

Primary-aged children's participation activities that influence adult decision-making: a scoping literature review

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Abstract

Children's participation lies at the intersection of children's rights and the 'new' sociology of childhood. Informed by these frameworks, this scoping literature review identified seven empirical studies involving primary-aged children's participation in adult decision-making; employing the search string: (child OR pupil) AND primary AND (empower* OR participat* OR consult* OR involve* OR influenc* OR decision*). This review describes a range of characteristics associated with these children's participatory activities, embedded within consultations, pupil voice circle meetings, participatory action research projects, pupil councils and membership of a strategic board. The type of adult decisions being influenced included issues relating to school domestics, teaching and learning, the local community and local government. This review offers guidance to those aiming to develop children's participation in adult decision-making by illuminating factors that can support this process.*

Key words

Children; Participation; Influence; Decision-making

Introduction

This scoping literature review was undertaken to locate the relevant literature and examine the breadth of research available to inform my work to develop children's participatory activities within primary schools.

Primary-aged children have been a neglected focus within voice and participation research and "...many children continue to be denied opportunities to influence matters affecting their lives." (Davey, 2010). The existing literature reports limited empirical evidence from the UK regarding the types of primary-aged children's participatory activities that influence adult decision-making (Mager and Nowak, 2012; Crowley, 2012). To my knowledge, there have not been any scoping reviews of the academic, peer-reviewed literature on the different participatory practices that enable primary-aged children to influence adult decision-making.

This literature review is informed by two frameworks: children's rights, specifically articles 12 and 13 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) and the 'new' sociology of childhood which emphasises children's

competence and knowledge, and their ability to participate as actors within their social world (James et.al, 1998).

In practice, children's participation is a highly contested term. It describes a spectrum of activities that are variously framed as a ladder (Hart, 1992) or pathway (Shier, 2001). Defining the term 'participation' is particularly problematic in an environment where the term 'voice' is frequently articulated as 'participation', particularly in school settings. To avoid the inclusion of the non-participatory practices of 'manipulation', 'decoration' and 'tokenism', as per the bottom three rungs of Hart's ladder (Hart, 1992); this study utilises Shier's framework which offers a less hierarchical model, relating children's participation to a range of five levels that address an organisation's commitment to 'openings', 'opportunities' and 'obligations'. According to Shier's framework, progress is not necessarily related to moving up these levels, which range from level 1, 'being listened to' to level 5, 'sharing power and responsibility for decision-making with adults'; instead participation is acknowledged as a more fluid state, where different levels may be appropriate at different stages of the participation journey.

Since the UK Government ratified the UNCRC in 1991, successive governments have promoted a range of initiatives to support the participation of children and young people in decisions that impact upon their lives (Davey, 2010); although, as yet, Wales is alone in embedding the UNCRC into domestic law (Wales.gov.uk, 2012). Following the publication of Dunford's (2010) independent review of the role of the Children's Commissioner for England, the coalition Government 'accepted in principle' (Long, 2012) his recommendations, including strengthening the role by incorporating the functions of the Children's Rights Director. Only time will tell whether this serves to address the four UK Children's Commissioners concerns that the 'mainstreaming of children's participation has yet to happen' (UK Children's Commissioners, 2011); suggesting a gap between the principles in the UNCRC articles 12 and 13 and what happens in practice.

The aims and outcomes of children's participatory practices are located within various discourses including children's rights, school improvement, citizenship education and service improvement (Mager and Nowak, 2012). To illustrate the relationship between the children's participatory practices and the types of adult decisions being made, this review sets out to answer three questions: 1) What are the characteristics of the children's participation strategies employed? 2) What are the characteristics of the decisions taken by adults that are influenced by children's participation? 3) What factors appear to support primary-aged children's participation in adult decision-making?

Methods

To map this field of study, a scoping literature review was undertaken to find out what is known in the academic literature about the different types of primary-aged children's participatory activities that influence adult decision-making. Assessment of methodological quality does not form part of a scoping remit; rather, this scoping exercise provides a 'descriptive account of available research' (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). Electronic searches of the following databases were used: Educational

Research Complete, Education Service, Education-line and Web of Science. The search for international, peer-reviewed empirical studies, published in English between January 2001 and March 2012, was conducted using the search string: (child* OR pupil) AND primary AND (empower* OR participat* OR consult* OR involve* OR influenc* OR decision*).

The selection criteria were set to provide a focus for the review within the limited timescale that was made available to undertake this study. The criteria for inclusion were that the studies reported: (1) participation involving children aged 4 to 11 years, occurring in or out of school; (2) empirical data suggesting a relationship between children's participation and adult decision-making and (3) initiatives located in the UK. Five exclusion criteria were employed: (1) systematic literature reviews (however, their references were manually searched); (2) 'grey' literature; (3) anecdotal reporting of data published elsewhere; (4) studies involving parent/carer – child relationships and (5) studies involving decisions about an individual child.

An initial selection excluded articles on the basis of duplicates and the content identified from titles and abstracts. The reference sections of studies selected at this stage were manually searched for relevant articles. Bibliographies of key authors in the field were also manually searched. Two researchers, working independently, selected studies based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria. Had there been any disagreement, a third researcher's opinion would have been sought; however, this was not necessary.

Researchers piloted a reviewing template to pose key questions of the studies selected and ensure optimal data generation. This template was then employed to describe a set of characteristics attributed to the children's participatory activities, the types of adult decisions they influence and the factors that appear to enable or inhibit children's participatory practices. The three key questions posed include:

1. *What characteristics define 'children's participation'?*
 - a. What type of activity is being undertaken?
 - b. At what level does children's participation appear to be operating? Based on Shier's (2001) model, chosen to capture movement between the five levels, where children are: (1) being listened to; (2) supported to express their views; (3) have their views taken into account; (4) involved in decision-making processes and (5) are sharing power and responsibility for decision-making with adults.
 - c. Is the activity on-going or time-limited?
 - d. Is adult facilitation provided internally or externally to the host organisation?
 - e. Does participation appear to be driven by a proactive, child-led agenda or in reaction to an adult-led agenda?
2. *What characteristics define the adult decisions being influenced by children's participation?*
 - a. What discourse is driving the participation agenda?
 - b. On which issues are decisions being taken?
3. *What factors appear to act to enable or inhibit children's participation?*

- a. Quotations were identified from the selected texts to illuminate issues that the authors describe as acting to enable or inhibit participation.

Findings

The initial search yielded 178 articles; reduced to 37 after the screening of abstracts. A further four articles were included from manual searches. After full text readings, seven articles met the inclusion criteria (Bragg, 2007; Burton et. al., 2010; Cox and Robinson-Pant, 2008; Hall, 2010; Maitles and Duechar (Case Study A only), 2006; Spicer and Evans, 2006 and Veitch, 2009).

A relationship between the children's participatory activities and adult decision-making was evident from the study context, the data generated and the adult decisions being made. The data reported in all seven studies was generated using a range of qualitative methods including: interviews, focus groups, observations and document analyses. None of the studies selected explicitly defined what they meant by 'children's participation', instead drawing on numerous frameworks within the literature (Shier, 2001; Hart, 1992).

Whilst acknowledging that this list may not be definitive, searches of references in relevant articles and bibliographies of key authors were taken to ensure the list was as complete as possible.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics attributed to the participatory activities and the types of adult decisions being taken. The participatory activities were school-based in six out of the seven studies and included school councils, participatory action research projects and pupil voice circle meetings. In the one community-based study, the participation process involved consultations with children and their membership on a Partnership Board. Children's participation spanned Shier's five levels and was an on-going activity in three school-based studies, the other time-limited projects occurred both in school and out of school. All in-school, time-limited projects were led by external facilitators, whilst all in-school, on-going practices were led internally. Two of the studies, both in-school, were developed from a child-led, proactive agenda. The others were developed reactively, in response to an adult-led agenda. The types of adult decisions being influenced by the children's participatory practices were predominantly domestic improvements in school and teaching and learning, other adult decisions being influenced, related to local community links and local government strategy.

Table 1: Characteristics attributed to children's participation and the adult decisions being taken

Selected study	Characteristics of children's participation				Characteristics of adult decision making		
	Participatory activity	Level of participation (Shier, 2001)	On-going / time-limited activity	Provision of adult leadership: Internal or external	Child-led proactive or adult-led reactive agenda	Discourse driving the participation agenda	Issues on which adult decisions are taken
Bragg 2007	School-based. Mixed-aged pupil voice circle meetings.	1 to 5	On-going	Internal	Proactive	Children's Rights; School Improvement	School domestics; Teaching and learning
Burton et.al. 2010	School-based. Pupil-led action research projects.	3 and 4	Time-limited	External	Two projects: one proactive, one reactive.	Children's Rights; Citizenship Education	School domestics; Teaching and learning
Cox & Robinson-Pant 2008	School-based. Pupil-led action research projects.	4	Time-limited	External	Reactive	School Improvement; Children's Rights	Teaching and learning
Hall 2010	School-based. Focus group consultations.	3	Time-limited	External	Reactive	School Improvement	School domestics; Teaching and learning
Maitles & Deuchar 2006	School-based. Pupil Councils.	2 and 4	On-going	Internal	Proactive	Children's Rights	School domestics; Teaching and learning; Local community
Spicer & Evans 2006	Community-based. Consultations or participation in strategic forums.	1 and 5	Time-limited	External	Reactive	Improved Services; Children's Rights	Local government
Veitch 2009	School-based. School Council.	1	On-going	Internal	Reactive	Children's Rights	School domestics

Table 2 describes factors that appear to enable or inhibit children's participatory practices. A range of enabling and inhibitory factors are described that fall under the key headings of: defining children's participation; resources; organisational commitment; engagement by children and engagement by adults.

Table 2: Factors acting to enable or inhibit children's participatory practices (article quotations in italics)

Enabling factors	Inhibiting factors
<p>1. Defining children's participation</p> <p><i>"...rights-based rationale for children's participation was strongly articulated..."</i></p>	<p>1. Defining children's participation</p> <p><i>"...poor understanding of the concept of 'participation' ...lack of commitment from staff to implement participatory practice."</i></p>
<p>2. Resources</p> <p><i>"... opportunities for children and teachers to have different kinds of conversations..."</i></p> <p><i>"... practical opportunities for improving decision making..."</i></p> <p><i>"... allocated project time..."</i></p>	<p>2. Resources</p> <p><i>"... children did not have the time and space to develop their own insights, abilities and directions."</i></p> <p><i>"... investment required to change professional attitudes to children's participation ...build capacities and skills within organisations"</i></p>
<p>3. Organisational commitment</p> <p><i>"... a commitment on the part of the adult team ...ensuring that children's views could be acted upon..."</i></p> <p><i>"...an intellectual champion ...to articulate a clear rationale for student voice..."</i></p> <p><i>"[when] ...at the centre of the school-wide participative practice, the focus on democracy appeared to be at its strongest."</i></p> <p><i>"...ensure that children's views are taken seriously by promoting them with school staff..."</i></p>	<p>3. Organisational commitment</p> <p><i>"...some teachers ... tokenistic"</i></p> <p><i>"...not the principles of democracy that necessarily need to be challenged but the processes..."</i></p> <p><i>"...institutional constraints... on both children's and teachers' scope for decision making..."</i></p> <p><i>"...limited scope for embedding practices if they are not permeated across the whole school."</i></p> <p><i>".. areas of decision making ... considered as 'not open' for</i></p>

4. Engagement by children

"...engage children from more marginalised groups..."

"... prepare children to participate through developing their confidence and skills."

"...different approaches may be needed to engage different groups..."

"... using accessible language ...and holding meetings in informal settings."

"... appropriate methods are employed to access ...the views of younger children."

... finding techniques to build successfully on what children do implicitly know."

"The emotional vocabulary used by the children... appeared to support [them] to... articulate clearly..."

"... key to the notion of 'representation' is the creation of dialogue ..."

"...participation officers were regarded as important ...in actively drawing in [child] participants ..."

5. Engagement by adults

"... teachers' recognised [the] powerful potential for transforming their own practice..."

"...development of teacher thinking and action as well as children's..."

"...recognise [that] ...change involvesteacher voice as well as student voice."

"...articulating to children the parameters of [adults'] influence on decision making... "

discussion."

"...tensions between local partnerships' abilities to determine their programmes and Central Government priorities..."

"... commitment is required at ...national level and through multi-agency structures..."

4. Engagement by children

"the environment ...was not child-friendly..."

"... a dialogue between the councillors and the decision maker was not formed."

"lack of dialogue ...gave councillors no opportunity to develop an argument...."

5. Engagement by adults

"...teacher's ...fear of anarchy ..."

"... limited experience of children's participation..."

"...the struggle around handing over decision making to children..."

Discussion

This review contributes to the limited empirical evidence available in the wider literature (Mager and Nowak, 2012; Crowley, 2012) by reporting on children's participatory activities that influence adult decision-making in the UK.

Characteristics of children's participation

These findings strongly suggest that when primary-aged children engage in participatory practices designed to influence adult decision-making, their level of participation can extend beyond simply being consulted to their being actively involved in the decision-making process (table 1). The characteristics of the participatory approaches described, reveal a range of activities spanning Shier's five levels (2001), with several studies working across different levels at different stages, related to the specific needs of the task in-hand. The four studies that appeared to be working at level 4, with children involved in decision-making processes (Bragg, 2007; Burton et.al., 2010; Cox and Robinson-Pant, 2008; Maitles and Deuchar, 2006), were employing three different approaches to children's participation, to include: pupil council; pupil voice circle meetings and action research projects. Those studies that appeared to operate at level 5, with children sharing power and responsibility for decision-making (Bragg, 2007; Spicer and Evans, 2006), were achieving this level through children's involvement in pupil voice circle meetings or through their membership of strategic boards.

A primary school's commitment to both participatory principles and practices was evident in two of the studies (Bragg, 2007; Maitles and Deuchar, 2006) where the school-based activities were characterised as on-going and child-led, with a member of school staff facilitating the participatory process.

The Veitch (2009) study reported on a school, that despite being committed to operate a school council, failed to evidence any level of commitment to higher level participatory practice; in effect, restricting children's participation to Shier's (2001) level 1, with adults only listening to children's views. Concerns about the limitations of school councils to offer opportunities for children to genuinely participate and influence adult decision-making have been expressed elsewhere in the literature (Alderson, 2002). Often referred to as tokenism (Hart, 1992), it risks disengaging a younger generation from the democratic process.

Although the studies selected indicate that in-school participatory practices, led by external adult facilitators, are restricted to time-limited activities; one of the projects reported in the Burton et.al. study (2010,) suggests that in-school, child-led participatory initiatives can be successfully delivered by external adult facilitators. What we fail to learn from any of these studies is whether externally-resourced adult facilitators stimulate a school into resourcing a longer-term commitment to on-going children's participatory practices.

Characteristics of the adult decisions being influenced by children's participation

These findings demonstrate that primary-aged children's participation can impact on a broad range of issues beyond the more traditional domestic school improvements

frequently reported in the literature. This review shows that children can influence decisions involving teaching and learning, through participatory approaches including pupil voice circle meetings (Bragg, 2007) and participatory action research projects (Burton et.al., 2010; Cox and Robinson-Pant, 2008). It also indicates that children can impact on issues involving the wider local community, through approaches including a pupil council (Maitles and Deuchar, 2006) and their involvement in local government initiatives (Spicer and Evans, 2006).

In illuminating the adult motives that appear to be driving the children's participatory activities in the studies identified, four key discourses are revealed to include children's rights, school improvement, citizenship education and service improvement.

In the children's rights' discourse, underpinned by the UNCRC (Lundy, 2007), children's participatory rights have been more evident in the medical, social work and legal fields than in education (Johnson, 2004). To ensure children's participation moves beyond a statement of intent to effective practice, organisational commitment to resource a rights-based approach to participation seems necessary. Although only a small sample, those studies that demonstrated a commitment to both participatory principles and practices were delivering an on-going, child-led participatory agenda (Bragg, 2007; Maitles and Deuchar, 2006). Fulfilling, what may be considered, a gold standard for children's participation as defined by Save the Children (2005): 'Participation is about having the opportunity to express a view, influencing decision-making and achieving change. Children's participation is an informed and willing involvement of all children... in any matter concerning them'. The domination of the school environment in these studies brings its own challenges; the 'willing involvement' of children in any school-based activity should be framed within an understanding that only when children have the freedom to dissent, can consent be fully realised (Macer, 2009).

In the school improvement discourse (Lodge, 2005), children's participation in adult decision-making is viewed as a tool to improve school functioning (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). However, much of the research literature that demonstrates the positive contribution of pupils to improved teaching and learning, relates to the participation of pupils of secondary school age (Roberts and Nash, 2009). Three of the review's studies involved participatory practices that impacted on school improvement (Bragg, 2007; Cox and Robinson-Pant, 2008; Hall, 2010); extending to children's ability to influence targets within their School Development Plan. As reported by Fielding and Bragg (2003), the motives for seeking the participation of children in decisions relating to school improvement need to be explicit, because they impact not only on what the children are asked to do, their consent to do it and which children are invited to participate, but critically the motives impact on the outcomes from their participation.

In this review, citizenship education did not feature prominently as an apparent motive for undertaking participatory practice; with only one study clearly involving participation within its citizenship curriculum (Burton et.al., 2010). Although citizenship education is not yet a statutory requirement within the primary curriculum, children's participation has an important role within the citizenship education

discourse (Wyness, 2006). It provides opportunities for pupils to experience democracy and to develop knowledge, skills and behaviours to enable them to be informed and make positive contributions as active citizens (Citizenship Advisory Group, 1998).

The value of children and young people participating in public decision-making about policies and services that affect them is well recognised within the service improvement discourse (Kirby et.al, 2003); with the principle gaining increased policy prominence in the UK (Tisdall and Davis, 2004). One of the studies selected in this review described practices that were embedded within a policy framework that set out explicitly to facilitate children's participation in local strategic decision-making. The opportunity for children to participate in strategic level decision-making through initiatives such as the Children's Fund (Spicer and Evans, 2006), indicates that when children's participation is embedded into local strategic partnership structures as a policy obligation, children can and do influence decisions taken on behalf of their wider local community.

Factors acting to support primary-aged children's participation in adult decision-making

Drawing on these findings, several factors are identified as important for enabling the development of primary-aged children's participation in adult decision-making: a clear definition of 'children's participation', provision of necessary resources, organisational commitment and the proactive engagement of both children and adults (table 2).

First, the term 'children's participation' should be clearly defined to allow for an unambiguous understanding of its purpose and the extent of the commitment required from all involved to enable effective participatory practices to be executed. There are evidently a wide range of activities that are clustered under the heading 'participation' (Cornwall, 2008); probably due in large part to the disparate way in which the literature defines and operationalises the construct that is 'children's participation' (Roberts and Nash, 2009). As argued by Cairns (2006), 'to make progress in promoting change in reality, greater clarity is needed about the purposes of initiatives which purport to promote children and young people's participation'. This review supports the wider literature in calling for 'children's participation' to not only be clearly defined, but for that definition to be informed by both children's rights and the new sociology of childhood (Mayall, 2000). Such a definition would assert children the right to have their knowledge and competences recognised by adults; thus affording children genuine agency.

Secondly, organisational commitment to both the principles and practices of children's participation is needed to ensure, not only the provision of dedicated time and space for participatory practices, but also resources to enable the provision of appropriately skilled adults as 'participatory champions'. The role of a skilled adult facilitator has been shown to be important to not only articulate a clear rationale for the practice within organisations but to provide the necessary support to ensure positive outcomes for the children and ensure that no child is excluded from the process (Franklin and Sloper, 2005).

The evidence presented in this review supports other findings that suggest that embedding participatory activities within organisation-wide practices can limit tokenistic activity and enable children to experience real change within their environment (Whitty and Wisby, 2007). Organisational commitment to the principles of participation is also necessary to avoid limiting the areas of discussion to 'safe' topics, such as food and playgrounds.

Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) argue that there is a 'need for a critical re-examination of how we theorise and practise children's participation' to address children's entitlement to respect and recognition and that this need should centre on the role of a dialogic model (Lodge, 2005). Several enabling factors identified within this review support a key role for dialogue between children and between children and adults; to ensure that children not only gain a good understanding of the issues and thus develop persuasive arguments, but also to enable them to develop a shared understanding with adults regarding the parameters of decision-making. This impacts not only on children but on the adults too. There is also the need for commitment from the wider community of child-focused organisations, to enable the promotion of children's participatory practices within multiagency settings. Further, to avoid central government priorities from over-riding local good intentions, this wider commitment is necessary across local, regional and national levels.

Another key issue that arises from these findings, is the need for adults to proactively enable the engagement of all children, by not only providing child-friendly environments and practices, but by investing in the development of children's emotional vocabulary; enabling them to articulate their views and ideas and engage in effective dialogue with other children and adults. The empowering of children to use their competence and knowledge to inform adult decisions that impact upon their lives is a key tenet of the new sociology of childhood (James et.al., 1998). These findings suggest that this proactive engagement should be extended to the issue of genuine representation in cases where only a select group of children are actively involved in the participatory process, for example in school councils; where it is essential that councillors have opportunities for effective dialogue with their constituency.

This review also highlights the value in proactively enabling the engagement of adults, by developing their confidences, skills and experiences; especially when adults have concerns relating to real or perceived negative implications of children's expressed agency. There is also the unquestionable issue of adult agency within the school setting, where the combination of government and school-prescribed policies and practices can serve to limit teacher autonomy; suggesting that to realise effective children's participatory practices in schools, teacher agency may need to be addressed alongside pupil agency.

Conclusion

Building on the extensive children's participation literature from within the field of international development (Hart and Schwab, 1997), the principles underlying children's participation in adult decision-making are finding an increasing body of support within the UK. Children's ideas and unique insights are being recognised as

providing valuable intelligence to influence those decisions that adults make in the interest of children (Arnott, 2008; Tisdall and Bell, 2006; Badham, 2004). However, when considering the body of literature excluded from this study, it appears that primary-aged children's participation initiatives have tended to focus on the participatory practice as a goal with a focus on providing children with participatory skills; rather than children's participation as a tool for influencing the decisions that adults make on their behalf.

Following the UK's endorsement of the UNCRC, there has been an ever increasing body of literature relating to participatory activities involving children and young people; fuelling the importance given to their involvement in policy making. However, the literature tends to be describing the activities or focussing on impact on the children, rather than seeking to analyse the effectiveness of the activities on the professionals, organisations and services involved (Cairns, 2006; Kirby and Bryson, 2002).

Although acknowledging that these findings relate to only a small number of studies, the guidance presented is offered to inform those practitioners planning to develop primary-aged children's participation in adult decision-making and to the wider research community, who are working to fill the current dearth of empirical evidence on how primary-aged children's participatory practices can serve to benefit UK health and social policy (Mager and Nowak, 2012).

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