

Children's agency in communities

The Benevolent Society, The Australian National University,
University of Western Sydney and NAPCAN

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ARACY Access Grid
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Genesis of the collaboration

Shared belief in children's competence, interest in their knowledge

Commitment to working with children “ecologically”, in their communities

- Where are children in social capital theory?
- Where are children in policies to combat social exclusion?
- Where are children in community development?

What we did

Awarded ARACY/ARC NHMRC Research Network Seed Funding

- Children's agency in communities: A review of the literature, policy and practice contexts
- A conversation with children about community
- Development of an ARC Linkage Grant proposal

Theoretical influences on our work:

The 'new' sociology of childhood/ 'new' social
studies of childhood

Children as competent

Children as social actors

Children as exercising agency - but within
structural constraints

Theoretical influences on our work:

Rights based approaches

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

Children as bearers of human rights

Children's right to participation

Children and social capital

Social capital:

a contested concept in theoretical debates;
an influential term in policy

Policy influence of Putnam's conceptualisation of
social capital:

Networks

Trust and trustworthiness

Putnam generally sees social capital as positive
– but recognises there can be a dark side –
'bonding social capital' versus 'bridging social
capital'

Where are children in theoretical and empirical studies of social capital?

Social capital generally assumed to be positive for children

Communities with higher levels of social cohesion more likely to have lower reporting of child mistreatment; lower incidence of domestic violence and higher birth weights (Vinson 2007; Jack and Jordan, 1999)

Children and social capital

‘...even in the preschool years the parents’ social capital...confers benefits on their off-spring, just as children benefit from their parents’ financial and human capital’ (Putnam, 2000)

Children and social capital

Children are generally absent from theorising about social capital.....

...except instrumentally or as beneficiaries

Children are not generally seen as contributors to social capital or active citizens in their communities

Children and social capital

‘Overall, the social capital research has not yet moved beyond adult-centred perspectives and preoccupations and explored how children as social actors shape and influence their own environments’ (Morrow, 1999)

Children and social capital

Mainstream
social capital
theory

Resulting
policy/practice:

- Children as beneficiaries
- Children as objects of intervention

Disconnect

Children's desire to engage
with their communities

Engagement with children as
democratising and building
children's capacity

Children as actors and
knowers

Children as bearers of
rights and as citizens

Implications for policy

- Combating social exclusion and place-based disadvantage: focus on communities, neighbourhood level interventions
- Children as “objects of intervention” (Mayall, 2006); “adults to be, future investments” (Ridge, 2003)
- Dual exclusion of disadvantaged children

*“it’s hard enough for adults to get heard.
Nobody listens to kids” (Boy, 10)*

Implications for practice

- Community interventions can focus on early intervention, wellbeing of children- seek to protect but not include children
- Parental participation and social networks- benefit children but don't include children
- Children left out of community development, often viewed as “the problem” (Barnes et al, 2006)

“we’re treated like we don’t care... the more they say it, it becomes kind of true” (Boy, 9)

Why does the exclusion of children matter?

- Incomplete understanding of children's knowledge of, and agency in communities
- Gap in theories of community and social capital, less effective policy and practice
- Reinforces social exclusion of children

Why does children's inclusion matter?

- Individual benefits: Children develop skills, self-esteem

*“when you know you have a right to be listened to
it makes you feel stronger” (Girl, 10)*

- Community benefits: networks, “practice citizenship”, critical awareness
- More effective interventions: services meet children's needs

What role can adults play?

- Children's agency exist and operates in our society (with or without the involvement and observation of adults) and can be enhanced or constrained through adult action
- "Children's participation" is a nexus point between adult's and children's agency- a bridge between adults and children (John 1996)

Methods for researching with children

Role play, drawings, photographs

Ways of engaging children in research

The important distinction between methods (tools) and methodology (broad approach, underlying principles)

Why did we talk to children?

To check our assumptions

To gain insight

To seek children's views on our methods

Limitations

Small number of children,
not representative

Strengths

Children as 'key informants'

Basis for our larger study

Conversation with children

- One small group in South-West Sydney
- Children aged 7 to 12

Key questions: what do children see and understand about community?, what do children do in their community?, what do children want for their community?, how do children want to talk about community to adults?

Conversation with children

Themes:

- **Communities** as geographical places: home, school, streets, shopping centres
- **Networks:** friends, extended family, classmates at language schools
- **Relationships of trust and reciprocity:** with neighbours, local people, the importance of helping others
- **Good streets and bad streets:** children aware of the stigma attached to their area, buffered by their networks, places they like to spend time

Conversation with children

Learnings for future research:

- Adult supervision
- Workshop setting
- Methods
- Children's relationships
- Children's competence
- Refreshments!
- Purpose

Where to from here?

Report available www.bensoc.org.au

Continuing collaboration between partners –
The Benevolent Society, NAPCAN, University of
Western Sydney, The Australian National University

ARC Linkage Application