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**Next steps in children and young people's research,
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researchers**

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Next steps in children and young people’s research, participation and protection from the perspective of young researchers

By Dan, David, Evie, Ollie, Donna Thomas and Cath Larkins (UCan)

This contribution is co-authored by young people and academics involved in a young researcher group. The article provides a brief introduction from the young researchers and some academic context to their work, then the young researcher group’s contribution. Their contribution is followed by a brief discussion of the issues they raise in the light of current academic debate.

Introduction

“Children and young people need to be at the heart of all decisions that affect them. And all the people working with them need to understand this.” (Ollie)

This is what Ollie said to Cath as they walked from our meeting writing this article towards the next meeting they were attending, a youth council special event at the university where they are both researchers. Cath is an old researcher. Ollie is a young researcher. The young researcher group we all belong to is called UCan. It is facilitated by an old researcher called Donna, with help from Cath and other people. The young researchers who take part are aged from 12 to 25 years. The old researchers are aged up to 50 years. We meet once a month at the University of Central Lancashire.

This article contains our critical reflection on participation and protection. We read summaries of the things other people have written for this special issue. We then shared stories of our own experiences. We discussed how our stories link up with each other’s and the things other people have written about child participation. Cath typed up our conversation and grouped things together around themes. We all looked at what she had written and made changes, sometimes adding new ideas.

Children and young people ‘at the heart of all decisions that affect them’ (Ollie) is a powerful way of describing child participation, which more conventionally tends to be associated with notions of having a say, consultation, involvement or influence within personal lives, practice, research and policy. In this article we are pursuing collaborative research practice which challenges ‘the donor recipient model of top down, academically informed practice or policy recommendations’ (Clayson et al, 2018). Participatory research is a process that ‘involves youth and adults in collaborative process of research, reflection, analysis and action’ (Kohfeldt et al, 2011, p316). It is grounded in an epistemology of shared knowledge production and ‘seeks to engage both researchers and community members in collaboratively determining problem definitions via problematisation...goals include the democratisation of knowledge production and the empowerment of subordinated communities’ (Kohfeldt, 2011, p316). This is distinct from research with simply uses participatory methods.

Starting from children and young peoples' issues, challenges preconceived, normally institutional ideas, of what priorities may be for certain groups. Although participatory practice within research with children and young people can involve a variety of degrees of influence in the processes and products of research (Larkins et al 2014) children and young people setting agendas is at the heart of our practice in UCan. Our collaboration then involves 'young and old' researchers exploring ideas they have generated and taking action, through research, teaching, community engagement and impact activities.

In research with children and young people, stories have a significant value for making sense of the world and UCan use stories to initiate, generate, analyse and disseminate research. Stories co-create peer relationships (Bamberg & Georgikopouli, 2008) and enable storytellers to 'negotiate and renegotiate a sense of self' (Thomas, 2019). The storytelling process in writing this article involved critical reflexivity (see Larkins, 2016, 2019) with other discourses ('the things other people have written about child participation') and their own shared experiences of participation. This gives an account assembled from all of our voices of how participation helps protect children and how participation work needs to focus on getting evidence; sharing information; and building opportunities for change. We conclude with ideas about what should happen next for young people interested in research, participation and protection from discrimination.

UCan's perspectives on participation and protection

Ollie's statement that children and young people participating in all decisions is part of the reason we set up our UCan group started back in 2012. There were three other young researchers in our writing meeting - David, Dan and Evie. David, Dan and Cath have been part of the group from the beginning. We all have lots of experiences of different participation activities. Many of us have experience of being disabled. We all come together to be part of UCan because we want to find out from other people about what they think and experience. We try to change the way people view and understand the world and to end discrimination. We do this through participatory research - choosing issues, doing research and telling people what we find out. One of the young researchers described this as "a wonderful experience for all of us, allowing us to socialise with more people, as well as achieve a lot more, than we could before. I am looking forward to having more public speaking or recording sessions". We are pleased to have this opportunity to contribute to the journal special issue. We are about to start more activities to enable other children and young people to share their research findings – so stay in touch!

How does child participation help protect children and young people?

The young researchers reflected that individual and collective participation helps keep children safe because:

'It allows them to get involved in society, increasing the chances of getting noticed'

'It helps them communicate and improves their communication skills, and this helps keep them happy'

'I think participation keeps young people safe because it gets them involved and included and it gives them a voice in decisions'

'It gives them more information about their rights'

'It helps us keep the safeguarding right, it makes safeguarding better because it puts a community-centred core to safeguarding'

Getting evidence

Some of the things that are going well in child participation are to do with the different ways we are gathering evidence of other children and young people's ideas. One example we talked about was groups of young people inspecting short break services to make sure they are of a good enough standard:

"We inspect short break services. Most of them we have been Involved with, and we know what should and shouldn't be there. Because the people are closer to our age they are more likely to open up to us than to someone in a suit. 10-11-year olds talk to us about what they think about the services. They say things about how they should have more things to do, and more choice in what they do. We tell other people about these things in our reports".

Another example was young people voting on priority campaign issues through their youth parliaments, then conducting research to gather evidence on these:

"I'm a MYP, this would be considered my last term. We've just recently had a reshuffle as one MYP has stepped down. At first, we weren't sure about what our national campaign is going to be. But we met with researchers. And we have talked about knife crime"

"And tonight you are going to start planning the research about it, thinking about different research techniques and how to choose between different sources of information. You will get evidence for a big summit meeting in the summer. You will decide what you do, how you do it. The only boundaries are about safety and about money"

There were difficulties however about gathering information and data. And these were to do with funding cuts:

"I have these sessions where I go out with a specific person and talk about matters with him. I figure that I have a lot of opportunities like that. But

1
2
3 *unfortunately the service has been cut and I have so much useful information*
4 *to give”*
5

6
7 A Lack of data sharing platforms was also an issue:

8
9 *“Data”*

10
11 *“If only there was a way we could create an avenue where people could share*
12 *information”*
13

14
15 *“And their data, as just said”*
16

17 Thinking of ways to gather data from other children is important because we need
18 evidence to convince people to make changes. We also need to make sure that all
19 children’s ideas are included, not just the ideas of the people lucky enough to take part
20 in groups. One young researcher noted that finding different ways to gather evidence
21 is important because “It will help improve your case when making an important point”
22 but there are challenges:
23

24
25 *‘Finding the right sources to get it from, so the material is not biased’*
26

27 *‘the value that organisations place on certain types of communication. For*
28 *example, many organisations value reports and statistics. Yet, children and*
29 *young people express their experiences in many different ways. How these*
30 *ways are presented (and kept authentic to what children and young people*
31 *mean) can become a challenge. New technologies can offer a way to overcome*
32 *this’*
33
34
35

36 **Sharing information about children’s and young people’s ideas**

37
38 *After gathering evidence, we have experience of lots of different ways of sharing*
39 *information about children’s and young people’s ideas with other people. This includes*
40 *film making and sharing films with national and local authority committees, for*
41 *example:*
42

43
44
45 *“I was involved in making a film. We did it like around stereotypes of different*
46 *people with different disabilities and needs. Autism, dyslexia, ... They were*
47 *talking about bullying as well”*
48

49
50 *“It’s been shown at the SEND boards”*
51

52 *It also includes making and sharing fictionalised stories using digital objects so that*
53 *they can be seen by anyone.*
54

55 *“We went around the room discussing what experiences we had. We took those*
56 *discussion interviews, two or three, and we then merged them together to form*
57 *an entirely new story. The stories were based on the people we interviewed.*
58 *We first merged their stories together, then made up a fictional character that*
59
60

basically managed to fit all elements of the story. And then with the aid of authors and illustrators, we then shared them with the general public as tales, using phygitals. Phygitals are our own personal inventions. They come in many [digital object] forms - the Suitcase, the Arcade Machine, the Rabbit in the magic hat with a wand, and the map. On the map you scan specific areas with your phone or ipad and there you would see a story. Those were our ways of giving the stories away. We were doing what we could to make these stories known”

It is important to find different ways of sharing information about children lives and opinions, to promote safety, :

- Young people get asked to tell their story or to go and tell their story to decision makers. And that can be a bit exposing. If you can tell a fictional story, that is still true but puts different people’s ideas together it connects to something that Elsie was saying in her article, about how young people can talk about difficult experiences whilst also keeping themselves safe.
- Fictional stories embody collectivity too, highlighting shared experiences and minimising the risk of exposure for children and young people. It’s also important that professionals do not confuse the identity of young people with the stories they tell. Fictional stories can reduce the risk of this happening.
- I think it is good because you don’t feel like you are on your own. And using a story it’s almost like it’s not you it’s the fictional character but you are putting your emotions onto the fictional character. So, it’s not you, you are talking about.

Building opportunities for change

When we started talking about how we use information about the data we have gathered to get things to change, we realised that it is really important to keep building the right opportunities for change. Opportunities include meeting with the right people and giving them clear suggestions, building good working relationships and building networks.

- ‘We do a lot of work with the SEND [Special Educational Need and Disability] partnership board to try to get young people’s voices heard and to change the EHCP [Education, Health and Care Plans] and to make sure that young people’s views are put in there. I think we made a change to how the EHCP plans are being done. We made it so that young people are having a one-page profile about themselves, that they update themselves. An adult at school sits down with the person at school and they update it together’
- ‘This connects with what Geraldine and other young and adult researchers are doing together. They have developed a rights framework for thinking about EHCP. They said that they had to challenge and change people’s ideas and

1
2
3 attitudes about disabled young people being seen as always vulnerable and
4 dependent'

5
6
7 'Yeah 'cos a lot of people think we haven't got any views about ourselves and
8 we have. We should have the primary views. And the problem is as well, we
9 didn't know our targets, they were made by the school, so we didn't know we
10 had to meet them'

11
12
13 'Developing networks is a crucial element of meaningful change, making sure
14 all organisations and 'stakeholders' are informed and understand the relevance
15 of the participation activity/process'

16
17
18 Changing attitudes is also important. This means not just attitudes of individual people,
19 but attitudes across the whole system, about involving children and young people in
20 decisions about their own lives and making sure they have information in accessible
21 forms.

22
23
24 "You have to make sure that every decision about a young person, is put it in
25 better language for them and make sure they are involved in every decision.
26 Why shouldn't they be? It is going to affect them"

27
28
29 "I agree, as a professional I would produce a young-person friendly
30 document/visual to make sure participation is retained across the whole
31 process. This also links back to the earlier point around communications. Some
32 'literacies' are valued over others and this needs to be challenged"

33
34
35 When you are trying to make changes across a whole system it helps to have the
36 director and the head of participation in the meeting. We need to be able to set agenda
37 items for these meetings and to help take the decisions about how money is spent.
38 Cath has written about this in another article too (Larkins 2019). This is important for
39 ensuring also resources are allocated and maintained for children and young peoples'
40 participation. Senior leaders have a tendency to avoid these types of meetings, always
41 placing responsibility with professionals who cannot make decisions that can
42 implement change.

43
44
45 One of the difficulties we discussed when trying to build opportunities for change
46 related to funding cuts, and the lack of involvement of children and young people in
47 decisions about where cuts should and should not be made.

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49
50
51 "They are making cuts to the funding but the consultation has not gone out to
52 children. Basically they didn't want to consult the young people about it because
53 obviously it would pull people's heart strings too much. So obviously they
54 wanted to block them out!"

55
56
57 "So what have you done about it?"
58
59
60

"We were promised and promised and promised that we were going to have our views heard and then it got to the last week and we wouldn't have had a meeting until after the deadline. Now the deadline has been changed. Apparently, it will be sorted"

"It can be difficult to establish ourselves in society on account of financial issues"

"There are 'red flag' situations where a decision is already made but they still have a legal duty to consult. In these cases, consultation becomes meaningless. Institutions need to be more upfront about this with children and young people, being honest when consultation is lip service and when it can really bring about change"

'Funding cuts are an important issue. We need to make sure that funding cuts do not stop children and young people sharing their ideas with other people or and that cuts do not stop children and young people from being involved in making decisions about services'

'We need to keep developing opportunities to share the evidence we gather and to use this to protect everyone from discrimination. Another thing is making sure that young researchers have a clear understanding of safeguarding, including having safeguarding training as young researchers (that also covers cyberbullying)'

Discussion

In the story assembled in this article we note that 'many of us [in UCan] have experiences of being disabled' this means protection and discrimination are important to us, as well as participation. Our research has shown that in the UK and Japan the rights of disabled children and young people are not protected and that conditions of austerity and neo-liberal family policies increase children and young people's exposure to harm (Larkins et al 2012, Larkins et al 2018). It is unsurprising then that UCan sees child protection as including interpersonal, environmental and social protection of children and young people. As other research they have conducted shows, ending discrimination against children and young people and promoting this protection, therefore necessitates addressing the underlying causes of inequalities (Larkins et al forthcoming).

Their reflections emerge from a committed process of doing research differently. This is underpinned by a rationale for doing collaborative research with children and young people that generates valid knowledge about self and experience, and it requires that we attend to the 'immersion, friction, strain and quivering unease of doing research differently' (Springman & Truman, 2017, p173). Traditional ethics can at times pose safeguarding issues for some children and young people (as explored by Kiili et al elsewhere in this issue). As Pickles (2019) observes during 'hate research' with young

people, noting that 'seeking parental consent placed young participants in a position of greater risk than what would occur during participation' (Pickles, 2019, p). We are fortunate that through UCan we have been able to build the long term relationships that enable safe, ethical and adventurous research.

The process of peer-inspections described by UCan has much in common with peer research, in which children and young people are researchers, enquiring into the experiences of their peers. Dixon et al (2019) highlight the value of peer researcher methods, noting that *'most young people (57%) who were surveyed about their experience of being interviewed by the peer researcher said that they would prefer to be interviewed by someone with care experience'* (p10). In both research and inspections, young people offer an epistemological authority in relation to the focus of investigation. A different type of space opens between two young people with shared experiences and peer to peer work can shift power to children and young people *'leading to children being acknowledged as competent social actors'* (Dixon et al, 2019, p10).

Service cuts impact upon children and young people's participation. Despite the passion of professionals working in this area, lack of resource for participation leads to cuts in service-provision. As UCan note, the potential for meaningful participatory activities is limited by safety and money. This is recently echoed by Dixon et al (2019) who notes *'realistic timescales, costs and flexibility are key areas to get right when working with young people'* (p11).

UCan noted that data collection and distribution can have challenges. Again this is reflected in other recent literature as Manney et al (2019) point out, *'a recurring issue for researchers is that of whose voice is being spoken and, simultaneously whose voice is being heard'* (p6). This can result in difficulties translating children and young peoples' recommendations into policy and practice. There are nuanced challenges that arise for researchers working with marginalised groups and with multimedia data, where children and young people can both increase their reach to wider audience, yet may be exposed to greater criticisms. UCan suggest reports and statistics are examples of institutional discourses which prioritize language. This is problematic for children and young people who communicate in non-conventional ways. As Barad (2007) notes *'Language has been granted too much power... at every turn lately every 'thing'...is turned into a matter of language'* (p108). We should not reject language, only start to understand its limitations in representing self, experience and reality; and in doing so, consider how other modes of expression can capture experiences that sit outside the realms of conventional thought and language. For example, Barton (2015), uses art as *'a vehicle to express a personal journey'* (p64); while Trowsdale et al (2013) work with a *'psycho-physical process...that is communal where all interpretations feed others and shape the collective experience'* (p72). Blaisdell et al (2018) note ways of working with younger children *'that centred their own creativity and play'* (p86).

Data collection at UCan can be innovative and interdisciplinary. Data is becoming more varied in research with children and young people. Data can include written and digital formats (see Heron et al, 2018), puppet shows (see Mayes, 2016), models (see Clayson et al, 2018), Collages (see Marcu, 2016) and body movement, poetry and art

(see Norton et al, 2018). Songwriting is also effective in enabling children and young people to challenge adult stereotypes about youth (Authors 2019). These diverse types of data are referred to as 'reflexive material' (Clayson et al, 2018), and the process of their production involves '*collaborative analysis*' (Mayes, 2016) with all participants.

Digital technologies have been used by UCan to represent experiences and share information with other young people and service providers. UCan note that film-making is an effective mode of communication because '*it's a visual thing, they [decision-makers] can't hide away from it*' (young person). As UCan stated above, sharing information in different ways means the materials are '*given more exposure to as many people as possible*'. This supports the aim to share information with "*people who can help us [young people] obtain more opportunities in society*". UCan note the therapeutic element of merging fiction and selves in the creation of retelling stories. Contemporary research with children and young people prioritises the telling of personal stories in the pursuit of social truths. Self, experience and stories are treated synonymously, '*sustaining an idea that children and young people are their stories, whether painful or soothing*' (Thomas, 2019). Fictional storytelling as a method for representing experience allows children and young people to become disentangled from their inner narratives, as one young person notes: '*it's almost like it's not you, it's the fictional character*' (young person). The epistemological position of the young person shifts from the 'story I', to a collective 'I', developing a 'transpersonal reflexivity' (see Thomas, 2019) about self, experience and the ideas being shared.

Researching and communicating a diversity of experiences requires a diversity of research approaches and dissemination tools. Groups of children and young people may have experienced trauma (as is the case for children and young people with experience of care, violence and seeking asylum). Innovative approaches to child participation are therefore foregrounding the wellbeing of children and young people (see Meyes, 2016, Marcu, 2016, Norton et al, 2018) using reflexive epistemologies and therapeutic methods for dialogue. For example, methods currently used in psychotherapeutic contexts, are transferrable and valuable for working with vulnerable groups of children and young people in collaborative research processes. These methods were seen by Norton et al (2018) as valuable in '*allowing participants to reveal more about themselves in a manner that is not confrontational breaks down power and helps youth explore the meaning of their experiences*' (p3).

As the insights from UCan highlight, the retelling of findings in the process of disseminating the findings of participatory research and action requires equal attention to wellbeing. Raising the voices of children and young people is not just engagement in recounting stories but '*also about disseminating their messages in accessible ways that can engender changes in both policy and everyday practices*' (Manney et al, 2019, p53). Fictional story work transcends personhood, offering protection from 'exposure' and providing a platform for collective action.

Information provision is an important aspect of child participation, allowing for children and young people to make informed decisions. Digital media can promote children's rights, including the rights contained in UNCRC article 17 '*to access socially and culturally beneficial information and material*' (Sakr, 2016) and the right to information which can enable children and young people to keep themselves safe. UCan are currently planning ways to use social media and web-based platforms to disseminate research findings and information for and with other young people and decision-makers. Networking is an important aspect of collaboration and dissemination of knowledge. A risk competent rather than risk averse approach to young people's engagement with digital media can therefore promote both participation and protection. Digital spaces are not sufficient. It is also important for young people to have a presence in organisational spaces where decision-making takes place. As noted by UCan, where their collaborative work with SEND resulted in changes to practice.

Conclusion

There is a lot more work to do to help children's and young people's participation bring about greater protection, but also a lot of knowledge amongst children, young people and adults about how to achieve this. As one young person notes, '*We need to keep developing opportunities to share the evidence we gather and to use this to protect everyone from discrimination*'. At the level of practice, innovative and emancipatory collaborative research are affording opportunities for children and young people to meaningfully contribute to and shape policy-direction. However, systemic barriers can affect how children and young people influence change. The potential for networks, collaborative partnerships and social media platforms to address a lack of resource is evident. Commitment and honest information are required from decision-makers for child participation to make a meaningful contribution. Finding ways to make emotional connections with people who make decisions is very important, as is making it safe for people to share their experiences without having to be exposed. Stories are a great way of doing this, and so are films, websites, songs and short summaries of research. The value of children and young people's participation cannot be underestimated and there remains an urgency to ensure that children and young people are protected, listened to and have opportunities to create change, in their own communities and society at large.

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