

# **Participatory Research: challenges, strategies and realities**

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# Aims

- Consider how together we can create the conditions that support *meaningful* participation in research
- Reflect on my and your experience
- Develop strategies relevant to the realities of your research

# What is participation?

- A Ladder, a Degree, a Pathway (Hart, Treseder, Shier)
- Involvement in and influence on decision making
- In a wide range of locations e.g. home, play, school, youth councils

**Meaningful Participation** is a rolling process where Children and young people's views and choices have a Positive impact on decisions, actions, structures and cultures.

# Or as other people put it so you have the references:

- Participation, according to the dominant contemporary definitions can be understood as taking part in an activity or different degrees of control or self-direction over decisions (Thomas, 2007).
- Participatory research methods are guided by an ethic of enabling participants' self-direction over the maximum range of research process (Alderson, 2005; Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Franks, 2011; Kirby et al., 2003) and should pay particular attention to other ethical considerations (Alderson, 2005; Morrow, 2005; Punch, 2002).

# Should I do participatory research?

## What is spot on for you?

What is the political aim of your research?

- empowerment of research subjects vs claim to neutrality or researcher

How does one generate robust knowledge claims?

- co-created through agents and researchers' perspectives vs through empirical observation.

# Perfect participation is not possible:

- Full control by children is probably an illusory goal, as children's structural position means at least that they have to be recruited to the initial stages of a research project, rather than initiating it entirely (Franks, 2011).
- Establishing participation in as many elements or pockets of the research process as possible is instead a useful strategy, especially when working with children across cultural boundaries (Franks, 2011; McLaughlin, 2005).

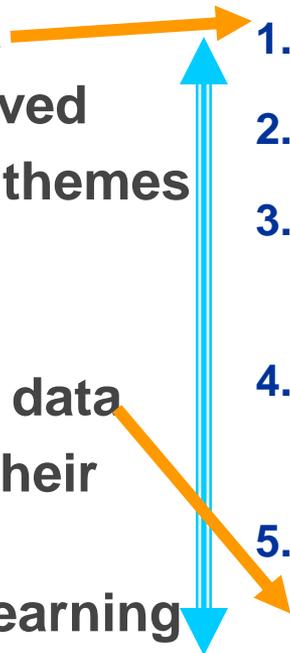
# What level of participation at which stages ?

## Project Stages

- Initial idea
- Who involved
- Exploring themes
- Deciding methods
- Analysing data
- Enacting their goals
- Sharing Learning

## Influence Levels

1. Not involved
2. Listened to, heard and respected
3. Having a say but the leader has the final choice
4. Having choice within limits agreed by leader
5. Having control, limited only by socially agreed obligations to others



## **2. The Example Projects**

- 1. Children, Citizenship and Europe:  
Listening to the voices of  
marginalised children in Wales  
and Languedoc Rousillon.**
- 2. Anyone want to offer?**

# Children Citizenship and Europe

## Aims

For marginalized children to define for themselves what citizenship means and what they want to change

To use these ideas to bring about change

## Who?

6 groups

Disabled

Gypsy Travellers

Young Carers

Refugees

Looked After

Minority Ethnic

55 children aged 5 –13

# **At what stages and levels did which (children) participate?**

- 1. Identifying initial themes,**
- 2. Identifying potential participants,**
- 3. Recruiting participants,**
- 4. Creating safe space for action and reflection;**
- 5. Exploring themes,**
- 6. Data ownership, review and analysis.**
- 7. Action for change in their own lives and consciousness**
- 8. Action for change for others**
- 9. Spreading the learning**

# 1. Identifying initial themes

## Challenges:

PhD timescale

My Own Interests

Marks out of 5  
for participation?

## Strategies:

To draw on existing research with children to influence my choice of focus, language, approach

## Realities:

Also drew on theory not particularly related to children, but tried to translate this.

# Marks out of 5 for participation?

## 2. Identifying potential participants

### Challenges:

I wanted to do research with marginalised younger children

These children are not already engaged in discussions of children's citizenship in Europe

### Strategies:

To recruit children in already existing groups

To work with them to develop an understanding of the relevance of Europe

### Realities:

Who I choose was influenced by 2006 EU Communication

**Think about who and why**

## **Reality: Participation is a rolling process**

The level of participation you are able to support children to achieve depends on the experiences of children and context in which they live.

If I had worked with 15-30 year olds (what the EU describe as young people) I would have been able to support them to have greater control over whole direction of project from the start because I could have approached the European Youth Forum and worked with relatively advantages youth.

# 3. Recruiting participants

## Challenges:

Getting past gate keeper (who do not support participation) = Ethics committees, group leaders, parents

## Strategies:

Battle it out in ethics

Research Protocol

Ensure children's consent is first and last

Parental assent, if they are likely to block

Support fluid consent by providing alternative activities

Marks out of 5  
for participation?

### 3. Recruiting participants

#### Realities:

#### Gate keepers:

Easy in Wales – Harder in France

#### Research Protocol:

willingness to be corrected and not argue,  
work with groups where on-going action could not be  
guaranteed.

Consent was fluid e.g LA. One exception – GT  
school BOZ

# 5. Exploring themes

## Challenges:

How to enable them to lead the direction of research within the confines of definitions of citizenship

## Strategies:

Break concept into component parts

Repeated meetings with same group

Work from previous sessions fed back to them

Ownership of research tools – questions, themes

Ownership of space and equipment - cameras

Observe group behaviour and respond to non verbal

Marks out of 5  
for participation?

## 5. Exploring themes

### Realities:

Young carer group  
made everything their own on the first night

Disabled children group  
controlled space and materials  
not questions

but through their actions (engagement in their  
here and now not research framework) they  
controlled themes - play

## 6. Data ownership and review

### **Challenges:**

To make 2 hours of dual group work accessible to children of varying language and literacy skills  
So they can code data and write their own reports

### **Strategies:**

Give info back in a variety of forms  
Use video and questions to enable them them to code data

**Marks out of 5  
for participation?**

## **6. Data ownership and review**

### **Realities:**

**All did some coding**

**Lack of time with some groups**

**– GT, Ref, ME**

**Full engagement by others**

- YC transcripts – highlighter I wrote report**
- LA wrote and reviewed words of report and videos on 4 extra sessions**

# What stages in your project shall we look at?

Identifying initial themes,  
Identifying potential participant,  
Recruiting participants,  
Creating safe space for action and reflection;  
Exploring themes,  
Data ownership, review and analysis.  
Action for change in their own lives and  
consciousness  
Action for change for others  
Spreading the learning

# Who are and could be the participants?

- Those who have engaged in previous research
- Those engaged in existing groups
- Those recruited to this project

# What level of participation can you support for these people in this stage?

- Informed of project, so they are involved, understand and can engage
- Listen to, so they are heard and respected
- Having a say, but the leader has the final choice
- Having choice, within limits agreed by leader
- Having control, limited only by socially agreed obligations to others

**Of how many children?**



# Key Messages

- 1. Participation is meaningful when it has a positive impact**
- 2. Participation can be maximised in our own practices if we ask ourselves HOW? and WHO? at every stage**
- 3. Participation can be maximised AND have more impact if it is a rolling process that develops a culture of respect and participation**

# 5. Useful References

## Reflect on your experiences

**Aspinwall, T. & Larkins, C. (2002)** *Breathing Fire into Participation: Funky Dragon Guidelines on Participation with Groups of Children and Young People* Welsh Assembly Government, Cardiff.

## See also

**Percy-Smith, B. & Thomas, N. (2010)** *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from Theory and Practice*, Routledge, Oxon.

**Kirby, P., Lanyon, C., Cronin, K., & Sinclair, R. (2003)** *Building a Culture of Participation: Involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation*, Department for Education and Skills, London.