

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATIO

A PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Development discourses in the 60s, 70s and 80s pitched children's issues within the framework of welfare and not within the framework of human rights. Therefore, most programmes for children would be tagged within women's programmes or it would be a health and education issue, seen from a medical need especially nutrition and vitamin deficiencies, immunisation or that of enrolling children in schools. One of the commonest programme during the 70s was mother and child health programme (MCH). The primary concern at that time by the state and civil society organisations was to prevent children from dying of preventable diseases and to enhance the nutritional intake of poor vulnerable children and improve enrolment of children in schools. The concept of peoples' right to development participation was still evolving. Children were not seen as a constituency by itself to be recognised and given its due importance. The concept that they had a fundamental right to participate in processes where decisions were taken regarding their lives was not thought of. In fact, the right to participate is a most complex concept.

Placing the concept of children's participation within the framework of UNCRC is important, as it was "the" international instrument that guaranteed children this right. UNCRC guarantees an entire range of rights from civil to political, social, economic and cultural. UNCRC Article 12 grants a child the right to express freely in matters affecting him or her and these views must be given due importance/weightage. All other following Articles...13, 14, 15 and 16 actively support the implementation of article 12. The ratification of UNCRC brought in a paradigm shift in the development world especially when it came to children's well-being and their agency.

UNICEF and International Funding Agencies, had guidelines on children's participation in addition, researchers wrote about what constitutes children's participation. However, underpinning it was the idea of children's participation solely in programmes, projects, activities, research, events and therefore the need to have guidelines. The idea that children have their own agency was not explored extensively. Prof. Roger Hart, Prof. Judith Ennew were the two scholars in the 1990s who wrote substantially on the subject. They drew upon grassroots NGOs experiences to draw lessons but also to analyse it within the political, social and cultural framework.¹ I have been inspired by their writings.

¹ Ennew, J, 2000, How Can We Define Citizenship in Childhood? Working Paper Series, Vol, 10, Num12. Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies and Hart, R, 1999, Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship, Innocenti Essays, No. 4, UNICEF

Right to participation and be heard is considered as one of the cardinal principles on which (community) development is based. To participate in decision making processes is seen as a fundamental right. Adults, hold this right. Men, youth, and to some degree by women. It is out of this right that all struggles for empowerment both political, civil and economic has been fought and won. Interestingly, this right was not given to children.

Children have economically participated in varying degrees and in some societies playing a crucial role in family economics. Young boys have historically participated in wars across the world, children as young as 12 years were part of crusades in the 13th century in Europe. In present times, children continue to be inducted into armed struggles by opposition warring groups.

As adults we have used children in political and economic spheres when we so desired. They become an actor or a victim as the situation changes. Power and interests regulate relations between adults and children.² The relationship between adults and children are socially and culturally constructed. Whilst many of the supposed differences between children and adults may be socially constructed, adults power over children '*means that merely in relation to adult's praxis.....children have no claim on equal treatment because they are not old enough*'.³ Adults' recognition of this right is important and they should be prepared to concede power to share decisions with children.⁴

'It will be futile to discuss about children's participation without considering power relations and the struggle for equal rights. It is important to acknowledge that not everyone is a part of the community in the same way and do not enjoy equal power and access to resources. Children from disadvantageous groups face double deprivation because of their age and marginal position of their community in the society. Therefore, there is a dire need to create opportunities for children especially from disadvantageous backgrounds to learn to participate in programmes, which directly affect their lives. It is only through participation with others can these children learn to question discrimination and repression, and to fight for their equal rights. It is important to recognise that participatory development not only facilitates inclusionary spaces but also creates room for alternative perspectives and voices that fosters critical thinking in children. An inclusive participatory space is very essential for children to learn to respect diverse perspectives and become tolerant of difference of opinions'.⁵ Dialogues and discussions are very crucial for children to discover different points of view and reach a consensus. Piaget argued that if children are always subject to authority and do not have opportunities for establishing rules through relationships with mutual respect, they cannot develop as autonomous selves. The blooming of a personality through the development of autonomy depends then on these social relationships.

In the early years of our work with children prior to UNCRC, we involved children in decision-making processes as Butterflies was founded on democratic values. Therefore, it was logical continuum of our approach in working with children. Social work practice in the area of community work have stressed the importance of community participation people's participation.

Child Participation: From Tokenism to Value

To understand child participation, we will examine the concept and how it has developed over the years and draw upon the experience of Butterflies, one of the earliest organisations in India that started working on this issue.

2 Qvortrup, J, 1994, Childhood matters: An introduction. In J. Qvortrup et al (Eds) Childhood Matters. Aldershot: Avebury.

3 Qvortrup, J, 1994, Childhood matters: An introduction. In J. Qvortrup et al (Eds) Childhood Matters. Aldershot: Avebury. Page 4

4 Lansdown, G, 2001, Promoting Children's Participation in Democratic Decision-Making, Innocenti Insights, UNICEF

5 Manocha, S, Panicker, R, 2017, Children's Participation in Governance: Andaman Nicobar Islands Experience, Butterflies

In 1988 when Butterflies began its work informally, (we were not a registered charity) with street connected children in Delhi, testing the ground, UNCRC had yet to be adopted by the UN General Assembly. The idea of children's participation, non-institutional care was unheard of. In the initial years, practitioners and theorists were critical of us when we gave space to children to share their views and insisted, they need to be part of the deliberations. However, once UNCRC was ratified by India (1991) and international funding agencies started to question the role of children in various NGO programmes, children's participation became a buzzword spoken by almost all Organisations working with children.

Organisations planned and budgeted children's participation 'activities.' Participation was seen as a project and not a value subscribed by the organisation, respect for children's agency nor a culture of democracy permeated the organisation. Despite the ratification of UNCRC by most countries including India, national governments, organisations still have not found a sustainable, effective mechanism to involve children in discussions, dialogue and decision-making processes.

In the race to be seen as an organisation that values participation, organisations would select children, older adolescents who are articulate, good communicators to represent the organisations in public fora; be it at conferences, press briefings, giving testimonies so on so forth. Children would participate in conferences, struggle to discuss issues on which they had limited knowledge and, in some instances, a complete disconnect from the children who they represent the most marginalized.

These children/adolescents participate in most of the public events of the organisations and become 'professional conference goers' and their identity is defined by their being 'child participants' or 'child representatives'. They read papers written by adults in a language, which is not of a child nor are the thoughts and ideas espoused, that of children. Sadly, after a while, in this process a pretense is maintained that they are older teenagers when they would actually be young adults. A journalist once remarked to me he had met a 17-year-old teenager from an organisation 4 years ago and when he met him next, the young man maintained he was 17 years! These permanent young leaders understandably find it very difficult and traumatic to give up their positions and power.

Children's participation as a concept has been largely interpreted by practitioners on theories emanating from the west. The most common questions posed to implementing organisations by international agencies was the level of children's participation in the organisation, were the children in charge, were they part of planning programmes and its strategies; are they members of the governing board, part of the hiring and firing processes of staff, budgeting and how the funds must be spent. The emphasis was on "rights". In this whole process of making children 'in charge', one completely lost the core value or rather spirit of participation.

It was therefore not unusual to find children being brought by INGOs to international meets and find them sitting in all adult meetings, often bored and tired, totally out of depth, and mouthing prepared scripts as they were trained to. The tragedy was compounded by the fact that feted and publicly acknowledged as 'leaders and spokespersons' for children, their own lives seldom changed. Hence their need to constantly pretend to be under 18 years of age!

Children's participation does not mean all the above. One can witness the ugliness of power since as mentioned earlier, it is difficult for adolescents to give up positions of leadership. By harping on rights, alone we miss the importance of responsibility, which is the flipside of rights. Children are vocal in demanding their rights but are silent on their responsibilities. Children have to understand that rights come with responsibilities.

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The most common questions posed to implementing organisations by international agencies are children in charge?

1. are they part of planning programmes and its strategies?
2. are they members of the governing board?
3. are they part of the hiring and firing processes of staff?
4. are they part of decisions on budgeting and how the funds must be spent?

Children's participation in the political space is a subject that has been written and debated by academics and practitioners. Should children be allowed to exercise their franchise irrespective of their age as argued by Holt (American Educator) as long as they have interest in politics? Bob Franklin, makes a point "the exclusion of children from full political status is an enigma which democratic politics should not allow what is at stake here is not simply the denial of citizen rights but the right to be a citizen"⁶. This is a contentious issue. I have problems with this proposition of children participating in politics. Politics is complex and layered based on ideologies, which children may not fully understand to make an informed choice. Furthermore, where does one draw the line when it comes to protecting children and the right to be active participants in politics? Age and maturity are socially constructed; it is based on various factors, such as, culture, economic, class, and socialization.

Over the years child participation has gained traction in India and is also included in government's policy documents.

The National Policy for Children 2013 says- "Every child has the right to life, survival, development, education, protection and **participation**". The **National Plan of Action 2016** has identified it as key priority area – "Enable children to be actively involved in their own development and in all matters concerning and affecting them" (See Annexure for details)

Key Priority Area 4 of NPC 2013: Participation

NPAC 2016 strategy to focus efforts on:

- Providing access to children relating to age and gender appropriate information regarding their own health, growth, development and protection.
- Providing access to children relating to information regarding their rights and entitlements under various schemes and programmes.
- Creating an enabling environment and opportunities in school and community to actively involve children in all matters concerning them.
- Ensuring stress-free learning environment in schools, elimination of corporal punishment, ragging or humiliation of children.
- Providing an effective platform for the voices of children so that they are able to freely speak out on sensitive issues such as child protection.

NGOs and some state governments (Kerala, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa to name a few) have facilitated children's participation in governance through numerous children's councils (bal sabhas), children's panchayats (bal panchayats) parliaments, assemblies, federations, which negotiate with the adult political and administrative agencies to get their entitlements. This is another area where there is a compelling urge to facilitate children's participation *in governance*, without giving much thought to the question of "why" and "how". To quote 13 year old Sushanto, from Andaman Nicobar Islands:

"At the School Parliament if we raise issues concerning us, the teachers tell us not to act too smart. Now you tell us what is the point in having a school parliament. If children cannot speak without fear and raise issues as we are afraid of the Principal and teachers. From such a parliament what will we gain?"⁷

In some instances, they function and imitate adult structures. It is hierarchal with positions of Presidents, Vice-Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers, assuming similar roles, and responsibilities as in adult structures. In the bargain children imitate and imbibe some of the power dynamics of the adult political structures. Who decides on these structures for children, do we ask children? Are we thrusting children to play a role that we have not prepared them for? On the other hand, are we making the adults sensitive to children's views and involve /consult them while planning a policy, law, programme, or infrastructure for them?

6 Franklin, B, 1986, The Rights of Children, Oxford: Blackwell.*Ennew, J. 2000, How Can We Define Citizenship in Childhood? Working Papers, Volume 10, Number 12, Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies.

7 Manocha, S, Panicker, R, 2017, Children's Participation in Governance: Andaman Nicobar Islands Experience, Butterflies

Yet it is indeed possible to see this as a right of the child and not a favour bestowed on them by adults. Town planners would rarely think of consulting children while planning a township. Perhaps children would have ideas where they would like schools, streetlights, bus stops, main roads and parks be located. Children's views are hardly taken into consideration in most schools. Schools are one of the most hierarchal agencies in the lives of children. In instances where space for children to share their views exists, it is tokenistic. Schools do not engage children in the management of school calendar, play, sports, and picnics nor on policies and laws that affect their lives. Teachers have no clue of the law-making process in the country, neither are they aware that children can input into a draft Bill. As practitioners, we try to engage children by educating them on the law-making process in the country and how they can participate in the process.

When the concerned Ministry drafts a new social or education policy or legislation, it is uploaded in the official website of the government, for comments from civil society. Butterflies would write the draft in child friendly language and share it with children; explaining to them the nuances of the law or policy and that the government has sought views from everyone and their views are important. Their comments are then shared with the government. This was a way to ensure that children participated in decisions that concern them.

To illustrate this point further by citing an action by Delhi Child Rights Club (DCRC) a forum of children from 21 NGOs in Delhi, who work together to seek solutions to their problems in the city. It could be about public toilets, open drains, street lighting, lack of public transport, absenteeism of teachers in school and lack of safe open spaces to play. The latter issue would come up at every meeting. DCRC members decided to do a survey of open spaces and parks in Delhi. Adults supported them during the discussions on the objectives of the survey and in developing the questionnaire and how and where they would conduct the survey. The children were surprised to discover there are 15,000 open spaces in Delhi but most of them not safe for children to play. Some of the spaces were taken over by real estate companies who had converted them to parking lots; some spaces were taken over by substance users and gamblers and in majority cases, the resident welfare associations had made the parks into ornamental gardens. The resident welfare association members were concerned that children playing ball games in the park will hurt senior citizens and therefore left no space for playing ball games. Children had a consultation on the survey report and the outcome was that they would meet the Chief Minister of Delhi and share their report and solutions to the issue. One of the solutions of children was that they would have a dialogue with the senior citizens of the neighbourhood and work out timings when both the groups can use the park. Children suggested that senior citizens could use the park when they are in school and after school hours, children could use the park. They also assured the senior citizens that they would take care of the flowerbeds and put a big net so that balls remain in their part of the park. The solution worked in some neighbourhoods. The Resident Welfare Associations are another classic example of an adult structure that gives no space for children to participate in decision-making processes.

Children in media is another contentious area. According to the International Federation of Journalists, the media's portrayal of children perpetuates a collection of myths: Families in developing countries, children living in poverty and victims of war and disaster lose their individuality and humanity. They are often portrayed as helpless sufferers, unable to act, think or speak for themselves. If stories about children are to illustrate a truth, journalists need to know what lies behind the experiences they are writing about. That includes appreciating the rights of children their right to security, anonymity and dignity.

However, there are a number of children's own media initiatives globally, which have given space to children to voice their opinions, views on issues that matter to them. Children are involved in bringing out their own newspaper, radio programmes, television programmes, photography and theatre. Some of the earliest initiatives were by organisations working

The primary concern must be to ensure that in all initiatives that involve children their participation is genuine and not tokenistic and adult driven, neither should young adults masquerade as older adolescents.

with street connected children in Columbia, Brazil, South Africa, Kenya and inner city of New York. One of the first documented experience of children's newspaper was in 1976 called 'Children's Express' in New York. Unfortunately, after 26 years in operation with bureaus in various cities in USA, Tokyo, London and South Africa it closed down due to lack of funds.

Issues surrounding sex and sexuality is an area that as adults we do not engage with children. The engagement is when there is a violation or for preventive actions. The idea that children might have their own views and perceptions on the subject has not been explored. It is time that we engage with them to understand their views on the subject, it might help us to understand children's actions better.

Our experience has shown that it is not difficult to organise children into a forum, children are articulate, and they have opinions on everything, very interested in sharing their views, and would be the most enthusiastic campaigners. What is important is how do we educate children the values of participation? What it means to be democratic.

Butterflies is concerned with this core value, for us children's participation does not begin and end with children's councils, children's parliaments, children's newspaper, radio - these are symbols of participation, which is visible. In our endeavour to listen to children, draw them into the process of decision-making, we are teaching children the principles of democracy.

The inevitable nature of child participation' does not only stem from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), rather, it has much deeper psychological, sociological, and anthropological roots. Various psychological and anthropological theories highlight the role of participation in learning. The situated perspective⁸ on learning explains that learning is not an individual process but children learn by participating in social practices⁹

Therefore, it is understood that participation begins with families. When we mention educating children about democratic participation, it suggests socialization. Families have to be democratic for children to learn and imbibe those values. Parents have to realise and reflect on their parenting knowledge and skills that children have their own agency, which has to be respected. Children have a right to ask and be heard/listened; consulted when decisions are made on their behalf.

Conclusion

Children's participation is possible in matters that concern them. However, it must be genuine and not tokenistic or a fetish. It is a value that must instill rights and responsibilities in children so that they can play a role in asserting their citizenship.

In our endeavour to make children's participation genuine and sustainable, it is important to facilitate life skills education with children and work with families, communities and schools. There are evidences where children have been able to negotiate with their parents regarding continuing education, participation in sports especially in the case of girls, prevention of early marriage. Apart from families, communities and schools have to be open to children's participation and involve them in decision-making processes. There has to be a culture of democratic values in families, schools and communities for children's participation to become a norm.

Based on the experience of Butterflies, it is clear that it is essential to take a position that there is a need to educate children about democratic values through practices that enable them to grow up to be democrats. The democratic values should enable children to learn to acknowledge and respect

⁸ The situated perspective can be contrasted with alternative views of learning, here, instead of defining learning as the acquisition of propositional knowledge, [Lave](#) and [Wenger](#) (1998) situated learning in certain forms of social co-participation. Rather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place". Lave and Wenger (1991)[[3](#)] argue that learning should not be viewed as simply the transmission of abstract and decontextualized knowledge from one individual to another, but a social process whereby knowledge is co-constructed; thereby emphasizing on the role of participation in learning.

⁹ Manocha, S, Panicker, R, 2017, Children's Participation in Governance: Andaman Nicobar Islands Experience, Butterflies

diversity, value voices of dissent, follow democratic means to come up with socially just decisions. Democratic participation should teach children to profess these values in real life and in their relationships. These values should empower children and give them tools to understand and challenge gender, ethnic, language, religion and caste discrimination. The aim of democratic participation is to enable children to grow into adults who know how to translate equality and social justice into practice and live a life that is democratic. That for us is democratic participation.

Annexure 1

National Plan of Action 2016 (Extract)

Key Priority Area 4: Participation

Objective:

Enable children to be actively involved in their own development and in all matters concerning and affecting them.

Sub-objective 4.1: Enable children to express their views freely on all matters concerning them.

Key Strategies:-

Priority Action

- Create a positive environment for children to express their views freely at home and at school, and promote respect for the views expressed by children.
- Orient teachers and frontline health service providers so that child survivors of abuse and exploitation are not treated in a condescending manner and steps taken to re-build their self-esteem

Sub-objective 4.2: Ensure that children actively participate in planning and implementation of programmes concerning them and their community.

Key Strategies:-

Priority Action

- Provide children with age-appropriate information on their rights and entitlements; schemes and programmes.
 - » Orient children on all forms (including online) of abuse, exploitation and violence; build their confidence to report any such incidence to CHILDLINE, police or local authorities and seek help.
- Strengthen Country and local mechanisms for participation of children.
 - » Provide children with an enabling environment to participate meaningfully in all plans and programmes
 - » Provide adequate support and referral to children dealing with physical or emotional stress through CHILDLINE services. Strengthen CHILDLINE services to disseminate information and provide support and counselling
 - » Ensure development of children in a gender –sensitive manner so that they learn to respect and understand opposite gender
- Orient parents to adopt parenting skills which promote positive behaviour and values among children such as hard work, respect for opposite gender, sportsmanship, etc.

- Build a sense of responsibility among children so that they are aware of their own duties and learn to act in a responsible manner
- Include a participatory approach in everyday classroom transaction by dedicating time and space for children to take an active part in teaching-learning processes, give their ideas and feedback freely
 - » Ensure a stress-free educational environment providing children equal opportunity to participate in the classroom processes
 - » Establish unanimous systems of providing feedback for children on various issues including behaviour of the teachers and staff.

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