Comparing the Impact of Children's Participation on Policy Making in Wales and Tamil Nadu
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Key search terms:

Disciplines: political science, social policy, sociology.

Topics / themes: citizenship (civic and political participation, human rights, non-governmental-organisations); governance (devolution); policy (policy development, policy implementation); socio-demographic processes (childhood).

Units of comparison: cultural units (citizenship groups); political institutions (policy actors, policy networks).

Concepts: politics (civic and political participation and engagement, participation, rights); socio-demographic processes (childhood); values (social status).

Funding: national research agencies (Economic and Social Research Council, UK).

Theoretical underpinnings: critical realism, social constructionism.

Methodological approaches: case studies; documentary searches (literature review); qualitative approaches (focus groups, participant observation, policy analysis, semi-structured interviews).

Methodological issues: bias (cultural, interviewer); case selection; contextualisation; interpretation; reflexivity; representativeness; sampling; translation and back translation; validity.

Research context

The research was an ESRC-funded doctoral study completed in 2011. The fieldwork was undertaken during 2009 and 2010 by the author, who conducted a pilot study of another case in Wales in 2007–08. The pilot study explored a range of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches for measuring the impact of children's participation in public decision making.

Prior to commencing her doctorate, the author had worked with the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales, as a practitioner, researcher and policy manager for an NGO, to develop structures, legislation and practice to support children and young people's participation in public policy development.

Successive Welsh governments had made strong investments in these policies and programmes in the 2000s in the context of devolution and the new governance arrangements, and the author was keen to understand the impact of these changes and how government policy and public services had been shaped and influenced by children's and young people's views.

Another antecedent influencing the choice of research questions and the design of the study was the authors' exposure to a number of interesting children's participation initiatives in the international development context. This experience and the available literature stimulated her interest in gaining a greater understanding of developments in Wales and in seeking insights into linkages between processes and outcomes.

Research topic / theme

The subject of the doctoral project was the participation of children in the governance of public services. The study examined the impact of their participation on public services in four formal governance structures: a local authority youth forum and primary school council in Wales, UK; a children's advisory group of a large international non-governmental organisation (INGO); and a programme of Neighbourhood Children's Parliaments (NCPs) in the Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu, India.

NCPs in this context comprise village level forums for all children and young people aged 6 to 18, enabling their participation in community governance at the 'grass roots' level in poor rural communities. With support from local NGOs, the NCPs are linked closely with capacity building structures for other citizens, in particular women and young adults. The NCP model was first developed by the Barefoot College in the Social Work and Research Centre located in Rajasthan, and subsequently replicated in other parts of India. The development of the NCP model was part of a larger community-led development project in Tilonia, a poor rural area of Rajasthan. The history and development of the 'barefoot college' in Tilonia links the education of men, women and children to community and economic development within an environment of participatory decision making.

The drive to include children as 'policy actors' as a legitimate group in the policy-making process has led in Wales, as in much of the UK, to the burgeoning of youth forums and school councils. However, evidence of the impact of public participation remains difficult to capture, and little previous work has been undertaken to

assess the influence of children's, or indeed adult, forums on the design, delivery and evaluation of public services

The study drew on theories of governance and power as well as the social construction of childhood to examine the policy influence of each of the forums from the perspectives of the key stakeholders involved. The study thus contributes to an understanding of the factors that enable children's 'voice' to be turned into policy 'influence', or inhibit it from doing so.

Aims, objectives and research questions

The central aim of the study was to identify and assess the impact of children's participation in decision making about public services at different levels of governance, with a view to testing whether devolution and the new models of governance operating in Wales since 1999 had created spaces that encompass children as 'active participants' in public decision making. Two international case studies were undertaken to allow a greater understanding of what might be possible in Wales and to gain insights into how processes and outcomes may be linked.

The study set out to ask whether anyone has listened to children and been able to take into account what they have to say about a variety of public services. The original aim was to carry out a study with 'objective overtones' (Bryman, 2004: 21), but the methodological challenges of, firstly, measuring impact and, secondly, attributing it to processes, especially when using an independent variable as difficult to operationalise as 'participation', required some re-conceptualisation.

The question the research sought to address was:
- How does children's participation, through deliberative forums established for that purpose, impact on the governance of public services?

This headline research question was subsequently broken down into the following sub-questions to explore more fully the varying perspectives of the main stakeholders and, particularly, the child participants and support workers in each of the four case studies:
1. What changes in public services have occurred as a result of children's participation in policy making and service development?
2. How do children, support workers, managers and policy makers understand the influence of children's views on the design, implementation and evaluation of public services?
3. What factors can be seen as enabling or inhibiting children's influence on public decision making?

The research questions were not explicitly comparative, and a cautious approach was taken regarding the comparative potential of the study, given the contextual differences between the Welsh and international case studies. The main purpose in adopting a comparative approach was to identify factors across the four case studies that might enable or inhibit the impact of children's participation on public decision making. To assess the transferability of learning, research participants in Wales subjected promising approaches identified in the international case studies to critical review.

Resources and governance

The study was funded by an ESRC doctoral studentship based in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. The funding included a small tax-free salary for the researcher for four years and £750 per year for three years for research expenses. Additionally, the ESRC covered the costs of one fieldwork visit to India. The research design was longitudinal and included data collection at two points, 'before' and 'after' (some 12 months later) the intervention. However, as ESRC funding was available to fund only one overseas fieldwork visit, it was not possible to undertake the 'before' fieldwork in India. Alternative less satisfactory arrangements were put in place to enable research participants to reflect on past developments and any changes resulting from the influence of the children's forums.

Robust supervisory arrangements were in place at Cardiff University to oversee the project. Monthly supervision was provided by two experienced supervisors: the lead supervisor had a background in sociology and social work, and the second supervisor had a background in social policy and social work. Annual progress reviews involved other members of the Social Science Faculty in assessing progress through the presentation and review of a chapter of the thesis and, in the second year, a critically observed, presentation.

Management and coordination

The project was managed by the author (working as a lone researcher) with support from the supervisory team at Cardiff University. Broadly speaking, the first year of the project, in 2008, focused on reviewing

literature and previous research, identifying and negotiating access to suitable cases. The second year was devoted to data collection, and the third year to analysing and writing up the project. No funds were sought for translation. Tamil was used in the south Indian case study, and the project director of the supporting NGO in India spoke very good English. A number of key project documents had already been prepared in English for donors; others were translated by the project director on request. An interpreter was recruited to support the fieldwork phase in India but, due to organisational difficulties, the project director acted as the interpreter for the majority of focus groups and interviews in India. While this service was well meant and gratefully received, it introduced an unwelcome bias into the data collection. Steps were taken to counter the bias by interviewing separately two English-speaking managers from other NGOs involved in supporting neighbourhood parliaments in the area and a number of children from the children's parliaments.

The INGO advisory group involved children who spoke a number of different languages. Four interpreters (one per language) were available to assist the researcher with the focus group discussions which, while time-consuming, worked remarkably well.

Professional and ethical standards

Ethical considerations were integral to the research design. In particular, careful attention was paid to issues of power due to the generational position of children in families and their lesser social status depending on age and culture. Ethical approval was sought and granted from the School of Social Science Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University. The British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2002) was used to guide the research alongside Priscilla Alderson's (1995) useful checklist of ethical considerations for research with children.

The main ethical issues to address were enhanced power imbalances, child protection and complex consent, although other issues were given consideration in the design and its application, for example whether and how to reward research participants. The research was designed to maximise the benefits for the children involved. This included opportunities to engage participants in enjoyable activities as well as taking steps to disseminate the research findings to those who may be able to effect change. Strategies used to help break down the power imbalance between the adult researcher and the children, and to encourage the children to communicate and explain their social worlds, included the use of focus groups and participatory techniques (see below).

Access to children was negotiated through key gatekeepers. Children were given information about the research, and initial consent was requested by the local project worker whom they knew and trusted. Informed written consent was obtained either from the children or, for those under 16 years of age, from their parents or carer. Measures were put in place to safeguard confidentiality and the anonymity of participants by making clear the limits of confidentiality. While the nature of the topics seemed unlikely to provoke disclosures of a personal nature, arrangements were nonetheless set up to ensure that, if children raised issues of concern, advice and support were available to them.

In addition, reflective and responsive research methods were selected to facilitate efforts to equalise power relations between researchers and children, and to reduce researcher and insider bias and strengthen validity. A detailed diary was kept throughout the research, and time was taken to review notes, to reflect on decisions, justifications and the implications of the choices made, and to consider problems that could arise due to factors to which the researcher was blind (Mason, 1996). Having 20 years experience of working with children in relevant contexts is helpful but can also be a hindrance. Strategies to counter familiarity and to support an open-minded approach and receptiveness to different ideas and understandings were adopted, including taking the stance of a 'curious visitor' and maintaining reflexivity. Multiple data collection methods were used to gather qualitative data from a broad range of stakeholders, and care was taken to triangulate different types of data from a number of different sources, to explore exceptions and negative cases and to question the function of research participants' accounts

Rationale for the research design

Consideration of the most appropriate research design was informed by a number of factors: firstly, the nature of the research questions; secondly, lessons learnt from a review of previous methodological approaches to evaluating children's participation and available plausible theoretical frameworks; thirdly, the author's ontological and epistemological position, her experience of undertaking research, developing policy and practically supporting children's participation in the context of devolution in Wales and in the international context; and, finally, pragmatic concerns.

The design, arrived at after much deliberation, was longitudinal, qualitative, multi-method, involving multiple case studies. Careful consideration was given to the choice of cases. The sample comprised four case studies: two in Wales and two international. A local authority supported youth forum for young people aged

11–25 and a school council for children aged 5–11 were selected in Wales. The international case studies included a programme of Neighbourhood Children's Parliaments (NCP) supported by a local NGO in the Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu in south India, and an advisory board of children and young people established by an INGO. The advisory board, which met annually in London, was comprised of twelve young people from across the six regions where the INGO was active (West and Southern Africa, Asia, South America, the Middle East and the UK).

The different levels of governance covered by the case studies extended from the local community and local government level to a high level, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifies that children should be enabled to participate and 'have a voice' in decision making concerned with all matters that affect the governance of their lives within an organisation.

The selection of all the case studies was informed by the possibility of being able to assess the impact that children's activities could have in influencing newly raised issues over the time frame available for the fieldwork (16 months). The Welsh case studies were selected on the basis of practical criteria such as the distance from the University and the willingness of the project manager to support the research. The selection of the international case studies was largely opportunistic and pragmatic. The Neighbourhood NCP model operating in parts of India has been positively evaluated (see for example Wyness, 2006), and the NCP programme operating in the Cuddalore District of Tamil Nadu was recommended by an former colleague as an example of a community-based approach to children's participation in public decision making that had achieved change in the living environments and provisions for marginalised children. The INGO advisory group had been recently established, and was keen to reflect on the influence of the forum on the organisation's decision making at the highest level.

All the case studies selected were deemed to be fairly typical examples of children's participation in the international development field and in Wales. The overall composition of the sample would, it was hoped, provide an opportunity to compare and contrast different approaches at different levels of governance across a full spectrum of children's ages and perceived maturity, leading to richer understandings of the processes involved and how these processes might link to policy outcomes.

The research was designed to enable the changes in policy and public services that the children in the forums said they wanted to see (their 'change objectives') at point A, to be contrasted with stakeholders' accounts of what changes had been brought about by the children's 'influencing activities', approximately 12 months later, at point B. Points A and B were determined by the forums' annual cycles, for example for the school council, it was the school year running from September to July. It was recognised that a multitude of variables could intervene and have an impact on policy outcomes between points A and B. Mid-point reviews afforded valuable opportunities to observe the forums and the interactions between the support workers and the children and gather reflections on the 'influencing activities' in which the children were engaged. Due to constraints on visits to India, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over one intense three-week period, rather than at two points in time.

Other design strategies were considered: a large-scale survey, a more controlled experiment or a purely theoretical exploration of the issue could have been employed. Although the case study design does not allow for statistical generalisability of the findings, on balance it was preferred as the four settings, or case studies, allowed for a more rounded and holistic study than alternative designs. The choice of depth over breadth created opportunities to explore children's own perspectives in an atmosphere of respect, openness and genuine intent to listen to children's views.

Rationale for the research methods
The project was informed by a comprehensive literature review which included consideration of a range of theoretical perspectives on policy making, citizenship and childhood, and previous empirical work on the impact of public participation. Little previous research had explored the impact on policy and services of public participation. Some studies (Burton, 2009, for example) have identified a number of conceptual and methodological challenges. An in-depth qualitative approach was adopted to overcome these challenges, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, structured observations and some documentary analysis.

Interviews or focus groups were conducted with all the participating children, the support workers, senior managers and governors, before and after the 'influencing activity'. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with a range of policy makers who were the subject of the children's influencing activities. Relevant policy and administrative documents were analysed to explore organisational accounts of the purposes, activities and achievements of the four forums.

The interviews and focus groups were designed to help the researcher gain an understanding of the nature and quality of participation by children in the four deliberative forums. They also aimed to identify the impacts of the children's participation as perceived by the stakeholders involved, and to explore how evidence in support of such claims could best be captured.

Focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews were selected to facilitate access to practitioners', managers' and children's accounts in an open and non-prescriptive way, while retaining the chosen lines of inquiry. The insights the research set out to explore were to be contextual, situational and interactional, requiring a distinctive approach to excavate the complex assumptions and understandings of research participants and get at what the researcher wanted to know (Mason, 1996: 41).

Focus groups were selected as a culturally and child-sensitive method. Participatory techniques were used when moderating the focus groups with children, on the basis of the author's own experience of communicating with children, and with the benefit of methodological insights from other researchers. These techniques were particularly useful in Tamil Nadu and with the INGO advisory group because of the language barriers and the range of ages and circumstances of the children and young people involved. They were also useful with the school council because of the young age of the children.

The participatory techniques helped to address the power imbalance between the researcher and the children. Feedback from the children suggested that this approach was enjoyable and made it easier for the children to express themselves confidently. One technique used with the younger children in the school council was to introduce hand-held puppets as 'actors' through which they could express their opinions both verbally and through actions.

Data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups were augmented by observations of the forums 'in action'. Detailed field notes were taken of these events and analysed alongside the participants' accounts, and documents such as the minutes of the forum meetings over the study period, policy statements and annual and other evaluative reports on the forums.

The research design and the combination of methods employed privileged regular opportunities for reflection and systematic consideration of the role of the author in the research. The research diary kept throughout the study proved invaluable as an aid to this process and the development of analytic categories and constructs.

Conceptual issues

Participation in public decision making is not an easy concept to define or measure in any context. The term 'public' decision making was used in the study to describe policy making and decision making concerned with the design, delivery and evaluation of public services. In this context 'public' decision making is distinguishable from participation in individualised decision making about life choices, and usually involves children as collective groups, participating in and influencing the design, delivery and evaluation of the public services that affect them.

Participation was located, for the purposes of the study, within a wider theoretical framework of governance perspectives that recognise and support partnerships and policy networks, encouraging greater civic participation. Inevitably, a study of participation in decision making has to be informed by theoretical perspectives on power. The study, therefore, drew on the work of a range of theorists who have applied late postmodern ideas about governmentality, community engagement and the dual conceptualisation of participation as a means of empowerment and social control (for example Kothari, 2001; Taylor, 2007).

This theorisation of public participation had resonance in all four case studies. Interestingly, much of the literature critiquing participation as a means of social control rather than empowerment has an empirical base in international development. However, conceptualisations of 'public services' and 'governance' were less transferable from the UK to the Indian context. A number of key research participants in India spent many hours explaining to the researcher what they understood as the meanings of these concepts in the south India context. For example, public services in Tamil Nadu were more likely to refer to only basic facilities provided by the state, such as the provision of access to clean water and decent roads and sanitation, in contrast to the dominant concept of public services in the UK, whereby the state has additional responsibilities to provide health and social care. An overlap was found with education insofar as the state in both the UK and Indian law is required to provide education for all children from a certain age, and parents are required to send their children to school. However, in Tamil Nadu and much of India, these legal requirements are not enforced, and the standard of state education is generally poor due to a lack of trained teachers, who are low paid and undervalued, and to inadequate school buildings and facilities.

Theoretical assumptions underpinning the study also included an understanding of the social construction of childhood, which implies the separation of childhood and adulthood, and gives rise to an imperative to recognise childhood as an important state in its own right, and not simply a state of 'becoming'. While, the views on what constitutes childhood clearly varied across the different contexts, the idea that one of the most important benefits of children's participation in public decision making is in shaping future 'active' citizenship, rather than just benefiting children in the 'here and now', featured in many different ways in all four case studies.

Data collection and analysis
Sampling within each case study was relatively straightforward. All the children engaged in the forums, support staff and nominal lead managers were invited to participate in the research, and the vast majority did so. One policy maker was approached for interview in each case study. The selection here was largely opportunistic. A total of 34 adults were interviewed across the four sites, and 88 children took part in the focus groups. At least three meetings of the forums in each setting were critically observed.

Observation assumed most importance in the India case study because of the reliance upon interpreters. Visual data (photographs and videos) augmented field notes. Since only one fieldwork visit could be made to India, all data were collected during a three-week visit. However, it was possible to interview people who had been involved with the development of the Neighbourhood Children's Parliaments (NCPs) in Tamil Nadu since their inception, and to review reports on the NCPs and their achievements written in English for the donor organisation and government officials.

The concentrated period of fieldwork in Tamil Nadu was more intense than the fieldwork in the other three case studies. Every day over the three-week period, opportunities were available to collect data over, and in addition to, the systematic data collection: for example, visits to the villages and discussions with parents, community leaders and young people; attendance and observation of the training of NCP members and local cultural and environmental events; and reviewing written material about the development of the NCPs in the area. The intensity of the fieldwork in India was linked to the isolation of the fieldwork site (the researcher was the only non-Indian in a rural conservative region); the work ethic and commitment to the research expressed by the NGO who opened their doors for seven days a week and organised a full and varied programme; and the researcher's need to gather as much data as possible in the relatively short finite time available.

Data analysis revealed that, notwithstanding the very real challenges of collecting data when the researcher does not speak the local language and is reliant on an interpreter who was not independent of the setting, the ethnographic approach to researching participation processes adopted in India provided data of greater richness than the other case studies.

The time spent in all of the case study sites enabled familiarisation with the institutional contexts within which the actor-orientated processes of change occurred, and it was possible to observe the significant bearing of these contexts on the participation dynamic. Prior knowledge of the UK-based institutional contexts proved to have advantages and disadvantages. Familiarity helped to focus explorations quickly with research participants on the dynamics operating in the setting. However, familiarity also made it difficult to see things that were taken for granted. The disadvantage due to the researcher's limited knowledge of the governance arrangements was counterbalanced by the fact that this strangeness meant that behaviour and interactions could be more critically observed and contextualised, and pertinent questions could be used to test out and explore assumptions. On reflection, the more intensive period of fieldwork in India allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the power relationships and interactions between children and adults that John Pinkerton (2004) asserts is at the heart of children's public participation, albeit at the cost of being unable to investigate changes contemporaneously over time.

Data were analysed using a framework that categorised different types of impacts across three broad dimensions of change, together with a complementary socio-legal conceptual framework, which enabled exploration of the steps involved in turning children's 'voice' into 'influence', with reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Both methods generated different types of data with significant similarities and overlaps, for example between observation and focused discussions with the forum members. Differences in the data relating to the perspectives and purposes of the accounts of the various research participants, including children, support workers, lead managers, sponsors and 'decision makers' that the children were seeking to influence, were compared and contrasted.

The combination of methods allowed the research questions to be addressed from a number of angles and perspectives, although at times the practical implications of integrating the methods proved to be challenging. At the same time, the range of data collection techniques employed and the cross-referencing of

data and analytic categories within and across focus groups, semi-structured interviews, observations, documentary analysis and the researcher's reflective account made it possible to address a range of challenges to the validity of the research.

While recognising that comparisons across Wales with the Indian case study, and their implications for the policy and practice in the UK context, had to be treated with caution, steps were taken to test out the feasibility of applying some of the lessons learned from the operations of the NCPs in India with the Welsh research participants. Comparative analysis across the case studies focused on the factors that were seen to be enabling or hindering the policy influence of the forums, including the role of support workers and the strategic engagement of the children's forums in wider policy networks.

Interpretation and dissemination of findings

Given the small number of cases involved, it was not possible to generalise the findings or infer casual relationships. However, interpretation of the findings identified a number of factors associated with achieving policy influence in the specific contexts. The transferability of the learning – particularly from the Indian case study to the Welsh context and *vice versa*– remains problematic, but the considerable potential policy and practice implications warrant further research and analysis of these factors and their applicability to practice in Wales.

The doctorate was awarded in May 2012 (Crowley, 2012). The findings and methodological and theoretical insights from the research on the impact of children and young people's participation or civic engagement in decisions about public policy and social welfare services have been disseminated to academic and non-academic audiences. Dissemination to an academic audience was through journal articles, presentations at four academic conferences in the UK, Europe and the wider international context.

Key stakeholders include government officials, politicians, non-governmental and statutory social welfare agencies working with children and young people in Wales, the UK, Europe and international development. Dissemination through written reports, updates, verbal feedback and presentations was undertaken through a number of relevant networks in which the author was actively engaged, including the All Wales Participation Consortium in Wales, the Council of Europe's Advisory Group on Children's Participation, and a joint Save the Children / UNICEF international development project on measuring children's participation. Reports for stakeholders in each of the case study sites were well received and some of the findings were used to inform the future development of the forums' work.

The learning from the research contributed to the development of a national framework and methodology (with data collection tools) for assessing the impact of children's participation in public policy in Wales. The Welsh Government identified gaps in knowledge about the benefits of children's participation in government-sponsored forums including school councils and local authority youth forums, and they noted the difficulties that service managers and practitioners face in trying to assess and quantify the benefits of children's participation. All stakeholders (through the All Wales Participation Consortium) were keen to remedy the situation and establish a national system for collecting comparable data on the impacts of children's and young people's participation on public policy and on children directly.

Lessons learned

A number of lessons were learnt from the experience of carrying out international comparative research:

- Be prepared to adapt the research design and methods as the research progresses.
- Be as clear as possible about the units of comparison from the outset but keep them under review.
- Given the time required to influence policy in national contexts and the serendipity of the process, the time span of an international study may need to be extended. It would, for example, have been useful to allow a third stage of data collection, whereby feedback could be gathered for a another six to nine months on any developments relating to the policy change objectives selected at the start of the process.
- Organise an interpreter independent of the research setting, where the research requires expertise in different languages.
- Keep a research diary as it is invaluable in aiding reflection, the identification and challenging of assumptions, and provides a contemporary record of the many decisions taken and justifications produced along the way.
- If policy learning and transfer are an aim of the research, consider dissemination plans and make links with relevant policy targets at the outset of the project.

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