

Children's experiences of participation

André Viviers (UNICEF South Africa), Glynis Clacherty (Clacherty & Associates)
and Aadielah Maker (Soul City Institute for Health & Development Communication)



The call for children's participation is a loud one, and rightly so, but it is critical that we think through why and how we involve children:

There is an urgency to “get it right” for children. This is partly because we are all aware of the very destructive effects of AIDS on individuals and social networks within this region. This has led to many organisations “doing participation” without really thinking through why they are doing it and without finding the best way to do it. On the other hand others have been very cautious about engaging children.

We need to take time to think about why and how we are doing children's participation before rushing ahead on the one hand and at the same time we need to be “brave” enough to try it, trusting that we will learn as we go along, particularly if we listen to the children and young people involved.¹
[Emphasis added]

Many organisations “do participation” but few stop to ask the children and young people who they work with if they think participation is important, how they experience it, and what they expect from it. Organisations, researchers, policy-makers and other people involved in children's participation need to make time to think about the best way of “doing participation” to make sure that the children and society are benefiting.

This essay examines the following key questions:

- Why do children think participation is important?
- What are children's expectations of participation?
- What do children experience when they are invited to “participate”?
- What are the potential benefits for children?
- What are the benefits for society?

Why do children think participation is important?

In a child rights survey, children highlighted the importance of participation by ranking it second only to the right to a safe environment in a list of rights most often violated.² While many children lack the opportunity to speak out and be taken seriously, children who have been able to participate in research and intervention projects value the direct and honest discussion about what is important in their daily lives.³

Recent research with girls and boys aged nine to 17 years focused on their experiences and opinions of appropriate children's participation. Children from three different areas in South Africa shared their experiences of participation in a girls' education movement club, a crime prevention club and a community support club for vulnerable children.

They described why participation is important:⁴

- It is a right that all South Africa's children have.
- It makes children feel part of society.
- It acknowledges that children have knowledge and insights on all matters.
- It recognises that children's opinions may help other children in similar situations.
- It recognises children's views as important and worthy of being taken seriously.
- It ensures that children are visible and heard.
- It enables children's inclusion in the design of legislation, policy and intervention programmes affecting them.
- It suggests that adults can learn from what children are saying.
- It contributes to children's development and growth.
- It provides children with new information that they can use.

Some of the children have put it very eloquently:

I would firstly tell them that children also have rights ... they also have a right to be heard.

Girls Education Movement club (GEM), Gauteng, 2010⁵

...our Constitution allows everyone of us to express his or her opinions without intimidation.

Girls Education Movement Club (GEM), Gauteng⁶

Everyone knows that one's opinion is important. Like maybe I can say something that you didn't think of or tell you something that you didn't even imagine. So if I tell you that particular thing and then you can do better at what you were doing before.

Crime prevention group, Free State, 2010⁷

What are children's expectations of participation?

Children have certain expectations of participation.⁸ Firstly, they expect a participation experience to respect their individuality, their knowledge and their capacity to make their views known:

I am of the view that, if you want to reach the youth successfully, get to hear what they have to say. You have got to let them use their own approach.

Community support club for vulnerable children, Free State, 2010⁹

Secondly, they want participation that is authentic and genuinely useful. They want access to information that will assist them to contribute. They want to work in an environment that is enabling, safe, inclusive, empowering and non-judgemental. They want trust between themselves and the adults facilitating their participation, which includes honesty and truthfulness at all times:

Honesty and truthfulness. Like if a person is honest to you, then if you have a problem, you won't be scared to talk to that person and if that person is friendly to you.

Crime prevention group, Free State, 2010¹⁰

Talking to children in a manner that they feel that they are not intimidated ... giving them the opportunity to speak and hearing what they say.

Girls Education Movement club (GEM), Gauteng, 2010¹¹

Children want adults to respect their confidentiality especially when they reveal personal and sensitive information. They say it is important to be asked for their consent and that their parents or caregivers should be asked too in some instances. Finally they want to be involved in the action, not just in sharing their ideas:

I mean you can [not] just take our ideas right now and just put them in a closet somewhere. You have to do something about them.

Crime prevention group, Free State, 2010¹²

Kids should be present throughout when changes are meant to be happening and be part of the process and the steering of the project.

Participatory project with children, Gauteng, 2010¹³

What do children experience when they are invited to "participate"?

Children's participation and contribution to the household and community is most often taken for granted and is seldom accompanied by the equal interaction and discussion they long for. So, the opportunity to make their voices heard can be deeply meaningful for children. As one child stated:

...people realise that I am there. So it shows that people respect me and take me seriously.

Community support club for vulnerable children, Free State, 2010¹⁴

Children also recognise how their participation can benefit other children:

Child: *I realise now I can make a difference and have a right to be listened to like an adult.*

Researcher: *What was it that we did that made you feel you can make a difference?*

Child: *You used our information in the report. You even made graphs with it. You took it seriously. It will go into a report that will help children. I feel that I did that. I can make a difference in other children's lives. I also feel like I have some power as a child.*

Participatory project with children, Gauteng, 2010¹⁵

Nthabiseng's story in case 5 shows how children's participation can help build children's confidence to speak out and address critical issues in their community.

Children are also very clear about what they do *not* want to experience when involved in participation:

...we don't want to be discriminated, because if teachers [adults] discriminate [against] us, we can't have the confidence to participate...

Community support club for vulnerable children, Free State, 2010¹⁸

They should take my feelings seriously. They are serious.

Crime prevention group, Free State, 2010¹⁹

Organisations, researchers, policy-makers and other people involved in children's participation need to make time to think about the best way of "doing participation" otherwise they run the risk of harming children. A Save the Children toolkit stresses

Case 5: Children as social actors

Nthabiseng Tshabalala is a member of a Soul Buddyz club in Soweto. Here is her story of participation:

People from IGOAL campaignⁱ visited our school. They asked for a child who could explain what Soul Buddyz was about. Luckily it became me. They liked my presentation. They left and came back again after some time and asked me if I could do a speech for the President. That's how it all started.

I was really excited when they invited me to New York to talk to world leaders about education. I couldn't believe it. But I wasn't scared because I am used to doing poetry. I even wrote my own speech. A part of my speech said, "You are politicians. You're in that place because you went to school. Let the kids go to school too, so that one day they can be where you are." People were so impressed they gave me a standing ovation.

Now I am back; people react very nicely to me, just like before. When they ask me, "So how did it go?" I tell them. Then I ask, "How were you while I was gone?" That way they feel happy and know that I care about their lives too.

Being a Soul Buddyz club member had a big role to play in this. I get motivated and confident in the club. I am what I am because of Soul Buddyz club. I wish all the children out there could believe in themselves.

Although this is a story of a once-in-a-lifetime chance to be a social actor in a high profile event, the way in which Nthabiseng attributes her confidence to participation in the Soul Buddyz clubs is echoed by other children who participate in local community projects:

There were these two children who were staying with their father, who was working and had no time to cook for the children. Every morning he was going to work and had not time for them. So I identified those children. Now every day after school those children go to the house of the lady who is working at the school to get food.

Soul Buddyz club, Limpopo, 2010¹⁶

We want to teach people on the radio.

We can go anywhere in our community to tell people how to live a good life, even if it's not on the radio, so that we can build a strong feeling inside ourselves on how to lead a good life.

We are going to make our country proud.

If you talk about good things, it makes you stronger.

Yes, you pressure yourself.

Soul Buddyz club (various members), Western Cape, 2010¹⁷

Source: Ntshalintshali D (2011) Buddy Nthabiseng flies to New York. In: *Soul Buddyz Club Zone Magazine*, 1:6. Johannesburg: Soul City Institute for Health & Development Communication.

ⁱ IGOAL is a campaign run by Education for All that used the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ to bring together footballers, fans, charities, corporations and individuals to lobby and achieve the aim of education for all. See: www.join1goal.org/home.php.

that children's participation should "provide children with a genuine opportunity to influence decision making while being based upon honesty and clarity about the extent of, and limits to, that influence".²⁰ (Also see pp. 25 – 26 for commentary on General Comment 12 on The Right of the Child to be Heard, issued by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.)

If children's participation is done in a way that does not respect children, then it can have a negative effect on them. Children whose input was sidelined in a town planning process have highlighted how children feel when they have spent time participating in a process and their ideas were ignored:

Don't make promises you can't keep – even researchers!

Participatory project with children, Gauteng, 2010²¹

To governments: Don't start these projects if you don't intend to finish them. To do that is crazy. It's like cutting out a dress and you won't be able to sew it.

Participatory project with children, Gauteng, 2010²²

What are the potential benefits for children?

Children draw multiple benefits, which are important for their development, from children's participation processes.²³ It is recognised globally that participation develops children's social competence and responsibility.²⁴ Children say that participation contributes to their growth and development because it assists them to express how they feel and what they think; to learn from peers; and to speak out in public about important matters. Children also learn new skills such as problem-solving, assertiveness, negotiation, collaboration, sharing and how to avoid social problems such as drug abuse and crime.²⁵

In the words of two children from two different contexts:

...when we are, like, participating in the group, we avoid many things like doing drugs...

Crime prevention group, Free State, 2010²⁶

My involvement ... gave me focus in life. It taught me a lot. For example I was able to stay away from alcohol. This was really difficult at times because of peer pressure. I was made chairperson of the first club so I had to lead by example.

Soul Buddyz club, KwaZulu-Natal, 2010²⁷

Children affirm the importance of participation in the development of their social competence and social responsibility. It develops their self-confidence and ability to play an active role in their communities²⁸ and builds protective factors that promote resilience²⁹. Children can also be very effective agents for change by being actively involved in advocacy, and modern media are a good channel for this.³⁰



Power statuses: Acting out how it feels when adults don't listen

The Soul Buddyz clubs, an innovation of the Soul City Institute for Health & Development Communication, are an excellent example of how children's participation can promote resilience in a context of vulnerability. One of the largest children's participation programmes in South Africa, the network consists of over 6,500 Soul Buddyz clubs that operate in primary schools across the country. Supported by teacher facilitators, these clubs are run by the children. The facilitators are supported with training and resource materials that focus on activities to promote individual growth and help children organise projects in their communities.

A recent evaluation³¹ of the long-term impact of the clubs on children showed clearly that participation builds resilience by developing children's self-confidence, communication skills, sense of agency, empathy and supportive social networks; and it enables them to start thinking about the future. These are essential protective assets needed to counterbalance developmental risks, such as poverty and violence, to which so many children in South Africa are exposed.

Children who are part of Soul Buddyz clubs have well developed interpersonal communication skills – especially in relation to difficult situations for children of this age. They are better able to withstand peer pressure, diffuse a potentially violent situation and seek adult help. Increasing their ability to communicate with others gives them a skill they can use to



Power statuses: Reaching out to listen with respect

protect themselves in high-risk social contexts, for example in alerting someone of abuse.

Self-confidence and communication skills are built through children's participation in public events and as a result of them taking charge of club events:

When she started Soul Buddyz she was just a quiet person. There were some clever Buddyz in the club at that stage so she just followed and listened to them. Then in grade 7 she was just another girl. I think that it was the influence of Soul Buddyz in her life. She just developed this boldness, this braveness. So all of a sudden she just changed from nowhere – she could speak out. Aah! We were surprised! When we had functions she was the programme director of the function, even the district staff who were attending were amazed. She was a ... a ... bomb!

Soul Buddyz club facilitator (talking about a club member in a rural area), Limpopo, 2010³²

Children who are involved in the clubs experience an increase in “friendships” with supportive adults. Increased ability to communicate with adults, to seek out adult help and to identify trusted adults who could be “friends” are products of the almost equal relationship between club facilitators and members. Children feel comfortable telling the teachers who facilitate the clubs about their problems.

Perhaps most importantly, a sense of power and agency is built through children leading the clubs themselves. Other developmental activities include planning and carrying out local community action projects that include speaking on radio, chairing meetings of adults and children, getting permission from the principal, presenting research findings, etc, as reflected in this interview:

Child 1: *We did many projects. For teenage pregnancy we called a meeting with the children – more especially the girls. We informed them about the teenage pregnancy. We talked about everything. With the children and the community.*

Researcher: *Who ran the meeting?*

Child 1: *Us, the Soul Buddyz.*

Researcher: *Okay. Where did you get the information about teenage pregnancy?*

Child 2: *The teachers gave us the information. Then we also advised the community on HIV. We organised another meeting at the school to advise parents and children about HIV and AIDS. We also did a research.*

Researcher: *How did you do the research?*

Child 2: *We went to the clinic and researched to the nurses and also asked the community what they understand about the meaning of the HIV and [how] is the virus transmitted.*

Soul Buddyz club in a remote rural area in Limpopo, 2010³³

Most importantly, the sense of agency children gained through participation also extended to a sense of power to make protective decisions relating to personal issues such as sexuality and to their future.

Child: *They give in [to peer pressure] because they do not have confidence. I try to have confidence. My parents teach me, and Soul Buddyz.*

Researcher: *What gives you self-confidence?*

Child: *I just trust myself. It's how I control myself and how I control my feelings.*

Researcher: *Where did you learn that?*

Child: *The advice I get from different people, the Soul Buddyz, my teachers, and even at church.*

Soul Buddyz club, KwaZulu-Natal, 2010³⁴

What are the benefits for society?

At the heart of democracy lies the notion of participation and engaging in active dialogue about all matters that impact on everyone, including children. These principles are safeguarded – for adults and children alike – in the Constitution.³⁵

Children's participation influences how children and adults relate to each other, and how children relate to other children. Participation encourages respect for different views. Children learn how the right of self is related to the rights of others and cannot be gained at the expense of others. Children's participation facilitates a culture of engagement, which enables the growth and strengthening of democracy. It places children on an active journey to exercise their civic responsibilities as they grow older and enter adulthood.³⁶

At the level of community, school and family, relations between adults and children are strengthened through participatory processes, which give opportunities for adults and children to listen to each other.

Children's participation should be viewed as an essential ingredient in making democracy work, whilst at the same time promoting and protecting the rights of children.³⁷ Participation is not only about preparing children for the future. By including their perspectives and ideas, homes, schools and society in general will be made a better place for all.³⁸

Conclusion

Children have rights now, which need to be recognised today.³⁹ It is important for children that their views are taken seriously and that their participation is meaningful. Children's experiences of participation differ significantly depending on the context and nature of the participatory process. It is important to take their experiences into account when moving forward with a children's participation agenda.

Participation should not be approached naively with a simple call for children to participate. It is important to think about *who* sets the parameters of the participatory process and *what* the outcome will be. Many participatory processes merely echo the ideological stake of the organisation or government that has started the process.

To avoid this, some guiding questions are: Is the participatory process set up in such a way that the views of children will be heard accurately? Are we thinking of children as homogeneous or are we creating a process that allows us to hear the voices of all children – even when what they say challenges the adults' ideas? And, most importantly, is there a commitment to follow up the listening with action?

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