Barriers to participation in decision-making for children and young people in state care: Towards a participation ecosystem

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Factors affecting participation for children and young people in care

There are a number of barriers affecting participation for vulnerable children and young people. Firstly, they are often prevented from meaningfully participating in decisions due to their perceived vulnerability (Powell & Smith, 2009). This can be a valid concern, but the tension between the need for protection and the right to participate is often a false dichotomy (Atwool, 2006) and the responsibility to protect children and young people can develop in to overprotection (Powell & Smith, 2009). Secondly, decisions relating to care can involve highly charged interactions between adults, which can diminish a child or young person's opportunity to have their voice heard (Atwool, 2006). Social workers are often tasked with determining what is in the child or young person's best interest, and as the 'best interests' test is discretionary this can lead to adults silencing or side-lining a child or young person's views (Tisdall, 2015a). Finally, the monolithic nature of the care system itself may also be a barrier to participation. A recent review of the care system in New Zealand found that organisational systems did not prioritise listening to children (Expert Panel, 2015), which has been echoed in other countries (Bessell, 2011). Opportunities to participate in decision making may also be limited by risk-averse social work agencies (van Bijleveld et al., 2015).

Factors affecting participation generally

Participation in decision making requires adults to view children and young people as unique individuals with the capacity to meaningfully contribute. 'Age and stage'-based views on the capacities of children and young people have been largely disproven but persist in practice (Smith, 2002). Meaningful participation also means viewing children and young people as individuals; the experiences of one child or young person cannot be assumed to be representative of all children and young people (James, 2004). There is a risk of assumed representation, whereby once a youth participation structure is set up those participants become 'the voice of children' (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). Secondly, meaningful participation can depend on the degree to which adult intermediaries filter, interpret or translate children's views (James, 2007). Adults can filter a child's opinions without intending to, and in some contexts

children's voices may be supplemented by those of professionals, which can determine how much weight the child's view should be given (Tisdall, 2015a). Other times there may be a selection bias whereby only those children and young people considered 'mature' or 'articulate' enough are invited to participate in collective decision-making, further marginalising disadvantaged groups (Horwath et al., 2012). There is a risk that children and young people's views can be excluded when they don't 'follow the rules' of certain spaces, such as government policy-making (Tisdall & Davis, 2004). Young people's views may not sit neatly with adult agendas.

Factors exacerbated by being in care

Trusting relationships are crucial to enabling children and young people to have a voice in decision-making (Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2014), but for children and young people in care those relationships may not exist, severely limiting the opportunities to have their voice heard (Ashton, 2014). Complaints mechanisms are often ineffective without having a trusted adult advocate, even when those mechanisms are well known (Cashmore, 2002). Independent facilitators can be crucial in this respect, and youth-led independent advocacy organisations can make a significant difference (Bessell, 2011). Professional facilitators can also help adult decision makers who want to enable children and young people to have input in to decisions but may not know how to do this effectively (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). Finally, the marginalised position of children and young people as a group means that they are inevitably dependent on adults to facilitate participation (Lansdown, 2010). This can become an issue in research with children, where researchers are sometimes impeded by the unwillingness of adults to allow children to be interviewed (Smith, 2011). The need for informed consent can lead to increased gatekeeping by parents and other adults (Powell & Smith, 2009).

The need for a participation ecosystem

There are several broader barriers preventing meaningful youth participation. These include the lack of a 'participation culture' (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012), a lack of 'participation infrastructure' (Lansdown, 2010), a lack of shared understanding of what meaningful participation entails (Tisdall, 2015a) and a lack of research on the impacts participation can achieve (Crowley, 2015). Together these could be labelled a 'participation ecosystem'.

A 'culture of participation' requires all professionals to adopt participatory practices rather than leaving this up to specific individuals (Thomas & Percy-Smith, 2012). Legislation enabling

children and young people to participate does not guarantee that participation will occur (Atwool, 2006), and a change in practice requires a change in attitudes, along with the development of the necessary skills (Cashmore, 2002). This includes cultural competency, as effective participation may differ across cultures (Shier, 2010; Suaalii & Mavoa, 2001).

'Participation infrastructure' involves elements of time, space and approach. Youth participation often occurs as a one-off process rather than through on-going engagement (Lansdown, 2010; Marchant & Kirby, 2004; Sinclair, 2004). Children and young people need to be able to have on-going input, rather than only being asked to contribute their views at one particular time (Vis & Thomas, 2009). As Smith (2010) notes, participation is most effective when children and young people's inclusion in decision-making is an on-going and integral part of their lives. Similarly, there is a need to recognise children and young people's participation in their 'everyday' spaces (Percy-Smith, 2010). While safe spaces can be useful, this can also isolate children and young people from decisions instead of making them more involved (Tisdall, 2015b). Governments and decision-makers should take a broad approach to youth participation, rather than a piecemeal one (Lansdown, 2010).

Often there is a lack of shared understanding between adults and children about the purpose of participation, with children believing they are there to influence decisions and adults viewing participation as more of a learning exercise (Tisdall, 2015a). Even when children and young people are asked for their views, decision-makers who hold traditional views of children as vulnerable and in need of protection may not expect those views to actually inform decisions (Crowley, 2015). Children and adults may also have differing views on when children's participation in decision-making is appropriate (van Bijleveld et al., 2015).

This may be due to a lack of research on the impacts of participation. Crowley (2015) notes that while there is a wealth of literature on how and why to involve children and young people in decision-making, there is less research about what policy impacts can be achieved. Others have also cited a lack of impact measurement as one of the barriers to a more comprehensive approach to participation (Lansdown, 2010; Sinclair, 2004).

Towards a participation ecosystem
Meaningful youth participation requires adults to broaden their understanding of what it means for children and young people to have their voices heard. Children and young people must be

empowered to contribute, and should be supported by adults who can help to make this happen. Participation must be an on-going process, not just a one-off event. Perhaps most importantly, mechanisms to enable youth participation should be comprehensively integrated within mainstream decision-making structures. This should be supported by a culture of participation, where all adults and professionals value the unique contributions that children can make. Only with such a broad understanding of what participation entails will children be truly able to exercise their right to have their voices heard.

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