Analysing Participation and Social Exclusion With Children and Young People. Lessons From Practice

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Introduction

The term ‘social exclusion’ has been criticised as being too vague (UN Commission on Human Rights 2000). It is difficult to give a distinct definition of social exclusion because it ranges from the effects of poverty to the way people interact in social settings (Hill et al., 2004). This paper does not seek to resolve this difficulty, nor will it attempt to elucidate a single specific definition of social exclusion. Rather, the first half of the paper aims critically to reflect on the utility of a variety of perspectives of social exclusion including the idea that the social exclusion of children and young people can be overcome by their involvement in participatory projects. This discussion will compare a number of discourses including those that relate exclusion to the need for: greater individual moral responsibility; the removal of social barriers to local spaces, leisure, education and work; the development of strategies that challenge poverty through redistribution; and the growth of approaches that promote resilience, involvement and participation. Through this discussion the paper develops a complex notion of social inclusion that moves beyond false dichotomies and includes discussions of space, power, politics and change. The second half of the paper compares this discussion to the findings of a participatory project carried out in Liverpool in the UK and concludes that we need to adopt a much more complex understanding of exclusion and participation if we are to support children and young people to instigate sustained changes in their life circumstances. (Please note this paper will use the term children to refer to those under the age of twelve and young people to refer to those between the ages of 12 and 21).
Moral Perspectives
Moral Under Class Discourses within political studies in the UK and US have related social exclusion to a decline in moral standards (see Levitas, 1998 for further discussion of this discourse). Moralist discourses have suggested that children and young people have a negative impact on communities and that their negative behaviour is caused by: poor parenting (which is related to parental educational underachievement), the negative influence of the liberalised media and disintegration of social ties (Murray, 1990). For example, Coleman (1988) defined working mothers and lone parents as causing exclusion (Morrow, 1996, 1999). Moralist discourses have suggested that children are prevented from achieving their full potential because they lack good role models, do not have access to quality education and fail to experience transition from school to work (MacIntyre et al., 1993; MacDonald, 1997). By concentrating on the limitations of individuals this writing stigmatises specific groups of people.

This blaming approach to social exclusion can be viewed in European discussions concerning young people that promote the idea that young people experience social exclusion because they have to be taught the correct way to behave by socialising adults. For example the Committee of Ministers Resolution (78) 62 on juvenile ‘delinquency’ and social change suggests that governments ensure they increase the ‘educative and socialising content of sanctions applied to them, and review the law on minors, with a view to socialising young people and preventing their marginalisation’ (Eberhard, 2002, p. 42). This statement assumes that children and young people experience social exclusion because governmental organisations or parents have failed to ‘socialise’ (educate) them properly.

The idea that children only receive resources from their parents was criticised during the 1990s within the sociology of childhood on the basis that such characterisations of childhood were predicated on an assumed deficit of rationality and competence. It was argued that such perspectives downplayed children’s capacities to act as capable social actors independent of family and peer group (Waksler, 1991; James and Prout, 1990). Moralist discourses have also been criticised within childhood studies on the basis that they have consistently failed to engage with the views and feelings of those they perceive to be excluded and those they believe to cause exclusion (Morrow, 1996, 1999). For example, single mothers are stigmatised without thought of how they themselves define their lives, and working mothers’ positive contribution to the incomes of families is ignored. Indeed, moralist discourses that criticise working mothers also overlook the benefits to those children who subsequently experience high quality child care provided by well-qualified education/care staff (Skinner, 2005).