of Pakistani origin tended to say that parents and other relatives made decisions for them, for example, "My mum and my dad make all the decisions and my sisters". Some mentioned themselves, "Me and my mum decide". The 10 year old girls of Pakistani origin also described how parents and other adults make decisions on their behalf: "I listen to my mum and dad, children should listen to parents, that's good manners". Another girl added "You should respect your mum and dad" and another "Miss, you should listen to your parents and love them". Other girls mentioned mums, dads, brothers, sisters, cousins, cousin brothers as making decisions. Boys of Pakistani origin, on the other hand, saw the question about children's rights as being about physical punishment, though one boy did say about "being listened to": "Miss, when they talk we have to listen to them, when you talk, they listen to you". In another group of boys the question led to a discussion about deciding who to marry, when to go to Mosque, and whose choice it was:

Miss, in Islam, miss, when you get married, you don't have to listen to your parents, it's up to you, who you want to get married to.../. you want to go the Mosque, and your mum and dad say no don't go to the Mosque, it's your choice whether you wanna go or not...

Another boy disagreed, saying "no it's not, its Gods choice, you have to"

A third boy added '... sometimes we talk about if you're gonna do this or not... and they sometimes let you and sometimes don't... you discuss this...'

Overall, the 10 year old boys of Pakistani origin were much more voluble in discussions of decision-making than the girls. This may reflect a cultural expectation to be obedient and honour elders, which may differ according to gender; girls may not be encouraged to speak out in the same way as boys. Islamic principles also "emphasise the importance of family obligations and interdependence" (Hylton, 1995: 15).

In the older Village sample (i.e. white), one 12 year old boy said "If it has got something to do with children, I think they should have a say in

it". Another group of 12 year olds had the following discussion:

Researcher: ...what do you think about being listened to?

Megan: interrupting: they don't! ... well, they do sometimes, but mainly you're just told what to do, and with things at school, they ask the parents, but the parents aren't in the lessons, /.../ they just, if they just wanna ask you if you're not happy about things, they ask your parents, but parents don't go to the school so they won't know.

Shannon: Its really unfair, because it's us that everything's based around, you know, we will be adults and be the world, so why shouldn't we have a say about what happens?

These girls are reflecting on the fact that frequently they are not directly "listened to" and that parents may act as proxies to comment on their behalf. A group of 14 year old girls commented:

Researcher: ... Do you think you get listened to?

Them: No... Not very much at school, but [we do] at home, /.../

Sophie: I think your parents care for you and they, like, listen to you,

Stephanie: they wanna listen, in case you got a problem and its serious, so they listen, in case it could involve getting hurt or something,

Others: Yeah

Stacey: cos they would listen because they care for you more than the people at school do... 'cos they're your flesh and blood, in't yer.../.../

Sophie: and teachers probably have problems of their own at home ...

In another group, Melanie, 13, said "it depends. If you've got a good point to say, then they listen, but if you haven't, they just shut off. Oh, it's only a kid, you know." Some children commented on how they felt that they had not had enough of a say in specific family matters. One group of 12 year olds had the following discussion:

Callum: I think it's very important because sometimes you're supposed to be making family decisions, and the children just get pushed out of it, it's just the parents making the decisions...

John: I have that going on at the moment, with my mum and dad, they're deciding who, when I'm gonna see my dad and when I'm gonna see my mum, and then not concerning me when I want to do anything. I'm not getting a decision in

anything at the moment...

Callum: if its got something to do with children, I think they should have a say in it.

These children seem to be saying that they want to have a say in decisions rather than make the decisions themselves. In a discussion with Village 11 year olds, Nicole disagreed with her class mates and said "No, I don't think they should get what they want, most of the time,... they've got to have something over you, you know, haven't they; you can't just go wandering off and doing exactly what you want". This view was expanded on in a different group, of 14 year old girls:

Stacey: it depends how old you are, whether you make all your decisions or not, when you get old enough to make important decisions for your future, and that sort of thing, I think you should be given help in making decisions,...

Charlotte: ... my mum thinks I'm old enough to make decisions, ... but I don't feel that I am ready to make all the decisions yet in my family, but I can make some, like what I was gonna do, or something, but I haven't made hardly any decisions, important ones, recently

Sophie: I think like your mum and dad like try and push you to make your own decisions, ...I think some decisions you should make for yourself...but sometimes there are some decisions that you can't make on your own, you need to like either get your friends involved, or your teachers or your parents, or your family...

These girls seem to be reflecting the notion that making decisions is not straightforward. They recognise that as they get older, they need to make more decisions, but that they need to have some help in doing so. They seem to express an awareness of the limits of their autonomy, and are clear that decision-making is contingent upon what the decision is about (Morrow, 1999b).

Decision-making in Schools

In both Project 1 and Project 2, a range of topics were mentioned about decision-making in their schools, and many of the secondary school children described their school councils and made various comments about them. As Lansdown and Newell (1994) note, schools have an important role to play in promoting children's freedom of expression. However, they also point out that "the school system throughout the UK tends to operate in a formal and authoritarian way which

does not encourage children to explore and contribute their ideas for the provision and development of education" (p9). Further, "the pressures of meeting the demands of the National Curriculum allow little room for child-oriented initiatives or issues of concern to children which are not part of the prescribed work programme" (p9; see also Alderson, 1999). Freeman (1996: 98) draws attention to the irony in this, "for one of the aims of education is to enhance the capacity for decision-making and yet, in crucial areas, participation in major decisions is removed from those most affected by those decisions".

School councils were mentioned in several groups. Schools are not under any statutory obligation to run a 'school council' (a group of teachers and pupils representative of various year groups in the school), but some schools do have such systems in place. In both the secondary schools in Project 1, there were school councils in operation. In the Village Secondary School, the Year 8 (12-13 year olds) children mentioned that only the Year 7 (11-12 year olds) and Year 9 (13-14 year olds) had representation on the school council: in one group, one boy commented that "I reckon it would be quite a good idea [to have a Year 8 rep]" and John commented that "because the Year 7s are deciding what we should do in the school, and the Year 8s and that aren't having no say, its like family decisions again". One group of Year 9 children at the Village school were more critical:

Chelsea: we have got a school council, at least

Alvin: that's all hype, it's all hyped up, its not very good, I'm a member of the council, its not good.

Researcher: why not?

Alvin: it's like this, it's like giving us this much power [indicating small measurement with his fingers]

Paul: they say, what do you want to do, then we say, oh [whatever] and they say no, we have to pass it with the senior management, and they say no and so we're back to square one

Alvin: its like they're trying to make it look as though we've got some power, but we haven't.

Chelsea: they're just listening, not doing...

Some of the groups of Town secondary school children were similarly critical of their school council, although it had organised trips, bowling and discos, and complained about the state of the school toilets:

Boy 1: I'm a councillor for my tutor group, ...

we don't seem to have any meetings anymore, that's the trouble, and if anyone's got any problems they tell me and I report back to the teachers at the meeting every two weeks, which we don't seem to have any more, for some reason, its just suddenly stopped.

Researcher: but does it work?

Boy 2: no

Boy 1 rep: well there's some things that have been done, like we started on the toilet and new bins, and trip to [] was organised

Boy 2 interrupting: that would have happened anyway, wouldn't it?

Boy 1: not really,

Boy 3: the toilets should have happened anyway...

One 14 year old boy commented "it would be nice if they had like a student governor".

In Project 2, one of the schools had a school council, but many children said that they were not satisfied the way it was run. The following is an extract from a group of Year 8 pupils:

Harry: we have a class rep, I'm the class rep, on the school council, they can pass information on to me, and that gets passed onto, we say these things in the year meetings, and then that gets passed onto the school meetings, and then it goes to the senior teachers, and we have said stuff and it has worked.

Researcher: it has worked? What about the rest of you, do you agree?

Kellie: no, not really, what I think they should do, is just get all the school reps together, and all the classes, and all speak about it all together. The teachers don't tell us much, they just tell us about a couple of things and then that's it, over for about another four weeks or something.

A different group of Year 8s had the following discussion:

Natalie: in every other class, they get to chose their class reps, but here, Miss just chose it, and we didn't even get to chose it,

Robert: I don't think its fair because I reckon that the favourites get picked, instead of the people that are gonna do something, they just say who they know best

Someone: the boffins, yeah

Robert: yeah, the favourite ones, like...

In a discussion with a group of Year 10s, even the two representatives did not feel the school council worked well:

Amy: You say it, and nothing happens...

Dave: the thing is, yeah, they'll have a

meeting, and they'll say, the toilets, they're in a bad shape, blah blah, that'll be it

Olanda: you can guarantee that at every meeting the toilets will come up

Dave: it's a good way for people to voice their opinions, but it doesn't really happen, like, the most say you'll get is what trip you wanna go on

Amy: Mmm, like I asked the head teacher to have more vegetarian meals, that was about six months ago, and nothing's happened. So he's saying he thinks all the people should stay in school for school dinners so we don't get in trouble down the shops, what are we supposed to eat? They don't even do salads or anything, they just do chips...

And another group of Year 10s, Mike commented:

I think we get played like fools, cos we have council meetings, ok, I'm a council rep, but I say this stuff, but they don't listen to me, they think I'm just a laugh, they don't listen, cos we say stuff, what we want, but they don't listen, they ask us what we want, then they say no, we can't have it, what's the point of asking us?

In a recent survey of civil rights in schools, Alderson (1999) found cynicism or anger about 'token councils' which suggests that these experiences are fairly widespread. On the other hand, in School 2 in Project 2, there was at the time of the research no school council operating, and pupils had no forum in which to voice their suggestions, and children felt there should be one. As one girl said: "Teachers are always telling us to speak up for ourselves".

School: Passive Participation

All under-16 year olds 'participate' in school, in the sense of 'being there', because it is compulsory, but to what extent do they feel that have a share in it and what does it mean to them? It was during the course of Project 2 that I realised that children were saying something important about what school means to them. From their perspectives, the experience of school was ambivalent - in other words, there are positive and negative aspects to schooling. Firstly, many children described how schooling and the acquisition of educational qualifications was extremely important to them, and secondly, it was clear that school is an important place to come and be with friends. Both these elements are shown clearly in the following extract from a discussion with a group of Year 10 students:

Dave: people do moan about school, but when they go they know they will learn stuff, they will have a bit of fun and they do meet their friends, so it's not all that bad.

Amy: yeah, if they've got all these ambitions in life to get a good career, they can't do it without going to school

Dave: because even the people who say that they don't care about their grades and all that, they always long to get good grades and everyone does know its really important and I think most people do try their best, no matter what they say or how hard they fight back.

Homework was often included in lists of activities outside school, and some young people mentioned how their neighbourhoods may be quiet, which is 'boring', but also 'good for getting homework done'. The importance of school as a site of social interaction also emerged other forms of data. Photos showed school students walking to school in pairs or groups and then clustered in the playground. Kerry, 14, wrote about how: "In school when I am not in my lessons I hang around with my best friend and my friend We normally just walk around having girly chats". The deputy head of the school mentioned that the school had worked hard to (re)define itself as a place of work rather than a place for students to come and socialise.

The downside of school is that various aspects of school life, such as the non-democratic nature of school, the content of school work, and the relationships between teachers and pupils, may constitute negative experiences for some young people. As one 14 year old boy put it: "None of the teachers really build up our confidence or anything". Others spoke of how the teachers' 'favourites' were usually 'boffins' or 'brain-boxes' and some young people seemed to express an awareness that only one form of knowledge, i.e. academic knowledge, was valued (not surprisingly given recent focus on school league tables: this school has been successful in raising academic standards). One boy said "I hate being told what grade the teachers expect of you, its very high expectations". Others mentioned that teachers "put you down"; they "don't really care". Some said they did not feel well supported by teachers when they did have a problem: Mary, age 12, and her friend, Maggie, also 12, complained that:

Mary: we had someone bullying us, and we told a teacher, and we didn't do anything wrong

Maggie: he just told us off

Mary: he didn't do anything we went to him to help us, he just goes and tells us off.

Maggie [angrily]: he goes and tells assembly that if there's any bullying going on you should come and tell me, and I'll, we will really sort it out, /.../ [but] they don't do anything.

These comments suggest that we need to see active participation in the context of relationships within school in general. The quality of these relationships is likely to affect the extent to which children are likely to 'participate'. Kirby, et al. (2003) found evidence that school children "do not feel listened to by many class teachers in their daily lives at school" (p43) even in schools with effective school councils.

Civic Participation: The Wider Community

Local authorities are under no obligation to consult with young people about provision of services and facilities in their communities, though some local authorities do have a Youth Forum or Youth Council (see Matthews, et al., 1998, Fitzpatrick, et al., 1998). However, in many of the group discussions in both projects, children were well aware that they had not been directly consulted in decisions about changes in their neighbourhoods. In the Village primary school, Project 1, the issue of the local playground was discussed:

Biz: we've got a petition up right now for not moving the playground and that,

Researcher: ... is that in the village?

Barney: it'll be better, just walk up from school and that...

Biz: No but it'll take ages /.../There's good reasons and bad reasons, because the play park up there stinks right now, cos it's next to like a farm and that,

James: and its graffiti and

Others: yeah

Biz: but if it's going to be next to the school, people are going to come and vandalise it and then like break into the school and that

In the Town secondary school, many of the children of Pakistani origin lived in a well-circumscribed part of the Town centre and came by bus to the school, which was located in a 'new town' on the outskirts of the city. Though the numbers of these children in this part of the sample were very small and were nearly all boys, it was interesting to note in this discussion that

they felt quite well served by the local community:

Waqas: you know like, the community, the area, you know where [youth club] is? near that area, like most people live in that area, they ask people, discuss if they can, if they can afford the money they'll do it, if they can't they'll do something for you.

Researcher: do they listen to you, young people,

Others: yeah

Waqas: cos you go to that place, you play about there, like football and anything, and if you want anything, trips you know, there a leaflet, they give you leaflets, the youth workers, and all activities are on there. Any problems you can go to them and they'll sort it out.

Other 13-14 year old (white) Town children were much more cynical when asked whether the local authority consulted with them about facilities and services in their area:

Girl: No, [they ask] either the parents, or the older people that live there

Girl: they say "is your mum there? we'd like to build a new park, can we have your mum's permission?", you think "oh, yeah, mum's gonna play on the swings, in't she!" [sarcastically] and in a group of 13-14 year old boys:

Them: yeah, you get approached, there was a petition for a basket ball net and they put it up,

Boy: they petitioned for a net in their area and they got one.

Researcher: so there's some notion of having a say

Boy: yeah, if there's a lot of people asking, yeah, but if there's just one, I don't think they'd take any notice

Bob: cos they went round like saying to everybody do you mind if we have this, and they all said yes, just don't play around in the area where like everybody lives

Some of the children in Project 2 described their neighbourhood environments as satisfactory, but others expressed a strong sense of exclusion from the social life of the neighbourhood and community. Their concerns focused on the following issues: traffic (literally not being able to cross the road safely); some children from minority ethnic groups described racial harassment - for example, one boy whose family are from Bangladesh described how he doesn't play outside his block of flats: "if I've got nothing to do I play inside with my own computer (not) outside as usually people are

quite racist to me, ... that's why I don't like my area much"; safety in local parks (dog mess, dirty needles, drugs, also assaults), and outside the shops; rapists and gangsters on the streets.

Some Year 10 students described how they felt mistrusted and not respected by the adults around them in their neighbourhoods. One discussion hinged around the issue of being regarded with suspicion in shops:

Amy: it's horrible, cos you walk into a shop, you've got no bag on you, you're looking quite smart, and you've got all these security guards watching you like a hawk, /.../

Olanda: they stereotype us. /.../

Many young people commented that there wasn't enough to do in the area for their age group. In England, leisure activities have been increasingly privatised and involve spending money - in the case of Project 2, children needed money for the bus or train fare into town, and then more money for entry into leisure facilities. 'Hanging about' outside is often the only activity available that does not involve spending money, but this presents a dilemma: on the one hand, their parents are not willing to allow them out on their own, yet the fact that they go out in groups makes them look threatening. This context of mistrust, that children are acutely aware of, is likely to have an effect on their capacity and willingness to 'actively participate' in their neighbourhoods.

When we discussed decision-making in the community, only one boy felt he could go to his residents association and make suggestions about his local area (when he said this in the group discussion, someone whispered "ah, but that's a posh area"). Mostly, they felt their needs had been ascertained through their parents: Amy (age 15) said: "they send, like, questionnaires to our parents, but its not our parents who want to go to the Youth Club, it's us. So they should ask us". A group of year 8s had the following discussion:

Them: no... they don't ask the kids,

Agnes: its adults saying "oh lets have a bingo hall", what are we gonna go and do?

Gavin: since we can't vote and stuff, they don't think that we're that smart, because they think parents have got all the experience, /.../

Agnes: they've just put a bowling thing up,

Peter: they've put an 11 screen cinema in there,

Agnes: but they haven't asked us, they haven't said to us do you want this, do you want

that, *we should get a say in it*

One girl said in this context "I don't think people are really bothered about kids"; in another group a boy said "They just do things like little tiny parks for little kids... we don't want little parks". One girl commented that she felt they should have a say in the community, "because what happens does affect us as well as the adults and they don't seem to think about that when they're making decisions". This led to some direct action in the past:

Mike (age 15): cos I remember, I was living in my old house, and it was like the woods, in Riverside, there was the woods like over to the side, and they knocked it down to build more houses, and we didn't [want that] we used to play there and have our like tree houses, dens and things, but they didn't ask us. We tried slashing their tyres and things like that, nicking keys, and stuff but it didn't work. *We was young then, so...* [laughter]

In adult terms, Mike's description would quite likely be seen as vandalism, or at best an act of resistance. However from his point of view one might suggest that it is the only form of 'participation' available to him.

The town council had recently started a 'Youth Forum', but children in the study were not aware of it:

Gemma: No-one knows about it, if there is one

Tamisha: I think there should be one, but

Miranda: but they'd chose the people who do all the best in school, and everything, and they're not average people, are they?

These comments suggest that participation, in the sense of being actively involved in decisions that affect them in their neighbourhoods, appears to be virtually non-existent for these children. Even where supposedly democratic structures such as school councils are in place, as was the case in one of the schools in Project 2, children did not seem to feel they were experiencing 'participation' through them, and the exclusion they appear to feel is likely to limit their sense of self-efficacy and control over their environments. One of the problems facing this age group is that they may have no consistent, formal channels through which to communicate, or to convert their energy into a positive resource for their neighbourhoods. Youth fora are the most common way of facilitating children's views, but they do not necessarily work effectively (see Fitzpatrick et al., 1998). Miranda's comment,

above, suggests that she is well aware of the limits of democratic participation and representation.

DISCUSSION

What do these examples tell us about participation? They reveal a range of experiences about 'participation', being listened to and having a say in decisions. Data from Project 1 showed that some children did feel they 'had a say' in family decision-making, others did not, and this varied according to gender, age and ethnic or religious background. Most children felt it was important to have a say in matters affecting them, though this varied according to gender and ethnicity in that the questions did not give rise to much discussion among 10 year old girls of Pakistani origin. Young children (nine year olds) could engage meaningfully with the notion of rights and being listened to. Some of the children seemed to reflect that they would like to have a say in the process of decision-making, to be heard, not that they make decisions on their own or have ultimate control over the decision-making process. They want to be talked to and consulted, and given information, and to be able to give their point of view and have their opinions taken into account. Children saw decision-making as potentially problematic and could see this from others' perspectives. However, 'participation', in the sense of effecting change, appeared from children's points of view to be extremely limited. A sense of participation could be fostered early on by including young people in decision-making processes, whether in schools or neighbourhoods, but it seems clear that many (adult) structures and practices need to change and shift before this can happen effectively.

In many popular (media) discussions of children's rights and 'participation', absolute decision-making seems to be the dominant theme. It is unusual to find a relative position expressed in popular debates, yet this was effectively the notion that children were suggesting in the two studies described in this paper: they want to have a say in, but not necessarily make, the decisions themselves, and further, 'it depends on what is being decided'. In other words, they are asking for inclusion and participation and are aware of their exclusion and lack of participation. The focus in most previous research on children's rights has been on dramatic, spectacular and profound, life-changing decisions - where to live

post-divorce, life-or-death situations. Children appeared to be more concerned with the everyday, even mundane, problems of being accorded little dignity or respect, and having little opportunity to simply have a say and contribute to discussions. These concerns need to be addressed before any meaningful attempts at effective participation can be made. Involvement in the decision-making process, depending on the nature and complexity of the decision, seems to be what children themselves are requesting. The children's accounts seem to reflect what has been termed a 'social' model of citizenship that emphasises 'the ways in which people are connected to each other, rather than being viewed as acting as individualised, autonomous, rational beings separate from each other' (Cockburn, 1998: 100). It also reinforces Alderson's (1993) suggestion (in relation to children's consent to medical treatment) that competence to participate in decision-making arises through a combination of experience and relationships and should not necessarily be seen as age-related.

Ultimately the extent to which children are 'listened to' will vary from micro-level (within families) to the meso level (within institutions such as schools and in their neighbourhoods), and is likely to be affected by the individual characteristics of each particular child. As Roche suggests, 'there is no single voice of childhood' (Roche, 1996: 36). How children participate, then, needs to be set firmly in the cultural/social context of those particular children, though it would be a mistake to overemphasise the differences between minority children and white children - they are all 'children' and subject to status markers set by the adult world. Children use the language of participation and inclusion, encapsulated by the phrase used by many of them, 'having a say'. This in turn emphasises their embeddedness in sets of social relations whether familial, institutional, or within their communities. However, at the same time, they are aware that, as children, they are effectively denied a range of rights that adults take for granted. This awareness becomes problematic as children get older. Contrary to stereotypical images and/or adult fears, the evidence suggests that children and young people are not as rebellious and disaffected as much dominant imagery depicts them to be (Roberts and Sachdev, 1996). According children participatory rights does not necessarily mean that adults have to relinquish their power. We

need a more complex and relative approach to participation and rights which is less based upon a categorical distinction between adults and children and which takes account of differences between children according to age, experience, gender and cultural background. We should also be aware that children may not welcome 'participation' in the adult sense of the word, and we need a broader definition of citizenship, based on relationships between people, because functionalist definitions are too limited and fail to account for what happens in practice when adults consult with children and young people.

The examples from Project 2, in deprived areas, show that, from the perspective of children, participation in the first sense, participation by default, is limited. In other words, they did not seem to feel they shared in community life, whether in their schools or neighbourhoods. Their participation in the second sense, that of being actively involved in decisions that affect them, appeared to be virtually non-existent. In terms of civic participation, this is not really surprising given that they are positioned outside of democratic structures by their very nature as children, in that they do not attain the right to full adult citizenship, at least in terms of voting rights, until the age of 18. However, even where supposedly participatory structures such as school councils are in place, school students do not appear to be experiencing 'active participation' through them. Their experiences of both these aspects of participation (or lack of it) is likely to have implications for their perceptions of democratic institutions and structures later on when they do leave school, and this begs the question of whether or not a 'healthy scepticism' is learnt early on in life.

This suggests that if we want to explore and expand young people's active participation, we have to approach the issue of participation holistically. In other words, we need to look at both aspects of 'participation', and see how constrained young people are within their existing structures and settings (their 'passive participation') and how these constraints may affect willingness or capacity to participate, before attempts can be made to enhance their 'active participation'. We also need to explore the broader context and try to understand whether (even) adults in deprived or disempowered communities 'participate' in any meaningful sense. This links to the community cohesion

agenda outlined at the beginning of the paper. On the one hand, government appears to want (or even requires) children and young people to participate, but on the other hand, only on the government's terms. The recent documentation on community cohesion simultaneously constructs children and young people as the problem to be solved, and as the solution to the problem, but this raises a question of ethics: As Ennew (2000) notes,

It is not fair to expect the powerless to assume responsibility for transforming the hierarchical structures in which their lack of power is inscribed. Indeed, to do this, is to blame them for their situation, and reproduces the same inequalities in political and economic structures, while reinforcing the economic structures that produce and maintain inequalities. In this respect, participation is a kind of conjuring trick (p5).

CONCLUSIONS

The past 10 years have seen a very rapid growth in research and consultation with children and young people in the UK. However, there is an increasing awareness that "children and young people have been giving the same key messages to decision makers for several years, and ... despite this there is little evidence of... an impact on the development of strategic plans" (Donnelly, 2003) writing in the context of Liverpool, but widely applicable). Kirby, et al. (2003) rightly suggest that there is still work to be done in ensuring that participation is meaningful to young people, that it is effective in bringing about change, and that it is sustained (p3). It makes sense to build upon what has been done, not least because there may be a danger of 'consultation overload' or 'burn out' - asking children and young people similar questions, over and over again, without any sign of change, sends a negative message to them about the limits of participatory democracy. This is a question of politics and ethics that needs addressing. Children and young people are wary of tokenistic consultations. Kirby, et al. (2003) recognise this when they suggest that organisations need to change (p144), but this begs the question of precisely *how* change in organisations can be brought about, and *which* organisations need to change. Policy priorities may clash with participatory agendas, and this needs to be unpicked. Practitioners and researchers now need

to locate the barriers to effective participation. Ignoring that there are barriers, and not paying attention to context, is likely to lead to frustration and disappointment. There is overwhelming evidence now from many sources, participatory projects, research reports, evaluations, audits, and so on, that children are responsive, creative and measured in responding to calls for their views. The challenge now is not only to get adults to listen, but to act upon what they hear.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the children and the schools who participated in the research projects described in this chapter. She would also like to thank the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a charitable organisation that funds policy-related research in the UK, for supporting Project 1 (co-grant holder Professor M. P. M. Richards); and the Health Education Authority, for supporting Project 2. Thanks as well to Mike Jones, The Children's Society, for helpful comments and encouragement in writing this paper.

NOTES

1 By this I do not mean to deny young people's agency: the places where young people do appear to 'participate' in both senses are within their friendship networks and within their families, but I am not going to address these aspects of social life here (see Morrow 2001a).

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KEYWORDS Community; consultation; decision-making; participation; school; social capital

ABSTRACT Recent changes in social policy require local authorities in England to focus on 'community cohesion'. For example, Home Office documentation on community cohesion recognises that older children and young people are crucial to 'community' life, but simultaneously constructs older children and young people as the 'problem' to be solved, and the source of the 'solution': the key issues identified include 'intergenerational tensions' and the 'disengagement of young people from the local decision-making process'; and the solution is seen as enabling young people 'to contribute fully to the development of cohesive communities and to have their own, distinctive voice' (Home Office, 2002). This paper draws on data from two research projects that have explored children's accounts of their involvement in decision-making in their schools and communities (Morrow, 1998a, 2001a) and examines some of the problems and possibilities for children's and young people's participation. The paper briefly explores evidence for what is happening to the efforts being put into consultation/participation/seeking users' views that is currently being undertaken in England. The conclusion attempts to identify some of the factors that may be blocking effective participation (change), and suggests some implications for children's citizenship.

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