

Children in urban regeneration: foundations for sustainable participation

Suzanne Speak

ABSTRACT Throughout the 1990s, urban policy in Britain was premised on the importance of *public participation* in local *regeneration and governance*, with a view to *empowerment* and developing *citizenship*. However, one group, frequently overlooked by the participation process is *children*, precisely the group whose perceived lack of citizenship causes such concern to many. Whilst they are often only offered token involvement in community regeneration projects, empirical research with children suggests they are capable of the same involvement as adults. Many of the barriers to adult participation may have been avoided if they had been encouraged to be involved fully as children.

Introduction

Throughout the 1990s urban policy in Britain has been built on the notion of resident participation in urban community development, and this trend seems set to continue (Taylor, 1995; Social Exclusion Unit, 1998). However, despite increasing awareness of the difficulties and limitations of resident involvement in neighbourhood management (Wood *et al.*, 1995; Hastings *et al.*, 1996; Gilroy, 1997), there are few suggestions as to how to overcome these difficulties. Within that context, this paper aims to discuss the abilities of children to be involved in such work. It argues for their involvement, not only in a token way, with playground design projects, as is often the case but to the same degree as adults, within the decision making structure. The paper may be valuable to those involved in community development, as a suggestion of what even small children may be capable of understanding and expressing. As Horelli (1998) points out, there is scant study or literature on children's participation. What little there is shows the increasing marginalization of children from the decision making processes in most cases (Chawla, 1997). Whilst there is some acceptance of children's involvement in urban design (Ward, 1990; Simpson, 1997) or the environment (Freeman, 1996), we need to develop a new concept of children as agents at all levels in urban neighbourhoods (Lansdown, 1997). To do this we need to know more of children's

capabilities and understanding, in order to incorporate their needs and abilities into urban policy.

This paper draws on empirical research which sought to assess the potential for children being more deeply involved in community regeneration (Speak, 1997) (hereafter, that work will be referred to as the children's study). This paper explores the potential for the wider involvement of children in participative, community led urban regeneration at core decision making level rather than, as is more common, in the form of token design projects. It suggests that more than the token involvement of children is necessary, not only for the development of active citizenship amongst children and young people but for sustained community ownership of regeneration initiatives and the development of new forms of community governance.

The paper is in three parts. First, it discusses the background to a specific community development trust, and the role of children within it. Second it highlights the empirical work with children on the same estate, who were offered a chance to express their desires for the area, understanding of the work of the trust and their thoughts on the governance of the community. The paper concludes by suggesting that children are capable of far deeper involvement than they have been offered.

Context: The Cruddas Park Community Development Trust

The children's study which informed this paper was carried out on the Cruddas Park estate in Newcastle, which had been the focus of a community development initiative for almost 10 years. It is important to give some background to that initiative in order to set the children's project in context.

In 1989, The Newcastle Initiative (TNI), a business-led initiative, sought to add value to public sector regeneration efforts on inner city estates in Newcastle, by focusing attention on one inner urban estate. The estate chosen was Cruddas Park, a neighbourhood of noticeable disadvantage. Between December 1988 and February 1989 a feasibility study was undertaken based on consultation entirely with adults amongst residents, businesses and the local authority. The consultation process highlighted the following key issues of concern to adults:

- high fear of crime;
- high level of void properties;
- high level of long-term unemployment;
- low level of confidence and skills;
- lack of facilities for children and young people;
- poor shopping facilities;
- poor health indicators;

- dissatisfaction with housing and repair services;
- low income and related problems;
- poor image of the area and stigmatization of estate.

TNI sought to address these issues by working in partnership with both local residents and the local authority. Between February and April 1989 a steering group of local people was established to take ownership of the initiative, called the Cruddas Park Community Development Trust. The group did not include any children or young people.

The Cruddas Park Community Development Trust (CPCDT) was one of the first initiatives in which active participation of residents at all levels was seen as central to any success it may achieve. However, from the outset a number of difficulties came to light which are now, a decade later, widely recognized as barriers to participation in such initiatives (Wood, 1995). The main issues were:

- the fragmentation of the ‘community’ – residents did not see themselves within the same framework of community as was perceived by the other members of the initiative;
- territorialism – the ‘community’ was split by physical and geographical boundaries of streets, and small neighbourhoods. Dominant families controlled the estate;
- low self esteem of residents and inability to communicate with or participate on equal terms with ‘professionals’.

These issues are raised here, as the children’s study sought to explore the potential for eliminating these problems in future generations, by engaging children in the regeneration process.

It is worth noting that throughout the consultation process of the CPCDT, indeed, throughout its work, children were regarded not as active residents and citizens in their own right. Even though the nursery school on the estate became a central ‘neutral’ building for meetings, the minutes of those meetings and subsequent reviews of the work of the Trust (Wood *et al.*, 1995) showed children were at no time consulted themselves about their own needs or desires for the estate or their lives on it. Whilst much of the work of the Trust was oriented towards children, in the form of crèche facilities or school playschemes, children were viewed either as property to be taken care of or as problems to be controlled.

The empirical work: children representing themselves

In 1997, the estate was revisited with a view to offering the children of the neighbourhood an opportunity to respond to a consultation process similar to that which the adult residents had been through. As with the adult residents, the children were first asked to comment on their neighbourhood and

issues of importance to them. Many of their responses were remarkably similar to the adult responses. Also, as with the adults, they were then invited to consider how they could be involved in their own governance by making their voices heard by the local authority. Unlike the adults, however, they were not presented with a community forum or any other process for engaging with local government and had to devise one themselves.

Cruddas Park – the place

Children were asked to discuss the good and bad things about living in Cruddas Park. As with the adults on the estate, there was a wide range of different opinions. However, several more negative issues were strongly represented throughout all discussions. Crime, arson, vandalism and boredom, or lack of places for children to go to were the most common bad points raised. The good points were the park, the open space, individual homes and school.

From these discussions it was easy to see that children had strong spatial awareness of the area and of the good and bad places. Children produced a map of their 'best' and 'worst' places, it shows clearly that the children had better feeling about the green area surrounding the tower blocks, than they did about the low rise flats and terraced housing with gardens. These were '*worst places*' where most fires occurred. The school and shopping centre were also '*best places*'.

The children had strong feelings about the physical lay out and condition of their neighbourhood. Their comments closely mirrored those of the adults with regard to rubbish, vandalism, mis-use of the neighbourhood and crime.

'In my area there is hardly anywhere to play because of the smelly rubbish and the broken glass. I play in the graveyard sometimes but I get wrong (told off).'

However, the children were also aware of good things about the area and recent improvements.

'There it's good (points out of the window to an area of grass by tower block) it's good that they have all that grass for people but dogs go on it too they make it a mess, but it's still good.'

It was not only the physical environment on which they commented, however. It was clear also from their answers that even young children from the age of 5 years were aware of good and bad behaviour. Although unaware at that age of the concept of citizenship, they clearly had a strongly developed sense of what was acceptable or unacceptable behaviour within the community. They were concerned about the same issues of crime and misconduct that the adults had raised.

'My Nan were robbed and they took her money and her telly.'

'Some lads take cars and they can't even drive and so they just set fire but it wasn't their car and that's wrong.'

Children and community governance

The initial work of the children's study was about what the children liked and didn't like in their neighbourhood. It was intended to both establish their spatial awareness and their feelings about Cruddas Park, and also to establish an element of trust and understanding between children and researcher. It was successful in both respects. However, the main focus of the work was to explore the potential for involving children in the decision making processes within participative community regeneration with a view to developing in them the skills needed for greater participation as adults. The paper now discusses ways in which the children considered they might have been involved in decision making in Cruddas Park.

Discussions about the Cruddas Park Community Development Trust

Of the 24 children interviewed for the children's study only two had heard of the CPCDT, neither of these understood what it was, despite having lived with it all their lives. The trust was explained to them as being a way for the people who lived in Cruddas Park to have some control over their neighbourhood and to be able to speak more easily to the council about issues which were important to them. The older children, those over 8 years old had no difficulty understanding this notion of speaking to the council, both with regard to personal issues and more general issues, as the following quotes show.

'I got dog stuff, dirt on my show one day and my Mam said the council should put up notice to say no dogs on grass. I said she should tell the council but she said you can't tell the council that, but you CAN! (said with anger).'

'Like if the housing (department) don't listen to you, my Nan says they don't never listen to you if you go with something 'cause she wants moved and they don't never listen so she could go to talk to them in the Civic Centre. She says she's going to write to the council, but she'll never.'

The children had more difficulty understanding the idea of speaking to the council about poverty or unemployment, which had been key issues behind the development of the CPCDT.

Boy – Well man, what can the council do. My Dad says if there isn't no jobs, there isn't no jobs. The council can't give him a job.

Girl – Yes they could give him a job. He could . . . there's loads man . . . loads of people work for the council, loads man . . . Mrs Grant (head teacher) works for the council all the teachers do.

Boy – She's a teacher . . . my Dad isn't a teacher . . . (argument ensues about the type of jobs the council have).

This led to a discussion about the possibility of using the council to talk to the government. Only the older children in the top class, those aged 10 and 11 and about to go to senior school understood this.

'You can write to your councillor and he can write to the Government for you. There was people in the town told us to write to us councillor and . . . what's that, like a councillor . . . (I ask MP?) Yeh, to write about beef and how it gives you mad cow disease (at this the group breaks into mooing noises and pretends to be mad cows for a few minutes). They were in the town telling ya outside Mac Donalds and that. Yeh the Council's like the Government isn't it.'

At this point the children were shown a copy of *Changing The Way We Do Things Here* (Wood, 1995). It was explained to them that this was a book about the CPCDT and that the sections in italics were what people who lived in Cruddas Park had said about it. Only at this point was the structure of trust discussed.

Children's understanding and the concept of community structure and collective voice

Most children over 8 years old could understand the concept of committees and the idea that there was a need to have a structure and process to get the voices of the residents heard.

'Like if just one person says (makes a complaint or request) they wont do nowt. But if loads say then they have to.'

The children were asked how a great many people might all make their complaint together. After some discussions about the entire community writing letters or all going to the Civic Centre, the children themselves began to raise the concept of only one or two people going on behalf of the whole of Cruddas Park.

As the discussion progressed, the concept of children being able to make their voices heard was beginning to dawn on one eleven year old girl, who without prompting, instigated the following discussion.

Girl – Who did they ask then?

Researcher – People who lived in Cruddas Park at the time

Girl – What! all of them!

Researcher – No, not all of them. They started by talking to the people who were involved with the resident's association

Girl – What's that resident's what, what's that then?

Researcher – A group of people who get together to try and make the housing and the area a better place for people living in it. . . .

Girl – Well I live here and they didn't ask me nowt!

(the group laughs and comments that the girl would only have been little, about 5 years old at the time)

Researcher – Don't you think little kids might want to say something about Cruddas Park if they live here, about the dogs and the fires?

Boy – Yeh but it'd be daft stuff 'cause when you're a little kid you don't know . . . nowt like about stuff not proper.

Researcher – What about when you get older, what about you, if they asked you now, would you think of something to say about what you liked and didn't like.

Girl – Yeh but they wouldn't ask 'cause we're just kids

Boy – Yeh they should ask kids an' all, 'cause we're residents an' all . . . They should ask us an' all I think I'd tell 'em!

Developing a way to be heard

The empirical work continued with the children developing ways of making their voices heard by local government. Working within the national curriculum, they wrote letters to local councillors and MPs. They expressed in writing and pictures their desires and concerns for their neighbourhood and its management.

Ultimately, the children developed the notion of a school forum, through which an individual child might make his or her feelings known to the governing powers of the community. This represented an important step, as it brought from the children the acceptance that some of their peers were key players in their own smaller worlds. What the children had arrived at was the idea of electing community representatives from amongst their peers.

This would have been significant in its own right. However, greater significance can be placed on this in relation to the original problems faced by the CPCDT in trying to engage residents in participation. One of the difficulties of involving the adult residents in the CPCDT was the dominance of certain families at meetings and on the estate generally. The Head Teacher of the school involved in the work recognized that this constraint was already developing amongst the children in the school but to a lesser extent. Commenting on the children's reluctance to name those of their peers who they felt to be 'strong characters' able and willing to speak up for others, the head teacher had this to say.

'They may have seen it as "grassing up" a mate. You don't "grass up" on anyone here. That's what they're taught. Anyway, I think what you're talking about . . . most of the children would do that, speak up for themselves, in school anyway. But yes, there are some who would be leaders, not ring leaders as such . . . more forward. They tend to be the kids from the families who run the estate, you know who they are and it shows.'

This issue has brought us full circle in that the children's study began with the notion that it was important to bring children into the participation process at an early age so as to develop in them the skills and confidence to engage fully as adults. Here we can see that some of the constraints which prevented adults from participating in the CPCDT, are already present in the minds of young children. Perhaps it is only through being encouraged to participate and speak out at this stage in their development that people will grow to expect to have equal rights of expression later.

Conclusions and suggestions

It seems clear from the evidence that even small children of 5 and 6 years are concerned about similar issues to their parents, including vandalism, crime, and lack of facilities. Children of 8 years to 11 years not only share those concerns but are also aware of their neighbourhood as being under the control of many agencies. Clearly, they can understand the concept of government and the notion of public participation in the management of their estate. They demonstrated, through their discussions and visual work, a strong sense of 'good civil behaviour'.

Importantly for the context of this paper, unlike the adults on the estate, the children showed a firm belief that they had something worth saying, and that all people had a right to be consulted and listened to.

Older children could also see the value of building structures enabling residents to voice their concerns not only to local councillors but also directly to central government. It is worth noting that other research on children's views of politics and power, reveals children's sense of powerlessness (Cullingford, 1992). The children's study did not find such a sense of powerlessness amongst the children of Cruddas Park. This may be due to their young age, as most other studies have focused on older children of senior school age, over 11 years.

Some schools are indeed beginning to develop the type of schools council that was designed by the children in this study. In Merseyside, for example, teachers are now commenting on improved democratic relationships with children in schools after the development of schools councils (Lansdown, 1997).

There is no statutory base for these initiatives. There is, however, recognition at least of the importance of increased child participation, both in school and in the community, in the Checklist for Children: Local Authorities and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1995).

It would be simplistic to suggest children can easily engage equally with adults in participation. As Hart (1997) shows, in his metaphorical ladder of participation based on Arnstein's (1969) those who try can be guilty not only of tokenism but even worse, can end up using the label of children's participation to support their own ends.

However, a few children's participation projects are beginning to reach beyond the tokenist gestures of play ground design projects or mural painting, to involve children at the core of regeneration initiatives. This is particularly true of environmental initiatives. What we are learning from these is that those which are more committed, and longer term as opposed to short term and tokenist are producing valuable long term results (Horelli, 1998).

The recognition that children should be encouraged to take responsibility for their planet, neighbourhood or school ground is growing. We must

recognize though, that with responsibilities come rights, the right to be consulted, and have ones views acted upon.

Suzanne Speak has been a research associate in the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne since 1993. Her work has focused on the logistics of everyday life in disadvantaged and marginalized neighbourhoods. Within this context, she has undertaken studies of youth, young single parenting and childhood, particularly in relation to community participation and empowerment.

Address for correspondence: School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Claremont Tower, University of Newcastle, Newcastle-upon-Tyne NE1 7RU, UK.

Bibliography

- Arnstein, S. (1969) 'The ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the Institute of American Planners*, 35(4), pp. 216–224.
- Chawla, L. (1997) 'Growing up in Cities', project report presented to the Urban Childhood Conference. Trondheim, Norway, June 9–12.
- Cullingford, C. (1992) *Children and Society: Children's Attitudes to Politics and Power*, Cassell, London.
- Gilroy, R. (1997) 'Building routes to power: lessons from Cruddas Park'. *Local Economy*, 11(13) November pp. 248–258.
- Hart, R. A. (1997) *Children's Participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*, Earthscan Publications, London, UK.
- Hastings, A., McArthur, A. and McGregor, A. (1996) *Less than equal? Community organisations and estate regeneration partnerships*, Policy Press, Bristol, UK.
- Horelli, L. (1998) Creating Child Friendly Environments: case studies on children's participation in three European countries. In *Childhood* Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 225–239.
- Lansdown, G. (1997) *Taking Part: Children's participation in decision making*. Institute of Public Policy Research, London, UK.
- Lynch, K. (1977) *Growing up in Cities: Cambridge, MA and Paris*, UNESCO, New York.
- Taylor, M. (1995) *Unleashing the Potential: Bringing Residents back to the centre of regeneration*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, UK.
- Simpson, B. (1997) Towards the participation of children and young people in urban planning and design. *Urban Studies*, Vol. 34, Nos 5–6, pp. 907–925.
- Social Exclusion Unit (1998) *Bringing Britain Together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*, NSO, London, UK.
- Speak, S. (1997) *Well, they didn't ask me!* Unpublished report based on research in Cruddas Park Newcastle upon Tyne. Department of Town and Country Planning, University of Newcastle upon Tyne.
- Ward, C. (1990) *Child in the City*, Bedford Square Books, London, UK.

Wood, J., Healey, P., Gilroy, R. and Speak, S. (1995) *Changing the Way We Do Things Here: the story of the Cruddas Park Community Development Trust*, Centre For Research on European Urban Environments, University of Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK.