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Measuring young people's participation in decision making: What young people say

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Abstract:

Young people are frequently exhorted to participate 'more' in decision making, both formally and informally. Paradoxically, no standard or comprehensively used measurement tool through which young people's right to participate in decision making exists. However, a range of participation scales have been developed and these mainly adult generated tools feature prominently in literature, impacting upon, and informing policy and participative practice. Yet, despite the emphasis on young people's right to participate in those things which affect them, including how their participation is measured, examples of young person-generated approaches to understanding the extent of their decision making are somewhat elusive. Drawing upon research undertaken in Swansea to explore how young people thought their participation in decision making should be measured, this article focuses and reflects upon the development of an appropriate, participative methodology, the views which young people offered through the enquiry, and the construction of a new participation measurement scale.

Introduction

Young people's participation in decision making, both conceptually and in terms of practice, has often been described as multi-dimensional and omni-locational (see London 2007, Sinclair 2004). As a concept and practical reality, participation is something that excites interest, but it has proven difficult to define. A significant body of literature has been generated that seeks to explain participation, and these works offer explanations of the concept of participation ranging from universal, to focused, project-specific perspectives. Various attempts have been made to measure young people's participation in decision making. For example, efforts to better understand the extent of young people's participation are manifest in formal measurement systems (see DCFS, 2008) and standards based approaches (Welsh Assembly Government 2006) and work has been undertaken to measure young people's participation, most often at a very local level, sometimes using child-focused instruments (for example, Morgan et al. 2004).

The literature suggests that two critical tensions exist in relation to the measurement of young people's participation in decision making. Firstly, there is discordance between the rhetoric concerning the right of young people to participate in decision making and its applied reality. This discordance is located centrally in the enduring control of the participation agenda by adults. Exercising control over the use of young people's right to participation in decision making, adults often promote engagement in formal decision processes and constitutional environments (for example, internationally via the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2004, and in nations via the Children Act, 1989) instead of focusing on those things which are closer to the

lived realities of young peoples' lives and which they might consider to be more important. Hence, less emphasis and resources have been invested in, arguably equally important areas of activity such as, young people-targeted, participatory research and evaluation compared to institutional structures and agency-focused service delivery. This reality persists despite warnings that participation can be utilised to deny young people's right to make decisions in critical areas of activity or to tokenise their engagement (see Kirby and Bryson 2002, Hart, 1992). Secondly, and specifically in relation to methodological processes, there is evidence that adults are simply not acting in a way that enables young people to be active contributors. Twenty three years following the ratification of the UNCRC (1989) and fifteen years after the emergence of the 'new sociology of childhood' (James and Prout 1997) the universal and consistent involvement of young people in research processes (not just as mere recipients) does not occur. There are very real and potentially negative consequences which flow from the existence of the denial of participative opportunities for young people.

The juxtaposition of an apparent denial of young people's right to participate in critical research processes stands oddly with the rhetoric of participation which policy makers have been eager to enshrine in law, policy and practice (for example, European Union 2000). Importantly, the non-involvement of young people in research poses critical challenges for the measurement of their participation. Key amongst those challenges is the danger that instruments developed by adults may neither reflect the reality of young people's decision making (see Waller 2006, Corsaro 1997), nor provide research participants with meaningful opportunities to review, contextualise and focus enquiry on the things that really matter (see Save the

Children 2004, Kellett 2003). The credibility of measurement processes are central to the quality of research. The extent to which young people are encouraged and enabled to participate in research design is fundamentally related to the development of processes which allow their voices to be heard.

This article focuses on research which was undertaken in Swansea to enable young people to design and develop new tools to measure their participation. In this article, the ways that young people participated in research, influenced design and research instrument construction will be explored, with an emphasis on the outcomes which flowed from their engagement.

Engaging young people in the research

To engage young people in the research, a participative and child-appropriate methodology was developed. There were clear reasons for this: a recognition that young people possess clear insights and a wealth of knowledge concerning their worlds (Christensen and Prout 2002); an understanding that young people are different from adults, perceiving and making sense of their lives in alternative ways to 'older' community members (London and Young 2003); and, critically in methodological terms, young people can help to make visible issues or topics that matter to them which remain invisible to adults (Fielding 2001). Specifically in relation to engagement within research processes, the methodology was intended to embed the principle that young people are partners who can play a central role in enquiry, making meaningful contributions to research design and the formation of relevant tools (Krenichyn et al. 2007). Thus, the ethos of the research reflected the inalienable

right of young people to participate and not to be either tokenised or used simply as data vessels.

When designing the methodology, two important concerns were specifically addressed: gaining the views of a broad spectrum of young people; and ensuring that adult domination of the research did not occur.

The primary group of young people engaged in this research process was drawn from a 'mainstream' school sample. This group was supplemented by a smaller sample drawn from young people engaged with the local Youth Offending Service, primarily to ensure that the views of those young people who are often excluded from mainstream research had an opportunity to have their voices heard (see, for example, Lowndes et al. 2001, Matthews et al. 2000).

Generation of a sample for mainstream young people was achieved purposively through engagement with a local secondary School. The School was supportive of the research and ensured that classes of pupils that participated in the enquiry were diverse, comprising young people of differing abilities, by designating PSE lessons as research sessions. By operationalising this methodological process, 93 mainstream young people, aged between 11-16 years participated in the research. For those in the 'harder to reach' group, the Swansea Youth Offending Service was approached and 6 young people aged between 11-18 years, who were working with the Youth Inclusion Project and the Resettlement and After Care Programme played an active role in the research. For this group a fixed location was not used for research sessions, rather, local community venues such as a rugby club were used to ensure

familiarity, comfort and the provision of a non-threatening venue for these young people, some of whom did not wish to meet in formal surroundings.

Strenuous efforts were made to minimise the domination of the research by adults. Two specific techniques were embedded to achieve this aim. Firstly, the empirical aspect of the research functioned on the basis of the researcher adopting a 'least adult' (Mandell 1991) model of working. Thus, emphasis was placed on the ability of young people lead discussion, identify and prioritise their views, offer recommendations for change and to offer suggestions about how research sessions could be improved. Further, the qualitative research was designed to incorporate within its framework reflective processes to ensure that it was young people and their views which were at the heart of enquiry: not the views or interpretation of an adult researcher.

It was considered important that the research was reflective (see Nieuwenhuys 2004) and facilitated a process within which young people could scrutinise, revise, amend and add to views which were offered as the enquiry proceeded. In practical terms, reflection functioned through a process of communicating the views of mainstream and harder to reach young people with each other. Thus the views of different groups of mainstream young people were not only shared with their peers, but also with harder to reach young people, with each group having the opportunity to discuss and explore their colleague's opinions and to offer views concerning these. Such a cyclical process was intended to encapsulate the belief that young people are capable not just of taking part in research, but offering sophisticated analyses of core issues that affect them. This research sought to harness the power of young people's

understanding and to trust them to offer recommendations which would shape the enquiry and its outcomes. Combined, these two approaches, of a 'least adult' approach and reflective interaction, were designed to minimise adult domination of the research and to centrally locate young people at the heart of the enquiry.

In order to elicit the views of young people concerning the measurement of participation, a child-friendly exercise was developed. Located in small groups (or sometimes singularly for the 'harder to reach' young people), young people were first invited to offer their views concerning existing participation scales. Three prominent, exemplar scales were given to young people (these being enlarged and printed in colour): Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992); Treseder's Diagram of Participation (1999); and the UNICEF Freechild Project Measure for Social Change by and with Young People (2003). Young people were informed that whilst these scales had been designed to inform thinking about the concept of participation in decision making, they were not necessarily intended to function as measurement tools (see Hart, 2008). Rather, they represented thinking about young people's participation which were located at fixed points in time and, whilst innovative at the time of their creation, constituted steps in the evolution of scales and the development of thinking about how participation in decision making by young people could be understood and potentially measured.

Young people were asked to respond to three key questions concerning the exemplar scales:

- Whether they understood what the participation scales were saying?

- What, in their opinion was good or bad about the individual scales?

- What, if they were creating a new, ideal participation scale it should look like?

Research participants were invited to comment upon and offer views regarding the example scales, whether these concerned meaning, language, graphics or presentation. Each small group discussed and reached agreement, consensually, about their main views concerning the example participation scales and the elements which they would include (or change) when designing a new scale. Young people's views were recorded on post-it notes, directly onto large pieces of paper, or through drawings. Views were then shared with all research participants (either the whole class in terms of mainstream young people, or those present in the venue for those who were harder to reach) and a further level of discussion occurred. The questions which young people were asked were intended to be appropriate and open to self-interpretation, reinforcing the centrality of their role in the enquiry and ability to make a difference to the research. This emancipatory approach was intended to promote young people's leadership of discussion and ground views offered in their valuable, lived experiences (see Kellett 2005, Grover 2004).

What young people said during the research

Three main outcomes emerged from young people's engagement in the research: a detailed critique of the example participation scales; the development of minimum standards which young people felt should guide the design of any new participation measurement scales; and recommendations which led to the construction of a new participation measurement scale.

Young people's views concerning existing participation scales

Young people were critical of the three example participation scales. Criticisms were expressed concerning the format, presentation and content of each scale. With regards Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation, a range of criticisms emerged. Primarily, young people did not understand the language used in the Ladder, stating that it was adult-orientated and not child-centric. Additionally, young people believed that the terminology used in the Ladder was insufficiently contextualised and that being broad framed created a barrier to its comprehension and use.

In basic terms, young people did not know what the Ladder was meant to do, nor did they understand what messages the terminology and language were intended to convey. Young people's difficulties were exacerbated when they sought to understand what the image of a Ladder meant: their conclusion was that the graphical representation was confusing and inappropriate:

> "What's a ladder go to do with anything? And the language? You can tell this person doesn't work much with young people, it's like, what on earth does that mean? I bet you don't even know... how on earth are we supposed to and this is supposed to be about our participation!"
>
> (Sion, Research Participant[1])

A specific, negative aspect of feedback that was offered concerning the Ladder related to what young people strongly felt was an erroneous implication of a concept

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[1] To protect their identities the names of young people have been replaced with pseudonyms.

of participative hierarchy, something which participants believed was alien to their experiences of decision making. Allied to this was criticism of the order in which the rungs or levels of participation were presented, with young people additionally identifying a missing rung at the top of the Ladder which should, in their view, have represented autonomous, young person initiated decision making. Finally, young people felt that the Ladder was neither child-appropriate nor helpful in either measuring or explaining their participation in decision making. The detachment of young people from the Ladder was justified on the basis that it was incomprehensible and distant from their experiences, reflecting, they thought, an adult-centric world view. Without exception, young people expressed highly negative views concerning the Ladder, querying its development, focus and appropriateness:

"Children are manipulated. Come on, you've got to be manipulated if anyone thinks this thing is any use. It's just about adults thinking that they are doing something to help children. Why not just scrap this, and make one [a new scale] which we have a say in?"

(Morwen, Research Participant)

Young people were also sceptical about the value, focus and meaningfulness of Treseder's Diagram of Participation (1997), articulating several criticisms of this scale. Primarily, young people felt that the Diagram was boring and that the language used was verbose and complicated. Young people complained that they simply did not understand what the Diagram was trying to say, why it was being said and to whom it was addressed. Additionally, young people challenged the order of levels of participation within the Diagram, explaining that it was too confusing and the

relationship between each degree of decision making was unclear and hard to understand. Echoing their criticism of the Hart's (1992) Ladder, young people felt that the Diagram lacked context and was overly generalised, making it too diluted to be a useful tool. Finally, young people felt that the Diagram had not been developed for use by them and, in fact may have been designed to dissuade them from reading it:

"This has got to be one of the most boring things we have ever had to look at. It's just so boring! Why would anyone our age want to look at it? There's a problem too with the words: it's not clear what's going on. Where does it begin and end? It just doesn't make sense to us."

(Iwan, Research Participant)

It is important to note that throughout the course of the research, whenever young people offered criticisms, they additionally suggested solutions and made an effort to highlight positive aspects of an issue or discussion. Criticisms were thus not made simply because young people could criticise but to help identify potential, positive solutions. However, when discussing Hart's (1992) Ladder and Treseder's (1997) Diagram, young people expressed the view that neither had positive aspects and that they were incompatible with their expectations of a participation measurement scale:

"You see, they just don't make sense. We'd never make something like them… They don't even make sense, the set up's all wrong and, let's be honest, they're not about our participation really are they? They're all about them [adults]… How can you write something about our participation if we can't make head nor tail or it? That's mad."

Although not considered to be either an appropriate or useful instrument, young people's review of the Freechild Project Measure for Social Change by and with Young People (UNICEF 2003) ('the Measure') revealed a limited degree of positivity. Firstly, even though the language and terminology of the Measure was said to be easier to understand than Hart's (1992) Ladder or Treseder's (1997) Diagram, it was still too complex and confusing, revealing, in the view of young people, that it was a tool intended for adults and not them. Additionally, the presentation of the scale in the form of a 'swirl' was not understood and young people queried whether the use of the 'swirl' had occurred to disguise a more subtle, implied form of participative hierarchy because:

> "… you have to follow the swirl, so they probably mean the end is the best…"

(Martin, Research Participant).

However, positively, young people felt that the Measure was easier to understand than either the Ladder or the Diagram and a sense of relief was detected in their view concerning the volume and content of text within the Measure:

> "… it looks better, there's less words and stuff. It's the best of the three you gave us, but there's lots that could be made better."

(Libby, Research Participant)

From the young people's discussions of the three example participation scales, something more than a sterile, negative critique emerged. Rather, young people's views were often passionate, especially when they felt that the participation scales had been designed by adults and for adults, lacked input from young people and appeared to embed a false understanding of participation: one that they deemed to be unrecognisable. The alienation which was evident during young people's discussions of the existing participation scales led them universally to recommend that a new participation measurement scale should be developed and that this scale should conform to a set of minimum standards.

Developing minimum standards to inform the development of a new participation measurement scale

Drawing upon their criticisms of the example participation scales, young people specified three minimum standards which they believed should be used to underpin and inform the development of a new measurement scale.

The first minimum standard concerned language. Young people felt strongly that the use of language was critical (see Morrow 2009). Reflecting on each of the example participation scales young people explained that they could not understand them primarily because of the language which they contained. More important than semantics, young people considered that the use of obscure or inaccessible language was actually an insidious tool used by adults to control how participation was portrayed and understood:

"It's all about power again isn't it? It's the adults saying, 'Look at us, we know more than you', and they're also really sort of saying that the way we'd put it doesn't count."

(Carla, Research Participant)

Young people specified a range of criteria to guide the use of language in a new participation measurement scale. Young people insisted that language should be concise, non-technical, accessible and non-patronising. Additionally, if slang or local terminology were used, they should be contextualised and explained, as also should words which have double meanings. The issue of double meanings was highlighted as a potentially significant contextual problem because, as young people pointed out, their vocabulary was often very different from that of adults. The term, 'sick' was given as evidence for this claim: to young people it was a positive term; whilst to adults it was negative. Language was also seen to be an explanatory, defining tool and young people strongly felt that terms and words used should reflect their lives and practical experiences, not abstract or esoteric terms. In addition to the text contained within a participation measurement scale, language had, in the view of young people a powerful role to play in explaining the purpose and functionality of the scale itself: all of which should be expressed in child-appropriate language.

It was felt by young people that language was important not just because it affected their ability to understand and potentially use participation measurement instruments, but also, because it impacted upon them personally. Harder to reach young people for example, claimed that they had become victims of the inappropriate use of language and wished to spare their peers from a similar experience:

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"Yeh, I agree with what they said. With me, I've been given formal stuff like from the court and I have no idea what it means. They ask you things and I don't know what it means... It makes me feel like I'm thick, or that people don't want me to know something. You shouldn't treat people like that."

(Lorraine, Research Participant)

The example above helps to contextualise the interplay between language, power and the ways that specific applications of language could affect young people. Certainly, young people themselves stated that language mattered and that, for any participation measurement scale to be meaningful, it needed to contain terminology and explanations of degrees of engagement that reflected their lived realities of decision making.

The second minimum standard concerned the way that a participation measurement scale should be presented. Young people insisted that a new scale should be 'appropriate in presentation' and, when explaining what this meant, stated that it was not simply an issue of typography. A core concern of this minimum standard rested on the assertion of young people that a participation measurement scale should not be saturated with graphical representations. Whilst no objection was made per se to the inclusion of graphics or images, young people recalled that often, when adults sought to include graphical representations in documents, especially in 'child-friendly' publications, they were either patronising cartoon type images or irrelevant, bland or boring. Thus, young people recommended that appropriate and contextual images

might accompany a participation measurement scale: such imagery could be used to optimise textual content, but only if it were appropriate, hence:

"It's not all about content you know. The youth club I go to, they sent some leaflets round about drugs and things. They were like cartoon books and everyone just laughed... there was nothing wrong with the content, but the way it was put together made a joke of the whole thing. You've got to be careful and do things to get people to understand that the contents are just as important as the way you put something together. "

(Mike, Research Participant)

A balance was proposed by young people consisting of a minimal use of graphics that could help to inform and contextualise a participation measurement scale, but which did not divert attention away from the tool itself and what it was trying to measure. This was deemed to be an essential design element, not least because young people could easily be distracted, thus weakening the impact of a scale:

"You need to keep their attention… by cutting out stuff that's not needed…"

(John, Research Participant)

The importance of balancing simplicity and the inclusion of images was emphasised by young people and they offered practical examples to demonstrate how, especially if adults solely developed materials, problems could occur. A poignant example

offered by young people concerned a teacher's use of 'smileys'. Carys, a research participant explained that her form tutor had spent some time creating materials that contained smileys with the intention of engaging pupils during lessons. However, since the teacher had not consulted young people, she failed to realise that the pupils considered the smileys to be patronising. Also, an older form of smileys had been used, something which was deemed to be evidence of the divide in understanding between young people and the adult teacher:

"... we were like, 'What's this?' It looked like something from a primary school. We have moved on since then, you know, I'm 14! But she, our own form teacher didn't even think about that… She's not one of us is she? She's a teacher and an adult. If we'd used 'smileys', we'd use the new ones you can get, but I don't think the school would like them, coz some are really rude. But we think they are great."

(Carys, Research Participant)

The examples of inappropriate usage of graphics and images catalysed young people's discussions, reinforcing assertions that their understandings of participation should be appropriately represented (see Zeller-Berkman 2007). To help achieve this objective, young people insisted that they should be meaningfully engaged in research processes and that they and their peers should be routinely consulted when decisions were being made about enquiry design and process (see Sabo 2003).

The third minimum standard advocated by young people concerned hierarchy. By 'hierarchy' was meant the direct or implied assumption which young people felt was in-built into the example participation measurement scales that participation ranged across a linear scale. For example, hierarchy meant to young people the embedding of a suggestion that autonomous decision making was better than that which was shared or focused more on consultation. Young people rejected the validity of a concept of participative hierarchy, claiming instead that participation has no fixed or linear continuum, but can be made manifest in many different ways and at various times and places (see London 2005, Driskell 2002). The existence of a sensitive understanding of the fluid, omni-locational nature of participation was evidenced by young people when they insisted that various types or extents of participation should be treated non-hierarchically:

> "You might decide not to take part, but that's still a decision, you see? You might be happy too to make a decision with someone, like when you're at home, sorting out what's for dinner. That's just as good too. Making a choice is not like that ladder thing where doing it yourself, on your own, is always the best. That's got to come across. After all, you want the truth don't you?"
>
> (Beca, Research Participant)

To remedy the practical, potentially negative implications of hierarchy in a participation measurement scale, young people recommended a pragmatic, methodological solution. Reflecting on how the three example scales had portrayed different degrees of decision making in what they deemed to be relatively fixed and

linear terms, young people believed that the points on a scale should rotate each time it was used. Thus, for each question on a participation questionnaire, the scale itself would 'move'. This movement in the placement of response categories from question to question reflected, in the views of young people, the dynamic and non-hierarchical nature of their participation in decision making. Furthermore, such practice would, in the view of young people, encourage research participants to refer to the scale and ponder the extent of their engagement, refocusing respondents and encouraging them to think about each response and not to adopt a 'tick box' mentality to their participation:

"If you don't have to think, you're not going to are you? If we do something that makes you think about if you do something, and how much, then we're helping to take the message home to people. They might be surprised by how much they do, or it might make them want to do more."

(Michelle, Research Participant)

Thus, young people, in the third minimum standard sought to achieve two things which were, in research terms, important. Firstly, young people wanted to ensure that a new participation measurement scale reflected their understanding of participation in decision making and rejected the concept of hierarchy. Secondly, young people wanted to encourage their peers, through the use of a methodological tool, to think about and accurately share the extent of their participation in decision making.

The three minimum standards featured prominently in the views of young people during the research process and had a profound influence on the third outcome, the construction of a new participation measurement scale.

Construction of a new participation measurement scale

Having articulated minimum standards to guide the construction of a new participation measurement scale, young people next offered recommendations about what the scale should actually measure, its contents and format, and how their peers could use the instrument in practice.

Earlier in the research process, young people developed a new understanding of the concept of participation, one which was centred on a recognition that it was: operationalised in very practical terms through the use of intention and communication; was intimately grounded in relationships; and located primarily in mundane, everyday decision making[2]. Young people understood that participation was complicated (conceptually and operationally) being both the subject of personal, internal dialogue (represented by intention and communication) and pragmatic actions.

Young people began their deliberations concerning the development of a new measurement scale by applying their understanding of participation and seeking to translate this into a working tool. When considering what the new scale should

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[2] The development of a new understanding of young people's participation is explored in a separate article and thus, will not be revisited in detail here.

measure, young people believed that a keen focus should be fixed on degrees of participation, with such degrees representing both the intention to act and their ability to communicate their decision making. Further, young people were deeply influenced by the assertions which they made concerning their vision of participation as something which was non-hierarchical. Reflecting on how a non-hierarchical design could be achieved, young people distinguished two key points. Firstly, there was a tacit recognition that there are different levels of participation which range from direct and autonomous decision making to indirect or no participation. Secondly, whilst the existence of different levels of participation in decision was recognised, an equally powerful insistence was placed on the need for the measurement scale to ensure no inference of linear, hierarchical relationships between indirect and direct forms of decision making:

> "You've got to be clear about this, this is about what we think will work. The other things [participation measurement scales] were so hard they made my head hurt and they didn't even match up with what we think… It's about trying to find out how much we get involved and make decisions and you seeing that sometimes all the different types matter. So, one day you can decide that you can't be bothered and that's not a bad thing. Next night, you might think that you want to do something yourself because you feel that it's needed… This new thing has got to have both in there."
>
> (Leigh, Research Participant)

In order to enable the measurement of different levels of participation in decision making and intention and actions, a five point scale was developed. The new participation measurement scale was specifically intended to embed young people's view concerning participative intention and action and each point was worded thus:

- I am able to take action or make decisions myself

- I am able to take action or make decisions jointly with other people

- I am able to give my view and it affects action or decisions which are made

- I am able to give my view but it does not affect action or decisions which are made

- I am unable to give my view or take any action

Reflecting on the minimum standards for the design and contents of the participation measurement scale, the five points were incorporated into a simple representation (see Figure 1). Furthermore, it was considered essential by the young people that the scale was to be provided as a response set to individual and very specific (clearly worded) questions about participation opportunities, e.g. 'when making decisions about what to eat for dinner'. Additionally, to combat the response bias identified by young people and encourage the users of the scale to think carefully about the level of their participation, as noted, the points on the scale would rotate from question to question.

Young people also considered the way in which respondents should record their responses. They felt it was important that the participation measurement scale

should not simply become an aesthetic tool which was distant and alien to those for whom it was developed, but one which could be practically used by their peers. Accordingly they felt that the manner of choosing a particular response should not be pre-determined (by adults) but that young people participants could choose how to specify the level of decision making in which they participated by putting a line through one of the ovals, crossing it out, ticking it, or circling it:

> "It's like the reverse of School, instead of making it difficult, we've got to make it easy. We're helping you and we're interested. There'll be some people like us who really don't want to know so you've got to try and sort that out… Honestly, if you move it around that's one thing and then if you let people answer the way they want to, they'll more comfy. I like that, I like it when I can decide and not have someone tell you what to do all the time."

> (Marianne, Research Participant)

There was acute concern by young people that the new scale should engage them and their peers as stakeholders, and draw them into a process of enquiry which they believed was important. The new scale was agreed by both mainstream and harder to reach young people

Conclusion

This article presents and offers insights into the ways that young people can meaningfully contribute to the development of methodologies to measure their participation in decision making. In particular, the article describes how, by

addressing tensions which exist in the literature and, as subsequently validated by young people, real life, concerning their ability to contribute to research and the development of appropriate tools, positive and sophisticated outcomes can arise. Challenging adult-developed participation scales and more traditional approaches to inclusion in enquiry processes, young people's engagement demonstrated that their participation can make a difference and augment understandings of how their decision making can be measured.

Beyond their right to participate in research (c.f. Article 12, UNCRC 1989), young people evidenced not merely a willingness to engage in the enquiry process, but also demonstrated that they can, in a sophisticated fashion share their views and address complex research questions. The sophistication of young people's views mirrors that of adults and some of the main recommendations concerning the development of a new participation measurement scale echo those found in the literature. For example, when discussing the Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992) and hierarchy, the views of young people epitomised and developed core aspects of challenge offered by, for example, Kara (2007), Craig (2003), Driskell (2002) and Lardner (2001). Recognising that participation and its measurement are difficult and multi-layered challenges, young people identified obstacles and, unpicking these, recommended pragmatic solutions to help achieve a more uniform, young people-focused and consistent approach to measuring decision making.

Young people demonstrated that working with their peers in a child-appropriate research environment they could, with little adult support, create methodological instruments that were sensitive and focused (Franks 2011, Greene and Hogan 2005,

Christensen 2004). The new participation measurement scale for example, was intended by young people to synthesise the conceptual and pragmatic considerations associated with participation in decision making, something which is not frequently, nor prominently visible in the literature. Instead, with adult power being limited (see Kellett et al. 2004, Kirby 2004), young people responded by leading discussion and offering innovative, child-appropriate solutions: solutions which challenge existing orthodoxies and the relative position of young people in research. Hence:

> "It's nice to be asked what you think and even better to be able to make a difference… And, knowing we might help things to improve... Who knows, perhaps they [adults] might even learn something from us. Perhaps if they listened long enough, or took a bit of notice once in a while, things would change…"
>
> (Gwilym, Research Participant)

These messages suggest that young people should and can play a meaningful role in research design and methodology - not merely as consultees. Young people, operating through a participative methodology have shown how they can fulfil important roles as partners for change and informed, critical friends for adult researchers. By offering in-depth critiques of existing participation measurement scales, articulating minimum standards for and developing a new scale, young people not only directly challenged existing orthodoxies, but positively created opportunities for change and improvement. By promoting the participation of young people and valuing and harnessing their views and involvement, the enquiry reported in this article suggests that subsequent research can be made stronger, more

focused and meaningful to those which are most affected by it: also, such an approach may increase opportunities for young people's participation and assist a more pragmatic application of their right to engage in making decisions that affect them.

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Figure 1 – The new participation measurement scale

I am able to take action or make decisions myself

I am unable to give my view or take any action

I am able to take action or make decisions jointly with other people

I am able to give my view but it does not affect action or decisions which are made

I am able to give my view and it affects action or decisions which are made