Children as Public Actors: Navigating the Tensions

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Drawing on comparative research with children's participation practitioners in Nicaragua and the United Kingdom, this study explores the thinking that guides their practice. Earlier models are considered inadequate to describe complex, multidimensional participation processes. Whilst several differences are observed, the key issues or tensions are similar in both countries. Fifteen tensions are discussed in three categories. Most are tensions between participation as social control and participation as empowerment, which apply to all marginalised groups, not just children. The second group is specific to children. Finally, there are tensions between process and product. It is suggested that practitioners could use this analysis to reappraise and improve practice. © 2009 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2009 National Children's Bureau.

Introduction

As an increasing number of agencies in both state and third sector seek to involve children and young people in governance, there is a growing need to strengthen the conceptual foundation of this activity. The seminal text in this field, and still the best-known, is Roger Hart's (1992) 'Ladder of Children's Participation', an adaptation of Arnstein's (1969) 'Ladder of Citizen Participation'. However, many other models have been proposed since, with Shier's 'Pathways to Participation' (2001) one of the most widely used (Thomas, 2007, p. 205).

Until recently, there was little sign of mutual learning or cross-fertilisation between the fields of children and youth participation and participatory governance (that is, participation by adult citizens). In much of the research carried out on participatory governance, children and young people simply don't exist. By the same token, little of the work on children's participation appears to be informed by wider research on citizen participation.

More recent work is starting to redress this omission, which is to be welcomed since, as the research described below shows, most of the important issues or 'tensions' that are being faced in children's participation, are no different from those encountered in work on participatory governance in general. Areas such as governance theory, social movement theory and theories of power and empowerment[1] all throw additional light on the problematics of children and youth participation (Taylor, 2007; Taylor and Percy-Smith, 2009).

Another area ripe for mutual learning and cross-fertilisation is linking work with an international development perspective with that with a domestic social policy perspective. The literature contains a lot of work on children's participation in the UK and a lot of work by both UK-based and overseas scholars, on children's participation in the developing world, but little comparative work, either empirical or theoretical. Addressing this issue, Hinton (2006) offers a useful list of problem areas where research in the international development field

and the (domestic) children's studies/social policy field could usefully be linked up and mutually reinforced. Lansdown (2006) has also summarised the lessons to be learnt from international developments in this field.

As these gaps in the existing scholarship are gradually addressed and the isolation of different research areas broken down, the search for improved theorisations continues (e.g. Prout and others, 2006; Thomas, 2007), helping us to understand children and young people's participation and thus improving the real-life effectiveness of policies and practices.

Since 'Pathways to participation' was published in 2001, this author's experience working with child coffee workers in Nicaragua has led to the conclusion that 'Pathways to Participation' and other models like it, are inadequate to conceptualise the complex and multidimensional reality of children and young people's participation in society, covering, as they must, every conceivable setting from the family home to national and global governance institutions and within these settings levels and styles of engagement as unique and diverse as the children and young people themselves (Shier, 2009).

Research methodology

The research described in this paper set out to add to our knowledge of children's participation as public actors by examining the thinking of adults who are engaged in, and committed to, the promotion and facilitation of this participation; particularly, the key ideas about participation that underpin and guide their professional practice.

A bonus here was the opportunity to carry out interviews in two very different societies: Nicaragua and the United Kingdom,[2] asking the same questions of leading practitioners in a variety of different NGOs,[3] each of whom had a team leadership, project manager or national/regional development role and a substantial track record in children and young people's participation work in their respective countries.

Ten semi-structured interviews were carried out, five in each country. Each interview lasted about one hour and the topics covered were:

- The subject's background: Where are they coming from?
- Key ideas that guide or influence their thinking about participation (both individual and organisational thinking), with concrete examples of how these ideas influence practice and limits to their application.
- What they consider to be the factors that determine the effectiveness of children and young people's engagement in participation processes.
- What they consider to be the factors that determine whether these processes challenge existing power structures or legitimise them.
- What they see as the main challenges they face in promoting and facilitating children and young people's participation in governance.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed and a systematic analysis of the transcriptions was carried out, looking for areas of agreement and disagreement, both within and between countries. Where quotations from the interviews are used below, these have been chosen as

illustrative of shared points of view. Where a quote is used to draw attention to a differing point of view, this is stated.

Overview of research findings: first, some differences between Nicaragua and the UK

There were some major differences between attitudes and approaches in the two countries. One of these was a stronger emphasis on the child as service-user in the UK; a 'children's services' orientation (see Moss and Petrie, 2002), which would have meant little in Nicaragua, where services for children are sparse and have to be fought for, rather than simply consumed. This is discussed further in Tension 1 below.

Another striking difference was in the responses to questions about what makes participation effective. The Nicaraguan respondents emphasised the capacities of the children and young people themselves as determinants of success (such as knowledge of the issues, organising experience, self-esteem, communication skills), while the UK respondents focused more on the role of the organisation: its policy commitment, staff capacity and the resources it invested in the process.

A surprising difference arose when subjects were asked what they considered to be the main challenges they faced in their work. It was the UK respondents who prioritised resourcing and time issues. Nicaraguans highlighted the search for new methods, new opportunities and extending participation into new settings. This was surprising because the UK respondents had far more resources at their disposal than the Nicaraguans, yet saw lack of resources as a challenge. It may be that Nicaraguans are simply more accustomed to doing a great deal with very little. The UK also has a culture of imposing strict deadlines, which place workers under time pressure, while Nicaragua works to a more relaxed rhythm.

What stood out more than these differences, however, was the fact that respondents in both countries were aware of a number of tensions that had to be confronted in their work and most of these tensions were common to both countries. 'Tensions' is a useful term here because in each case, the practitioners are aware of opposing pulls (or pushes). The next section considers these tensions one by one.

The tensions

Most of the tensions, eight out of fifteen, can be grouped under a single heading, namely tensions between participation as control and participation as empowerment. This is discussed further below. It is important to note that none of these tensions are specific to children and young people: All would be recognised by mainstream participation researchers if the word 'child' was replaced by 'citizen'.

Tension 1: The child as consumer versus the child as activist

UK respondents frequently spoke of children's services and referred to children as service users. Nicaraguan workers did not. Although UK respondents did not often use the term 'consumer'; when asked if the concept of the child as consumer fitted their perception of the

participation agenda in the UK, most were strongly in agreement (although they also mentioned notable exceptions). Nicaraguan respondents, by contrast, often spoke of children and young people's pro-activism in developing their own campaigns and action plans.

This issue is widely discussed in the mainstream literature on participation, where Foucault's theory of 'governmentality' (Foucault, 1991) has been used to explore the contrast between the citizen as consumer and the 'active citizen'. Discussing how differences in power and resources disadvantage community participants, Taylor (2007) suggests that in many typical participation initiatives, 'Citizens are constructed as subjects, clients and consumers rather than as citizens of equal worth and decision-making capacity'. 'Active citizens', on the other hand, 'are defined, not through consumerist power … but as democratic agents, empowering themselves through their challenges to the activities of institutions and organisations which shape their everyday lives' (Raco and Imrie, 2000, p. 2188).

Whilst recognising the dominance of the 'child as service-user' approach in the UK, most UK respondents also expressed a commitment to move away from this towards children's autonomous and pro-active engagement. For example, one said:

> A good example of the potential is the way children and young people reacted over the Iraq war: That was a very strong reaction by children and young people who were on the streets campaigning to say this was something they felt very strongly about.

Nicaraguan respondents gave examples of how this potential can be developed:

> It's an accumulation of actions. They (the children and young people) draw up a proposal, they mobilise before the state, they try to influence public opinion, they go and speak to the media, they set out their proposal to other important stakeholders.

At a global level, this movement away from a 'consumerist' approach towards social activism has been described by Cornwall and Gaventa (2000), who talk of the 'repositioning' of participation in social policy as a move 'From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers'. Cornwall and Gaventa are writing about adult citizen participation in developing countries, but their title[4] perfectly encapsulates both the tension in current work on child participation in the UK and the 'repositioning' that many UK workers aspire to.

Tension 2: Government agendas versus children's agendas

Closely linked to tension 1 is the tension between working to government-set agendas and working on the agendas set by children and young people themselves. As a UK respondent pointed out:

> Children's issues do not set the agenda. Policy issues set the agenda, budgetary constraints set the agenda, council priorities set the agenda; but children's own real life issues don't seem to set the agenda.

Tension 3: Consultation versus shared decision-making

The move from consultation to shared decision-making is a giant leap, both in work on citizen participation in general and in children and youth participation.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child gives children and young people the right to express their opinions (i.e. be consulted) and to have these opinions given due weight by decision-makers. Children and young people's right to sit in deliberation at the decision-makers' table is less clearly established. However, many practitioners agree that taking this leap is of paramount importance. The main reasons for this are outlined in 'Pathways to Participation' as: 'Increasing children's sense of ownership and belonging, increasing self esteem, increasing empathy and responsibility, laying the groundwork for citizenship and democratic participation and thus helping to safeguard and strengthen democracy' (Shier, 2001, p. 114).

A UK respondent clearly expressed this tension:

> The link has been made between participation and consultation, and people think that if you have achieved consultation then you've achieved participation, and it is very much an adult agenda: We go and talk to children and young people, they tell us something, and then we go and carry on doing whatever it was that were doing.

Tension 4: 'Invited spaces' versus 'popular spaces'

Those who hold most power not only set the agenda around, which citizen participation can take place, but also generally own and control the spaces in which deliberation takes place and decisions are made. Concepts of participation spaces are debated in depth in the mainstream literature and this tension is well-expressed by Cornwall (2004b, p. 78):

> The primary emphasis … seems to be on relocating the poor within the prevailing order: bringing them in, finding them a place, lending them opportunities, inviting them to participate. The contrast here (is) between spaces that are chosen, fashioned and claimed by those at the margins … and spaces into which those who are considered marginal are invited.

This analysis fits well with current perceptions of children and young people's participation, as, in terms of governance and policy-making, they are clearly on the margins and are resource-poor compared to most adults. A problem with promoting participation in these 'invited spaces' is that often, 'entrenched relations of dependency, fear and disprivilege undermine the possibility of the kind of deliberative decision-making they are to foster' (Cornwall, 2004a, p. 2). The alternative is for the poor and the marginalised to create their own spaces in which to participate. These are referred to as 'popular spaces'. However, if the important decisions are being made in the spaces where power is held, how does the ownership of their own 'popular spaces' help the poor and marginalised (read children and young people) to influence these decisions?

One way is through the whole spectrum of 'outsider' tactics: popular protest, direct action, campaigns, lobbies, strikes and demonstrations. However, when children and young people take to the streets seeking to influence decisions, the response of adults in authority is usually (a) to insist that they are being manipulated by 'politically-motivated outsiders' and (b) to clamp down hard. A UK example is the many hundreds of children and young people who took to the streets in protest against the Iraq war in 2002–2003 (as mentioned by a respondent quoted above), where both these adult responses were in evidence. Teachers, who might have encouraged young people to participate actively in school councils (invited

spaces), were quick to sanction them for missing school without permission (Such and others, 2005).

In Nicaragua, as throughout most of Latin America, the self-organisation of children and young people can be seen in the well-documented development of the NATRAS (child and adolescent workers) movement. Responses of adult authorities to NATRAS' campaigns have varied in different countries at different times, but have typically been characterised by the same responses: denying the legitimacy of children's voices and demands and severe repression (Cussianovich, 1995; Liebel, 2007).

While 'popular spaces' can be a base from which to launch a direct confrontation of authority from an 'outsider' position, they also function effectively in other ways, notably when they serve to prepare, empower, support and legitimise those who are then delegated to enter the 'lion's den' on their behalf and engage in policy deliberation in an 'invited space'. This can be seen at work in Nicaragua, for example in the movement of young environmentalists supported by CESESMA (Shier, 2009). Children and young people form environmental action groups in their villages. A network of such groups sends representatives to the Municipal Environmental Committee, an adult-run 'invited' space, where environmental policies and plans for the district are deliberated on. What is crucial is that the young people sit at the adult table as representatives of an organised local group, with its own track record of action in the community, with both practical and theoretical knowledge of the issues under discussion, and with any timidity about speaking out in public long cast aside. Thus the direct connection between the young people's own 'popular space' and the adult 'invited space' does away with the tokenism that is often felt to contaminate young people's participation in such arenas.

In the interviews, several Nicaraguan respondents said experience had shown there is little point in sending children ill-prepared to deliberate in adult spaces and that their preferred way of working was to support children and young people's own spaces, from which the young people can launch their campaigns to influence decisions in adult spaces, using both insider and outsider tactics, as and when they feel fully prepared.

To better understand the concept of 'participation spaces' in relation to children and young people, rather than a simple distinction between 'invited' and 'popular' spaces, it may be helpful to consider a range or spectrum of participation spaces as follows:

1 Adult only spaces, where children and young people are excluded.
2 Adult-dominated spaces where representatives of children and young people are invited to the table, but treated tokenistically.
3 Spaces where there is genuine shared responsibility for decision-making between children and adults (are these real or just a fantasy?).
4 Children's spaces which are organised and facilitated by adults.
5 Children's spaces, which are self-facilitating or autonomous, but are made viable by adult organisational backing.
6 Children's wholly autonomous spaces, created and managed by children themselves with no adult involvement or support (or even awareness in many cases).

The critical point here is that the power and effectiveness of these spaces lies not in the spaces as such, but in the connections and movements between them, as when children are

delegated from a Type 5 space to go and present their demands to a Type 2 space, or when a demonstration is organised outside a Type 1 space, and in the struggle to transform them; for example challenging a Type 1 space to become a Type 2 and then a Type 3 space, or empowering children in a Type 4 space to turn it into a Type 5 or Type 6 space. Much of the work described by interviewees in this research, particularly in Nicaragua, could be described as helping to push these kinds of transformations of participation spaces.

Tension 5: Reactive participation versus pro-active participation

This tension is intimately tied up with the previous ones. When participation is (a) purely consultative, (b) following an adult-determined agenda, (c) in an adult-controlled 'invited' space, the participants can do little more than react to what is put before them. To take a pro-active stance, they need an organising space of their own, which in turn enables them to set the agenda, and define tactics to influence decision-making.

> We sometimes respond to government consultations, but we make a clear distinction between young people's leadership, and being consulted. Young people decide what their campaigns are and then pursue them. (UK respondent).

> Many Local Authorities and NGOs still haven't got past this type of participation where they make the plans and design the projects and then incorporate children and young people into them. We're looking for more pro-activism. (Nicaraguan respondent).

The same Nicaraguan respondent mentioned adult resistance to children's pro-activism as one of the main challenges to be faced.

Tension 6: Manipulated voices versus autonomous voices

The manipulation of children and young people's voices for adult ends was recognised as a major issue by both groups of respondents, however, the two groups focused on different aspects of the problem.

UK respondents were concerned about the prevalence of manipulation, feeling that in some cases their own agencies were guilty of it. The way adults dominate interactions with children is so culturally entrenched, they maintained, that we often manipulate children's voices without being aware we are doing it.

> There are a number of ways in which children's views can get diluted and dissipated, and the first of these is often in the initial stage of writing it down on a piece of paper: You've automatically changed the language and put an adult interpretation of what the children have said, which may well not be accurate.

For Nicaraguan respondents, however, the key issue was not unrecognised manipulation, but rather the refusal of adult authorities to recognise genuine voices when they heard them:

> The adult mentality always says, 'They were told to say that'.

> The leaders, when they see a child who is more eloquent, more sharp-witted, who is able to speak, to express themselves; they assume the child has been manipulated.

Tension 7: Legitimising the existing power structure versus challenging it.

The research revealed this to be far from a simple choice between one and the other. This issue had more resonance for the Nicaraguan respondents, all of who had lived through a socialist revolution and its subsequent overturning. So the unasked question of whether an overthrow of the existing power structure is (a) possible and (b) desirable was a real one for them, while perhaps more hypothetical for those in the UK.

That the government should have legitimacy is important for social stability, development and democracy. Destroying the legitimacy of a weak government leads to chaos as often as progress. However, challenging an existing power structure does not always attack its legitimacy; sometimes it can strengthen it. It depends how the power holders respond to the challenge and respondents saw this to be the case with many children's participation initiatives.

> It's important to respect institutionality and what that represents. Children have to respect the state institutions and they do this through making their demands of them. If they demand a better school, that's their right, but the demand itself legitimises the institution by demanding that it fulfils its obligations. (Nicaraguan respondent)

Where children's participation initiatives can be genuinely and profoundly challenging, according to Nicaraguan respondents, is not in terms of overthrowing authority, but in the challenge they present to deeply entrenched beliefs and attitudes:

> They are more challenging because they disrupt a social model defined by discrimination and adultist exclusion

Tension 8: A public service framework versus a rights framework

For UK respondents, this tension is closely related to Tension 1 above, with a rights-based approach being contrasted with the dominant consumerist or children's services approach.

Nicaraguan respondents equally strongly advocated a human rights approach to participation work and emphasised the legal basis for this in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Nicaragua's Children's Rights Code. What differentiated the two groups was that Nicaraguans did not contrast this with a consumerist or service-provision approach, but rather with a traditionalist attitude that saw children as property of parents (particularly fathers), to be disposed of as they saw fit. One respondent defined this as follows:

> Children are seen as an extension of the family's property. In the same way as the father considers himself owner of the smallholding, the cow, the pig, the hens; at this cultural level, he is also owner of the children. Children are reified – seen as a thing, an object, as labour, guaranteeing to the parents that the labour force continues.

Breaking away from these deep-rooted attitudes and moving towards a children's rights culture is seen as a long and difficult struggle, but a fundamentally important one.

These eight tensions complete the first group, which, as mentioned above, can be characterised collectively as the tension between participation as control and participation as

empowerment. This has been an important theme in the mainstream literature on participation, particularly that stream influenced by Foucault's ideas about 'governmentality'.

Drawing on Taylor's analysis (Taylor, 2007), the argument, in its simplest form, is as follows: As it becomes difficult, maybe impossible, for the state to govern by direct imposition, a whole range of alternative, indirect forms of governance are developed, to maintain control over the governed by other means. Much of what passes for 'citizen participation' falls under this heading. As long as the spaces of association, the agenda, the invitation list, the language of debate, the budget and the overarching policy objectives remain in the control of the already powerful elite group, 'participation' is little more than a mechanism of 'soft policing'. This scenario was vividly captured by Cooke and Kothari in their already-classic book 'Participation, the New Tyranny?' (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

A reflective practitioner working in children's participation will probably recognise the broad applicability of these ideas to their field. However, luckily this is not the end of the story:

> 'There is also in Foucault's notion of power the possibility of resistance, which allows the articulation and implementation of alternative agendas. Self-steering actors outside the state can thus become 'active subjects' in the new governance spaces, not only collaborating in the exercise of government but also shaping and influencing it' (Taylor, 2007, p. 302).

The truth of this has been amply demonstrated in the experiences of the interviewees described above, with their discussion of children and young people as activists, protagonists, self-organisers and, where necessary, challengers of adult authority; and their own efforts as practitioners to navigate the tensions that this throws up.

Group 2: Tensions specific to children as a social group

We now turn to a second group of tensions which, unlike the first group, are specific to the situation of children and young people as participants in an adult-controlled world. As such, they do not have exact parallels in the mainstream discourses on participation.

Tension 9: 'Youth participation' versus 'children's participation'

> It's not the same promoting participation in little children as in teenagers. (Nicaraguan respondent)

This fact is often masked by using the UN Convention's technical definition of 'child' as anyone from birth to 18; a definition which runs contrary to common usage in most countries of the world. This means that many of the impressive examples of 'children's participation' in the literature in reality describe the actions of 16 and 17-year-olds.

As a general rule, the younger the children involved, the less well-served they will be by processes that mimic those used by adults and the more crucial it therefore becomes to devise, test and validate new processes appropriate to the evolving capacities of young children (Lansdown, 2005). Another general rule is that the younger the children, the harder it is to convince adult decision-makers of the value and validity of their active participation.

Tension 10: Mimicking adult structures versus inventing new ones

> In spite of being open to new ideas, often we reproduce the same formats that we already have. Not all the kids want to be sitting in meetings or assemblies or reading documents. (Nicaraguan respondent)

> The aim is to invent new modes of participation that respond to the kids' own dynamics; and then convince the adults of the legitimacy of these new formats. (Nicaraguan respondent)

This last point is key: It is one thing to invent creative alternative ways of expressing opinions or making decisions, but quite another to convince conservative councillors and bureaucrats of the validity of these new models.

Tension 11: Child protection versus child empowerment

This tension reflects two different approaches to safeguarding children. One is to try to prevent them from encountering any kind of risk; and the other is to educate and empower them so that they can understand and assess the risks of everyday life and take action, individually and collectively, to protect themselves. UK respondents spoke of their preference for an empowerment approach, but were aware of the pressures on them as professionals to take the opposite approach, fuelled by the risk-averse, litigation-fearful climate in which they operated.

This climate has not yet reached Nicaragua, where assessing and managing risk is part of children's everyday lives and so the participation workers' approach is to seek to strengthen children's already-developed capacity to do this.

Tension 12: Local and close-to-home participation versus national and global participation

It is easier to promote non-tokenistic involvement of younger children in settings closer to their everyday lives and more challenging to do the same in national and international arenas (Shier, 1998). This was echoed in the research interviews:

> Trying to promote younger children's involvement in national and local government decisions is less developed; not necessarily because of resistance, but trying to find structures and mechanisms to do that in ways that are meaningful for children. (UK respondent)

However, an alternative point of view emerged in the Nicaraguan interviews, with some workers feeling that, while there were impressive advances in getting children's voices heard in council chambers, national conferences and the media, they had lost sight of the essentials, namely building children's participation in families, in schoolrooms and in local communities.

A possible explanation is that in Nicaragua high profile 'showpiece' events attract more resources than everyday activities in local communities and this may have skewed the NGOs' priorities.

Tension 13: Extrinsic motivation versus intrinsic motivation

Several UK respondents said it was their practice to reward children for engaging with participation processes:

> I think rewards are very important. We always give immediate rewards for taking part – small things that only cost a pound or so – to say 'We valued your contribution'.

This use of extrinsic rewards to encourage children's participation is of concern in so far as it implies that, in the UK, children and young people cannot be expected to embrace 'active citizenship' on the basis of their own values and beliefs, but only if an external reward is offered.

In his case study of young community activists in Nicaragua, Shier (2009) offers this alternative view:

> We do not pay them. This is partly because we don't have the resources, but more importantly because we have always insisted that they do not work for us. What they do, they do for the good of their community and for the defence of their rights as children and young people.

Group 3: Process versus product

The final group reflects a tension that runs through almost every sphere of human endeavour, where people ask the question, 'Which is more important, the process or the product?'.

Tension 14: Getting a quick result versus including everybody

Several UK respondents spoke of their commitment to engage with marginalised or hard-to-reach groups and the time and resource constraints that made it difficult for them to do this.

> It takes a long time to work with children with complex needs. A lot of people say it can't be done, but we've done pilot projects that say it can be done, but it's expensive; it's labour-intensive.

This problem of inclusion–exclusion also arises when structures of 'representative democracy' are used (see Cairns, 2006). When a small group of young people are elected or selected to speak for all the young people in their area (e.g. in a youth council), to what extent can we be confident that minorities within that wider group will be adequately represented?

Tension 15: One-off projects versus long-term development

Much participation work in the past 10 years has involved getting a group of children together for a time-limited project leading to a specified 'output'. The current climate in the UK, where NGOs are often contracted to facilitate one-off consultations for local authority clients, fosters this approach. UK respondents felt this tension strongly, recognising it as an organisational imperative, but at the same time reacting against it.

I'm less interested in an end goal, and more interested in what the young people gain in terms of their personal development during the process of their involvement. I'm probably a minority voice on this. Most of my colleagues are much more task-focused.

We don't keep children in a cupboard and wheel them out for consultations.

Nicaraguan respondents spoke of their commitment to participation as a long-term development process, where time constraints were of little importance.

No one is born with participation skills, but one learns them. This learning is gradual and systemic. One learns to participate from one's first years in the setting of the family, and then the school. As adults, we must facilitate conditions so that these capacities and competences are developed: self-expression, opinion, communication, access to information and knowledge, decision-making. Thus participation is an educational process.

Conclusion

Reviewing the fifteen tensions and the research interviews that helped define them, what stands out most is the great degree to which, despite the obvious disparities, they are generalisable between such different cultures as Nicaragua and the UK. Quotes from UK and Nicaraguan respondents more often reinforce rather that contradict each other. The tensions may be experienced differently, but they are felt and recognised on both sides. This suggests that the tensions themselves are inherent in the nature of the participation process, rather than products of specific cultural contexts.

Since the research was completed, the 'Navigating the Tensions' framework has been reflected on in seminars with groups of participation practitioners and managers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where it has been found to be a useful analytical tool that can effectively enhance appraisal, planning and management of participation work. Practitioners who have analysed how these tensions affect their current practice recognise that it is rarely viable to make a simple choice between one side and the other. Certainly many share a commitment to more empowering forms of engagement and therefore want to add their weight to a collective push in that direction. For most, however, the challenge is to navigate the tensions, steering a path around the constraints imposed by different social, organisational and political contexts, with their sights firmly set on a more effective and empowering practice that resonates with their personal beliefs and values.

Notes

1 For convenience I will refer to this as 'mainstream literature' from now on, implying no value judgement.
2 Specifically England and Wales
3 Often called 'Voluntary Organisations' in the UK
4 Which I wish I'd thought of.

Acknowledgements

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