

# Involving Children in Social Policy: A Case Study from Northern Ireland

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This presentation is based on two papers which are in the process of being published. If you wish to receive copies of these papers, please contact me by email and I will forward them to you.

# Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992)

Barn and Franklin (1996) survey of children's organisations in the UK

Model divided into three sections

1<sup>st</sup> three rungs – represent ineffective ways of involving children in research

2<sup>nd</sup> three rungs – represent effective ways of involving children in research

Top two rungs – concern research initiated and carried out by children

## Ineffective Ways of Incorporating Children in Research

Manipulation — Decoration —  
Tokenism

Children have no real understanding  
of issues

Children have no control over how  
views are expressed

Children have no information on  
how views are being used

Shier (2001) Hart's model useful for  
identifying these superficial methods

Brannen and O'Brien (1995)  
distinguish between research on  
children and research with children

## Effective Ways of Involving Children in Research

**Assigned but Informed** - refers to where adults decide on the project but take active steps to ensure that children are fully informed about the research and why they should be involved.

**Consulted and Informed** – here children are consulted about the research and their opinions are taken seriously –

**Adult Initiated – Shared Decisions with Children** - is the sixth rung of the model – this is where children are involved at various stages of the research process.

## Child-orientated Research

Adults may be involved but children remain the primary decision makers.

Alderson (2001) has involved children as co-researchers but such research continues to be written up by adults

To obtain funding proposals have to be written in such a way that they appeal to adult evaluators.

As Pole et al (1999) point out 'the prospect of giving out large amounts of public money to children to conduct their own research is likely to halt even the most committed child-centred researchers in their tracks'

## Eleven Plus in Northern Ireland

Sorting device to separate children into grammar and secondary schools

Secondary schools became second best as pupils had to fail an exam to gain entry to secondary school

System abolished in UK in 1960s but retained in Northern Ireland

Blair government in 1997 instigated review of system

Good Friday Agreement – Martin McGuinness (Sinn Fein) appointed Minister of Education in 1998

Set up review body (Burns Commission)

Save the Children and DENI funded qualitative piece of research into children's experiences of doing test

8 primary schools selected to account for gender and class

230 children aged 10-11 took part in research

## Applying Hart's model

Gaining Access – access negotiated via adult gatekeepers (parents and teachers)

Children's consent placed secondary to adults' consent

Children rendered voiceless during initial stages of research

First stages of doing research with children – characterised by invisibility and passivity of children

Power relationships in research  
between adults and children and  
researchers and gatekeepers

Gatekeepers may have on-going  
influence in research

Hierarchy of consent

Mandell (1991) children are the  
ultimate gatekeepers to their world

Adults who consent to research on  
children's behalf may make it  
difficult for them to withhold  
consent

Morrow and Richards (1996)  
'informed dissent'

## Methods Used in Research

Stories – children wrote two stories on their experiences – first story was to enable them to identify themes

Drawings – Children drew a picture on their experiences of doing the test

Focus Group Discussions – 4 to 6 children in each group

Role Play – Children pretended that they were presenting their views to Minister of Education and Review Body

## Example of story

The night before the first exam I was so nervous and my hands were shaking and my legs were like jelly. I was very nervous and did not want to do the test. That was the most sleepless night I have ever had. As I was getting dressed on the morning of the exam...suddenly the phone rang. It was my uncle to wish me good luck. I was still as nervous as ever. As I was walking to school I started to think what the exam would be like, whether it would be hard or easy. I finally got into school, still shaking. I sat down in my seat. I couldn't believe it was finally here, the Eleven Plus. Everyone was shouting and yelling and saying good luck to each other while I sat so nervous, I couldn't seem to speak.

## Confidentiality

Difficulties in accessing private space

Pupils close proximity to one another raises problems of confidentiality

Probed by teachers/principals about what children had said

**Anonymity** – Children wanted real names used - ‘You are expecting us to do all this work for you and then nobody even knows it was us. I want you to use my name’

Artist of picture for cover of report remained anonymous due to insistence of gatekeeper

## Dissemination

Report launched at popular venue in Belfast – all children attended launch

Drama group presented dramatisation of findings using actual quotes from report

Minister of Education and Chair of Commission responded to report

Researcher becomes gatekeeper to data

Media interest in report and media attempts to interview children who took part in research

Do you know what it felt like? It felt like you were in a big cage with all dogs that you know are going to destroy you. Yeah, that's what all the stress is about. You think if you don't keep good you are going to die. The dogs are the Eleven Plus and you have to kill them. They are the ones that are trying to eat you and you're in a cage and you can't escape. If you do bad you fall out and they maul you.

Or you're on top of a volcano and if you don't keep good, you're going to fall in. You think you are in for it. You are going to die like you're not going to make it. It's pretty scary

## Conclusions

Hart may have underestimated extent to which adults as gatekeepers' impact on intentions of researchers to promote children's successful participation

Hart's model focuses on power imbalance between child respondent and adult researcher – leaves undeveloped power imbalance between adult researcher and adult gatekeeper

Gatekeepers cannot be disregarded once access has been obtained – they may exercise influence over all stages of the research process