



Developing Children's Participation: Lessons from a Participatory IT Project

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Developing Children's Participation: *Lessons from a Participatory IT Project*

Abstract

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, advances in the sociology of childhood and the consumer rights movement have placed the spotlight on children's rights in society, challenging those working with children to examine how they share power and ensure that children's views are taken on board. While children's service practitioners are broadly supportive of the concept of participation and there are numerous examples of how children's participation has been realised in practice, many are unsure where to begin due to the range of options, considerations and challenges associated with participatory work. This article describes and analyses the process used by Barnardos in developing and implementing a participatory approach in a children's IT project in Galway City, Ireland. The process employed, the challenges encountered and the added value the participatory approach brought to the project are outlined. Finally, four broad lessons emerging from the experience are discussed, namely; the value of having a clear framework and reflective practice; that good participatory work is inextricably linked with good project management; that small efforts at participatory work can increase capacity and appetite for further work and that there is a role for informal approaches in the context of a formal participatory framework.

Introduction

'Children's participation' is a broad term, which means involving children in decisions that affect their lives, the lives of their community and the larger society in which they live. It involves supporting children and young people to think for themselves, to express their views effectively and to interact in a positive way with other people (Save the Children, 2003). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) upholds the rights of children to have their voices heard in matters which affect them. A body of theoretical and practice literature has emerged to support organisations in understanding and developing children's participation (Treseder, 1997; Lansdown, 2001; Shier, 2001; McAuley and Brattman, 2002; Kirby *et al*, 2003; and others). Cutler and Taylor's (2003, p.4) survey of the participation infrastructure among UK youth organisations highlighted that there is a considerable level of activity and broad support for children's participation among children and youth services, but found that many organisations face particular challenges in moving from principled support for children's participation to embedding that commitment in everyday practice, indicating a need for assistance with 'route mapping and path-finding'. By describing the experience of Barnardos, Galway in 'trying out' and learning from a participatory methodology in the context of a children's IT project, this article aims to add to the learning in relation to how children's services can begin to meaningfully translate their support for children's participation into practice. The analysis is based on a formative evaluation of the project undertaken by the author (Brady, 2004). After setting the context with a brief overview of key concepts, opportunities and challenges in relation to participation, the choices made in relation to participation by Barnardos are described and located within a framework, based on the work of Kirby *et al* (2003) and Treseder (1997). The article asks whether a participatory approach made a difference in this project and outlines a

number of lessons emerging that may be of interest to organisations interested in engaging in participatory work.

Children's Participation

In recent times, a number of trends, not necessarily compatible, have converged to give momentum to the cause of children's participation. Firstly, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child formally acknowledged for the first time in international law that children are the subjects of rights, rather than just recipients of adult protection (Lansdown, 2001). Article 12 of the Convention states that, if children are able to express their views, it is necessary for adults to create the opportunities for them to do so. Secondly, children are consumers of goods and services, and thus, in line with a growing consumer movement, are considered to have a right to exercise their preferences and influence the nature and quality of the goods and services made available to them (Sinclair, 2004). Thirdly, a growing body of work on the sociology of childhood, instead of subsuming children into the family, takes the life of the whole child as a starting point and studies children as an independent social group with its own culture, characteristics and meaning (Torrance, 1998; Jans, 2004). It is argued that children's participation enables children to democratically engage as citizens with their communities and society; leads to better decisions and services for children; can enhance children's skills and self-esteem; and better protects children (Sinclair and Franklin, 2000; Lansdown, 2001).

Ireland marked the new millennium with the launch of the National Children's Strategy, 'the most significant policy commitment to children and young people made by government in the history of the Irish State' (Pinkerton, 2004, p.120). The unifying vision of the National Children's Strategy is:

“An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential” (Government of Ireland, 2000, p.4).

One of the three goals of the National Children’s Strategy is that ‘children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity’ (Government of Ireland, 2000, p.30). Martin (2000, p.5) considers the empowerment of children as autonomous human beings with legal rights and with ability to participate fully in Irish society to be ‘the new millennium challenge’, which will involve Irish society accepting an evolving ‘child liberation philosophy’ to improve the lives of children.

Participation in Practice: Opportunities and Challenges

But in practical terms, how can children’s participation be achieved? Participatory practice has been defined as a means through which the voices of children and young people are heard; something that is concerned with and relevant to the lives of children and young people; a means to a political end; inclusive; and transformative, i.e. it needs to challenge the dominant discourse that represents children and young people as lacking the knowledge or competence to be participants in the policy debate (Setting the Agenda: Social Inclusion, Children and Young People, 2004). Literature on children’s participation has valuably illustrated that participation can have various levels and dimensions, stressing that there is no one ‘perfect’ model of participation, and what is appropriate will vary from case to case. Frameworks such as Hart’s Ladder of Participation (1992) and Treseder’s (1997) adaptation of the model, illustrate that different degrees of involvement each have the potential to be the most appropriate under a given set of circumstances. Moreover, children’s participation can relate to

public or private decisions; it can be informal or formal; small or large scale, one-off or continuous (Kirby et al, 2003). Children's decisions can relate to service planning and development, or to influencing policy. Practitioners are urged to be conscious of the diversity of children, taking age, disability, gender, race and social and economic circumstances into account (Sinclair, 2004). Examples have been provided of children's successful involvement in research, advocacy, conference participation, project design, management, monitoring and evaluation and other areas (Lansdown, 2001).

While there is consensus among practitioners that participation is a 'good thing', there is confusion as to what counts as participation, what participation is for, and exactly how participation impacts on social exclusion (Setting the Agenda: Social Inclusion, Children and Young People, 2004). Furthermore, Kirby and Bryson (2002) highlight that, while there is a fast growing literature about how and why to involve young people in making public decisions, there is very little evaluation and research about how best to do so and what impacts can be achieved. Some of the criticisms of participative approaches are that they are not representative, that models based on adult democratic principles risk replicating their disempowering aspects and that they will prove most attractive to the most confident and articulate young people. Critiques of general participatory work can apply to work with children – for example Cooke and Kothari (2001, p.14) argue that proponents of participatory approaches have been 'naïve about the complexities of power and power relations', while they, Kapoor (2002) and others have critiqued what they perceive as the inadequate theoretical basis of participatory development.

Given the range of reasons for and against engagement in participatory work with children and the countless possibilities associated with the process, it is not surprising

that organisations embracing a child liberation philosophy find it difficult to find a clear and meaningful starting point. As the following case study illustrates, Barnardos were keen to translate their theoretical support for children's participation into practice, but, like many children's services, were unsure regarding how best to operationalise this commitment. The steps taken by them in translating their principled support for participation into practice in relation to a children's IT project are discussed and analysed.

Case Study: Barnardos 'Computer Characters' Project

Context

Barnardos is Ireland's largest national voluntary childcare organisation, working with more than 12,000 children in over 30 locations around the country. The work of the organisation is underpinned by a commitment to the best interests of children and young people, promoting and respecting their rights in all of the work. Barnardos (West and Midlands Region) received funding for a pilot children's IT project from the national Children's Hour initiative in 2000. The 'Computer Characters' project wished to target the emerging 'digital divide' between those children who are benefiting and those who are being left behind by the information society (Becker, 2000), by increasing and improving the access to and usage of information technology by disadvantaged children and their families. As work to develop a children's participation policy for Barnardos was underway at the time funding was received for the project, the value of using the children's IT project as an opportunity to pilot and learn from a participatory methodology was recognised.

The Computer Characters project was of one year's duration initially, commencing training in October 2003. Ten-week training sessions took place at six sites, which included local youth projects and community centres. Thirty-three children participated

in the project, (ranging in age from 3 years to 13 years) and including specific groups for Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers. Representatives of local statutory and voluntary organisations sat on an advisory group to support Barnardos with the project design and implementation.

Project Evaluation

As assessment of the project's participatory methodology was a key area of interest for Barnardos, the Child & Family Research and Policy Unit (CFRPU) was commissioned by Barnardos to undertake a formative or process evaluation of the project. According to Rossi *et al.* (1999), process evaluations verify whether a programme has been delivered as intended to programme recipients. A process evaluation is suitable for a relatively new programme, to answer how well it has established its operations and services, with feedback helping to shape how the service develops. While process evaluation involves some assessment of the impact of the programme on participants, impact evaluation is not the primary consideration.

Project Methodology

'Computer Characters' was fundamentally a social inclusion project, which aimed to tackle disadvantage in relation to IT by combining a community development approach with a children's participation methodology. The community development approach involved consultation with local groups and agencies, targeting of children from excluded communities (both area based and communities of interest) and working with local community and voluntary groups, while the children's participation aspect of the project involved choosing an appropriate level of participation, implementing it and reflecting on it. How the project merged the two approaches is described under the following five headings:

- a. Increasing knowledge and understanding of participatory approaches among stakeholders.
- b. Deciding on the level of participation that was most feasible within the parameters of the project.
- c. Gaining access to and securing the participation of children and families.
- d. Encouraging active participation and shared decision-making during sessions and maintaining the ongoing participation of selected participants.
- e. Reflecting on and learning from the experience of the project.

a. Increasing knowledge and understanding of participatory approaches among stakeholders.

One of the most crucial questions for organisations undertaking participatory work is 'why are we doing this?' (Sinclair, 2004; McNeish, 1999). Barnardos believed that a participatory approach would help to tailor the project delivery to meet the needs of the target group, enhance children's self-esteem and responsibility, improve children's communication and decision-making skills and show respect for children and young people.

Before the project model was designed, Barnardos commissioned a literature review in relation to participatory approaches with children and training was provided to staff and Advisory Group members on 'consulting children'. This helped to enhance knowledge and understanding of what participation is and how a participatory approach could be adopted. While this training was valuable, it related mostly to formal consultation, and a more general focus on participatory approaches with children may have been more useful. The evaluation noted that, at this early stage, it would have been useful to have more discussions among stakeholders (staff, management, advisory group members), in order to surface attitudes and pre-conceptions in relation to children's rights or

abilities to participate, which, as McNeish (1999, p.199) points out, represent a 'hidden barrier' to participation in virtually all organisations.

b. Deciding on the most feasible level of participation.

Participation literature stresses the importance of clarity and realism regarding the extent and possibility of change in the use of participatory approaches, with genuine and beneficial forms of consultation on a smaller scale preferable to grandiose, tokenistic gestures (McNeish, 1999; Kirby *et al*, 2003). Given the one-year funding timescale within which the project had to operate, Barnardos felt that there would not be time to build ownership of the wider project structure and that the most meaningful level of participation would be achieved through the direct training provided as part of the project. Even within the training, there were some parameters in relation to what was desired – for example, the project had to develop participants' IT skills. Using the Tresder model (1997, p.7), therefore, the level of participation chosen was 'adult initiated, shared decisions with children', which in this case means that adults have the initial idea for the project and bring the groups together but young people are involved in every step of the planning and implementation, including taking decisions.

Sinclair (2004) stresses that it is incumbent on those involved in participation work to ensure that their practice reaches appropriate ethical standards. An ethical statement was developed by the project advisory group, outlining procedures in relation to consent, safety, confidentiality, voluntary participation and complaints procedure. Procedures were put in place in line with this ethical statement – for example, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and consent forms for the project and the evaluation had to be signed by parents.

c. Gaining access to and securing the participation of children and families.

The project wished to target families who were most disadvantaged in relation to IT. It gained information about potential participants via an advisory group, who collectively possessed a wide range of knowledge about groups and areas in the city experiencing social and / or economic disadvantage and the current profile of services for these families. Local youth and community groups were identified to act as an interface between the project and participants, selecting participants that they felt would enable the project to meet its objectives. While this approach worked well and was the most feasible in terms of the project timescale, it is worth noting that groups and areas identified that did not have well-established youth or community groups were precluded from participating, reflecting Sinclair's (2004) point that children with minimal involvement with local agencies are generally less likely to be included in participation activities. The evaluation also identified a need for clearer guidelines and additional support for the selection of participants to ensure that the project reaches its desired target group, i.e. families with little experience of or access to computers.

d. Encouraging active participation and shared decision-making during sessions and maintaining ongoing attendance.

The child-centred, participatory approach adopted in training was in line with guidelines for engaging children in participatory approaches (McNeish, 1999; Sinclair and Franklin, 2000; Lansdown, 2001). Ground rules were developed at the outset by the trainers in conjunction with participants and the objectives and rationale of the course were clearly outlined to children. Children had numerous opportunities to express their feelings and opinions about any aspect of the course – including through feedback forms, a suggestion box and a complaints box. Children were asked to identify their interests and training was designed to fit in with these interests as much as possible. Learning to use the Internet to look up information about their favourite football team or

singer, using a scanner to scan photos of their favourite people and things and using a word document to paste photos and write about their lives are examples of how learning IT was made relevant to the children. Children could take the lead on their own training including choosing games and software to use and deciding a theme for a group project. Children took part in self-directed learning, but could ask for assistance if required. Parents were encouraged to get involved, were kept informed regarding the progress of the course and were asked for written and verbal feedback about their child's learning and enjoyment. Those parents attending sessions were encouraged to allow their child to take the lead and not direct them in their choices. Throughout the course, there was an emphasis on fun, sharing and celebration of achievements. Trainers adapted to the dynamics of each group (influenced by age, parental attitudes, culture, gender and other factors) as much as possible, while retaining a focus on broad learning objectives. For example, a small group of pre-school children living in a residential centre for asylum seekers and refugees were trained by multi-lingual trainers on-site, using mobile technology to facilitate access by families.

Children who joined the training groups maintained strong attendance in the majority of cases. Just a small proportion (less than 10 per cent) of children attended erratically or dropped out. While this is a normal occurrence in all training groups, the project paid attention to the range of factors, both external and internal, that impact on a child's ability to participate. While many of the external factors were beyond the control of the project (i.e. attitude of parents, interests of the child, other commitments), efforts were made to identify and overcome barriers occurring internally in the group, (such as shyness, lack of confidence, timing of sessions) in order to support ongoing attendance and a healthy level of participation. The group leaders went to great lengths to make children feel welcome and important. Following a recommendation in the Interim Evaluation Report, additional group work was included in the course to add a social,

interactive and creative dimension, which appeared to have a positive impact – certainly the level of participation was high in the second phase.

e. Engaging in ongoing reflection and learning

Participants were introduced to the evaluator at the outset and consented to their participation in the evaluation and to the attendance of the evaluator at training sessions. The evaluator met with the project co-ordinator, trainers and advisory group regularly to reflect on the process and outcomes. Thus, the formative evaluation of the 'Computer Characters' project enabled the stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of the factors in the project environment that influenced outcomes and to feed these back into the ongoing work of the project.

Challenges associated with the participatory approach

Needless to say, there were plenty of challenges in implementing a participatory approach. Firstly, the children came from school and home environments, which generally did not encourage them to take a lead, so was not always easy for them and their parents to accept or understand a participatory model. For example, where parents took part in sessions, they would, in some cases, direct the child regarding what to do on the computer, which was contrary to the project's approach. Children's participation literature stresses the importance of surfacing and exploring attitudes to children's participation among adults (McNeish, 1999). While this was done with other adult stakeholders in the project (i.e. trainers, advisory group members, staff), more discussion with parents about the 'what and why' of participation would have been valuable. However, feedback from some parents suggests that they noticed the way the trainers worked with children and learned from them regarding how they should let their child take the lead. Secondly, while a participatory approach emphasises what

children want, the trainers found that children don't always know what they want to do. In some cases, information and experience has to be provided before they can identify the possibilities. In this project, the Co-ordinator brainstormed with the children all the things they could possibly do and showed them additional options before they chose what they themselves wanted to do.

The third challenge brings us back to the dichotomy between the divergent forces of children's empowerment and consumer rights driving the case of children's participation. While this project was rooted in a desire to encourage participation as an empowering activity for children, when given a choice regarding content, many young people showed a preference for what could be considered consumerist activities. For example, one older group (9-12 years) were oriented to individual interests, such as downloading music or ring tones, while children of all ages were drawn to computer games, particularly those featuring famous cartoon characters and car racing. While the younger and more inexperienced computer users could develop keyboard, literacy and motor skills through playing games which they would not otherwise have an opportunity to do, the older group were reasonably computer and internet literate and so, had the trainers merely followed their lead, there would have been little skills development or group work. In this case the trainers encouraged the young people to develop a web page and learn morphing, which they agreed to and enjoyed. For the trainers, therefore, getting a balance between teaching and facilitating, leading and being led was a challenge, as was the decision regarding the degree to which pursuing individual consumer desires was acceptable in a project designed to develop young people's skills, abilities and capacities.

Did the participatory approach make a difference?

Evaluation of the project found that it was very successful – children derived great enjoyment from the project, their IT skills developed and they had an opportunity to practice social and group work skills. However, the key concern here is not so much what emerged, as what difference the participatory approach made to the project and to the outcomes for children. While comparison of a participatory and non-participatory approach would be necessary to adequately answer this question, nonetheless some observations regarding how the participatory approach offered ‘added value’ in this project can be made.

Participatory approaches recognise the importance to children of physical places and social contexts in which they lead their lives, whether in formal or informal spaces, such as school, services or home (Moss and Petrie, 2002). A key criterion for genuine participatory work is relevance to children’s lives and a link to their day-to-day experience (Lansdown, 2001). This projects’ approach to children’s IT training is in line with recommendations from research (Facer *et al*, 2001), which emphasises that children are motivated to acquire computer skills by non-technological objectives, such as personal communication and peer group interests, and that training should be based on its relevance to children at the present time. Facer *et al* (2001) argue that to overcome current societal inequalities in relation to IT, it is important to contest dominant constructions of ‘valuable’ ICT skills and work with young people to develop their vision of an information society, while Valentine *et al* (2002) urge that policies to promote an inclusive ‘information society’ recognise that children’s use of computers is not only about the broad-scale distribution of resources but about children’s everyday social relations. Facilitating children to take the lead on content meant that the children took the lead in creating relevance. Furthermore, children were viewed as actors,

rather than respondents, thus allowing for the creation of imaginative actions rooted in their daily lives (Tisdall and Davis, 2004; Hill et al, 2004).

Furthermore, the participatory approach facilitated trainers to respond and adapt to the diversity of ages and cultural backgrounds among participants. Because trainers took the lead from the children as regards the content they desired, it was in fact easier for them to encourage and respond to cultural diversity, rather than depending on their own or others opinions regarding what is culturally appropriate.

Children's rights advocates argue that participatory work with children enhances children's self-esteem and confidence and can help to develop leadership skills. In the case of this project, children grew in confidence over the course of the training. The evaluator observed a confidence among children regarding their rights to express themselves to trainers and to take initiative in making suggestions. There was also a sense of ownership in relation to IT, wherein the children were supported to express and communicate their own social reality through the medium of technology. The values of sharing and respect for others promoted by the trainers were also evident in most cases.

Discussion

A number of key learning points in relation to participatory work emerge from this project. These are the importance of a clear framework and reflective practice; that good participation work is inextricably linked with good project management; that small scale participation can have larger scale impact; and finally that there is value in undertaking informal approaches within a formal framework. These points are each discussed in turn.

1. *A clear framework and reflective practice*

Participation literature stresses that, to engage honestly with children, it is crucial that those involved in participatory work thoroughly think through the decision-making context and the appropriate level of power-sharing (Sinclair, 2004). This project was greatly enhanced by the fact that it worked from a clearly defined framework (participatory approach), developed at the outset on the basis of a literature review. The formative evaluation process helped to review, reflect on and refine the project development. For all involved with the project, the framework provided a clear ethos and direction, without which the participatory work may have lacked focus or meaning. Furthermore, ongoing reflection on the emerging practice meant that stakeholders' understanding of participation developed and evolved.

2. *Good participatory work is inextricably linked with good project management*

The project evaluation identified that a range of critical success factors in the direct training and wider project environments such as secure funding, advisory group expertise, skilled staff, as well as the features of the training model outlined earlier, created the environment in which good participatory work could take place. The lesson, therefore, is that the outcomes from participatory work are heavily influenced by the wider project structure, skills, relationships and procedures, as well as by the specific actions in relation to securing and developing participation.

3. *Doing participation on a small-scale increases capacity and appetite for further work*

While children's participation literature recommends that services start small and develop genuine participation, the ideal scenario is that participation and the active listening to children ultimately becomes part and parcel of the formal and informal ways in which organisations make decisions (Kirby *et al*, 2003). Among the 'Computer

Characters' evaluation recommendations were that the level of children's participation be extended in the next phase of the project to include the wider project structure (for example, children could be represented on the project advisory group). Apart from this particular project, the challenge for Barnardos is to ensure that the organisation, both regionally and nationally, develops a genuinely participative structure and culture, ultimately becoming a child and youth centred organisation, wherein children and young people are involved in making decisions on a daily basis, in many ways and with varying degrees of influence (Kirby *et al*, 2003, Sinclair, 2004). While this project represents just one step of many for Barnardos towards becoming a child and youth centred organisation, its impact in terms of increased learning, confidence and understanding in the organisation and among external stakeholders (i.e. advisory group members, local community and youth groups) has been significant. Witnessing and experiencing the genuinely positive outcomes of a child centred approach, even on a small scale, has raised the profile of participatory work among stakeholders and increased their capacity and inclination to pursue a participatory agenda in other areas.

4. Informal participation work can work well in the context of a formal framework

In the literature, a distinction is made between formal and informal mechanisms to support children's participation. Formal mechanisms provide opportunities for children and young people to influence decisions, such as a youth parliament or consultation meetings, while informal approaches enable children to express their views and have them listened to in less structured manner. There is much more in the children's participation literature about formal than informal approaches, yet informal approaches, such as those used in the direct training in this project, are essential to child-focused practice (Kirby *et al*, 2003). Allowing children to take control in an informal manner, but within a formal participatory framework, that explains and justifies the rationale, was an approach that met with success in this particular project. Stakeholders found it valuable

that the methodology was explicitly articulated as it provided guidance for daily interaction moments as well as a reference for bigger decisions. This marriage of the formal and informal may be attractive to organisations concerned that their approach is not sufficiently 'participatory' (Setting the Agenda: Social Inclusion, Children and Young People, 2004).

Conclusion

As noted at the outset, the emphasis on children's rights has emerged primarily through consumer movements, legislative change and the growing field of the sociology of childhood. Barnardos' decision to adopt a participatory approach in this IT project was motivated by a desire to develop and innovate in relation to good practice in child care and to operationalise the intent of the National Children's Strategy, which emphasises children's rights to have a say in matters that affect them. Designated funding, with scope for innovation gave Barnardos the 'space' to try out and learn from a participatory approach, from which they have gained greater expertise, understanding and confidence in relation to participatory work. Barnardos experience in this particular case shows that the participatory approach brought an added value in terms of relevance to children's social reality, increased confidence and cultural compatibility. The experience of the project has been that it is useful to start small, and do participation well rather than attempting too much before the organisation has a well-developed awareness, understanding and competence in relation to participation. Research, evaluation and training were critical in terms of drawing out learning and promoting common understanding. While the degree of participation was small, the spread of the awareness and learning has been great, both internally within Barnardos and externally among stakeholders in the project.

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