Is participation prevention? A blurring of discourses in children's preventative initiatives in the UK

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between two key concepts that have defined recent social policy initiatives for children in the UK: participation and prevention from social exclusion. Drawing on the Children's Fund initiative as an example, this paper traces the diverse and sometimes contradictory discourses of childhood and social inclusion/exclusion in stakeholders' differing rationales for supporting children's participation and prevention. The authors argue that the blurring of the rationales for participation and prevention has implications for the strategies and practices that agencies adopt and raises questions about which groups benefit and whose agendas are served by participation and prevention activities. **(100 words)**

Key words: Children's Fund; children and young people's participation; prevention; social exclusion; citizenship.

Introduction: social exclusion, prevention and participation

Since its 1997 accession, the New Labour Government in the UK has defined poverty, socioeconomic inequalities and social exclusion as major social problems and places considerable emphasis on their reduction (Alcock, 2004). Social exclusion has received particular attention, a notion that not only corresponds with income poverty, but also embraces the 'mutually reinforcing' problems of '…unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor

housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown…' (ODPM, 2004:3; see also Davies, 2005). Social exclusion thus is concerned with the complex interplay between several different dimensions of exclusion, including material poverty and disadvantage, spatial restrictions and mobility, health and well-being, cultural marginalisation, as well as the ways in which an individual's capacity to act is determined, and the opportunities available to participate in decision-making about matters which affect people's lives (Percy-Smith, 2000; Barnes, *et al*. 2002; Pierson, 2002).

As part of the drive towards tackling social exclusion, the UK Government has introduced a host of preventative initiatives in England targeting children[1] deemed to be at risk of social exclusion, including *Sure Start,* the *Children's Fund, On Track* and *Connexions*. Such initiatives are located within what France and Utting (2005) call the 'risk and protection-focused prevention paradigm', which embraces the concepts of building resilience and enhancing protective factors in children's lives, as well as tackling risks of future negative outcomes which may lead to social exclusion. The prevention and early intervention agenda developed in the UK during the 1990s, evidenced in New Labour's growing concern with outcomes for disadvantaged children and the shift in legislation and social policy from the concept of 'children in need' to the broader notion of 'children at risk' of social exclusion (NECF, 2005; Home Office, 1998). The Children Act 2004 gives further impetus to prevention of social exclusion and early intervention in children's lives in order to reduce the probability of negative outcomes in later life. However, the meaning of the term 'prevention' is still subject to much debate; the Dartington Social Research Unit comments: 'One person's prevention is another person's intervention. There is much confusion over the term, and no single definition can be counted on as definitive' (2004:18). This has resulted in a lack of clarity about what constitutes 'preventative services' and hence statutory, voluntary and community sector organisations have developed a diverse range of activities under this banner.

Policies to address social exclusion have been critiqued for a number of reasons. Levitas (1998), for example, argues that despite recognising the multi-dimensional aspects of the concept, current UK Government policy has emphasised a *social integrationist discourse* of social exclusion in which people are expected to become integrated into society by taking up opportunities in the labour market, and children are expected to prepare themselves for paid employment. To a lesser extent policy also reflects a *moral underclass discourse* of social exclusion in which individuals are constructed as excluding themselves through not conforming to 'normal' social behaviour. Both discourses define citizenship in terms of a balance of rights and responsibilities (Davies, 2005; Giddens, 2001). Less emphasis is apparent in the current UK Government's policy on what Levitas (1998) calls a *redistributionist discourse*, an approach that criticises the ways capitalist economies create socioeconomic inequalities, necessitating the need for progressive redistribution of wealth. Indeed, the mobilisation of the term social exclusion in current policy discourse is seen by some commentators as not acknowledging unequal incomes and their structural causes (Davies, 2005). We trace and develop these discourses of social exclusion in Children's Fund stakeholders' rationales for children's participation and prevention and relate the discourses to the implementation of such activities.

Although children represent a key focus of the social exclusion agenda, their views are rarely considered in the design, delivery and evaluation of social exclusion initiatives (Hill *et al*.2004). However, exclusion from participating in decision-making about matters which affect people's lives represents a key dimension of the multi-faceted concept of social exclusion. Some researchers argue that participation is opposite to the process of social exclusion, and therefore represents an integral part of the social inclusion agenda (Hill *et al*. 2004; Stevens *et al*. 1999). Furthermore, Jenks (1996), Giddens (1998) and Prout (2000) argue that the New Labour Government engages in a strategy of 'social investment', a key feature of which is 'investment

in human capital wherever possible, rather than the direct provision of economic maintenance' (Giddens, 1998:117). While the Government's concern with child poverty has been broadly welcomed, some commentators draw attention to the fact that a 'social investment' approach to reducing poverty and disadvantage constructs children as future 'investments' rather than as subjects whose present wellbeing is important (Fawcett *et al*., 2004; Williams, 2004). This means that there is a reluctance to consider children as subjects among policy makers and practitioners, and hence, limited attention is given to fulfilling children's rights to participate in decision-making (Fawcett *et al*., 2004).

Since the adoption and ratification of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) by the UK Government in 1991, over 400 voluntary and statutory sector organisations have formally adopted its principles. Some local authorities use the UNCRC as the planning framework for children's services (Willow, 2002). The increasing prominence of the rights discourse is accompanied by increased understanding of the active role that children can play in shaping their environments. Instead of being seen as recipients of welfare services and passive objects of research, children are increasingly recognised as active participants in the construction and determination of their own social lives and of the societies in which they live (James *et al.* 1998). Many commentators acknowledge children's competencies, including those of very young children, and therefore their capacities to be involved in decision-making about their lives (Kirby *et al*., 2003). Moreover, recent research and policy documents are starting to recognise the political, legal, social and moral reasons for promoting the greater engagement of children in their local and wider communities (Craig, 2000; Willow, 2002; Sinclair, 2004). Sinclair and Franklin (2000:1) summarise the reasons for involving children as: '… to uphold children's rights; fulfil legal responsibilities; to improve services; to improve decision-making; to enhance democratic processes; to promote children's protection; to enhance children's skills; to empower and enhance self-esteem'.

The New Labour Government's encouragement of 'active citizenship' and 'consumer/user' involvement in local governance can be seen as efforts to promote greater participation, and implicitly correspond to the goals of the social inclusion and prevention agendas. Indeed, children's participation is widely embraced in a number of policy initiatives (DoE, 1995; Barnes, Matka & Sullivan, 2002) and children now receive training in citizenship in schools as part of the UK national curriculum (DfEE, 1999; see also www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship). However, social policies directed towards children demonstrate an ambivalence and tension between the interrelated notions of children's rights and responsibilities (Such & Walker, 2004). New Labour's rhetoric on 'rights and responsibilities' has shifted the balance of responsibility down the lifecycle by adopting increasingly punitive policies towards children, such as antisocial behaviour orders[3] and maintaining the age of criminal responsibility at ten years, while increasingly emphasising parents' responsibilities for their children's behaviour (Williams, 2004). While policy rhetoric couples 'rights' with 'responsibilities', there has been much less regard for adopting rights-based approaches and actively involving children in decision-making about matters which affect them. This seems to contradict the overarching policy goal of preventing social exclusion, a key dimension of which concerns exclusion from taking part in decisions that affect people's lives (Percy-Smith, 2000; Barnes, *et al*. 2002; Pierson, 2002).

Despite apparent commitment to the principle, practitioners and policymakers have found that achieving effective participation in the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes and services is challenging. Prout suggests that in terms of the engagement of children in decision-making about community or school issues, 'initiatives have remained local, scattered, *ad hoc*, fragile and experimental' (2000:309). Considerable uncertainty remains about how to

effectively involve children in ways that are effective, inclusive, and bring about lasting change (Danso *et al.*, 2003; Kirby with Bryson, 2002). Some commentators argue that participation often has limited effects on children's empowerment whilst serving and legitimising adult/professionally driven agendas (James and James, 2004). Indeed, a wide range of activities are potentially denoted by the term 'participation' that have different implications for children's empowerment[2].

The literature to date tends to focus on describing the implementation of different participation activities and the degree to which children are involved in decision-making (Kirby *et al.*, 2003; Sinclair, 2004; Tisdall and Davis, 2004). There is less focus on the purposes of participation, which groups may benefit and how this reflects the strategies and practices that agencies adopt in promoting children's participation. Similarly, there is considerable confusion around the rationales for and implementation of prevention activities in the UK (DSRU, 2004; NECF, 2005). Using the Children's Fund initiative as an example, this paper explores the parallels between the discourses of children's participation and prevention in the UK. Drawing on the rationales articulated by a range of key stakeholders involved in the initiative, including children, we trace the diverse and sometimes contradictory discourses of childhood and social inclusion/exclusion. We argue that the purposes of participation and prevention are becoming increasingly blurred, which has implications for the strategies and practices that agencies adopt and raises questions about which groups benefit and whose agendas are served by participation and prevention activities.

Scope and methods

The Children's Fund was established in 2000 to promote multi-agency collaborative working in preventative services for children at risk of social exclusion within all 150 English Local Authority areas in 149 partnership arrangements. Local programmes were planned and

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managed by partnership boards consisting of representatives of statutory and voluntary and community sector organisations. The initiative was expected to contribute to strengthening communities and families, which were seen as domains in which children can develop as healthy, responsible and engaged citizens. The initiative aimed to provide: 'preventative services which provide support for young people and their families before they reach crisis, with the aim of reducing the future probability of poor outcomes and maximising life chances' (CYPU, 2001:7). Congruent with the children as 'future investments' discourses outlined above, a long-term approach to exclusion was embraced, articulated in a key objective of the Children's Fund: 'To ensure children and young people… gain maximum life-chance benefits from educational opportunities, health care, and social care…' (*ibid*.:3.3). The initiative also represented considerable commitment to promoting children's participation across England. Children's participation in the development of local programmes was one of the guiding principles of the initiative, in that children should be actively involved on an ongoing basis in the design, delivery and evaluation of preventative services. The consequences of not engaging children were clearly acknowledged in the *Guidance*: 'If children and young people are not involved, they often vote with their feet leaving the service unable to meet their needs or its targets' (*ibid*.:59).

This article draws on detailed case study research conducted between January 2004 and March 2005 by the National Evaluation of the Children's Fund. The research aimed to examine the structures and processes that support effective participatory, preventative services for children at risk of social exclusion in England. The research also aimed to explore the participative approaches adopted by programmes and assess their influence on service planning and delivery. The research design involved qualitative interviews with strategic stakeholders, service providers, children and families in 16 Children's Fund multi-agency collaborative arrangements (henceforth referred to as 'partnerships'). Interviews were conducted during visits to each

partnership at four weekly intervals over a period of five months. The case studies were selected to represent regional spread and type of local authority (rural, urban, unitary, two-tier and metropolitan authorities). Qualitative interviews were conducted with a range of stakeholders during visits to each partnership at four-week intervals over a period of five months. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical protocols as stipulated in the British Educational Research Association guidelines (see Edwards et al., 2006 for details of the overall study).

This paper draws on research conducted in 14 of the case study partnerships, based on interviews with programme managers, management staff, participation officers and partnership board members (n=190); Children's Fund service providers (n=102); children (n=65, aged 5-14 years) and their parents/carers (n=47). This paper does not seek to characterise the overall rationales, strategies and approaches taken by each partnership, but rather highlights discourses of childhood and social inclusion/exclusion emerging through the diverse perspectives of different stakeholders within case study partnerships.

Throughout this paper, we use Hill *et al.*'s (2004) definitions of 'participation' and 'consultation'. 'Participation' is defined as children's direct involvement in decision-making, whether individually or collectively. 'Consultation' is defined as seeking children's views, normally at the initiative of decision-makers.

Is participation prevention? A blurring of discourses

Different stakeholders involved in commissioning and developing Children's Fund services had limited time to develop their own understandings, or more collective understandings of the underlying rationales and purposes for implementing participation and prevention activities within partnerships (Spicer and Evans, 2005; NECF, 2005). Some partnerships introduced a

range of participation strategies without, or with limited, articulation of the purposes of these activities (Spicer and Evans, 2005). Partnerships found it necessary to invest considerable time and resources to enable children to participate in strategic and project level processes, and hence developed their participation strategies incrementally (NECF, 2004.). As a result, partnerships tended to lack strategic focus to their work on participation, which was often unevenly developed (*ibid*.). Similarly, there were diverse interpretations and understandings of the purposes of 'prevention' and 'preventative services' among Children's Fund strategic stakeholders and service providers, varying according to agency affiliation as well as personal experience (NECF, 2005). This resulted in a lack of clarity about the strategic direction and approaches to be adopted.

Within this apparent diversity of interpretations, there are a number of areas where the rationales for participation and for prevention seem to overlap. In Table 1, we identify four main discourses of social exclusion/inclusion and childhood that stakeholders drew on when articulating the purposes, benefits and rationales for children's participation and prevention: personal, social and academic development; citizenship and social inclusion; relevance and efficiency; and compliance. The table shows key features of each discourse and gives illustrative examples of participation and prevention strategies and practices adopted by Children's Fund partnerships that drew on these discourses. In the following sections we unpack these discourses further and explore how they are manifest in a diverse range of activities and services developed for children deemed to be 'at risk' of social exclusion.

INSERT TABLE 1. HERE

Children's personal, social and academic development discourse

Participation activities were described by some stakeholders as supporting children's personal, social and academic development by providing them with opportunities to gain experience, meet other children, learn new skills and raise their awareness and knowledge of issues affecting their lives. This perspective perceives the benefits of participation as enhancing children's resilience, skills and capacities and supporting educational attainment as foundations for social inclusion and employability within adulthood. Such a rationale corresponds closely to the social integrationist discourse currently embraced in UK social policy and emphasises the notion that children represent future economic actors or 'future investments'/'human becomings' (Fawcett *et al*., 2004). For example, a participation project which provided opportunities for children to plan, deliver and evaluate community events, was described by a participation officer as enabling children to develop transferable skills: *'...useful long-term skills that were transferable to many other situations… there was a realisation that they can use those skills in other situations, so at school or in the community really'*. Similarly, a partnership board member suggested that participation developed children's confidence, self-esteem, aspirations and independence:

> So, there's a whole sort of plus in terms of their developing self-esteem now whether it's to express themselves, their confidence in adults and I guess… it actually enhances youngsters ability to make use of opportunities that adults provide, it might help give them tools, you know in the educational world and school, with their parents…even the local community where they live.

This rationale tends to be associated with 'qualitative participation', approaches that involve working relatively intensively with small numbers of children over sustained periods (Spicer

and Evans, 2005). In the minority of partnerships where this rationale for children's participation was evident, small numbers of children participated directly in the management of the partnership and/or projects and in service delivery through child and young person-led group activities. For example, children participating in strategic processes were involved in the appraisal of funding applications and the recruitment of adult professionals. At service level, children planned, delivered and evaluated community events, organised youth-led conferences, designed newsletters and websites about local services and developed mentoring schemes for younger children.

Strategic stakeholders and service providers' rationales for participation which emphasised children's social, personal and academic development correspond with children's accounts of the benefits of participation, as well as with parents/carers' views of their children's participation. Participation was described experientially in terms of making new friends, learning transferable academic and life skills, such as interviewing, writing, public speaking and communicating with adults. Children described their increased confidence and felt that activities provided them with a positive learning environment, as one boy said: '*After I start going I've got a bit more confidence to learn, and I'm making some new friends'*. Children participating in running a magazine explained that the activities were fun and helped with their education. One parent of a boy (aged 10) with learning difficulties said that through participation, his son's communication skills improved and he had made new friends. Similarly, children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds who initiated and organised a conference for other children felt they had gained personally from the experience in terms of increased confidence, feeling valued and responsible: '*I felt special when I was singing, I felt special when I was reading my speech…I feel more like an adult…*' (girl, aged 13) and '*I'm not scared to do public speaking now'* (boy, aged 12) (see also Evans et al. 2006).

Some researchers argue that participation in the development of preventative initiatives can be preventative in itself, although evidence of outcomes is limited to date (Pancer and Cameron, 1994; Smith, 1999). Within the resilience literature, opportunities for participation are commonly identified as important 'protective factors' that may help to reduce children's vulnerability to risks and promote their resilience (Benard, 1991; Newman, 2002; Gilligan 1997; Howard *et al.* 1999). It is clear from Children's Fund stakeholders' accounts , and those of children and parents/carers, that the justification for undertaking children's participation resonates closely with rationales for promoting prevention. In accordance with the requirements of the initiative, prevention was articulated by many stakeholders as building children and families' resilience to cope with difficulties, building children's confidence and self-esteem and developing their aspirations and independence. Stakeholders in some partnerships commented that enhancing children's strengths could lead to positive educational outcomes, thereby helping to promote social inclusion. A strategic stakeholder from one partnership commented that preventative services relate to: '… *how you support families to be more resilient, to cope better themselves, it's about how you create independence, these underlying objectives of prevention which I don't think were there in the beginning'.* Similarly, a service provider from the same partnership described preventative services as aiming to improve younger children's emotional wellbeing and competencies to deal with adversity in future: *'... build emotional literacy and the development of greater self-esteem in younger children…'.*

This partnership developed prevention strategies focused on supporting children in school during difficult transition periods with the goal of improving children's school attendance and educational performance as well as reducing the risk of future mental health problems. This rationale for prevention constructs children as 'human becomings' who need to develop their emotional competencies and skills to maximise their educational attainment and promote their social integration in adulthood. Other prevention strategies and practices that drew on this

discourse included homework and book clubs to promote children's academic development, and mentoring schemes and extra-curricular activities which provided opportunities for children to develop confidence, learn new skills and raise their aspirations.

A participation project within this partnership operated at the intersection of prevention and participation, drawing on the personal, social and academic development discourse. A participation worker based within a voluntary sector organisation facilitated an after-school club over ten sessions in which a group of children were supported to plan, deliver and evaluate a consultation with parents and present the findings to a board of governors. The children (aged 9-10) participating in the project were identified as meeting Children's Fund criteria as being at risk of social exclusion. Children and parents felt that the project helped to build children's sense of responsibility, develop new skills and gain confidence in communicating. One boy (aged 10) felt that he would not have been able to talk to groups of adults before: *'No. I kept on hiding.'* His mother felt that the project enabled her son to become more responsible, independent and able to communicate with adults:

> I think it's given [my son] responsibility. It's given him like some, that he doesn't always need me around, you know, he is growing up and he can do things and to communicate with other adults and stuff like that. […] he was quite shy and stuff like that [before].

Other children felt that the project helped to improve their behaviour at school: '*Yes, I've been a lot better. I used to be really bad - I used to flood the toilets all the time';* and *'I used to hit people. That was ages ago though - two months ago'*. The head teacher explained that the programme had significant benefits in terms of children's personal empowerment, developing friendships and addressing behavioural problems at school and home:

… it's involved the children in sort of decision-making and empowered them. …In their day-to-day lives within the school they are much more empowered and we have no behavioural difficulties… we're seeing actually children's friendships grow with each other because all of them have had a chance to have their self-esteem raised.

While the participation project cited here was one of several projects funded through the 'participation and consultation' theme of the partnership, it drew on the notions of risk, resilience and responsibility, which are often associated with the prevention discourse. Furthermore, it aimed to enable children to develop transferable skills and maximise their long-term educational outcomes and wider life chances, in accordance with the goal of preventing social exclusion and promoting social integration in adulthood.

Children's citizenship and social inclusion discourse

Some stakeholders in a minority of partnerships rationalised participation and prevention as promoting children's citizenship and social inclusion. Unpacking this broad discourse, three distinct notions of citizenship were evident: one which emphasises children's responsibilities and the need to promote the social inclusion of groups who are constructed as marginalised on the basis of their perceived inappropriate behaviour or their particular characteristics; secondly, a notion that emphasises children's rights to participate in decision-making processes; and thirdly, a notion which aims to promote children's collective social identities and communitarian values.

Children's responsible citizenship and social inclusion

Some strategic stakeholders and service providers described the rationale for participation as promoting children's social inclusion by developing their sense of responsibility as citizens. Such a notion has clear implications for children as individuals, but also introduces popularly held perceptions that children represent a potential 'nuisance' or 'risk' to communities as a whole through their inappropriate or antisocial behaviour, a rationale that accords with the goals of prevention that draw on the moral underclass discourse of social exclusion. For example, a participation officer described participation as leading to improved intergenerational relationships between children and adults, and reducing negative public perceptions of children as 'deviant' youths engaged in antisocial behaviour:

> If we can develop some intergenerational links through the participation work that we do it can only be for the benefit of the whole community. So that children aren't seen as a nuisance who make noise and break windows...

In another partnership, consultation with children to develop new, responsive services was seen as a means of helping to prevent antisocial behaviour among young people, as a development officer commented:

> Everyone was saying about [this neighbourhood] and how dreadful that there were kids that were scaling the roofs, throwing stones and everything […] I said "well unless you talk to them and find out what it is, why they're doing that, what would stop them from doing it, what would they want to see"… [the Children's Fund is] actively involving and trusting young people within the local neighbourhoods. And then from that, [preventative] services have developed.

This policy emphasis on children whose behaviour is perceived as problematic was reflected in the higher profile given to children at risk of involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour during the course of the Children's Fund initiative. Specifically, the Central Government stipulation that 25 per cent of programmes' budgets be allocated to crime prevention activities introduced in 2002 gave added impetus to the risk and protection discourse (CYPU and the Youth Justice Board, 2002). This requirement provoked considerable conflict and undermined partnerships' ability to implement locally determined programmes (Morris and Spicer, 2003), and indeed the abilities of children to shape local programmes (Spicer and Evans, 2005). Although this rule was later relaxed, children whose behaviour was perceived to deviate from norms of 'responsible citizenship' became a principal target group for interventions. Prevention strategies and practices that drew on this discourse included the provision of play and extracurricular activities to divert children from antisocial behaviour and drug misuse in the neighbourhood and multidisciplinary teams of youth inclusion support workers who provided individual support to direct children away from antisocial behaviour and the risk of offending.

Reflecting the moral underclass discourse of social exclusion, one strategic stakeholder commented, '... *it's trying to find the generic environment in which those kids who are already "part of the problem" can go back into the mainstream children's provision'*. Indeed, in many Children's Fund partnerships, services were targeted towards particular groups of children perceived as 'hard to reach' in order to promote their social inclusion, although these partnerships drew on diverse notions of inclusion. Children perceived by service providers as 'hard to reach' on account of their particular characteristics included, for example, disabled children and young refugees and asylum seekers. As Fawcett *et al.* (2004) argue, while the social investment approach supports strategies that invest in children as a whole, it also identifies particular groups of children who pose a risk to this investment project. Howard *et al.* (1999) argue that children labelled as vulnerable or at risk are often those whose appearance,

language, culture, values, home communities, and family structures do not match those of the dominant culture. The effect of targeting particular groups of children may result in stigmatisation and little attention being given to the commonalities between children in terms of generational power relations vis-à-vis adults, emphasising instead 'the particular characteristics of some groups of children which prevent them from becoming responsible future citizens' (Williams, 2004:416).

Participation strategies that drew on a discourse of citizenship and social inclusion of marginalised groups included, for example, the involvement of children in the care of the Local Authority and black and minority ethnic children in children's management committees to inform the development of services. Prevention strategies and practices that drew on this notion of citizenship targeted services towards marginalised groups and aimed to, for example, promote the integration of refugee and newly arrived children in schools and enable disabled children to access mainstream play and leisure services by providing individual support.

Children's citizenship and rights-based participation discourse

A rather different notion of citizenship was also apparent in stakeholders' accounts, in which children's *rights* to participate were emphasised. These perspectives acknowledged that children's participation potentially marks significant shifts in power from adult professionals to children. Some strategic stakeholders and service providers described the purposes of participation as increasing children's empowerment and their ownership and control over issues and services which affect them. One interviewee commented:

… it's giving the kids a sense of worth, in what they are doing, it gives them an understanding in why we are doing things a certain way and how they can have control over issues, services, which affect them.

Similarly, a sense of responsibility to fulfil children's rights to participate in decision-making in matters affecting them was highlighted in some accounts. Some stakeholders insisted their partnerships had adopted 'rights-based' approaches to children's participation, emphasising the promotion of citizenship through involvement in decision-making activities, as one service provider commented:

It's about building the children's knowledge and understanding of their rights, their local communities and how they can affect them… it's very much about providing them with a variety of experiences and opportunities that they just would not have, and if in doing that we can also give them knowledge and understanding of, you know, how they can affect things and how things work in their local area…

The small number of children who participated in strategic processes appeared to value such opportunities to be involved in decision-making about community issues and have an influence at local level. For example, a girl (aged 10) participating in a community grant allocation panel said: '*when someone applies for the Children's Forum ...we get to choose if they get the money or not'*. Similarly, children participating in the management committee of a service for black and minority ethnic children valued the way that service providers took their views seriously and responded to their suggestions: '*When we got told that we got some money, I don't want to be big headed, but I came up with the idea of the conference! They responded to that, just little things we all said we wanted, we got it'*.

There were only a small number of prevention practices that drew on a discourse of children's rights to participate in all matters affecting them, which focused predominantly on actively negotiating with children and involving children in decision-making about the design and implementation of their individual support plans. Children who received support from youth inclusion support workers, school transitions or family support workers felt satisfied that they had a good relationship with workers and decisions about their individual support plans were made jointly. For example, a boy (aged 13) who had low school attendance valued being involved in decision-making with the project worker about the support: *'...we decide together what we're going to do and stuff'*.

This notion of citizenship appears to embrace a more empowering discourse of childhood which recognises children as social actors and values their present contribution, rather than their future roles as citizens. Nevertheless, the notion of children's rights was conspicuous in its absence from the majority of stakeholders' accounts across the case study partnerships, while the notion of empowerment[2] was often invoked without a clear sense of how children would actually be empowered in practice. Indeed, stakeholders commonly described a degree of apprehension among partner agencies, and in some cases, resistance to shifting the balance of power from adult professionals to children. For example, a partnership board member explained:

> If you do it right, you're going to be challenged and the structures are going to be challenged… I would hazard a guess that there would be a lot of resistance, good god, yes. A lot of resistance to consulting… adults, never mind young people, so yes, it's just a guess, yes, there'd be a lot of resistance (see also Spicer and Evans, 2005).

Children's communitarian citizenship

The literature discusses the ways in which participation may lead to new collective identities being constituted (Barnes *et al*. 2004). Many participation projects aimed to provide opportunities for children to support each other and develop a greater understanding of common issues affecting them. For example, a girl (aged 13) with behavioural difficulties indicated she enjoyed helping other children at a youth-led conference: '*I felt really good to take part in the conference because I can talk to people about the stuff that's going on ...we were talking about how to get over it and to help the rest of the children.*' Children engaged in participation activities saw their participation as helping to bring about change for others, linked to a growing collective identity or awareness of issues facing children. A young person involved in strategic activities including staff recruitment commented:

> I like doing the interviews and stuff because you know you are going to make a change for loads of different people, that you are making a good change for maybe some of the children that they are going to be working with and you are doing something good for someone, like you are giving them something new in their life and giving them change as well. It is like giving people a chance to change.

Similarly, children participating in another project felt it was important that the project should develop activities for their younger siblings and helped to develop a system of peer support where older children act as younger children' mentors : *'we decided that we are going to do [a project for younger children] ...because my sister doesn't get to do much at all'.*

Many preventative services also aimed to create safe spaces where marginalised children, such children in the care of the Local Authority (looked after children) and those at risk of crime and antisocial behaviour, could develop positive collective identities and peer support. A boy (aged

14) explained why it was important for looked after children to meet other children who understood their difficulties in targeted leisure and play activities: '*At least you can meet people who are in care and discuss things like "how are things going for you" and all that sort of stuff, instead of comparing living in care kids with someone who's living with their parents'* (see also Evans and Pinnock, forthcoming and Evans et al. 2006).

Another project, operating at the intersection of participation and prevention, attempted to promote collective identities for children from 'multiple heritage' backgrounds (defined as children of mixed ethnicity) and offered opportunities for their participation in the planning and development of the project. Project staff defined the focus of their prevention work as enabling children to gain: '*a good understanding of what the issues are… celebrating world culture and a chance for them to investigate some of that and to forge their own identity'*. Working with children on issues of cultural heritage and promoting a positive sense of racial identity can be seen as promoting what Newman (2002) calls children's 'cultural resilience', as well as their skills to cope with racism. One boy (aged 12) participating in the children's management committee commented on his experience: '*You try and help people cope with their multiple heritage because they're not from one race and that might be hard for some people'*. He explained that the youth-led conference they organised helped: '*… to bring multiple heritage individuals together and talk about what problems they've had and share experiences with racism and stuff'*. By enabling children of mixed ethnicity to meet together as a group, children were able to develop a collective sense of identity and raise awareness of common issues affecting each other, such as racism.

These examples draw on a more communitarian notion of citizenship, in which children may develop a more collective sense of empowerment, support each other and help to bring about change for other children. Indeed, the notion of 'self-efficacy' (the ability to make a difference

and help others) is commonly identified as an important 'protective factor' that may help to reduce children's vulnerability to risks and promote their resilience (Benard, 1991; Newman, 2002; Gilligan 1997; Howard *et al.* 1999). This illustrates further the blurring of the discourses and practices of participation and prevention.

Relevance and efficiency discourse

Whilst a minority of strategic stakeholders and service providers drew on the above discourses across the case study partnerships, the majority constructed a rather different justification for children's participation: a discourse of relevance and efficiency. In response to limited resources and considerable pressure to deliver quickly, the most widely practiced approach to children's participation across the 149 partnerships nationally was to adopt forms of consultation (Spicer and Evans, 2005)[4]. Unlike the discourse of promoting children's personal, social and academic development which often adopted forms of qualitative participation, consultation activities tended to be driven by more 'quantitative approaches', which involved large numbers of children typically in consultation events in the early stages of local programmes' development (*ibid*). This tended to offer children relatively minimal, one-off engagement in the process of programmes' decision-making (*ibid.*). Accordingly, the majority of strategic representatives of case study partnerships equated children's participation with consultation and there was a lack of clarity among stakeholders about the meaning of the two terms.

While some partnerships adopted quantitative approaches to consulting children at strategic level, most Children's Fund services involved children through on-going consultation about the activities available in those settings. Thus, many children were involved in selecting activities that they enjoyed, which they thought was important, as one young person (aged 11) said:

'*because it's giving us a say in what they do, they're not just telling us what to do'*. Many children who were consulted about activities felt that their project had improved in response to what they had suggested, as a girl (aged 13) said:

> They ask us if we like what we did and what we would like to improve on if we disapprove of it, so they can try and make it better next time […] they always take what you think into account and they change it if you want it changed.

Many children seemed satisfied with this level of involvement and appeared to prefer informal approaches to participation rather than more formal consultative or participative processes, such as participating in strategic decision-making forums.

Consulting children about preventative services they were receiving was described by strategic stakeholders and service providers as ensuring that children's priorities inform the development of programmes and services that correspond to children's articulated needs and interests. It was widely acknowledged that preventative services were more accessible, relevant and effective if informed by children's views. Such a discourse corresponds with the UK Government's Modernising Agenda that emphasises the importance of service users' views in shaping services (Sinclair, 2004). This discourse constructs children as individual consumers/service users, but also draws on more communitarian notions of improving services for children as a group in the long term. A strategic stakeholder suggested that participation was required for: *'Making sure the services that you end up providing are what people actually want and not what planners have decided people seem to want'*. Such views also corresponded with those of service providers who emphasised the importance of consultation leading to effective and efficient services that were taken up by service users and could lead to positive outcomes. As a statutory partnership board member suggested:

> We all make all sorts of assumptions about your service being efficient and its often only when you get your service viewed through the eyes of a young person that you can see some of the huge errors that your making and some of the things that you just have an adult perspective of it and how we will do this…

Implied in many accounts is the notion that participation could assist partner agencies to make more effective use of scarce resources. Some stakeholders emphasised the importance of demonstrating the effectiveness of consultative practices to statutory services by highlighting the cost benefits of engaging service users; for example: '*For me, the participation work has been… more easily accountable, you can see more value in what you're doing. You can see what you're getting out of the projects…*'. A participation officer explained that involving children benefits both potential service users and providers by enabling the development of relevant and cost-effective practices:

> You get services that are more relevant, that are better used and are used by people. And that the services you provide, if you're in touch with the people who are going to use them, you can adapt and change to meet changing need more quickly… it can be about money. Well, maybe not always saving money but targeting money more effectively.

From this perspective, consultation and prevention have similar goals: preventive activities were justified as avoiding the need for expensive crisis interventions by statutory agencies. One programme manager explained that strategic partners had supported the Children's Fund since it was understood that early intervention would prevent the necessity for children to use expensive Tier Three and Four services[5]:

There was a view that… the situation of those kids could be better dealt with through early intervention… We had an analysis that for example if you were excluded from school, there was a high likelihood that you would just smash through the Tiers… and it's been costing £50,000 a year… We had a view that there are about 7,000 kids that we thought were at that point in time coming into Tier Three needlessly.

This perspective rationalises prevention in terms of early intervention to prevent higher levels of service use and conceptualises children as potential 'consumers/service users'. Prevention strategies and practices that drew on this discourse included the provision of school-based counselling services to reduce demand for Child and Adolescent Mental Health services; youth inclusion support that aimed to prevent children entering the youth justice system; and weekend activities for disabled children to prevent the need for families to access expensive residential respite provision.

Compliance discourse: conforming to initiative rules and requirements

A more critical rationale alluded to by some strategic stakeholders and service providers was that children's participation was a core requirement of the Children's Fund[6] and that this represented the primary rationale for undertaking this work. Partnerships were required by the initiative to demonstrate they had involved children, particularly in the initial stages of programme planning and designing services. In response, some partnerships established consultation as an important criterion for commissioning preventative services; each provider was required to incorporate a commitment to participation and consultation within their service level agreements. In one partnership in which some statutory agencies were sceptical about whether children should participate in strategic decision-making , there was a sense that the programme manager and central team had coerced board members into accepting children's

participation's: A board member described the way some members felt: '… *pushed into doing it*'.

The sense that children's participation was a requirement of the initiative was reflected in the resistance among some stakeholders to adopt more challenging approaches to participation, including those in which children actively contribute to strategic decision-making. Conversely, one-off consultation events were described by some interviewees as primarily fitting adult-driven agendas and presented less of a challenge to existing power relations. A development officer described tensions between the need to fulfil the initiative requirements and the apprehensions of some partner agencies, who saw participation as threatening: '*[It relates to] organisational culture - experience. I think everybody knows it is what they must do and I think everybody wants [it], but I think there is a fear as well, of handing over some of the power*'.

The political necessity to demonstrate children's participation was seen by some service providers as an opportunity to benefit from initiative funding and brand their activities as 'participative preventative services'. Voluntary sector organisations in particular commented on the need to be responsive within an environment of multiple and fluctuating funding streams. The need to seek ongoing funding sources and potentially re-brand activities according to political priorities and different initiatives' rules was perceived as a constant preoccupation in ensuring the sustainability of voluntary sector organisations:

> … my day job is about constantly looking at other income streams because I am always seeing that certain things are going to come to an end and the work continues but very little of my work actually fundamentally changes from one income stream to another and all we do is just make it fit.

Conclusions

This case study of the Children's Fund, a Government initiative that aimed to prevent children's social exclusion in England, reveals considerable blurring of the boundaries between what is meant by children's participation and prevention among decision-makers and practitioners in the UK. Indeed, participation and prevention are concepts which continue to be complex, differently understood and contested, resulting in a lack of clarity about how to implement participation and prevention strategies in practice.

Children participating in Children's Fund preventative services saw the benefits of their participation predominantly as their personal, social and academic development. They also emphasised their rights to participate in decision-making about matters affecting them and valued opportunities to help other children and develop awareness of issues affecting other children, which could lead to new collective identities being constituted. These perspectives corresponded with some of the adult-defined goals of prevention, such as enhancing resilience, developing transferable skills and maximising outcomes for children in later life. This reflects the 'social integrationist discourse' of social exclusion evident in current UK social policy (Levitas, 1998) that constructs children as 'future investments' (Fawcett *et al.* 2004). However, the majority of adult stakeholders across the 14 partnerships drew on very different rationales for participation than those of children. This raises important questions about which groups are intended to benefit and whose agenda is being served by participation and prevention activities.

The predominant adult-defined justification for children's participation was to enhance the relevance and efficiency of programmes and services through consultation. Such an approach constructs children as 'consumers' or 'service users' and their involvement tends to be limited to adult-defined parameters in terms of the ways they are able to engage in the development of programmes and the extent to which their views may be taken into account. Similarly, strategies

which drew on a discourse of children's responsible citizenship and social inclusion corresponded to adult concerns about the problematic behaviour or characteristics of particular groups of children, particularly the policy emphasis on preventing antisocial behaviour and the social inclusion of groups constructed as 'hard to reach'. Such approaches draw on the 'moral underclass discourse' of social exclusion (Levitas, 1998) and emphasise children's vulnerability and simultaneously, their potential deviancy; children are deemed as either *at risk* or *as risk*. As with personal, social and academic development, such a discourse emphasises children's future roles as responsible citizens who are integrated into society. While such an approach emphasises protection and recognition of children's needs, as Williams argues, it is 'far less forthcoming in how to create a culture of respect for children and childhood' (2004: 411).

Whilst the notion of children's rights to participate in decision-making was largely absent from the majority of stakeholders' accounts, some stakeholders' accounts of participation and prevention drew on relatively empowering notions of children's citizenship and constructions of childhood. The rights-based citizenship discourse tended to emphasise children as individuals; some stakeholders, however, described children's participation in preventative services as developing collective social identities and communitarian values, ideas that were also seen as important to children themselves. Such notions acknowledge children's present roles in actively shaping society and suggest that there are spaces within the social investment approach for more child-focused approaches which value children's views in shaping policies, programmes and services and may improve children's quality of life in the present, as well as investing in the future (Lister, 2003; Fawcett et al., 2004).

James and James (2004) argue that the Government's goal of joined-up thinking in policy and practice seeks to engage families in different policymaking processes. Thus, it is '… increasingly only in the gaps between such adult structures and the reach of these policy areas

that children have the opportunity to exercise and experiment with their agency…' (2004:218). With the implementation of the Children Act 2004, there is a danger that participation rationales and strategies become increasingly subsumed by the prevention and social inclusion agenda in the UK and participation is seen only as a means of building individuals' resilience, preventing antisocial behaviour and integrating groups of children seen as 'hard to reach'. Greater emphasis on children's rationales for participation, as well as greater recognition of children's rights to participate in decision-making are needed in order to provide more meaningful opportunities for children's involvement in policy initiatives. Strategies based on such multi-dimensional understandings of participation appear to offer children more potential for social inclusion, through as Hill *et al*. suggest: '… emphasising society's barriers rather than individual failings' (2004:78).

Notes

[1] The term 'children' is used throughout this paper to denote children and young people under the age of 18 years, although the Children's Fund, which is the main focus of this paper, targets children aged 5-13 years.

[2] It is beyond the scope of this paper to deconstruct the concept of empowerment in relation to children's participation.

[3] Antisocial behaviour orders are civil orders which can be made against any person aged 10 or over (Home Office, 2003). An order prohibits a person from engaging in specific acts identified by community members as antisocial or entering defined areas for a minimum of two years.

[4] Quantitative research suggests that the principal rationale of the majority of partnerships for carrying out children's participation was to help inform their programmes and projects (NECF, 2004).

[5] The Children's Fund *Guidance* adapts a four-tier approach proposed by Hardiker (1999) to conceptualise levels of need and intensities of intervention, ranging from diversionary services focused on whole populations (Level One) to targeted remedial services which focus on reducing the impact of an intrusive intervention (Level Four) (CYPU, 2001). Children's Fund services were expected to address Levels Two and Three, which focus on early intervention to prevent problems becoming serious and heavy-end prevention to tackle multiple, complex and long-standing difficulties that require customised services to meet the needs of the individual.

[6] The Children's Fund *Guidance* states: 'We are not being prescriptive about which methods are used but the participation of children and young people is a requirement' (CYPU, 2001:59).

Acknowledgements

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Is participation prevention? A blurring of discourse in children's preventative initiatives in the UK

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 ON PAGE 9 OF ABOVE ARTICLE.

Table 1: Children's participation and prevention: a blurring of discourses

Rationale, purpose & benefits of participation & prevention	Examples of participation strategies & practices	Examples of prevention strategies & practices
Personal, social & academic development discourse • Building individual children's confidence, self-esteem & resilience • Developing transferable life skills & a sense of responsibility • Improving behaviour, educational attainment & aspirations • Long term goal of social integration in adulthood • Child as 'future investment'	• Participation in strategic decision-making such as appraisal of funding applications & staff recruitment • Participation in service management & development • Involvement in child & youth-led activities such as planning, delivering & evaluating events & conferences, designing newsletters & websites & developing mentoring schemes for younger children	• Homework clubs & book clubs promoting academic development • Home-school liaison work, family support & nurture groups in school for children with low self-esteem & behaviour problems to support children during school transitions & improve school attendance/ reduce risk of school exclusion • Mentoring schemes & extra-curricular activities to develop confidence, skills & aspirations
Citizenship & social inclusion discourse *Responsible citizenship & social inclusion* • Preventing crime & antisocial behaviour • Promoting social inclusion of marginalised groups • Child seen as 'at risk' or 'as risk' to society due to children's perceived inappropriate behaviour or particular characteristics • 'Moral underclass' perspective emphasises children's future roles as responsible citizens	• Community-based consultation & involvement of children in development of local services to reduce crime & antisocial behaviour • Intergenerational work with older residents & children within communities • Participation of marginalised groups of children in managing services they use	• Play & extra-curricular activities as a diversion from antisocial behaviour & drug misuse • Multidisciplinary youth inclusion support workers & family workers providing individual support to direct children away from antisocial behaviour & risk of offending • Services supporting refugee children's integration in schools, inclusion of disabled children in mainstream play & leisure provision
Citizenship & rights-based participation • Supporting children's rights to participate in decision-making about issues affecting them • Children's rights perspective • Child as individual 'social actor' whose present role is valued as an active citizen	• Participation in strategic decision-making processes such as appraisal of funding applications & staff recruitment • Raising awareness of children's rights in after-school clubs • Participation in service management & development • Involvement in planning, delivery & evaluation of child-led activities	• Involving children in decision-making about the design & implementation of individual support plans
Communitarian citizenship • Promoting children's collective	• Participating in planning,	• After-school/weekend activity clubs

identities, peer support and helping others • Child as 'social actor' whose present role is valued as an active citizen and whose commonalities with other children are emphasised	delivery & evaluation of child & youth-led conferences, developing greater awareness of common issues affecting them, supporting each other & mentoring younger children	& youth-led conferences targeted towards refugee & black & minority ethnic children to develop 'cultural resilience', skills to deal with racism & peer support
Relevance & efficiency discourse • Informing policy & service development for more efficient, relevant services • Intervening early to prevent children from using expensive crisis interventions • Child as 'consumer/service user'	• Large one-off consultation events to develop services that are relevant and efficient • On-going informal consultation within projects to ensure relevance and efficiency	• Coordinating access to school-based counselling services to reduce demand for Child & Adolescent Mental Health services • Youth inclusion support from multi-disciplinary teams to prevent children entering the youth justice system • Weekend activities for disabled children to prevent the need for residential respite provision
Compliance discourse • Fulfilling requirements of initiative, securing funding & ensuring sustainability of service provision	• Large one-off consultation events to secure funding & fulfil requirements • Consultation within projects to comply with service level agreements • Branding of activities & services as 'participative' to secure funding & ensure sustainability	• Need to evidence prevention outcomes • Branding of activities & services as 'preventative' to secure funding & ensure sustainability

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