**Book Chapter**

**The Big Push Forward**

**Valuing Children’s Knowledge: The politics of listening**

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**Introduction: Listening to Children and Young People**

In this chapter I take a critical look at one domain of evidence – that of children and young people. The analysis I present shows: firstly, that children’s voices matter and can help us to understand the complex realities of their lives; secondly, that for children and young people to be heard, people in positions of power need to be included in participatory processes with children and young people and that interaction between decision makers and children can help to build confidence in the value of children’s evidence. Having revisited participatory evaluations in the UK and Nepal, and speaking to managers, staff and children and young people who had previously been involved, I draw out examples where children and young people’s evidence can lead to transformational change at individual, organizational and to some extent societal levels. Further analysis shows that children and young people’s evidence is valued in different cultural and political contexts if local power dynamics, including those between adults and children, are recognised and addressed. Mechanisms for how this can be done are collated from the evaluations revisited and presented so that practitioners can build on these in future evaluations conducted with children and young people.

Although progress has been made to take into account the right for children and young people to participate in decisions affecting their lives following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, whether their evidence is actually listed to and acted upon in participatory evaluation processes varies depending on context and the capacity and experience of the adult and younger participants involved. In 1995 Save the Children called for ‘A New Agenda for Children’ suggesting that children and young people’s evidence should be taken seriously and that their perspectives should inform services and resource allocation intended to improve their lives. Rights based discourses over the past decade have also helped to recognize children and young people’s voices as part of participatory processes that base decision-making on the local people’s realities. This has been exemplified by child-centred organizations and researchers working with some of the most marginalised children, such as street connected children, child workers and children in care (for example Ennew and Boyden 1997, Johnson *et al.* 1998). In broader international development practice, however, children and young people’s perspectives have often been disregarded or ignored at worst and, even where their opinions are specifically sought, their evidence has been poorly understood or sidelined in comparison to adult perspectives (Bartlett 2005, Chawla and Johnson 2004, Theis 2010).

In order to understand how children and young people’s agency can be supported in participatory processes and their evidence taken more seriously by decision-makers, power dynamics in local cultural, political and institutional contexts need to be acknowledged and explored so that interventions to improve their wellbeing are well informed. In order to translate a child’s right to participate in decisions that affect their lives into improved outcomes, it is necessary to move beyond the concept of voice and incorporate ideas of participatory spaces for children to build confidence and interact with adults, audiences who listen to children and young people’s perspectives, and people in positions of power who are willing to act on their evidence (as also suggested by Lundy 2007).

In this chapter I will provide a brief overview of the methodology I used to revisit participatory evaluations to explore whether the perspectives of children and young people had been taken seriously in varying contexts. The analysis that follows will focus on the politics of evidence and power, and asks why, in the evaluations revisited, there were barriers to using children and young people’s evidence and what made a difference to taking their perspectives more seriously? Examples will be provided demonstrating what led to children’s evidence being valued and acted on, drawing on case studies in the UK and Nepal. Finally I present the ‘Change-scape’ framework that I developed to link children and young people to their contexts through mechanisms that helped to negotiate power and encourage decision-makers to start to see them as agents of change. These mechanisms or strategies include creating spaces for children and adults to interact and increasing communication and dialogue between children and young people and decision-makers.

**Methodology and Background to the Research Revisiting Evaluations**

When initially reflecting on evaluation processes with children and young people, I decided to explore the way in which their evidence had been valued across a range of settings and political, cultural and institutional contexts – hence the selection of case studies of participatory evaluations previously conducted with children and young people (described below). When revisiting the evaluations, I carried out a critical inquiry in which I interviewed participants who had been involved in the previous evaluation processes.

I firstly wanted to understand what staff, managers, commissioners and the children and young people themselves thought about the different ways in which evidence had been collected, including what they thought about the use of participatory visual methods. This was discussed within a broader analysis of what participants thought about participatory approaches more generally and the type of evidence produced from evaluation processes, and also whether it made a difference when the evidence came from children and young people as opposed to adults. This aspect of the analysis is discussed below in a discussion of the politics and power of evidence with regard to voice and the use of participatory visuals with children.

The second aspect of my analysis examined changes at individual, organizational and even societal levels that were linked to the evidence that had been collected with and by children and young people. This aspect of the research followed a critical realist approach (as articulated by Sayer 2000 and Robson 2002) in that it specifically examined the context in which the evaluations were being conducted and the mechanisms and strategies that had helped to shift power dynamics including preconceptions about what children and young people can do and how their evidence can be valued in decision-making. I used a case study approach to the research (based on Stake 2003) so that I could reflect on each of the evaluations that I revisited and compare similarities and differences across the evaluations that were conducted in different contexts.

In the following sections I discuss the politics of evidence and reflect on how children’s evidence was valued by participants who had been involved in the evaluations. I then present the transformational changes as a result of children’s evidence being listened to and acted upon. In a final section of this chapter, I provide more detail on the mechanisms or strategies that were successful in shifting power dynamics and leading to children’s evidence being valued so that these can inform practitioners and researchers in future evaluations with and by children and young people.

The analysis in this chapter is based on details from the following three evaluations that were previously conducted with the participation of children and young people. They were selected in order to provide a range of timeframes, institutional, cultural and political contexts for the case study analysis.

One evaluation revisited was located in Nepal in the high hill villages of Nawalparassi in the Mahabarat range of mountains. I worked with a team of Nepalese researchers to evaluate integrated community development interventions of the Himalayan Community Development Forum (HICODEF) that included components to address school based and informal education, local environment and energy including water pumps and tree planting, and income generation. ActionAid Nepal and their local partners HICODEF were initially interested in children being involved in the evaluation as there were unintended negative consequences of some of their interventions, for example one income generation programme to assist women in villages had resulted in children dropping out of school to look after goats. The evaluation took place over a decade ago (Johnson *et al.* 2001) and involved the co-construction of innovative participatory visual assessment methods with children and young people in villages. Particularly active were some of the children who were members of the child clubs that were supported by HICODEF and local village development committees (VDCs).

Another process, conducted at around the same time in the UK, was carried out to evaluate a Save the Children programme of youth led programmes called Saying Power (Johnson and Nurick 2001). Young people designed and led their own interventions with peers with the support of mentors who provided logistical and moral support, and host agencies that supported projects with resources and worked in partnership with the young people. Projects addressed a range of social inclusion issues facing young people including social isolation, living in deprived areas, drug and alcohol use, sexual and racial discrimination and activism in local political processes. The evaluation consisted of an external element where the evaluators interviewed young people, mentors, service providers and policy makers, and an internal component where the evaluators trained young people to carry out their own participatory evaluation with peers.

The third evaluation revisited was more recent, and rather than being commissioned/ managed from within the voluntary or non-governmental sector was part of the UK government Children’s Fund in Croydon (Johnson *et al.* 2005). The nineteen funded projects were managed by Croydon Voluntary Action, but were located in government and non-government domains. The Partnership Board that made decisions about funding and resource allocation was a mix of statutory and voluntary sector representatives and included parents of children from a couple of the projects. Expectations of the representatives on the partnership board meant that evaluators needed to use a mix of participatory approaches and more quantitative monitoring methods so that decision-makers had a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence on which to base decisions.

This mix of timeframes, institutional, cultural and political context provided a rich foundation on which to base the case study analysis to examine what factors had led to decision-makers valuing evidence from children and young people. Comparing perspectives within the case study settings, where each case was one of the evaluations described above, and then comparing mechanisms and strategies that were successful across the cases, provided the analysis presented in the rest of this chapter. The fact that I had previously carried out the evaluations could be seen as introducing bias, however, rather than examining whether the evaluations had been successful (or not), the inquiry in which participants (adult and children) were interviewed was to examine how evidence from children and young people had been listened to and acted upon. It was because of my intimate knowledge of the settings and processes that I was able to access participants in case studies, as suggested by Stake (2003), and therefore it was possible to talk honestly and openly about power dynamics and what had not been successful when it came to taking children’s perspectives seriously. Rather than discussing the full analysis from the comparative research, in this chapter I have provided examples that illustrate issues of power and the politics of evidence that are relevant to this book and to the domain of children and young people.

**The Politics and Power of Evidence:**

**Sharing Children’s Visuals and Voices**

All too often participation and particularly children’s participation may be seen as a tick box requirement of following a more rights-based approach to evaluation. It is specified in Article 12 of the UNCRC that a child has the right to participate in decisions affecting their lives: this has often in practice translated into an emphasis on voice in rights discourses, that is children and young people having the space to articulate their perspectives. Indeed in participatory research I led with children in ActionAid over two decades ago, even the title implied the importance of this aspect of child rights: *‘Listening to Smaller Voices’* (Johnson *et al.* 1995). All too often this has meant that processes have as one of their objectives to raise the voices of children and young people, but this can become an end in itself, rather than a means to achieve positive transformational change. Simply signing up to a rights based approach and gathering children’s perspectives does not mean their voices are heard. In this chapter I seek to move beyond the concept of voice and to go a stage further in an analysis of politics and power. What I examine is how evidence from children and young people once generated has actually been listened to or acted upon (or not), and whether their perspectives have been regarded as valuable knowledge and resulted in transformational changes at individual, organizational or societal level.

Voice, however, still remains one important part of the picture in children and young people’s participation. How can processes genuinely obtain evidence from younger participants without falling into the classic assumption that adults were once children and know what girls and boys need and want? Many participatory approaches and methods offer the opportunity for children and young people to express their perspectives and views in ways that are both enjoyable and rigorous. These methods can also provide mechanisms for children and young people to communicate their perspectives to decision-makers in evaluation processes, as we can see in the analysis below. The development of participatory methods with young people is widespread and the development of visual methods is well documented in the literature around participatory appraisal and participatory learning and action (for example Johnson 1996, Johnson *et al.* 1998, Chawla and Johnson 2004).

Across the evaluations, participatory methods used with children and young people were co-constructed with children and staff who were working on the projects that were being evaluated. This allowed flexibility depending on cultural context and preferences expressed by the children in terms of what methods they enjoyed and found meaningful to express different aspects of their lives and the interventions being evaluated. In all of the evaluations, once methods were developed and piloted, there was application of methods across projects in that particular setting. Comparative analysis was also carried out across different groups of children by gender, age, ethnicity and caste, taking into account that many different aspects of children’s identity intersect, thus also making individual situations and stories an important aspect of the evaluations. In the UK cases a coding system was developed so that analysis could be done that mixed quantitative scoring and qualitative information and quotes (further details of developing coding systems in the context of participatory visual methods can be found in Johnson and Nurick 2003).

Revisiting evaluations then required careful interrogation of what decision-makers and managers felt about the evidence that they had received from evaluators and children and young people, and what staff on the ground and children and young people themselves felt about the approaches that had been used. When revisiting evaluations sometimes a decade later, children and young people involved had become young adults and needed to remember the participatory processes. The picture below shows this aspect of the revisit in Nepal that took time to reflect on evidence that they had previously produced in order to remember the evaluations.

*Insert Figure 1: Children during evaluation and the same young adults reviewing their pictures 10 years later*

In Nepal and the UK, children and young people who had been involved in the evaluations suggested that participatory methods had allowed them to communicate their important issues to adults that make decisions in their villages and projects. In a sense the participatory methods gave them a mechanism for communication and gave them confidence in expressing their perspectives.

“I think they are good to use ‘cause people can just pick them up and we can show them what we wanna say.”

(Boy, aged 11, Croydon)

“You are left with a visual that you can use and present… as young people we also directly see what we have achieved.”

(Young Award Holder in the Saying Power scheme in Wales)

**Valuing Children’s Knowledge in Decision-Making**

In order to ensure the conditions are created for children’s voices to be heard, we need to understand attitudes to children’s knowledge. In the revisits, managers and commissioners of evaluations generally regarded children and young people’s evidence as showing ‘soft outcomes’. They were useful in terms of providing experiential evidence and demonstrated the perceptions or voice of the children and young people in the programmes. This type of evidence had informed decision-making on programming and resource allocation more often in the voluntary sector. Even then, managers and also staff suggested that times are changing and that, although they had previously been encouraged to explore ‘different ways of knowing’ during the 1990s when rights-based approaches were popular, they are now under pressure to provide more quantitative evidence in their evaluations. Managers and commissioners referred to quantitative evidence as being ‘more concrete’ and ‘more measurable’. Across the three evaluations, managers, commissioners and staff suggested that evidence generated by participatory processes with children and young people, especially more recently and particularly in statutory or government institutions, required the back up of quantitative monitoring statistics, or what was referred to in interviews with managers as more structured qualitative data. Examples of what they meant by this included the numbers generated by using scoring or ranking on participatory visual methods accompanied by a coding system (as in the Croydon case study), longitudinal studies, distance travelled and the use of proxy indicators.

The perceptions of managers, commissioners and staff relating to the politics of evidence, however, also changed over the process of the evaluations. This depended on whether they had the time and space to interact and become involved in dialogue with evaluators and with children and young people so as to build trust and relationships, and in turn their understanding of children’s evidence. In this way, they became convinced of the value of the evidence that was produced through participatory processes with children and young people. One manager, for example, talked about how he had been unconvinced of the value of children’s evidence at the beginning of the evaluation and that they were fulfilling a requirement by government to take children’s views into account. By the end of the process, however, he appreciated the importance of understanding the ‘softer’ outcomes of the funded projects that could be illuminated by children’s evidence about their lives. Another manager of the one of the funded projects in Croydon said that at first she thought of the children’s evidence produced through the use of participatory visual methods as ‘pink and fluffy’. By the end of the five-year ongoing local evaluation process she was convinced that their participation provided different and meaningful insights and so retrained staff and modified ongoing monitoring systems to ensure that the children and young people’s perspectives were captured and informed the ongoing project. Some of the managers and commissioners who had been most skeptical at the beginning of the evaluation processes recognised that there had also been transformational changes at individual and organisational levels as a result of children and young people’s participation in the evaluations.

A manager who was at first not convinced by children and young people’s participation in evaluation processes ended up by suggesting that visual participatory evidence generated by children had the following value:

“The value of the qualitative information is also in finding the linkages between issues. When a child is excluded from school this may link up with more then just the immediate problems in the school environment… The problem comes when links are not acknowledged and the real issues that face children and young people are not found: then they may find another value system that they can relate to, for example in local gangs or in extended family or groups.”

(Manager in Croydon)

**Children’s Evidence Being Acted On**

Participants who were interviewed during the revisits to the evaluations discussed changes that as a result of involving children and young people in evaluations that included transformation at an individual, organizational and more of a societal level.

The first level of change at an individual level included children and young people increasing their confidence and staff and managers changing their attitudes to children’s participation and their evidence. Examples of children and young people increasing their confidence and changing their behaviour were given by young participants who had been children at the time of evaluations and in two of the cases, had grown into young adults by the time of the revisit. In Nepal young men reflected on how they had started to realise how much work girls did in the household and had even started to wash some of the dishes and eat with the girls who otherwise would eat after the rest of the family had eaten. Girls, especially from ethnic groups that were considered to be of a low status in the local community, had only gradually been able to join in with the evaluation as fieldworkers had started to learn their local language as they spoke ‘Magar’ rather than ‘Nepalese’. In the Save the Children example, one of the young people running their own project gave an example of how, although at first he regarded the young people’s participation in the evaluation as a waste of time, he had gradually built his confidence and was still running his own project with peers over a decade later. He felt that evidence from the evaluation had helped him to show the impact of the project to get continued funding. In Croydon, boys aged 9-11 years suggested that adults seemed to have a better understanding of their lives and how the after school project they attended could help them to stay in school.

Different dimensions of power as expressed by Lukes (1974) and modified by Kabeer (1994), VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) and Chambers (2006) can help us to understand how power is acted out and can change in participatory processes. These dimensions include: *power over; power to; power within and power with.* Shifts in power and transformational change at the individual level arose as staff, researchers and managers started to appreciate children and young people’s knowledge could inform their understanding of their complex lives. In revisits there were examples of adults increasing their awareness and confidence as they realised that children’s evidence provided new insights. This shift happened as decision-makers recognised children’s evidence is part of the picture: they had the *power to* value children as agents of change and to create the conditions where children’s participation rights could be claimed. Some staff and managers talked about self-realisation as the value of children’s knowledge was established as the participatory process progressed: in a sense they became aware of their *power within* and some of the contradictions that this raised in their decision-making processes.

Staff and researchers from projects interviewed in both Nepal and the UK felt that training in participatory evaluation had helped them to increase sensitivity to the perspectives of children and young people across the project cycle from planning to implementation and developing monitoring systems. In Nepal, researchers felt that skills of involving children and young people could be transferred to other programmes of research such as in HICODEF’s involvement of the UK Government funded ‘Safer Motherhood Programme’. The scale of this influence had varied in the two UK cases revisited. Form young people influencing policy and practice across the organization in Save the Children during the early 2000s to staff and children feeling ownership of the evaluation process in individual funded projects in Croydon so that children and young people’s views became increasingly integrated into delivery of services.

Many examples were provided about how specific aspects of projects and interventions were changed as a result of children and young people’s evidence eventually being taken on board and acted on. These are three examples of the changes that were specified as a direct result of children’s evidence being valued:

* Children in Nepal who previously had to hang off taps that had been built too high for them to reach could better fulfill their household responsibility of collecting water when steps were built up to the taps: an idea that was initiated by children in the evaluation.
* One of the young people in Wales felt that she and her peers could more effectively lobby the Welsh Assembly through their youth organization, Funky Dragon, with the evaluation evidence that they had jointly planned and collected.
* Staff in the Youth Inclusion Support Project in Croydon changed the way that they worked to ensure that they listened to young people and their families so they could be effective in early intervention and identifying priority issues for children.

Achieving transformational change at an organisational level was helped by establishing new ways of working through creating different structures and spaces for participatory dialogue. HICODEF have rolled out children’s participation in their programming and now always build steps up to taps in their water programme so that children can reach them, as suggested by children in the participatory evaluation revisited. In some cases young people were recognised as a resource and included in governance structures, for example including young people on boards and in broader decision-making in Save the Children. In Croydon, changing ways of working were more limited to specific projects, but exposure to participatory evaluation had encouraged some of the projects to continue to find new and innovative ways of including children in evaluation: the Xpress project ran child-led evaluation and the Willow project that used drama to evaluate and communicate their work with children with life threatening illnesses and complex disabilities.

In Nepal it was a case of working through existing child clubs in villages, but finding new ways to encourage interaction between the children in the village and adults that had responsibility for local decision-making. This included finding enthusiastic children and young people who could help to sustain dialogue between children and adults. In one village, the level of change was at a broader societal level as dialogue was very much kept alive by one boy who organised his peers and now many years later has become a local journalist. In this village adults still listen to what children in the club say, whereas in other villages revisited they do not. A key aspect of engaging in a more participatory way with children is to ensure that capacity of adults is built and that they have a chance to interact and dialogue with girls and boys, young men and women, that are involved in the projects. It was only when there was this more sustained interaction between adults and children that adults making decisions started to listen, value children’s evidence and act upon it. Shifting power dynamics through creating participatory spaces for dialogue between children and adults within organisations and between people in communities across generations could therefore be seen as addressing the dimension of *power with.*

**The Change-scape Framework: Strategies for hearing children’s voices**

As a result of analysis to examine the conditions under which children and young people’s evidence had been listened to and acted upon, I decided that a framework could help to stratify and understand context and to share and replicate mechanisms or strategies to address power imbalances between young participants and adults making decisions. The research was informed by a critical realist perspective (following Sayer 2000 and Robson 2002) and the framework or model that arose from the findings I call a ‘Change-scape’ to describe the landscape of change and the mechanisms that help to turn outcomes into actions. Although this has some similarities to realist evaluation (as described by Pawson and Tilly 1997) in that the analysis of context is prioritised and the evaluation informed by critical realism, I have also stratified context by using Burawoy’s analysis of realist revisits that takes into account ‘external drivers’ and ‘internal processes’. I take ‘external drivers’ to explain context and structural issues determined by political, cultural, physical and institutional context, and ‘internal processes’ as those aspects that vary depending on the particular evaluation process, such as the capacity and confidence of individuals involved (young and old), their commitment to change and whether there are ‘champions for children’.

In addition, when considering children and young people as agents of change in development processes, I draw on socio- and cultural-ecological theories (following later theories of Bronfenbrenner 2005 and Tudge 2007). These theories help to connect children and young people to their context: particularly important in this framework is that the proximal processes are bidirectional so that young participants are not only affected by their context, but that they can also influence and change their context (also raised by Corsaro 1992).

*Insert Figure 2: Change-scape*

For the purposes of this chapter and the analysis of the politics of evidence with regard to the domain of children and young people, it is the mechanisms in this framework that link agency of children and young people to context through shifting power dynamics, that are particularly relevant. I have identified five key mechanisms or strategies that I feel may be useful to share with practitioners and researchers who are thinking of involving children and young people in evaluation so that these could be considered in planning to help ensure that evidence produced by young participants is listened to and potentially acted upon:

1. Capacity building with evaluation participants
2. Creating and strengthening participatory spaces
3. Communicating and encouraging dialogue through different media
4. Identifying champions for children
5. Examining commitment to change as a result of children’s participation.

The first mechanism relates to capacity building carried out for managers, commissioners and staff so that they become more aware of how children’s knowledge can inform their decision-making. This capacity building approach can also be taken for any participatory evaluation process so that there is a growing appreciation for the evidence from a more participatory approach that includes, for example, visual methods and the amplification of voice with marginalised people in communities. In Nepal staff piloted participatory visuals with girls and boys in communities, for example: developing matrices with indicators developed by children to compare and score different interventions that had been implemented in HICODEF’s community development programme; also drawing project cycles, for example of designing, building and evaluating water taps to show at what stage and how children had been involved. In the evaluation of Saying Power in Save the Children evaluators trained young people to lead their own evaluations with peers so that they could use their evidence to inform their projects and to influence policy and practice. Evaluators in Croydon worked over a five-year period with a partnership board of decision-makers to build their capacity to understand children’s visual evidence, convincing them of the rigour of participatory approaches and the value of children’s contributions.

The second mechanism relates to creating and strengthening participatory spaces as part of the evaluation process. This allows children and young people to interact with their peers, build confidence and engage in dialogue with adults. An example in Nepal was to work with the local village child club to provide girls and boys to analyse issues and work together to present their perspectives to adults in the village. In Saying Power young people and mentors attended residential sessions that were an important and fun space for young people to develop skills and plan their participatory evaluations with their peers. Another was to provide space in the form of ‘networking lunches’ for service providers to interact informally and talk about the participatory evaluation processes with children across the nineteen funded projects in Croydon. In these lunches, some structure was introduced in order to share successful strategies for involving children in a more meaningful way in ongoing programming and monitoring and evaluation.

The third mechanism is to use different forms of media to communicate issues arising in evaluation and to encourage dialogue between participants, therefore helping to shift perceptions and power dynamics. Children in Nepal communicated with adults using visuals that they had created with researchers, such as environmental mapping, preference ranking for their different household tasks and diaries that showed how much time girls and boys work and go to school. In the Saying Power programme in Save the Children attitudes towards young people’s evidence and roles in policy and practice grew as young people were encouraged to use drama, role-play, quizzes and visual evidence from their own peer evaluations to engage in dialogue with decision-makers. Children from some of the projects in Croydon were also encouraged to communicate messages to the members of the partnership board in media they felt comfortable with such as through pictures, video and rap songs.

The fourth mechanism relates to identifying ‘champions for children’, who can be either children or adults, who can motivate and inspire others to value the contributions of children and young people. In Nepal, a young boy championed children’s evidence taking up the role of organizing peers and helping to encourage them to present evidence to adults in the village. He is now a local community journalist and still an activist. Adults in this particular village still listen to and value the perspectives of children from the child club – as previously mentioned, not the case necessarily in other villages revisited. Mentors in Saying Power championed children’s knowledge, supporting young people when they requested help in running their peer projects on a range of issues of inclusion. In Croydon, the voluntary sector manager managed to convince others on the partnership board to embark on participatory processes with children and allowed space and time for evaluators to set up an ongoing process to build capacity amongst adults who were receiving the evidence from the evaluation.

The fifth mechanism is about examining the commitment to change before embarking on the evaluation process. It is important to understand the expectations of participants with regard to the politics of evidence and how the evaluation fits with broader theories of change. This also includes consideration of whether organisations have the flexibility to allocate resources and take decisions based on children’s evidence. This can help to plan appropriate evaluation processes that include mechanisms to help shift power dynamics and perceptions towards the value of children and young people’s roles and their evidence. The ongoing dedication of staff, for example Nepali researchers, Save the Children mentors and service providers in Croydon, pays testament to the commitment on the ground to children and young people’s participation. Even during times of conflict during Maoist insurgency, Nepali researchers and staff of HICODEF continued to listen to, act upon children’s perspectives and incorporate their right to be listened to into community development interventions. There was continued commitment to continuing the Saying Power programme into a second phase on the basis of the evaluation including the young people’s evidence and evaluation of their peer programmes. In Croydon the evaluator contract was renewed on an annual basis over a five year period as it took time to convince decision-makers of the value of children’s qualitative evidence, as opposed to relying solely on quantitative evidence, especially government based services were expected to provide.

The way in which all of these mechanisms may translate into practice depends on the local context: their development depends on an analysis of existing power dynamics and relationships between children and adults. The capacity and commitment that is present at the beginning of an evaluation process may need to be built upon to address preconceptions about the roles of children and young people and confront resistance to valuing them as agents of change able to generate valuable evidence.

**Conclusions: shifting power dynamics**

In this chapter I have presented evidence from three participatory evaluations revisited to show how mechanisms to shift power dynamics can help decision-makers to value children and young people’s evidence and to result in transformational change. Responses to take into account a child’s right to participate in decisions affecting their lives has unfortunately all too often resulted in processes that are tokenistic and have only served to tick the boxes that require evidence that children’s voices and perspectives have been gathered as part of evaluation processes. Whether their evidence is then listened to and acted upon depends on incorporating processes of building capacity, commitment, and spaces for communication and dialogue into the evaluation and identifying champions for children. These mechanisms fit with recent discourses on participatory processes and child rights, such as encouraging a greater emphasis on listening to children, creation of participatory spaces and dialogue (for example Percy-Smith 2006, Lundy 2007, Mannion 2010). Actively engaging in dialogue between service and research users including children and young people and decision-makers can help us to understand complexity and get services right for children (as also suggested by Morton 2014).

Moving forward on children and young people’s participation means moving beyond a token recognition of their voices to a more fundamental shift in attitudes towards their knowledge and evidence from participatory processes that engage them in a meaningful way. Shifting local power dynamics including between children and adults, will only happen when there is an acceptance that children and young people’s perspectives matter. Simply gathering their voices is not enough: mechanisms that shift power and build confidence in children’s knowledge need to engage adults in positions of power in dialogue. Listening to children and young people and co-constructing knowledge can inform transformational change at individual, organisational and societal levels. Greater commitment to creating conditions where children and young people can claim their participation rights therefore includes respecting children as agents of change and placing them at the centre of decisions that affect their lives.

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