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Consultation with children and young people about their community: Challenges to the transformative potential of engagement in research

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Background

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in accessing and understanding children and young people's perspectives on their own lives. As well as the influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, changing theoretical and conceptual understandings have resulted in shifts in the ways in which children and young people (CYP) are viewed. The project reported in this paper reflects such a shift, where CYP are viewed as competent experts on their own lives, whose approaches to life and choices are regarded as interesting in their own right, and who have participation rights as active citizens.

This paper reports a collaborative project between researchers and a local council aimed at engaging with CYP about their perceptions of, and aspirations for, their community. The project aligned with the worldwide trend of developing child and youth-friendly communities, in which CYP are valued and respected members of the community.

Challenges and tensions highlighted by efforts to engage CYP in research consultation are explored within the context of this project. This critical review of methodological and ethical challenges serves as a reminder that some groups of CYP remain silent or silenced even within pedagogies of participation.

Research Questions

Development of child and youth friendly communities

A range of current research emphasises the importance of positive and supportive relationships in developing child-friendly communities. Where such relationships exist between families, services, institutions and the wider community, CYP tend to feel valued and welcomed members of those communities.

The first step in creating child-friendly communities involves consultation with CYP about their communities. This project utilised a range of innovative methodologies to address the following research questions:

- How do CYP perceive and experience their community?
- What are their aspirations for their community?
- What opportunities do CYP have to be involved in decision-making?
- What are the processes that serve to include, or exclude, CYP? and
- What are the relationships and networks available for CYP within the community?

Ethical engagement of children and young people in research

Promoting the ethical engagement of CYP in research requires reflection upon access to consultation opportunities, the nature of consultation with CYP and the expectations of such consultation. Acknowledging the democratic and participatory frameworks that underpin much of the current focus on including the voices of CYP, this project aimed to critique the processes of engaging with CYP and the transformative potential of this engagement.

Methods

The project used a wide range of participatory methods to seek and listen to the views about their community of CYP aged 2 to 17 years. All methods involved familiar adults working with CYP. Consultations occurred in the context of early childhood services or schools (primary and secondary).

Methods used included:

- opportunities to draw and comment upon elements of the local community;
- mapping the community;
- planning future communities;
- video journals about the community;
- conversations about the community;
- photo journals of the community; and
- 3D construction of the communities they would like.

Over 350 CYP contributed data. From these, approximately 80 attended a Children and Young People's Leadership Summit, hosted by the local council, to present the data and to engage in discussions with decision-makers about their perspectives of the community, their roles within the community and the ways in which they wanted to engage with the community.

Frame

The data generated were analysed in relation to the two areas of enquiry. On the one hand, the project was analysed in terms of the CYP involved and their perceptions of, and aspirations for, their community; opportunities for participation in decision-making; processes that served to include, or exclude them; and the relationships and networks available within the community. Consistent themes were identified in all of these areas.

A further level of analysis cast a critical look at the processes of engaging with CYP and the transformative potential of this engagement. Issues addressed include the impact of context on the participation of CYP; ambiguities related to what constitutes consultation and participation; and notions of power and empowerment, and how these were distributed and exercised within the project.

Research findings

Five consistent themes about what they would like to see in their city were identified by children and young people:

- 1. Safety and security. CYP identified places where they felt safe as well as instances where they did not feel safe. They suggested strategies to enhance safety and security.
- 2. Parks and open spaces. CYP were very positive about parks and the roles they played in their lives. However, they were concerned about air pollution and bullying by older children that prevented younger children accessing playgrounds.
- 3. Fun activities. CYP reported that there were not enough fun activities within their community. Those opportunities that existed were well used but were not always suitable for all CYP.
- 4. Shops and the main street. CYP did not feel welcome in the main street. They described the street as dirty and with not enough shops of interest to them. They were very positive about some community landmarks and places and valued some of the creative community spaces.

- 5. Issues specific to a local area. Where an area was located some distance from the town centre, children and young people reported frustration at always having to travel to access resources.

Reflection on the transformative potential e of the consultation has raised the following questions:

- Did the project offer opportunities for genuine consultation?
- Where the project was implemented in schools, what opportunities did CYP have to exercise choice related to both involvement in the project and the methods used?
- What are the barriers and supports in consultation with CYP?
- How was the project represented - to CYP as well as to community members?
- What views of CYP were challenged or reinforced by the project?