

## **Reflections on the enactment of children's participation rights through research: between relational and transactional spaces**

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### **Abstract**

Young people's participation in the evaluation of services designed for them has become widespread in England following the United Kingdom's ratification of the UNCRC. This makes participation a matter of citizenship as well as of research. The paper reflects on these developments from a critical social psychological perspective. In particular it looks at the experience of working with a transformational model of participation. The author reflects on the possibilities and limitations of such a model and argues that within the English socio-cultural context a number of challenges, conceptualised by the author as transactional practices, make the establishment of enduring relational practices difficult. Epistemological reflexivity and a pragmatic approach towards children's participation rights are advocated by the author as a way of managing the conflicts between different participatory approaches that present themselves in practice.

**Keywords:** children's participation rights; youth inclusion; transformational models of participation; evaluation; epistemological reflexivity.

## **1. Introduction**

Over the last 20 years following the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), the issue of children's<sup>i</sup> citizenship has become an important topic of policy and academic debate. In this paper I reflect on one particular aspect of children's citizenship, namely children's participation rights as those are enshrined by Article 12 of the UNCRC. Article 12 promotes respect for the views of the child and gives children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them.

Article 12, I argue, is readily practised through the increased involvement of children in research designed to inform policy and practice and in the evaluation of services (broadly defined) that are designed for them (Shucksmith, Spratt, Philip and McNaughton, 2008; Bostock and Freeman, 2003; Munro, 2001). This makes participation a question of citizenship as well as of research. The practice of eliciting children's views and experiences is carried out through questionnaires, group discussions and participatory research methods. It is the latter approaches that are the main focus of this paper.

I write as a critical social psychologist with an interest in a specific form of participation, namely what is often referred to as participatory action research. This is a transformational model of participation which honours the narrative construction of the self, gives young people a voice and aims to generate dialogue and critical reflection on the possibilities and limitations of problems being addressed and solutions being proffered (Mason and Hood, 2010; Watkins and Shulman, 2008).

As a social action researcher I am interested in developing spaces that enable such participation. I refer to these spaces, and the practices they engender, as relational in order to draw attention to the multiple subjectivities that make up these spaces and the potential for such inter-subjective spaces to transform both self and other, as well as to impact on the context itself. Such spaces of participation are not only plural but also dynamic and emergent (Bouwen, 1998) and depend on careful non-directive facilitation. Critical social psychology (Watkins and Shulman, 2008) provides both a conceptual language and a methodological approach for creating such relational spaces. Furthermore,

I draw on post-modern and critical theories which focus on lived experiences and which conceptualise subjectivity and participation as “fluid rather than solid and process-oriented rather than topographical” (Flax, 1990:37) in order to theorise the self and citizenship.

My stance towards transformational models of participation is both sympathetic and critical: sympathetic to the values of inclusiveness and dialogue but critical of what is often a lack of reflexivity about the way in which these values pan out in practice. My interest is in developing a critical, reflexive approach towards transformational models of participation. In this paper I reflect on an evaluation study I was involved in that sought out young people’s “views and experiences” of participating in a youth inclusion programme (Play On, a pseudonym) running in some of the most deprived areas of England (Humphreys, Nolas, and Olmos, 2006). Working with colleagues I used participatory visual methods and focus groups as a way of supporting young people in reflecting on their areas and communities. The approach taken was designed to give young people the opportunity and creative freedom of constructing their own narratives about their areas and their youth inclusion programme.

This article does not report on data from the evaluation which has been done elsewhere (Humphreys, Nolas, and Olmos, 2006). Instead, in this paper I reflect on my practice as an evaluator using a transformational model of participation and working at the interface between citizenship and research practices. In particular I am interested in the extent to which the widespread approach of eliciting children’s views and experiences through research, and especially the use of transformational models, enables “democratic [and] non-coercive” (Mason and Hood, 2010:3) expressions of children’s citizenship. The thinking presented in this paper began during my doctoral research which explored the meaning of participation in practice (Nolas, 2007, 2009, 2010). My thinking has been further informed through the experience of working as a researcher and children’s participation coordinator at a London-based children’s charity.

## **2. Social exclusion, youth inclusion and young people's participation rights**

The Play On programme I was involved in evaluating was set up to address aspects of young people's social exclusion. The emphasis on social exclusion in UK policy making over the last 15 years represents efforts to move towards a broader, albeit much contested (Levitas, 1998; Micklewright, 2002), understanding of poverty that goes beyond economics, income and basic needs (Hills, 2004: 54-55). Exclusion, as conceived of by the previous Labour government at least, refers to the multiple and overlapping problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low income, poor housing, high crime, ill health and family breakdown (SEU, 2000).

Children and young people targeted by the social exclusion agenda were those from (persistently) low income households, those living in low income neighbourhoods, teenage mothers, and children who have been taken into care (Micklewright, 2002). They were also those young people who were beyond school age but "not in education, employment or training" (NEETs) and those who while engaged in education, training or work become marginalised through criminal activity and problematic substance abuse (Newburn, Shiner and Young, 2005:23).

The Play On programme was designed to provide socially excluded youngsters, aged 10-19 years, the opportunity to re-enter education, training and employment. Programmes like Play On provide somewhere safe for young people to go where they can learn new skills, take part in activities and get support with education and careers advice. The aim of the Play On programme was to mitigate young people's exclusion through youth development strategies such as providing constructive activities, building relationships between youth workers and young people and providing young people with role models and alternative pathways out of exclusion. By engaging with young people in this way, the programme hoped to support young people's constructive re-engagement with society and improve their social, psychological, educational and vocational outcomes.

Whilst doing research that foregrounds young people's perspectives is not new (Christensen and James, 2000), linking such research to discourses of citizenship and

rights marks a contemporary turn in providing more accountable and inclusive, as well as market-driven, services (Barnes and Prior, 2008; Kirby, Lanyon, *et al*, 2003). Such forms of citizenship have been greatly influenced by the children's rights movement. The UNCRC (1989) has generated discussion around the child as a citizen exercising rights and responsibilities, and in possession of an identity of their own, whilst also being given the opportunity to participate in the communities and issues that affect them (Jans, 2004).

Article 12 (respect for the views of the child) in particular relates to assurances that the State will give children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and that their views will be given due weight in accordance to the child's age and maturity. Article 12 is put into practice in a number of ways. Representative children's forums are common: these are groups of children and/or young people that are trained and supported by adults to act as advisors to an organisation, project or service (Wyness, 2009). Local youth councils and public consultations (Pinkerton, 2004) with young people have proliferated. These mechanisms aim to involve young people in local decision-making and get their views and opinions on policy under consideration by local and central administrative bodies.

One of the most prolific enactments of Article 12 is through the elicitation of children and young people's views and experiences. Young people's views are collected by professionals using a range of research methods (surveys, focus groups, and activities). This research is framed both in terms of citizenship (young people have a right to express their views) as well as service improvement (are our clients satisfied? how can we improve our service?) and monitoring and evaluation (what has been the impact of our service?). In the case of the Play On programme research on young people's views and experiences drew on all three of these frameworks. The research that I, and my colleagues carried out was part of the programme's monitoring and evaluation strategy. Findings from the research were used to improve local projects, especially in relation to the activity provision for young women. The programme, and the evaluation, put the young people at the centre of their activities and valued their views and experiences. In

the next section I outline the transformational model of participation taken by the evaluation.

### **3. Relational spaces and transformational models of participation**

One of the challenges of the children's rights movement has been to find an appropriate notion of citizenship for children (Jans, 2004; Roche, 1999). Feminist and post-modernist theories have suggested a view of child citizenship that focuses on the intersubjective dimensions of becoming instead of a purely subjective experience of being.

These theoretical developments also go some way towards capturing the notion of a relational space. For instance, social theorist Ruth Lister (2003) has convincingly argued that an inclusive view of citizenship that overcomes binary oppositions (e.g. ethic of justice versus ethic of care and rights versus obligations) can be achieved when citizenship is reframed as a practice. Feminist critique of current debates on children's citizenship (Lister, 2007) has suggested that focusing on lived experience as opposed to abstract categories (Flax, 1990), paves the way for a "subjects-in-process" view (McAfee, 2000) of children's citizenship. Noëlle McAfee (2000) has argued that our notions of citizenship are closely related to our notions of subjectivity and proposes a view of citizenship as "relational subjectivity".

Thinking about citizenship as an inter-subjective space also provides a useful lens for framing the citizenship dimension of participation. McAfee's relational approach brings together post-structuralist theories of subjectivity, namely Julia Kristeva's view of the subject as an "open system", in conversation with modernist theories of political agency, namely Jürgen Habermas's view of deliberative democracy. She argues that, "reconsidering the citizen of a public sphere as a subject-in-process, as one who *needs* others in order to know and act in the world, makes possible a more democratic politics" (McAfee, 2000:16).

As such, the term relational denotes a particular post-structuralist, psychosocial orientation to thinking about the link between the individual and the social or in the case of citizenship, the individual and the state. Critical social psychology (Watkins and Shulman, 2008) aims to support the process of making more democratic politics possible. It is a form of theorising and engagement that seeks to humanise, give voice and rehabilitate the subject often in contexts where extreme poverty and exclusion result in the absence of hope and action. For those living in “very harsh and barren” contexts social exclusion becomes “the endemic failure of possibilities for innovative collective decision-making” (Humphreys and Brézillon, 2002:3), leaving members of such communities to believe that the most attractive course of action is either to leave the situation or to adopt courses of action, or more often inaction, which deplete both individuals and communities (*ibid*).

Critical social psychology attempts to critically and collaboratively theorise these contexts of exclusion with the socially excluded themselves. Through dialogue and creative practices, such as art and digital media, young people were invited to reflect on the meaning of their audiovisual compositions and the realities represented therein. The aim of such an endeavour is to enable participants to evaluate the possibilities and limitations of the problems being addressed (social exclusion in this case) and the solutions being provided (youth inclusion in the form of the Play On programme). In this respect critical social psychology provides a way of not only respecting the view of the child but also creating an improvisational space in which to re-imagine different subjectivities and in which children and young people can more “consciously perform [...] identity rather than unconsciously enacting a set of unreflective identifications” (Watkins and Shulman, 2008:171). It seeks to create a transformational model of participation in which to participate is also to change in relation to oneself and to others.

My appreciation of children’s participation rights drew on these post-structuralist ideas. In this approach, youth inclusion projects are not seen as interventions that correct faulty development. Instead they can be understood as spaces for raising critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) and enriching young people’s contexts to create (new) resources and

pathways through limiting situations. The participatory visual methodology we used (Humphreys, Lorac and Ramella, 2001) is then understood as a methodology for supporting and further extending the programme's aims, at the same time as enabling young people to create their own stories of exclusion and inclusion. In the next section I provide details on the evaluation project.

#### **4. The Play On project evaluation**

The evaluation study focused on five local Play On projects in one metropolitan and two urban areas. Eighteen (18) young people between the ages of 13 to 18 took part in the evaluation. Young people were nominated to take part by their local Play On project coordinator. Our group of 18 comprised of both young men and women of English, West African, Middle Eastern and Caribbean heritage. We also interviewed eight (8) project workers about the Play On project and the audiovisual activities.

A participatory visual methodology was used as a way of engaging young people in the research as well as a way of reflecting on their social realities. Young people, with the research team's support, created audiovisual compositions about their areas and what the Play On programme meant to them (Humphreys, Nolas, and Olmos, 2006). Support involved weekly visits to the different groups over a period of 18 months. We introduced young people to participatory video and trained them in using the digital video recorders. We provided young people with a short interview brief to help structure their initial activities. The brief contained questions asking them to describe their area, the positive and negative aspects of their area, what they would change, where they saw themselves in five years time and what they thought of the Play On programme.

Once footage had been collected by the young people we provided them with technical support for editing their audiovisual compositions. This involved providing laptops with appropriate editing software, showing young people how to use the software in order to edit their films and supporting them in making decisions about what footage to include in their final audiovisual composition. Young people decided on the story they wanted to tell about their area and selected the soundtrack to their films. Our main interventions

into the editing process related to technical support in terms of selecting “good” footage for inclusion into the final composition, namely footage that was not shaky or where the sound quality was poor.

Following the completion of the videos, we held group discussions with each group. These group discussions varied in size. Some group discussions involved only the group of young people who had produced the video. Other discussions were much larger. For instance, in a couple of cases audiovisual compositions were screened for the group in their local centres. The screenings were attended by the adults who worked with the young people, such as youth workers, project workers and teachers and in one case a local youth service manager. Following the screenings we held discussions with larger groups of young people to further reflect and interpret their audiovisual compositions. Decisions about whether to screen the video were made by the young people but were also made on the basis of opportunity. In other words where the local group had facilities available to hold a screening and where we were able to coordinate schedules of all involved.

## **5. Articulating a methodology for critical reflection on practice**

Foucault (1981, p.155) reminds us that critique “is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest” (cited in Rabinow and Rose, 2003, p.vii). Critique is carried out through empirical research as well as through the practice of reflexivity. In thinking critically about the Play On evaluation my interest is in epistemological reflexivity (Willig, 2008, p.10; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) specifically as applied to exploring the possibilities and limitations of the powerful narratives of transformational models of participation (Nolas, 2009).

I develop this reflexive stance by drawing on ethnographic methods to document and reflect on the participatory research process as it unfolds in the field. In effect, and

drawing on the language of transformational models of participation, such a reflexive stance introduces a further feedback loop into the practice space, one that holds a mirror up to the key assumptions of transformational models of participation (such as participatory action research), namely that they are *de facto* transformational and empowering. With some notable exceptions (Ellsworth, 1989; Watkins and Shulman, 2008; Williams and Lykes, 2003) such epistemological reflexivity tends to be absent from transformational narratives of participation, whilst calls for “the social scientist’s practice [to] be analyzed in the same historical, situated terms as any other practice under investigation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.50-51) have largely eluded the literature on transformational models of participation.

Ethnography helped me to contextualise my practice, whilst the grounded theory tradition, as developed by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), provided me with an analytical approach with which to interrogate my practice. Grounded theory approaches are useful for studying practice because, as Star (2007:79) puts it, they make invisible work visible. The approach helps surface the tacit and taken-for-granted aspects of practical work by asking questions about what people are doing and trying to accomplish, how exactly they are going about the ‘doing’, and how people understand what is going on. During this time I made detailed fieldnotes of the time I spent with the young people doing participatory video. In this paper I do not present a grounded theory analysis but I have used the tools of grounded theory –abduction, constant comparison, and reflexivity<sup>ii</sup>- to critically engage with and reflect on my own practice of participation.

My own involvement in the local enactment of children’s participation is by no means novel. Indeed it represents quite a commonplace practice. What is perhaps more unusual within these contexts, is the reflection on the possibilities and limitations of current arrangements for “respecting the views of the child”. In the next section I reflect on being involved in the activity of children’s participation.

## **6. Reflections on transformational models of participation in context**

Drawing on critical social psychology we asked young people to focus on their lived experiences by asking them to tell us about their areas. Young people used the video to paint a vivid picture of their areas. In doing so they took their audiences (other young people, the researchers and civil servants) on guided virtual tours that depicted the positive and negative aspects of these youngsters' neighbourhoods. At the same time they showed images of and recounted stories about those aspects of their communities that they would want to change such as drugs, police, racism, money, gangs, and "nothing to do" (Humphreys, Nolas, and Olmos, 2006).

The approach enabled young people to paint a vivid picture of their complex social and physical spaces in which they negotiated and navigated their everyday lives. Through the relationships, interactions and dialogue with each other and with the youth workers and researchers, the evaluation created spaces in which young people could discuss and reflect on contexts and situations of exclusion and their positions within those. Young people spoke about this exposure as an opportunity because in many cases they were not aware of "like what people want to do when they are older" or learnt "that people had views I didn't think they would have" (group discussions, fieldnotes, March 2005). In some of these spaces we experienced young people more consciously performing their identities (Watkins and Shulman, 2008:171), such as for instance when one young man reflected on how taking part in the project had given him the opportunity to reflect on leisure provision in his area: "You made us think what's happening in our environment cause if this never happened, then I wouldn't been thinking about where I have to go to get leisure centres and stuff like that" (group discussion, fieldnotes, December 2004).

Young people also reflected on the multi-faceted nature of what the evaluation team had been calling participation in the singular. Young people reflected on the different aspects of the participatory video process and which parts of that process had been more or less important for them. Some young people talked more about the editing process as

representing their involvement, whereas others spoke more about what might be equated to a director's role (e.g. deciding what footage to collect), thus suggesting that participation and its spaces were broader than originally conceived by the evaluation project team.

However, transformational processes of becoming are not without their challenges. Young people reflected on the challenge of interviewing their friends, peers, mentors and other significant adults and getting them to express their views about their area on camera. Whilst talking on camera may have initially felt unnatural to those being interviewed, it also suggests that adults and other youngsters were not used to young people initiating conversations and asking for their views on topics of general community concern. In this sense, the participatory video activities provided an opportunity to open communication pathways between young people and those around them and to enable exchanges that otherwise may not have happened, such as when young people screened their video stories to youth workers, project managers and local authority personnel.

But not all obstacles were overcome. Other challenges to the transformational model of participation honed my appreciation that not all spaces and practices can be described as relational. In one of the groups the evaluation replaced the boys' usual Play On sporting activities. After complying with the participatory video activities for a couple of weeks the boys became increasingly wary of us. They began to disengage with the activities and became disruptive, not wanting to complete their video. Time constraints imposed by our evaluation contract led to a more compressed schedule which made it difficult to spend adequate time building relationships with those young people. The geographical distance between the university and the group meant that "hanging out" there in order to build these relationships was impractical. Our contractual deadlines also meant that we could not work at a slower pace with the group, perhaps alternating the sporting and video activities on a weekly basis, as suggested by the group when we later asked them about their experiences of participating in the evaluation. In an attempt to make sense of these constraints, to move beyond the frustrations they created for both the young people and

myself, and to understand their implications for transformational models of participation, I turned my analytical gaze to the evaluation context.

### *Analysing the context*

Working with a transformational model of participation, my aim was to create the appropriate spaces that would enable transformation to happen. In my own mind the participatory video activities had always been about the potential of dialogue to lead to changes in young people's perspectives of their world but also in the ways in which they engaged with the world around them. I worked hard to create such spaces by putting dialogue at the centre of my practice, and creating non-directive spaces for young people to interact in, play and discover. I facilitated discussions amongst the young people in which they could explore, and arrive at the meaning of their audiovisual compositions for themselves. I was very sensitive to the evaluation agenda and resisted available programme and policy discourses for interpreting the projects and young people's experiences. I listened hard in order to hear what young people were saying instead of hearing what I, or others wanted to hear. For instance, with one of our groups I became convinced that the programme and evaluation interpretations of "area" and "community" had been limited to geographical understanding of the terms. Sure enough, in the focus group when asked about their experience of the participatory video evaluation young people were quick to extend the limited geographical definition to include communities of identity (my friends outside the project) and practice (my school).

In designing the weekly activities with the young people I took my lead from the ideas of critical social psychology. However, my own analytical practices of resistance (Nolas, 2009) made me aware of the range of responses and reactions to the participatory video evaluation, many of which deviated from my expectations of working with a transformational model of participation that had been largely created through reading both classical (Freire, 1970) and contemporary literature (Reason and Bradbury, 2004). I found that the understanding of these spaces I was carefully trying to craft was often disrupted by both young people and youth workers bring their own interpretations to

what was happening. I began to take note of these little disruptions in an attempt to understand the bigger context in which my work was taking place.

An initial response that left an impression on me was the ways in which young people and youth workers alike often responded to the participatory video evaluation through the lens of popular culture. Young people thought they would be making video diaries or starring in reality television shows. In one group in particular, after spending some time explaining to the young people what we would be doing together for the next period of time, one of the girls responded somewhat disappointedly that she had thought we would be doing a “costume drama”<sup>iii</sup> (fieldnotes, February 2005). Project workers also invoked images of reality television. One in particular suggested that if we wanted to get a “real” understanding of what life was like for these young people we should follow him around for a day with the cameras. Another project worker asked if we would shoot a promotional video for him. In the 18 months of the evaluation study we were often referred to as a film company and amongst some of the groups became known as the “video project”.

A second response to the evaluation activities by youth workers was a focus on outputs and products. In the case of the evaluation this translated into a strong interest in the actual DVD of the young people’s audiovisual compositions. Much to my disappointment, given my enthusiasm and care for creating a relational space, most of the youth workers had seemingly little interest in the transformational model of participation being used. In fact, I was told point blank by a couple of them that whilst they were delighted with our dedication to transformational processes, what counted for them were the outputs of that process. On further discussion it transpired that products such as the DVDs could be used by the workers to demonstrate the impact of their projects to funders and other stakeholders. I often found my exchanges with the youth workers resembling market bartering, whereby they were happy to give us access to the groups in exchange for use of the physical product of the participatory activities.

The third and final response that I noted in my interaction with youth workers was the way they often heard and reacted to the model of participation that the evaluation was trying to promote. When we spoke about participatory approaches to exploring young people's views and experiences project workers were quick to respond that they did not want yet another "consultation". Consultation is often used by decision-makers to discern the views of local communities, or other purposely selected members of the public, on social, technological and scientific issues of concern. Many of the communities served by the Play On programme had, we were told by project workers, been "consulted to death". Their views on issues relating to the regeneration of their local communities had been collected and then seemingly disappeared into ether. Youth workers and project workers were keen to ensure that the model of participation we were bringing to the groups was in line with the Play On programme's strategy of building relationships with the young people as opposed to yet another consultation, the outcome of which would not be experienced by the youngsters.

In analysing the context in which participation took place, I found that young people and youth workers' responses drew on different socio-cultural canons to the ones that had shaped my own practice. Appeals to the genre of reality television, a form of "other" representation, as a way of making sense of a methodology for self-representation and identity transformation, underscores the medium's stronghold over the construction of social knowledge about individuals' and communities' experiences. The invocation of products and outputs by youth workers makes reference to the "audit explosion" (Power, 1999) and marketisation that has come to shape public services in the last 20 years. The videos, as an output, helped the youth workers respond to increasing calls for youth work to be performance managed. Finally, reactions to the participatory video as a form of consultation suggest the over-reliance in some areas on forms of engagement of an ephemeral nature, which can be experienced as tokenistic (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1997).

Later as a researcher and participation coordinator at a London-based children's charity I found these themes of other representation, outputs/products and consultation recurring in my work. Such experiences are perhaps unsurprising given that bureaucratic and top-

down approaches to participation are very much characteristic of the British context (Badham, 2004). This is in sharp contrast to apparently more relational approaches to young people's participation found in abundance in the developing world (Lansdown, 2006). In the next section I propose an interpretation of these recurring themes with the intention of illustrating the tensions of the lived experience of participation and, in particular, the competing and sometimes conflicting spaces in which participation takes place.

## **5. Discussion**

So far this paper has reflected on the possibilities of children's participation rights, as those are enacted through research that elicits children's views and experiences using a transformational model of participation. I discussed these opportunities in relation to evaluation research on young people's views and experiences of a youth inclusion programme. In my reflections I noted a number of possibilities for transformational models of participation when it comes to respecting the views of the child. At the same time however, I also noted that the broader socio-cultural context in which the youth inclusion project resided presented a number of challenges and that those I worked with responded to the transformational model of participation in novel and sometimes unexpected ways.

In trying to make sense of the socio-cultural canons that shaped young people and youth workers' responses, I have come to think of the practices often demanded by this context as transactional as opposed to relational. Transactional here refers to the desire to exchange other-representations, products and information. Such exchanges bring to mind established commercial and political practices such as advertising or consumer and voter focus groups, and I find a strong resemblance between the various enactments of Article 12 (e.g. collection of young people's views, representative children's forums, local youth councils and public consultations) and these more established practices. The focus of such encounters tends to be on knowledge domains that are of immediate interest to the initiators of these exchanges and of potentially future interest to the participants. The engagement with "users" is intended to subsequently feed into, and at times reshape, the

initiators' knowledge interests. This is a different focus to that of a transformational model of participation in which one engages in dialogue in order to create an interest. The definition of what may constitute an interest, and the potential responses to that interest, is an emergent process. In the transactional context expertise is more important than experience and social knowledge. In relational spaces experience and social knowledge are foregrounded and engaged with as valuable resources in and of themselves.

In making this comparison my intention is not to suggest that one approach to participation is superior to the other. In practice a mixture of both may be used and certainly each approach has vociferous supporters and critics. My intention is instead a pragmatic one aimed at highlighting the tensions of participation in practice. These approaches overlap, co-exist and compete within the broader enterprise of children's participation. Different occasions may call for one approach to be used over another. Practice is far messier and more plural than the models and metaphors we create to represent it. And as Hart (2008) has recently reflected on the now well-established metaphor for children's participation (the ladder), models and typologies are there to elucidate, to problematise and to spark new practice - not to become a straightjacket that constrains it. As such, it is perhaps more helpful to think about what is gained and what is lost in the decision to follow one model over another.

Exchange relies on the *a priori* existence of an object, be that social or material, with which to enter a transaction in the first place. Such participation, whilst involving young people, risks remaining a "one-sided" process (Dorrian, Tisdall and Hamilton, 2000, cited in Timmerman, 2009, p.574) driven by adults and experts who are not required to provide young people with a response or indication of what, if anything, has changed as a result of knowing their views. In the long-term such approaches threaten to erode trust between young people and professionals.

Transactional approaches to participation risk trivialising young people's involvement and reducing their participation to an exercise of socialisation into citizenship as opposed to an act of citizenship in its own right (Alparone and Rissotto, 2001). At the same time,

they also present practical challenges in terms of actioning the information generated especially when it comes to changing or improving services and programmes; the pre-determined areas of information that are collected through questionnaires and other research tools, often create inactionable results (e.g. more parking spaces) which the local service-providing organisation can do little to change.

However, transactions usually take place with objects of *value*. In this respect such exchanges provide an insight into young people and youth workers' life worlds and the things that are important to them. Transactional practices are less time consuming than relational practices, an asset when a quick response to plans and policies is needed. Finally, over the long term it is possible for what starts as a transactional space to change into a relational one.

Conversely, relational practices take time to establish as initiators work on gaining the trust of the young people they work with. Time, as is often the case in practice, is usually a luxury that most programmes and services cannot afford. When such relational spaces are, often painstakingly, created through sheer personal commitment they tend not to survive for very long. There is an inherent assumption in the transformational model of participation that asymmetrical relations are necessarily oppressive and that structural solutions to problematic situations are inadequate.

Drawing on the writings of the originators of transformational approaches to participation (e.g. Freire, 1970), the language used to write about such approaches is often heavily ideological and exclusive, and for most alienating. It is perhaps unsurprising then that within the British context, outside of a small community of social and community psychologists and youth workers, transformational models of participation exist at the margins of practice with children and young people. Finally, as noted earlier epistemological reflexivity is lacking and with some recent exceptions (e.g. Piggott-Irvine, 2010), there has been little interest in systematically researching the outcomes of transformational models of participation.

## 6. Conclusion

Jans argues that there are problems with directly translating adult models of citizenship because of inequalities between such models and children's capabilities, legal status and their vulnerabilities and need for protection. The arrival of the children's rights movement has created what Jans (2004) refers to as a social ambiguity towards contemporary childhood; the very idea of children's rights creating anxieties for adults in general who for the past century, at least in Western industrialised nations, have been socialised with a view of the cherub child (Lancy, 2008).

Anxieties also run high for those professionals trained to protect, educate and care for children and here questions about children's biological and cognitive ability to be citizens are raised as barriers to participation (Rushforth, 1999). With this backdrop Jans (2004) suggests that citizenship understood as identity offers the most fruitful avenues for developing a "child-size" citizenship and for creating a space where both adults and children, relating to one another, can learn how to deal with the ambiguity that shifting legal, policy and social landscapes are creating.

In this paper, I explored such a model of children's participation rights that places identity, and the narrative construction of the self, at its core. This transformational model of participation tries to counter-balance institutionalised, asymmetrical adult-child relations (Mason & Hood, 2010, p. 4). At the same time however, I also reflected on the extent to which structural elements of the broader socio-cultural context to which both children and adults wishing to empower children, are subject. Relational spaces and practices often co-exist alongside other, competing models of participation.

It remains for us to ask how, when contexts are dictated by project deadlines, funding limitations and other very real, contemporary constraints, can we create less isolated and more enduring spaces for children's citizenship? This might require a much more holistic way of thinking about participation than the balkanized approaches currently practised that separate adult and child, expert and lay spaces, transformational and transactional

practices. Such an approach both in practice and research would be sensitive to the pluralism of practice and honour the tensions of participation in practice. More interdisciplinary dialogue between legal, social psychological, anthropological and social policy communities on the different models of participation available to us would be beneficial, as would further research on the lived experiences of institutionalising children's participation rights, in terms of both the successes and failures of practice.

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<sup>i</sup> In terms of the UNCRC children refers to the ages of 0-18 years.

<sup>ii</sup> Grounded theory in its original formulation by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is not especially known for its reflexivity. However, more contemporary developments in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) note the importance of reflexivity.

<sup>iii</sup> At the time reality television shows that re-enacted past historical periods through giving contemporaries the experience of living in, for instance, a 1900 house, were popular.