

Children and Young People as Active Citizens: A Practitioner's Guide to Navigating the Tensions

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Photograph: Children as public actors protesting about water services in Nicaragua

This paper is based on the author's article "Children as Public Actors: Navigating the Tensions" (forthcoming).

Abstract

This paper draws on comparative research with children's participation practitioners in Nicaragua and the UK to explore the thinking that guides their practice. Whilst there are several differences between the two countries, the key issues or tensions that practitioners experience are similar. The paper identifies fifteen tensions, which can be grouped under three headings and suggests ways in which practitioners could use this analysis to reappraise and improve practice. Most are tensions between participation as social control and participation as empowerment, which apply to all marginalised groups, not just children. A second group is specific to children. Finally there are tensions between the process of participation and the product.

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 research described in this paper aimed to add to our understanding 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 Kingdom¹. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in both countries with leading practitioners in NGOs², each of whom had a substantial track record in children and young people's participation work in their respective countries.

¹ Specifically England and Wales

² Often called "Voluntary Organisations" in the UK

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 a 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 response 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. Also the UK has a culture of imposing strict deadlines, which place workers under time pressure,

while Nicaragua has a culture of working 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 practitioners are aware of opposing pulls (or pushes). The following section considers these tensions one by one.

The tensions

Group 1: Tensions between participation as social control and participation as empowerment.

Tension 1: The child as consumer vs. the child as activist

UK respondents frequently spoke of children’s services and referred to children as service users. Nicaraguan workers did not. UK respondents did not often use the term “consumer” but 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 (though they also mentioned notable exceptions). Nicaraguan respondents, by contrast, often spoke of children and young people taking the initiative to develop their own campaigns and action plans.

This issue is widely discussed in the mainstream literature on citizen participation, where the identification of the citizen as a passive consumer (or if not passive, very much restricted in their acceptable sphere of action) has been contrasted with the concept of the “active citizen”.

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, they ask the overseas development agencies for help”.

At a global level, this movement away from a “consumerist” approach towards social activism has been described by Cornwall and Gaventa (2000) as a move “From Users and Choosers to Makers and Shapers”; a title which 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 vs. children’s agendas

Closely linked is the tension felt between working to government-set agendas and working on the agendas set by children and young people themselves.

“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. I would love to say there are a thousand and one ways we have managed to get children to set the agenda, but we haven’t”. (UK respondent)

Tension 3: Consultation vs. shared decision-making

The fact that there is a giant leap to be made from consultation to shared decision-making is widely recognised, both in work on citizen participation in general and in children and youth participation.

The right accorded to children and young people by Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is 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. Many practitioners agree however that taking this leap is of paramount importance.

A UK respondent clearly expressed his sense of 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 we were doing.”

Tension 4: “Invited spaces” vs. “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 or settings in which deliberation takes place and decisions are made.

In terms of governance and policy-making, children and young people 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”.

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”. If the important decisions however are being made in the spaces where power is held, how does the ownership of their own “popular spaces” help the poor and marginalised (in this case children and young people) to influence these decisions? (Cornwall, 2004a p2).

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”. There is however rarely a simple choice to be made between popular spaces and invited spaces. As Andrea Cornwall (2004b p78) explains: “The boundaries between such spaces are unstable. Those who participate in any given space are also,

necessarily, participants in others; moving between domains of association, people carry with them experiences and expectations that influence how they make use of their agency when they are invited to participate, or when they create their own spaces”.

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 therefore 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.

Thus the power and effectiveness of these different participation spaces lies not in the spaces as such, but in the connections and movements between them. Much of the work described by interviewees in this research, particularly in Nicaragua, could be described as helping to push for the transformation and opening up of participation spaces, thus creating greater opportunities for the empowerment of children and young people within them.

Tension 5: Reactive participation vs. 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. In order 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 gain real influence over 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 vs. 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 in 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 vs. challenging it

The research revealed this to be far from a simple choice between one and the other. 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. Challenging an existing power structure however 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 vs. 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. 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 and practitioners if the word "child" was replaced by "citizen".

Behind this group of tensions lies the idea that some forms of participation can also be seen as mechanisms of control. This idea has been widely discussed in the literature on citizen participation and the argument can be summarised as follows: as it becomes difficult, maybe impossible, in a modern society 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 an already powerful elite group, "participation" is little more than a mechanism of "soft policing".

Any reflective practitioner working in children's participation will recognise the broad applicability of these ideas to their field. Luckily however, this is not the end of the story "There is also ... 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 p302).

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 and so do not have exact parallels in the mainstream discourses on participation.

Tension 9: "Youth participation" vs. "children's participation"

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

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 vs. 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 vs. child empowerment

This tension reflects two different approaches to safe-guarding children. One is to try to prevent them from encountering any kind of risk; 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 vs. national and global participation

It has long been recognised that 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)

An alternative point of view emerged however 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.

Tension 13: Extrinsic motivation vs. 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. If they received a salary, inevitably most would work for the salary rather than for something they personally believed in”.

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 vs. 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 vs. long-term development

Much participation work in the past ten 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

As they encounter these tensions, it will rarely be viable for practitioners 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.

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Children and participation – working through the tensions

Learning exercise- reflecting on your experience

What is a tension?

Tensions are an everyday part of partnership working. Every-one will have their own definition and experience, but in this context a tension can be loosely summed up as the stresses and strains you feel when pushed and pulled in different directions. For example in partnership working, you can be pulled one way by your view of what the service should be and pulled another way by the views of the users in favour of, in your view, a less effective service, and another by the limitations of government funding. **How can you work a way through this?**

- With some of those tensions listed in Group 1 in the article, you may feel that there is a 'right' answer, that you want to work towards participation as empowerment but you are being pulled in other directions by other pressures such as funding or partnership working or accepted practice.
- In an ideal world, you could make a simple choice between one and the other and stick to it, but in reality you seldom have this luxury, as there is no one 'right' answer or simple choice to be made (e.g. see tension 7) so you have to "navigate" a way through to achieve desired outcomes.
- It is useful to be aware of how much these pressures consciously or unconsciously affect your work and your own tension level.
- Navigating the tensions is about working a way through the tensions by being aware of the pushes and pulls. This awareness can help you find a balance between seemingly opposing options, which works well for you and the people you work with.
- In the article many of the tensions described are as relevant to adults as to children, and people working with adults may find it useful to think about how they affect their work too.

Learning exercise: based on your reading of the article, ask yourself some relevant questions.

- Think about your own experience working with children and young people. What is a key tension for you? Have any of tensions described in the article affected your work?
- Choose one or two which most affect your work or your organisation and which you would like to understand better.
- Ask yourself what are the pushes and pulls in each direction.
- Can you do anything to resolve these? If so, work out how to move forward.
- If not, secure in the knowledge that there is little you can do at this time, feel less tense and more at ease with what's going on.