Youth Reflexivity as Participatory Research in Senegal: A Field Study of Reciprocal Learning and Incremental Transformations
Maclure, Richard

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Article

Youth Reflexivity as Participatory Research in Senegal: A Field Study of Reciprocal Learning and Incremental Transformations

Richard Maclure

Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada; E-Mail: rmaclure@uottawa.ca

Abstract

There is now widespread appreciation that children are capable of functioning as key protagonists of their own development, and that this capacity can be enhanced if they are afforded opportunities to participate in forms of inquiry that stimulate reflexivity amongst themselves and with outside researchers. There is likewise common acceptance that youth participation in research on issues that relate to their well-being can contribute to evidence-based knowledge that has multiple benefits. Rather more ambiguous, however, are questions concerning the nature of youth–researcher relationships and whether—or to what extent—youth participation in research can be characterized as a transformative process. Such questions are particularly salient in countries of the global South where the notion of youth participation tends to run counter to the persistence of hierarchical power arrangements, and where there are substantial socio-cultural differences between youth participants and professional researchers, many of whom are associated with international aid. This article addresses these questions by recounting a field study that engaged eight groups of youth living in rural communities and urban neighbourhoods in Senegal. Through processes of reflexivity that entailed analysis of issues they deemed to be socially problematic, and through subsequent dissemination of their analyses in narrative performances of their choosing, the youth attained a remarkable degree of project ownership. As a result, the field study also fostered a process of reciprocal learning among the participants and the researchers that contributed to the genesis of incremental transformations.

Issue

This article is part of the issue "Promoting Children's Participation in Research, Policy and Practice", edited by Jo Aldridge (Loughborough University, UK).

1. Children's Participation in Research: Dimensions of Power and Transformation

Since the promulgation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) and the advent of a "new paradigm" in the sociology of childhood (Matthews, 2007; Prout & James, 1997), there is now widespread acknowledgment that children and adolescents are social actors who possess unique cognitive and affective attributes. From the earliest stages of life children are endowed with keen awareness of their surroundings and, if given the opportunity, are capable of revealing unique insights into their own observations and experiences (Clark & Statham, 2005; Keating, 2017). This is especially true when children are engaged in peer-to-peer interaction within their own social spaces (Elsley, 2004). In light of this heightened awareness of children's capacities, the predominance of studies that focus on children as passive "research subjects" has increasingly ceded ground to participatory forms of research that aim to enlist the resourcefulness of children in generating knowledge and in interpreting their own lived realities. Through multiple approaches, ranging from the selection of research topics to decisions concerning research design, data collection and analysis, and the dissemination of findings, children are recognized as frequently capable of contribut-

ing "insiders" perspectives of their own experiences and those of their peers that may elude the full grasp of adult researchers (Tisdall, 2016).

Alongside the enlightenment that child participants can bring to research, there is also ample evidence of the pragmatic impact that can result from their involvement in purposeful forms of inquiry and in other realms of adult-supported dialogue and decision-making. For young people themselves, the attainment of investigative skills and new knowledge, and the corresponding enhancement of self-confidence in knowing that their voices carry weight in an adult world, are sources of empowerment (Flicker, 2008; Hill, David, Prout, & Tisdall, 2004). Likewise, for policy-makers and organizations that provide services for youth, there is growing affirmation that the participation of young people in applied research and evaluation can contribute to stores of evidence that are useful for the direction or realignment of social policies and services (Theis, 2010; Tisdall & Davis, 2004). From a more radical perspective, the ultimate rationale for engaging children in the accumulation and dissemination of research findings is to facilitate social transformation, particularly through the advancement of children's rights (Ginwright & James, 2002; Stasiulis, 2002). Viewed in this light, by drawing upon their own acquired knowledge and critical reflections, young people can challenge prevailing discriminatory norms and undertake actions that aim to expand social justice for themselves and for other marginalized social groups (Butler & Princeswal, 2014; Cockburn, 2005; Couzens, 2017).

In principle, therefore, the benefits of child and adolescent participation in research are difficult to refute. Yet paradoxically, because children are governed by the norms and prescriptions of an adult world, there is also an inherent dissonance associated with claims regarding the merits of children's participation. This incongruity is highlighted by stipulations of the CRC itself that parents and other guardians are responsible for children's welfare (Articles 3 and 5) and that States Parties must undertake all necessary measures to provide children with essential services and protection (e.g., Articles 19, 27, and 28). As the CRC makes clear, while the agency of children and the discrete perceptual and social spaces that they occupy should be respected and cultivated, children also constitute a significant target population of policies and services to be developed, delivered, and evaluated by adults. The inexorable relation between children and adults is therefore implicitly understood as a manifestation of adult power. This is as inescapable in the domain of research as it is in every other form of interaction between children and adults. The exercise of power, however, is not a uniform process; it varies considerably according to custom and purpose, and underscores the multiplicity of participatory processes (Brookfield, 2001). Consequently, while children's participation in research is now generally accepted by most social scientists and service providers who work in the fields of child studies and youth social programs respectively, in practice it

is replete with challenges and constraints that relate to prevailing power arrangements (Christensen, 2004; Tisdall, 2016).

In efforts to shed light on the variable characteristics of children's active involvement in activities normally directed by adults, several prominent conceptual models have described the forms and dimensions of children's participation, ranging from symbolic gestures to full-fledged child control (Cashmore, 2002; Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001). While clearly useful in delineating typologies of children's participation, as Tisdall (2016) has argued, these models tend to be "weak at recognizing the social, economic and cultural contexts of participation activities and changes over time and locations" (p. 76). In social contexts where traditions of civic democracy are historically grounded, power tends to oscillate according to the actors involved and the tasks that are undertaken. In such circumstances, significance lies less with who has power than how and for what purposes it is exercised, and the extent to which it is distributed. This is clearly relevant to the phenomenon of children's participation in goal-directed activities that have long been regarded as the purview of adults. Service organizations, for example, may accede to young people's active engagement in internally conducted deliberations and decision-making if such participation can be shown to enhance the quality and overall efficacy of child and adolescent social programs (Morrison, McCulloch, Mackie, Halliday, & Liddell, 2014; Tisdall & Davis, 2004). Similarly, in promoting children's participation in various decision-making fora, organizations may consider such support as an investment in children as future citizens and consumers within the established social and institutional order (Bessant, 2004).

Alternatively, while embracing the precept of children's participation, organizations may nonetheless be hampered by lack of resources, administrative capability, and necessary staff training to undertake the structural and procedural changes required to move from principle to practice (Cockburn, 2005; Naker, 2007). At a more interactive level, when adults and children are expected to work together, the extent to which power is divested among child participants will depend significantly on the acumen of the adults. In the event that adults are imbued with negative biases regarding the capabilities of young people (coloured, for instance, by attitudes towards characteristics such as children's age, experience, level of education, or socio-economic status), or if adults lack the confidence or skills needed to relinquish responsibility and control to young people, children's participation may prove to be restrained or altogether illusory (Couzens, 2017). Similarly, in research that purports to be participatory in design, adult concerns about methodological rigour and the exigencies of time frames, budgets, and issues related to validity and reliability may hinder the extent to which children and adolescents can be engaged as full research participants (Cockburn, 2005; Tisdall, 2016). Conversely, adults who are overly keen to engage youth

in research projects and in other educational and community service activities may be unwilling to sufficiently disengage themselves so as to allow a transfer of power to youth (Hill et al., 2004). Regardless of the reasoning, in contexts where power-sharing has become commonplace both culturally and in practice, such barriers to participation almost invariably are due to the ambivalence and biases of adults themselves.

In other societies, however, where the exercise of power—from the nation state down to local household levels—remains more concentrated, growing numbers of young people are confronted with a contradictory sense of their identities and place in society. In such contexts children tend to be widely regarded as family assets or protégés who must be subordinate to the conventional norms and values of the adult world. This is particularly evident throughout much of West Africa where children are expected to "know their place" within established social structures and to "not overstep the boundaries when interacting with their parents and other adults" (Twum-Danso, 2010, p. 135). In households and communities where cultural ties and ancestral roots are revered, hierarchical power arrangements are maintained through longstanding processes of socialization and, where deemed necessary, coercion (Massart, 2006). The role of children is therefore to listen, obey, and learn from their elders. In these circumstances, adult responsibilities for the socialization and protection of children are easily conflated with the right of parents (and other adults) to raise their own children. Accordingly, adults' right to exercise authority over children invariably outweighs children's right to participate in power-sharing or to act in ways that contravene adult authority (Quennerstedt, 2009).

Yet, paradoxically, while traditional notions of power over youth are still widely upheld, an array of social problems throughout West Africa—rising urbanization, weak education systems, high levels of unemployment, and unrepresentative governments—has led to growing waves of youth disenchantment with established structures of power. In addition, the impact of globalization has fostered forms of cultural hybridity that stem from interactions between the local and the global, and between the traditional and the modern, that have re-shaped the identities and aspirations of growing numbers of youth. The emergence of ideas associated with mobility, individualism, and emancipation has engendered an expanding youth culture in the global South (Nilan & Feixa, 2006). Consequently, for organizations working to assist youth in such environments, the discourse of children's participation has become increasingly accepted as a means of channeling the energy and abilities of young people towards the possibilities of fostering social transformations that impinge on their livelihoods (Teamey & Hinton, 2014).

The notion of transformation, however, is itself subject to different interpretations. The most common view is that it constitutes a radical re-structuring of power arrangements. From this perspective, through skilled leadership and clearly articulated objectives, social groups can be mobilized to undertake struggles for fundamental change and to assume the risks associated with resistance and contestation (Ratner, 1997). This viewpoint is very much associated with campaigns for the rights of disenfranchised adults who themselves are often at the forefront of acts of overt struggle. For children, however, the route to fundamental change is far more equivocal. For one thing, their involvement in efforts to foster social transformation is generally as much, if not more so, a process of learning as it is of concerted action (Butler & Teamey, 2014). For action through learning to occur, young people almost always have to rely on enlightened adult guidance. In addition, there are ethical issues associated with the engagement of children in social struggle. Precisely because they depend on adult guidance for protection, they must be safeguarded from the risks of backlash that can easily arise in protracted agitation for social justice (Lavan & Maclure, 2011). Consequently, rather than consider social transformation *per se* as the singular pinnacle goal of children's participation in social or community-based research, or in actions designed to challenge unjust circumstances, an alternative perspective is to recognize that several *incremental transformations* can emerge from children's participation in critical forms of inquiry (Shier, 2015), and that over time these small-scale transformations can gradually coalesce and serve as the impetus for broader societal change.

This view of transformation as a series of small-scale successes rather than a major volte-face from habitual social practices is a more pragmatic perspective with regard to children, especially where the rights of children are constrained by extraordinary structural barriers. As Shier (2015) has observed, the participation of young people in research can lead to four distinctive forms of transformation: a) empowerment of young research participants, mainly through a process of reflexivity that arises from their engagement in inquiry, analysis and subsequent critical awareness; b) reflexive learning among those adults who work with and mentor youth researchers; c) transformation of attitudes among a broader population of adults regarding issues raised by young researchers; and d) social mobilization and community action that follow from these antecedent transformations. Viewed in this light, social changes emanating from children's participation in research and other discrete learning activities are far more likely to occur as a series of incremental stages rather than as precipitous forms of overt—and potentially risky—contestation against prevailing power arrangements.

In considering the possibilities of incremental transformation, however, a number of questions arise regarding the nature and outcomes of children's participation in social contexts where, despite the growth of youth assertiveness as a function of cultural hybridity, the conventional exercise of power remains essentially authoritarian and top-down. In such circumstances, can chil-

dren and adolescents participate meaningfully in critical inquiry and in the analysis of social problems in their own communities? If so, to what extent can they attain a level of genuine partnership and shared ownership of the inquiry? And in the event that these gains are made, can the effects of children's participation extend beyond instrumental benefits for sponsoring organizations, and contribute to broader processes of social transformation? These are questions that frame this retrospective overview of a study that engaged youth participants in reflexive activities in the West African country of Senegal in 2007–2008. What follows is a synopsis of the stages of the project, and a discussion of the way it was conducted in relation to these questions.

2. Reflexivity as Research: A Participatory Field Study in Senegal

Senegal is a youthful country. With a population of approximately 16 million people and a current median age estimated at 18.7 years, children and adolescents figure prominently in the country's development trajectory (World Population Review, 2017). Although favored with a relatively stable democratic political system and an economy that has been experiencing modest growth, Senegal's levels of poverty and unemployment are high and its public services are under-resourced (World Bank, 2017). Of particular gravity for young people is the quality of the school system which is hampered by lack of adequately trained teachers, educational materials, and out-of-school training programs (USAID, 2017). As elsewhere in West Africa, agriculture and informal sector activities generate 90% of jobs. Yet low productivity has hindered the absorptive capacity of these sectors, and rapid urbanization has failed to generate commensurate employment opportunities (Wilson Center, 2014). Vast numbers of young people are therefore confronted with prospects of long term joblessness or seasonal low paid informal sector work (Economist, 2017). In these conditions, child abuse and exploitation are frequent, especially among street children (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

In the face of these structural problems and the government's inability to address them, assistance for children and adolescents has been provided principally by an array of international aid agencies and NGOs. Two such NGOs are Plan International (Plan)[1] and Enda Jeunesse Action (EJA), both of which have embraced the discourse of child protagonism, a development approach that acknowledges the inherent capacity of young people to analyze their conditions of life and to contribute to strategies for improvement (Lavan & Maclure, 2011; Liebel, 2007). Since the late 1990s both organizations have undertaken field studies designed to attain information on the livelihoods and preoccupations of children

and adolescents living in diverse community contexts. While much of this work has consisted of qualitative inquiries led by agency staff, in the early 2000s both organizations began to facilitate collaborative youth input into their research programs. These studies involved youth in processes of reflexivity, i.e., reflections enabling them to critically assess the social forces affecting their lives and to consider possibilities of change (Dénommée, 2008; Schutt, 2006). Methodologically the research entailed peer dialogue among youth and the subsequent creative articulation of their reflections through narrative forms such as music, dance, and theatrical story-telling. These studies were then summarized in a series of written and video-taped reports that highlighted young people's interests and concerns, and revealed the extent to which they were becoming a major socio-cultural force in Senegal and in other West African countries (Dénommée, 2008; EJA, 2005). Little in these reports, however, gave an indication of the nature of researcher–youth relationships during the course of these field studies, nor of the transformative import of the research, either at local levels or in relation to NGO programming. Accordingly, in 2007 the author and a Plan researcher, Moussa Diagne, conducted a field study adopting the same concept of reflexivity as a basis of participatory inquiry with several diverse groups of Senegalese youth.[2] A key objective of the study was similar to that of earlier Plan studies—to encourage youth to collectively reflect on their lives and the events and issues surrounding them, and to disseminate the main points arising from their reflections in formats of their own choosing. A further objective, however, was to monitor the nature of youth participation in the field study and to gauge the possible effects of this activity on their immediate social environments and on the development programs of Plan and EJA.

Designed to be open-ended in view of its participatory intent, the study underwent a fundamental shift in the researcher–youth relationship over the course of three stages of fieldwork. The first stage consisted of a period of familiarization and trust-building between our two-person research team and the youth participants. Under the auspices of Plan and EJA, we were introduced to eight cohorts of youth living in eight different sites in western Senegal. Beyond extended family ties and indirect connections with Plan or EJA, few of the young people in all eight cohorts had been affiliated with other formally recognized or constituted groups outside of school or with some form of vocational training activity. Instead, through friendships or mutual acquaintances, they were drawn together essentially because of their initial interest in the project. The cohorts were not large; they ranged from twelve participants to just over twenty, aged between ten years old and early twenties. Four of these groups were rural, consisting of relatively

equal numbers of boys and girls living in villages that had received assistance from Plan. Most of them were attending either the last two years of primary school or were enrolled in nearby secondary schools. In line with village protocol, we met with community leaders and received their approbation to work with the young people. The other four cohorts consisted uniquely of girls and young women who were living and working in four distinctive neighbourhoods in Thiès, Senegal's third largest city. Most of them had been associated with various short-term EJA-sponsored training activities, and while almost all had completed a few years of primary school education, none was attending any type of formal education at the time of the study. More than half of these young women had migrated from their home villages and were working as domestic servants in affluent households. Of the remainder, the majority lived with family members and were engaged in unpaid domestic work or in low-paid informal sector jobs.

During the first three months of the project, Diagne and I traveled several times from Dakar, the capital city where we resided, to the different localities in order to meet informally with the young people in settings that they selected—usually community centres or after-hours school classrooms. We arranged these meetings to achieve two basic purposes: to develop a friendly rapport with each group of youth, and to encourage them to talk informally about their daily activities, their communities and school experiences, and their concerns and aspirations. During this first stage, by initiating meetings and prompting discussions, Diagne and I were very much in the position of conventional qualitative researchers conducting focus group sessions. Through the formal consent process, it was understood that youth participation would be voluntary and non-remunerative, and that we could offer no guaranteed compensation such as access to further education or paid employment. Likewise, although we occasionally bought soft drinks and snacks for cohort participants on an impromptu basis, we avoided doing this systematically so as to be sure that youth were participating out of a genuine desire to speak with us and with each other rather than for other ulterior ends. In this early stage of the project, inhibited by their lack of familiarity with us and perhaps by initial uncertainty regarding the project agenda, many of the youth in all eight groups exhibited an aura of reticence that was exemplified by their tendency to speak mainly in response to questions we posed. Gradually, however, as friendliness and a sense of mutual informality developed, by the third or fourth meeting with each cohort, most of the participants had gained sufficient confidence to speak independently and—to us it seemed—candidly. Much of this shift in the relationship was due to the affinity they developed for Diagne, a native Wolof speaker and an amateur musician who, during the time of fieldwork, was also actively involved in the popular music scene in Senegal. Although in his mid-thirties, in interacting with the youth he often came across more as a peer than as a professional researcher.

Early into the fourth month, having established good rapport with the participants, we invited each youth cohort to delve independently into one or more issues that were of concern to them, largely through sharing their first- and second-hand experiences and their own acquired knowledge, and to subsequently convey their interpretive conclusions to a wider public through forms of creative narrative expression that they themselves could choose. This signaled the start of the second stage of the field study which, for the participants of each youth cohort, involved a process of critical reflection grounded in their own realities and creative abilities. For purposes of public dissemination, all groups identified three narrative forms that interested them: the compilation of photos of their local environments to be taken by individual youth; popular theatre (essentially dramatized stories that would highlight specific social issues); and mock radio phone-in shows, commonly referred to as *journaux futurs*, that would also entail role-playing a mock "radio host", one or more "guest interviewees" having ostensible expertise on specific topics, and an audience of radio "listeners" who would "phone in" queries and commentaries concerning the topics of discussion. Except for the loan of several digital cameras that we provided, the youth were left to their own devices. Over the course of this second stage, which lasted approximately two months, the impetus for ensuring the continuation of the project shifted towards the young people themselves. Although Diagne communicated with individual group members through frequent cellphone exchanges and occasional visits, often it was these individuals who initiated contact with him, requesting his advice concerning their emerging narrative presentations and sometimes asking when he planned to visit. Frequently, too, youth participants expressed interest in what other groups were doing. Having a proprietary sense of the narratives they were formulating, various group representatives began to exhibit signs of subtle competition as if aspiring to emulate and even outshine the planned presentations of their peers in other groups.

The third and last phase of the project led to another shift in the relationship between the youth and ourselves, one that required collaboration in organizing the presentations of youth narratives in the communities where they lived. We two researchers provided some technical assistance (e.g., temporary provision of photo projectors and megaphones) and, because of the community publicity that was generated prior to the presentations, funds for celebratory food and drink. Presentations were undertaken in a variety of venues—in two community halls, outdoors under a broad canvas cover in one village (due to the threat of rain), an open-air courtyard, and—in the case of the four urban cohorts who presented their narrations at one scheduled event—in a neighbourhood street blocked off for the occasion. Taken together the narrative presentations centered on a host of serious social issues: family violence, corruption, illicit drug trafficking, forced marriage, sexual harassment

of female workers, truncated educational and employment opportunities, and maltreatment of the poor. Underlying all of these issues were the themes of power, specifically the ways in which it is customarily abused, and the corresponding struggle for the rights of children, women, and other vulnerable groups. Several of the narratives included music, song, and dance, and all the dramatized stories and simulated radio interviews were video-taped as had been agreed by the participants. Indeed, the youth were uniformly keen to be video-taped so that there would not only be a record of their collective presentations, but there would be opportunities for dissemination of their perspectives on key social problems among a broader public audience, especially among governmental and nongovernmental officials having an interest in youth issues. In two villages, photos taken by several youth depicting daily village life were also presented with the use of a digital projector.

At the end of each presentation, Diagne and one youth presenter moderated a discussion among youth presenters and community spectators who were numerous in every locale. In Thiès especially, following the presentations of the four female cohorts, exchanges centering on the vulnerability and exploitative treatment of young girls became quite animated. References to late-night working hours, to sexual harassment and physical abuse (being "slapped in front of everyone"),[3] and to unpaid wages and unwarranted dismissal reflected the tenor of exchanges concerning the lack of labour protection for female domestic servants. Each event concluded with speeches of congratulation and a celebration. A fortnight or so after the completion of all the presentations, Plan Senegal and EJA jointly hosted a day-long seminar for public officials and the personnel of several national and international NGOs in Thiès. The seminar focused specifically on the conditions of youth and their ostensible rights as participants in development policies and programs. A presentation of selected photos and film footage served as a basis for much of the day's discussion. This effectively concluded the project.

3. The Underlying Dynamics of Shifting Project Ownership and Leadership

As recounted in this brief overview of our field study with eight cohorts of youth in Senegal, the transition from tentative youth engagement in the first stage to full-fledged ownership of their respective activities of dialogue and creative narrative development in the second stage occurred seamlessly and fairly swiftly. Yet the nature of their participatory involvement in this field study was almost certainly a novel experience for most of them. In their own cultural milieux, the youth participants likely had had little or no experience in fundamentally altering the nature of their status vis à vis their elders, and none in relation to outside aid agency personnel. Initially they responded guardedly to the lead of two *étrangers* (one

of them an expatriate) whom they only knew as being connected to two prominent NGOs. Yet once a relationship of cordiality and trust had been established, whatever culturally induced reservations they may have originally sensed quickly dissipated when they were invited to become *bona fide* project collaborators. Upon embarking on their respective activities of reflexive dialogue and narrative creativity, a sense of shared project ownership took hold. In addition, while no clear leadership qualities were evident in the first stage of the field study, when groups assumed direction of their own project engagement, specific individuals within each cohort began to take the lead in coordinating their peers and, on occasion, in communicating with Diagne. Through their own interactions, each cohort developed a collective sense of purpose that ensured continuity and cohesion through to the final public dissemination stage of the project.

What this rapid shift from subordinate status vis à vis outside researchers to fully engaged participants revealed was that, despite the abiding conventions of social hierarchy in Senegalese communities, given the opportunity to participate in this field study, the youth were clearly primed to do so. In part, this can be attributed to the effects of the changing socio-economic landscape on Senegalese youth. All the young people who participated in the project had been exposed either directly or indirectly to the norms and possibilities of a world beyond the traditional cultural framework of their household and community roots. All had attended school, and although the quality of their formal education was undoubtedly less than optimal (as much of it is throughout Senegal), it helped to instill among them, as many explained in informal exchanges and in their narrative presentations, aspirations for further education or steady remunerative work, and for independence from the domineering sway of family elders. Notwithstanding the vulnerability associated with young age and (for girls) gendered differentiation, many of them had had opportunities to experience some degree of autonomy and to develop peer relations—through school, work, or shared interests such as popular music and dance—that could be as significant as their immediate family ties. Many of those who had been in the last year or two of primary school or who were enrolled in secondary school had traveled to other parts of the country during school holiday periods. Others—notably the domestic workers in Thiès—had lived away from their immediate family relatives for months and sometimes years. Many of them were also very much aware of the materialist trappings of globalization that are evident in towns and cities, and even in villages where cell phones are ubiquitous. The cumulative effects of these shared experiences among youth had undoubtedly fostered the emergence of identities that were gradually becoming less bound to the age-based authority structures of traditional household contexts (Fredericks, 2014). As one young domestic worker stated, mirroring the sentiments of many youth

---

[3] Quotations in English are close approximations of verbatim statements made in Wolof that were translated into French.

contemplating approaching adulthood, "I don't count on my parents to support me because they don't have the means….I have no desire to cross my arms and watch others work. I have to assist my mother and take charge of things." As we also discerned, several community leaders and parents we spoke with also tacitly accepted the burgeoning independence of young people, and the likelihood that many of them would migrate to larger urban centres in search of opportunities that natal family households could not provide.

Yet these structural forces and shifting social attitudes cannot alone explain the relative ease by which the youth cohorts attained a sense of project ownership that marked the second stage of the field study. From the start, we researchers—especially Moussa Diagne—assumed a mentorship role which in many respects superseded our own self-identification as researchers. Because the main aim of the project was to foster reflexivity as research, enabling youth to collectively analyze their lives and social influences, and to express their own views on issues and changes that they deemed significant, it was essential for us to begin by initiating and guiding the engagement of youth as project participants. This involved communication that put a premium on listening to the youth, on offering them the time and space to formulate and discuss their ideas, and on affording them opportunities for graduated decision-making. Our interactions with the youth thus took the form of scaffolding, with our direct encouragement diminishing as the young people assumed control over the fieldwork in their respective rural and urban localities. Patience and self-effacement were necessary in the scaffolding process. The first round of project meetings often necessitated accommodation of youth availability and obligations. We shuttled from site to site, stayed overnight in three out of the four villages, and on occasion withstood lengthy delays before youth arrived for designated meetings. Yet once the young people became immersed in collective reflexivity, they assumed a more dynamic collaborative role in the project and we deliberately allowed ourselves to shift from the position of focus group leaders to a more supportive status as monitors and observers. The fluidity of the relationship, with more autonomy and decision-making power transferred to the youth, helped substantially to stimulate their agency and to foster a sense of shared project ownership.

4. Project Aftermath: "Transformations" versus Social Transformation

The activities of the youth in this field study clearly demonstrated their inclination and capacity to collectively examine critical social issues and to formulate modes of dissemination designed to spur public reflection. As discussed above, the impetus underlying youth readiness and ability to participate lay in a combination of structural forces and mentorship. As many adolescents in Senegal feel less committed to tenacious norms

of adult-dominated power arrangements, those who participated in this project took advantage of the opportunity to channel their personal reflections into forms of collective consciousness-raising. Yet the question remains as to whether consciousness-raising through reflexive dialogue among small groups of youth, and between youth and others in their communities as exemplified by the exchanges that followed the presentations of our young participants, can generate social transformation. The field study described here was a stand-alone project that lasted for approximately eight months only. For the youth, it ended immediately following the public dissemination of their narratives. For the researchers and for the two organizations that facilitated initial connections with the youth, project activity continued for another two weeks until the closing day-long seminar in Thiès. Viewed in hindsight, one might conclude that the project was anything but a catalyst of social transformation. Without continuing mentorship, none of the youth cohorts remained as a distinctive group aiming to address any of the concerns they had raised in their reflexive analyses and presentations. Nor did Plan and EJA initiate specific actions that followed upon either the youth presentations or the closing seminar that featured the youth-produced photographs and video-taped excerpts of their dramatized narratives and *journaux futurs*. Now, a decade on, the social problems highlighted by our young participants persist, and the prospects facing youth in Senegal and elsewhere in Africa are, if anything, even more challenging. It would be easy to surmise, therefore, that the field study with this small group of young people fell short of having any transformative effect.

On the other hand, if considered in terms of *incremental transformations* as opposed to the radical notion of social transformation as the singular goal of comprehensive structural change, a case can be made that this participatory study did convey some transformative import. In reference to the four transformations noted above (Shier, 2015), the project stimulated at least two dimensions of change, or at least developmental progress. First, through the combination of learning and agency prompted by collaborative reflexivity, most of the youth participants experienced a degree of collective empowerment, at least for much of the project's duration. Empowerment in this sense was synonymous with a learning-by-doing process that enabled youth to transform reflexivity into knowledge production. This was most evident in the formulation of their narrative presentations, all of which necessitated a cooperative process of thoughtful creativity. In contrast to authoritarian top-down approaches to teaching and learning in schools and to traditional forms of socialization governed by their elders (Massart, 2006), creativity was an integral feature of the collaborative learning-by-doing process. This was especially visible in the role-playing that was central to the dissemination phase of dramatized storytelling and *journaux futurs*. Through role-playing the youth actors

were able to subsume themselves safely in alternative personas (e.g., the corrupt official, the drug dealer, the beaten child, the domestic worker sexually assaulted by her employer), and thus demonstrate their reflections, both affective and cognitive, on the underpinnings of social injustice more effectively than if they had participated in more conventional forms of inquiry.

Equally significant, they did this entirely on their own. Drawing upon lived experience, reflection, and dialogue, they confronted the themes of poverty, insecurity, inequity, and discrimination, and through the vehicles of their narrative presentations they became knowledge producers. In their dramatized narratives and the more spontaneous *journaux futurs* that involved both role-playing and audience participation, they openly addressed the problems that ensue when power is unwisely or unfairly exercised in a diverse range of circumstances—family, school, employment, and gender relations. For each of the youth participants, participation in the field study epitomized process as progress (Samoff, 2001). By focusing on issues that necessitate fundamental social change, this fusion of their own learning with knowledge dissemination and advocacy was a transformative undertaking for the youth participants, and possibly for some of the observers in their own communities. Commenting on this process, two young lads briefly articulated what many others shared: "In talking together about problems that worry us, we gained more understanding, and it was good to show this to the community." "I didn't think that I could speak publicly about problems; but now I'm less intimidated and I feel motivated."

A second incremental transformation, that of reflexive learning that transforms adult facilitators, was experienced by Diagne and myself. Throughout the duration of the project we spent hours talking about the youth with whom we were connected, musing on both the research and the mentorship process that we were engaged in. The relation that we developed with young people whose formative development had occurred in social milieux different than our own (particularly myself, being unfamiliar with Wolof language and culture)[4] entailed a marked learning curve. In addition, closely related to mentoring was the educational aspect of the researcher–youth relationship. Learning in this field study was not a unidirectional process emanating solely from adult instruction and guidance, but rather was a shared educational endeavour necessitating adult accommodation of gradual youth control of their own learning and knowledge production. Just as participation and learning were mutually reinforcing, so too were youth and researchers engaged in a reciprocal learning-by-doing process. Through dialogue in naturalistic settings that were familiar to the youth participants, and through the gradual creation of an atmosphere of informal collegiality, youth and adults learned from and about each other (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003). This, in fact, is the essence of participatory research, similar to Freire's (1976) description of education

as the practice of freedom—when the teacher becomes learner and the learner becomes teacher.

For Diagne and myself, transformation lay in our deepening understanding of youth participation in research, with its emphasis on critical inquiry, collective deliberation, and narrative dissemination as a shared learning process for youth and adults alike (Maclure, 2011). Participation and education, in other words, were two sides of the same coin. In the current era of globalization, with its cavalcade of rapid social and technological changes that occur alongside persistent and often deepening societal problems, we were able to fully appreciate why education should no longer adhere to the erstwhile view of young learners as passive repositories of information delivered to them. Instead, good quality education should be conducted in ways that enable learners to be *participant* discoverers and practitioners of knowledge (Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). In many circumstances, however, for this to occur often requires cultural and institutional adjustments that in turn facilitate shifts in power differentials between adults and children—between those who are deemed to be knowledgeable and those who depend on the adult world for the content and direction of their learning (Percy-Smith, 2006). This is a theme that applies to research as well. For research to be truly participatory, methodologically adult researchers must cede substantive control of key aspects of inquiry to young participants so as to ensure that it yields reciprocal pedagogical benefits.

Concerning the third and fourth transformations, however, there was no evidence that this field study provoked any change in general adult attitudes, either in the communities where the participant youth disseminated their concluding narratives or beyond, nor that it led to any transformative community actions. Several reasons account for this. Most obvious was the small scale and particularistic focus of the project which was not designed to encompass the scale of most of the problems addressed by the youth. Quite simply, the limitations of the project were determined by its primary objective: to focus almost entirely on the youth participants themselves—their issues of concern and the nature of their participation as the field study progressed. In part as well, the project was not conducted as an integrated component of the youth assistance programs of either Plan or EJA. This was largely due to the role of Plan's research unit within the organization's West African regional office. With its mandate to conduct research projects in all West African countries where Plan's development programs were located, the research unit functioned separately from the specific program activities administered by Plan Senegal. Consequently, apart from assisting in some of the logistics of the project, e.g., providing transport, facilitating connections with youth in the four villages, and hosting the closing seminar in Thiès, the personnel of Plan Senegal's community development programs were not involved in research

---

[4] As most of the youth could speak some French, this was the language of communication between myself and the youth participants.

planning and oversight. Periodically a Plan program staff member was in a village when we were meeting with youth, but when our paths crossed, which was seldom, our communication was limited to brief social greetings. The connection with EJA was even more distant as the project had no formal financial or administrative attachment to this organization. For similar reasons, the concluding seminar of the project held under Plan Senegal's auspices had no goal other than to serve as a briefing for interested professionals working in the domain of child and youth development programs.

Seen in hindsight, however, rather than being miscast as a potential catalyst for social transformation that did not succeed in a broad sense, this field study can be regarded as a small part of a transformative process that was already ongoing within the two sponsoring NGOs and among youth themselves. As noted at the outset, both Plan and EJA had adopted the discourse of child rights and children as protagonists of development since the 1990s, and hence this field study was aligned with the ongoing development assistance approach of the two organizations. Likewise, as also observed, Senegalese society—from rural communities to large urban centres—is undergoing a socio-cultural transformation that has multiple manifestations, not least of which has been the growing restiveness of many of its youth and their propensity to openly criticize and demonstrate against the injustices of an entrenched socio-economic and political status quo. Consequently, although I have characterized this field study conducted with young people as a stand-alone project, in another sense it can also be regarded as a small collective activity in tangent with many similar youth-oriented actions aiming to enhance children's rights and to foster inclusive democratic discourse. While these are goals that in many respects are still unfulfilled in Senegal, we can nonetheless entertain the hope that multiple activities for and with youth such as the participatory research described here will contribute incrementally to these transformative ends.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Bessant, J. (2004). Mixed messages: Youth participation and democratic practice. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, *39*(2), 387–404.

Brookfield, S. (2001). Unmasking power: Foucault and adult learning. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *15*(1), 1–23.

Butler, U. M., & Princeswal, M. (2014). Children and young people's participation in public action in Brazil: Genealogies and recent innovations. In E. K. M. Tisdall, A. M. Gadda, & U. M. Butler (Eds), *Children and young people's participation and its transformative potential: Learning from across countries* (pp. 61–78). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Butler, U. M., & Teamey, M. (2014). Conclusion: Unlearning participation. In E. K. M. Tisdall, A. M. Gadda, & U. M. Butler (Eds), *Children and young people's participation and its transformative potential: Learning from across countries* (pp. 208–226). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cashmore, J. (2002). Promoting the participation of children and young people in care. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, *26*(8), 837–847.

Christensen, P. H. (2004). Children's participation in ethnographic research: Issues of power and representation. *Children and Society*, *18*, 165–176. doi:10.1002/CHI.823

Clark, A., & Statham, J. (2005). Listening to young children: Experts in their own lives. *Adoption & Fostering*, *29*(1), 45–56.

Cockburn, T. (2005). Children's participation in social policy: Inclusion, chimera, or authenticity? *Social Policy & Society*, *4*(2), 109–119.

Convention on the Rights of the Child. (1989). Retrieved from http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Professional Interest/Pages/CRC.aspx

Couzens, M. (2017). Child participation in local governance. In M. D. Ruck, M. Peterson-Badali, & M. Freeman (Eds.), *Handbook of children's rights: Global and multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 515–532). New York: Routledge.

Dénommée, J. (2008). *Revue du projet "Réflexivité et créavitié dans l'éducation au développement"*. Dakar: Plan International (WARO).

Economist. (2017, June 15). What drives the huddled masses: Why migration from West Africa may start to slow. Retrieved from http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21723417-west-africans-now-realise-migrating-europe-not-easybut-some?zid=304&ah=e5690753dc78ce91909083042ad12e30

Elsley, S. (2004). Children's experience of public space. *Children and Society*, *18*, 155–164. doi:10.1002/CHI.823

Enda Jeunesse Action (EJA). (2005). *Enfants en recherche et en action: Une alternative Africaine d'animation urbaine*. Dakar: Enda tiers-monde.

Flicker, S. (2008). Who benefits from community-based participatory research? A case study of the positive youth project. *Health Education & Behavior*, *35*(1), 70–86.

Fredericks, R. (2014). "The old man is dead": Hip hop and the arts of citizenship of Senegalese youth. *Antipode*, *46*(1), 130–148.

Freire, P. (1976). *Education, the practice of freedom*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.

Ginwright, S., & James, T. (2002). From assets to agents of change: Social justice, organizing, and youth development. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *96*, 27–46.

Gutiérrez, K. D., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits or repertoires of practice. *Educational Researcher*, *32*(5), 19–25.

Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Centre.

Hill, M., David, J., Prout, A., & Tisdall, K. (2004). Moving the participation agenda forward. *Children and Society*, *18*, 77–96. doi:10.1002/CHI.823.

Human Rights Watch. (2016). Senegal: New steps to protect talibés, street children. Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/28/senegal-new-steps-protect-talibes-street-children

Keating, D. P. (2017). The evolving capacities of the child: Neurodevelopment and children's rights. In M. D. Ruck, M. Peterson-Badali, & M. Freeman (Eds.), *Handbook of children's rights: Global and multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 184–199). New York: Routledge.

Lavan, D., & Maclure, R. (2011). The fluctuations of child worker support: A study of female domestic workers in Senegal. In M. Denov, R. Maclure, & K. Campbell (Eds.), *Realizing children's rights internationally: Essays and challenges from the field* (pp. 241–267). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Liebel, M. (2007). Paternalism, participation and children's protagonism. *Children, Youth and Environment*, *17*(2), 56–73.

Lundy, L. (2007). "Voice" is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), 927–942. doi:10.1080/01411920701657033

Maclure, R. (2011). The dynamics of youth participation: Insights from research fieldwork with female youth in Senegal. In M. Denov, R. Maclure, & K. Campbell (Eds.), *Children's rights and international development: Lessons and challenges from the field* (pp. 155–173). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Massart, G. (2006). *Réactions: The Convention on the Rights of the Child put to the test by power relations and social norms in rural West Africa*. Dakar Bureau Régional pour l'Afrique de l'Ouest (WARO) de Plan International.

Matthews, S. (2007). A window on the "new" sociology of childhood. *Sociology Compass*, *1*(1), 322–334.

Morrison, C., McCulloch, C., Mackie, D., Halliday, S., & Liddell, H. (2014). Transforming the urban environment: The EcoCity project. In E. K. M. Tisdall, A. M. Gadda, & U. M. Butler (Eds), *Children and young people's participation and its transformative potential: Learning from across countries* (pp. 189–207). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Naker, D. (2007). From rhetoric to practice: Bridging the gap between what we believe and what we do. *Children, Youth and Environments*, *17*(3), 146–158.

Nilan, P., & Feixa, C. (2006). Introduction: Youth hybridity and plural words. In P. Nilan & C. Feixa (Eds.), *Global youth? Hybrid identities, plural worlds* (pp. 1–13). London and New York: Routledge.

Paradise, R., & Rogoff, B. (2009). Side by side: Learning by observing and pitching in. *ETHOS*, *37*(1), 102–138.

Percy-Smith, B. (2006). From consultation to social learning in community participation with young people. *Children, Youth and Environment*, *16*(2), 153–179.

Prout, A., & James, A. (1997). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In A. James & A Prout (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (pp. 7–33) London: Falmer.

Quennerstedt, A. (2009). Balancing the rights of the child and the rights of parents in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Journal of Human Rights*, *8*(2), 162–176.

Ratner, R. S. (1997). Many Davids, one Goliath. In W. K. Carroll (Ed.), *Organizing dissent: Contemporary social movements in theory and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 271–286). Toronto: Garamond Press.

Samoff, J. (2001). *When progress is process: Evaluating aid to basic education: Issues and strategies*. Paper prepared for the Joint Evaluation of Aid to Basic Education coordinated by the Government of the Netherlands and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

Schutt, R. K. (2006). *Investigating the social world: The process and practice of research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. A new model for enhancing children's participation in decision-making, in line with Article 12.1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Children and Society*, *15*, 107–117.

Shier, H. (2015). Children as researchers in Nicaragua: Children's consultancy to transformative research. *Global Studies of Childhood*, *5*(2), 206–219. doi:10.1177/2043610615587798

Stasiulis, D. (2002). The active child citizen: Lessons from Canadian policy and the children's movement. *Citizenship Studies*, *6*(4), 507–538.

Teamey, K., & Hinton, R. (2014). Reflections on participation and its link with transformative processes. In E. K. M. Tisdall, A. M. Gadda, & U. M. Butler (Eds), *Children and young people's participation and its transformative potential: Learning from across countries* (pp. 22–43). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Theis, J. (2010). Children as active citizens: An agenda for children's civil rights and civic engagement. In B. Percy-Smith & N. Thomas (Eds.), *A handbook of children's and young people's participation: Perspectives from theory and practice* (pp. 343–355). London and New York: Routledge.

Tisdall, E. K. M. (2016). Participation, rights, and "participatory methods". In A. Farrell, S. L. Kagan, & E. K.

M. Tisdall (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of early childhood research* (pp. 73–88). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Tisdall, E. K. M., & Davis, J. (2004). Making a difference? Bringing children's and young people's views into policy-making. *Children and Society*, *18*, 131–142. doi:10.1002/CHI.823

Twum-Danso, A. (2010). The construction of childhood and the socialisation of children in Ghana: Implications for the implementation of Article 12 of the CRC. In B. Percy-Smith & N. Thomas (Eds.), *A handbook of children and young people's participation: Perspectives from theory and practice* (pp. 133–140). London and New York: Routledge.

USAID. (2017). Education in Senegal. Retrieved from https://www.usaid.gov/senegal/education

Wilson Center. (2014). Youth unemployment: A potential destabilizing force in Senegal? Africa Up Close. Retrieved from https://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/youth-unemployment-a-potential-destabilizing-force-in-senegal

World Bank. (2017). The World Bank in Senegal. Retrieved from http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/senegal/overview

World Population Review. (2017). Senegal population 2017. Retrieved from http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/senegal-population

About the Author

Richard Maclure is a professor of comparative and international education in the Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa. He has conducted externally funded research on aspects of child and youth rights in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, the dynamics of children's participation in West Africa, and youth social capital formation in Central America and Canada. His recent publications include a co-edited book, *Children's Rights and International Development: Lessons and Challenges from the Field* (2011), an edited special edition of the *International Journal of Children's Rights* (2014), and a chapter in the *Handbook of Children's Rights: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (2017).