Using qualitative methods to elicit young people’s perspectives on their environments: some ideas for community health initiatives

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Abstract

This paper describes qualitative methods used in a research project for the former Health Education Authority, exploring Putnam’s concept of ‘social capital’ in relation to children and young people’s well-being and health. Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital consists of the following features: trust, reciprocal support, civic engagement, community identity and social networks, and the premise is that levels of social capital in a community have an important effect on people’s well-being. Research was carried out with 102 children aged between 12 and 15 in two relatively deprived parts of a town in southeast England. The paper describes the research setting, methods, consent process and ethical issues that arose. It explores how the methods generated different forms of interconnected data, giving rise to a number of health/well-being-related themes. The paper concludes that using a range of methods, including visual methods, has helped to explore quality of life issues for children that are usually neglected in studies of young people’s health-related behaviours.

Background

In the UK, health promotion specialists are increasingly aware that health-related behaviours are shaped and constrained by a range of social and community contexts, and that the ways that individuals relate to wider social networks and communities have important effects on health and well-being. The Government Green Paper Our Healthier Nation: A Contract for Health (Department of Health, 1998a,b), for example, highlights a range of complex factors affecting health and emphasizes ‘social environments’:

Neighbourhoods where people know each other and trust each other and where they have a say in the way the community is run can be a powerful support in coping with the day to day stresses of life which affect health. And having a stake in the local community gives people self-respect and makes them feel better. [para. 2.16]

During the late 1990s, the Health Education Authority (now the Health Development Agency) commissioned a number of research projects to develop and test a range of hypotheses about the way in which health-related behaviours are shaped and constrained by a number of social and community factors. One way of exploring this link has been to develop the concept of ‘social capital’, based on Putnam’s (Putnam, 1993) formulation of ‘social capital’ as consisting of trust, networks of cooperation and reciprocity, civic engagement, and strong community identity (Gillies, 1998). The premise is that levels of ‘social capital’ in a community have important implications for people’s health and well-being. An earlier paper has explored some of the origins, definitions and applications of the notion of social capital as it relates to children and young people (Morrow, 1999). This paper describes qualitative research methods utilized in an empirical project exploring...
the concept of ‘social capital’ in relation to children and young people.

**Conceptual frameworks**

The research reported here draws on two theoretical frameworks. The first is the emergent sociology of childhood (James and Prout, 1997), which suggests that we need to move beyond psychologically based models of childhood as a period of socialization, and emphasize that children are active social agents who shape the structures and processes around them (at least at the micro-level), and whose social relationships are worthy of study in their own right. The second paradigm is the welfare research paradigm that seeks to incorporate social context into health research, and to explore the importance of ‘place’ and ‘lay knowledge’, and lay narratives, into theories and research on health inequalities (Macintyre et al., 1993; Popay et al., 1998; Williams et al., 1999). There has been a shift towards using ‘participatory’ research methodologies in both these paradigms. De Koning and Martin [(De Koning and Martin, 1996), p. 1] note (for health research) this is due to two factors: (1) ‘an increasing awareness of the gap between the concepts and models professionals use to understand and interpret reality, and the concepts and perspectives of different groups in the community’ and (2) the realization that ‘cultural, historical, socio-economic and political factors, which are difficult to measure, have a crucial influence on the outcomes of interventions and efforts to improve the health of people’. Thus, ‘the emphasis is on generating knowledge from the perspective not only of the researchers but also of the researched’. The ‘sociology of childhood’ suggests that this approach can be extended to children and young people, and it is increasingly acknowledged that ‘Research about children’s lives is...essential if policies and programmes are to become more responsive and relevant to their concerns and needs’ [(Boyden and Ennew, 1997), p. 10]. A large amount of epidemiological attention has been paid to links between material inequalities in childhood and inequalities of health outcomes in adulthood. However, these studies cannot explain why, or how, deprivation in childhood is linked to poor health outcomes in later life nor can they trace the processes involved. As Popay et al. [(Popay et al., 1998), p. 629] note, ‘a great deal of epidemiology and social survey work in the inequalities in health field remains profoundly non-social—in the sense that it does not explore the complex interactive relationship between individual experience, social action and the way in which societies are organized at a macro-level’.

Health promotion initiatives with children and young people have tended to be based on questionnaire surveys of risk behaviours. These are useful for identifying broad trends in health behaviours like drinking and smoking (i.e. behaviours that give adults cause for concern) but cannot elicit the meaning, perspectives and social contexts of these behaviours [there are important exceptions, e.g. (Brannen et al., 1994; Mayall, 1994; Hendry et al., 1995; Michell, 1997; Pavis et al., 1996, 1997)]. Recently, Backett-Milburn and McKie [(Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999), p. 397] have argued convincingly that ‘health education research with children must be premised on an appreciation of the social context and world of the child.... Health education researchers need to create the potential for children to have their own ideas and explanations heard and understood’.

This paper describes multiple research methods that were used to build up a picture of how children and young people view their social networks and their communities. The remainder of the paper described the research setting, the methods, the consent process and ethical issues that arose. It briefly explores how the methods generated different forms of data that were interconnected, using three themes from the data. The paper does not attempt a full analysis of data [see (Morrow 1999a, 2000, 2001)] and the paper is not intended to be a ‘how to do it’ guide to health-related research with young people [see, e.g. (Cohen and Emanuel 1998; McNeish, 1999); for a manual of participatory research methods with children, see (Boyd and Ennew, 1997); for descriptions of involving children and young people in social research, see
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also (Alderson, 1996; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Christensen and James, 2000); for discussions of children’s experiences of place and space, see (Hart, 1978; Ward, 1978)].

Research setting and sample

The research was conducted in two schools in a town about 30 miles to the north of London (all names have been changed; children chose their own pseudonyms). It used qualitative methods to investigate young people’s perspectives on their social context and environments, with the intention of exploring the implications of these accounts for their general well-being. The study was conducted in two comprehensive secondary schools, in two relatively deprived parts of the town. School-based research is not ‘participatory’ in any sense of the word, but does give access to a ‘representative’ sample of children in the area. There are many problems associated with school-based research that have been explored elsewhere (Hendry et al., 1995; Mayall, 1996; Morrow, 1999b). Consideration was given to conducting the research in a youth club, but doing so would have biased the sample, given that one element of ‘social capital’ is involvement in community-based associations.

The total number of young people in the sample was 102, in two age bands, 12–13 year olds (Year 8s) and 14–15 year olds (Year 10s). Both schools had significant proportion of young people from minority ethnic groups (School 1 = 20% and School 2 = 40%). Entitlement to free school meals rates in School 1 were 22.5% and in School 2 were over 47% (the national average is 18.2%; children whose families receive Income Support/Job Seekers Allowance are entitled to receive free school meals). According to a recent OfSTED report, School 2 took a ‘not inconsiderable number of disaffected pupils’.

Process and methods

Three qualitative research methods were used in combination to explore young people’s subjective experiences of their neighbourhoods, their everyday experiences and the nature of their social networks. Using a range of methods in research with children is a useful way of ‘triangulating’, or building up a picture of the phenomenon under investigation from a range of perspectives [see also (Brannen, 1992; Lucchini, 1996)].

Structured methods, in the form of freely written accounts, were used to elicit personal information. Young people were asked to describe: ‘who is important to me and why?’, which provided social network and social support data. They were also asked how long they had known their friends, and to ‘brainstorm’ definitions of friendship by writing ‘what is a friend?’ and ‘what are friends for?’. In the second school young people were asked to try to describe in writing ‘where do I feel I belong?’.

They also wrote about ‘What I do when I am not at school?’, which provided data on opportunities for independence and taking responsibility, membership of clubs and out of school activities, involvement in work (family, paid, as well as domestic), as well as leisure pursuits. They also noted the general area of where they live and how long they had lived there. They also briefly described their aspirations for the future by writing about what they hope to do when they leave school and whether they already know someone who is doing this kind of thing. One 13-year-old boy in School 2 who could not read or write volunteered to have a conversation tape-recorded.

Visual methods were also used. Individuals and/or groups of Year 10 students were asked to volunteer to take photographs of places that are important to them and then to describe why. Many skeptical comments were made by everyone involved in the study except the young people themselves. [For other examples of using children’s photography as a research method, see (Punch, 1998; Percy-Smith, 1999); see also a special issue of Visual Sociology, ‘Seeing Kid’s Worlds’, particularly papers by (Dell Clark, 1999; Faulstich Orellana 1999; Rich and Chalfen; 1999); see also (Dewdney and Lister, 1988)]. At the end of the first session with Year 10 students, a number of disposable cameras were handed out. Some were shared between groups of up to three students. The
aim was to elicit young people’s perspectives on their local environments in a way that enabled them to choose and control what they wanted to depict. This avoided the need to do ‘participant observation’, which is problematic with this age group, or for the researcher to photograph them (either the children or the places). Others have used the ‘neighbourhood walk’ as a method with younger children, where the researcher accompanies children on walks through a neighbourhood and records their accounts (Bryant, 1985).

Volunteers were asked to take about half a dozen photographs of places that are important to them (they were asked not to put themselves at risk when taking photos). They were told they could use the rest on whatever they wanted, and that they would be able to keep the photos of their friends and family. Disposable cameras are not expensive (£2.99 plus £2.99 for processing) and this did not seem to be a huge loss if cameras went missing (some, of course, did). The cameras were returned sporadically, but the schools were visited fairly regularly and this helped to get the number back. Cameras were processed and packets of photos were returned to the photographers unopened. They then went through them, sorted the ones out for the research and, using self-adhesive notes, wrote captions on the back of each photo describing why they had taken them. This took place just before the group discussions and often issues that featured on photos emerged later in discussion.

Overall, working in groups and sharing cameras was effective. However, one girl complained that she kept forgetting her camera, and someone in another class grabbed it and took photos of the school roof and the ceiling. One boy was disappointed that some of his photos did not come out (possibly the cardboard case covered the lens, he thought). He had taken photos of the butcher’s shop, where he worked part time, and the green grocers next door, where his friend works. Sometimes young people mentioned things they had wished they had photographed but had not done so: one girl, who had complained about a range of environmental factors affecting her neighbourhood and school, said ‘I wish I’d taken a photo of the planes [which flew in low over the school] and the pylon in the school playing field’.

A further consideration was the time of year the research was conducted. In School 1, the research was done in the winter term and the weather was not good. In School 2, students had cameras during the summer term and over the course of two weekends. In total, 26 Year 10s were involved in the photographic exercise and generated about 100 photographs for the research.

Lack of funds meant that it was only possible to use the cameras with the Year 10 students. Year 8 children were asked to draw maps or plans [there is a small tradition in health research with children to use drawings, see, e.g. (Pridmore and Bendelow, 1995; Mayall, 1996; Backett-Milburn and McKie, 1999) for a critique]. School 1 children drew maps in their spare time (a very small number were collected, \( n = 3 \)) and in School 2 they had time to draw if they wanted to in the whole class session (\( n = 14 \) provided drawings or maps). Similar themes emerged in the maps as the photos, but the ‘neighbourhoods’ in School 1 seemed smaller and did not include the town centre, but as School 1 was some distance from the centre of town, perhaps these children were not yet allowed into town on their own.

Finally, group discussions explored young people’s use of and perceptions about their town and their neighbourhoods. Newspaper cuttings describing the town and their age group were used as ‘prompts’ to explore the extent to which young people have a sense of belonging and identity with their neighbourhoods/communities, and whether they felt safe in their neighbourhoods. Other issues that were discussed were their attitudes to institutions and facilities in the community, and what physical spaces, such as parks, streets, leisure centres and clubs were available to and use by them. They also discussed participation in community activities and in decision making both in their schools and their neighbourhoods.

**Ethical considerations:** obtaining ‘informed’ consent

Permission was obtained from the Head and Deputy Head teacher and the class teachers in each school.
to work with whole classes of children. The Directors of the Local Education Authority and the local Health Authority were informed about the research. The town in which the research was carried out is a Health Action Zone, and meetings were held regularly with a group that consisted of local health promotion specialists, public health professionals, and representatives of the Planning Department and Youth and Community Development team in the town council. In School 2, parents/carers were informed that the research was being carried out and were invited to withdraw their child if they wanted to (none were withdrawn). In School 1, the Year 10 sample consisted of a sociology class and the school felt the students could learn something from being involved in the research.

Consent was sought from participants in the following way. In the first session, they were given a brief leaflet explaining that the research was exploring how young people feel about their friends, family and where they live, because (for adults) this affects their health and well-being. The leaflet also described the tasks they would be asked to undertake. It was explained that by participating in the research, they would be giving their views and opinions, and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. (Small numbers of children dissented from participating in some of the tasks.) Care was taken not to raise expectations about what the research might produce in the way of change in their environments. It was explained that they were doing the tasks for the research and the researcher would be the only person who would see all the data they produced, though if they agreed, excerpts of what they say/wrote/drew/photographed would be used in research reports and papers. Participants were told that what they wrote/said/drew would be confidential to the researcher, though the researcher had a responsibility to help if they disclosed some kind of problem and she would discuss this with them first. They also chose their own pseudonyms on the last visit.

In the following sessions, children were divided into discussion groups. These were conducted in adjacent or spare classrooms and were taped and transcribed; permission was asked of the children. One girl declined to speak because of the tape machine and she wrote her responses instead. Preliminary findings were presented to the participants in an oral presentation and each child was given a leaflet outlining the main conclusions. Children were asked whether they felt their views were being represented fairly and accurately.

Other researchers have noted that if children in a whole class situation are asked for their consent they all tend to say yes, but a minority of them will simply not participate at all, will write minimally and say virtually nothing in discussion [(Morrow, 1999b), see also (Edwards and Aldred, 1999)]. However, they all wrote or drew something, even if they did not necessarily speak, and in the groups it was noticeable that some did not say anything. For example, one girl wrote and took photographs, but it was clear that she did not want to speak. She described (in writing) how she was not happy with where she lived, because since they moved there about a year ago, ‘I feel very upset because since we’ve been there, me and my mum have been having lots of angry rows. And also there are too many stairs for my disabled brother’. She had photographed a number of cars, including her mum’s car: (‘I sit there if I’m upset’), and her nan’s house (‘I chose this because I go there if I am upset. And I talk to her a lot’). In this case, because she did not appear to want to talk to the researcher, concern was mentioned to her teacher (who was familiar with her problems and was apparently providing support). Using a range of methods appears to enable young people to participate if they want to, because they can chose how to express themselves.

Themes and issues

The common themes represented in the photographs and drawings were as follows:

- My home, my road/street, view from my window, grandparents'/relatives' houses.
- Friends’ houses, route to friend’s house, places to meet up with/hang about with friends.
- School, the playground, the buildings, junior schools.
• Parks: where to go with friends, to walk the
dog, play football.
• Shortcuts, paths and routes, to school, town
centre, friends’ houses.
• Urban landmarks, including the Town Hall and
shopping centre.
• Work-related (present) butcher’s shop, super-
market trolley used for newspaper round, local
factories (future work).

The differences between the two schools related
to the distance from the town centre, in that School 1
photos and maps included photos of small parades
of local shops, while children from School 2, who
lived in an area that was located within walking
distance of the town centre, included photographs
of the shopping centre, the leisure centre, the town
library, etc.

The paper now discusses three specific themes
that ran through the different forms of data:

• Friendship
• Use of neighbourhood space
• Public parks and urban spaces

Friendship

One element of ‘social capital’ consists of social
networks and it was clear from all of the data
collection methods that the experience of their
friendships was central to their everyday experi-
ences. Children often spend more time with their
friends than they do with their families, especially
as they get older. As Veronica [age 15, School 2]
put it: ‘Why are my friends important? Because I
spend nearly all of my time with them’, and Maria
[age 14, School 2], ‘My friends are also very
important to me because I spend so much of
my life with them’. Daily activities were often
structured around encounters with friends: Maria
described how after school:

I often ring my friends and talk on the phone
for quite a while as well. ...After eating I will
either go round a friends house, go to a local
youth club, the cinema, or just stay in. My
weekends are usually spent in the town centre
with different friends. I sometimes go to the
cinema, or bowling or just out...

Friends were involved in many of the activities
described outside school, and this was very marked
among the School 1 Year 10s and both year groups
in School 2. This may reflect the time of year that
the research was carried out, in that there may
have been more opportunities for going out to play
in School 2, because it was the summer term. On
the other hand, it could reflect the fact that in Ward
1, there are fewer parks and places to go out and
much less of a ‘street life’ for children.

Friends’ houses, routes to friends houses and
places to meet up with friends featured in the
maps and photos—as noted, they were asked to
photograph places, not people, but they found ways
of incorporating friendship into their photos and
in at least half the photos, the places were photo-
graphed because they were important for friendship
(see Figures 1 and 2 for examples of maps and a
photo).

This road is the most important road because it
leads to my friend’s house. [Tom, age 14,
School 1]

My old school: I often play football there with
my friends. [Bob, age 14, School 1]

This is our school playground, we hang around
with our friends there. [Wendy, Leila, Chloe,
School 1]

This is McDonalds. I always go there every
week with my friends. [Jennifer, School 1]

[Local] Park. Where I used to go as a child and
still go with my friends now. [Maggie, School 2]

School. Where we sit at lunch time. [Maria,
School 2]

I took this photo of my friend’s house, because
she is my next door neighbour, and I hang
around in and outside her house. [Gemma,
School 2]

Corner of a street where I meet my friends.
[Mary, School 2]

[High Road] area. Lots of my friends live
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Fig. 1. ‘This road is the most important road because it leads me to my friend’s house.’ [Tom, age 14]

Fig. 2. Maps drawn by Harry [age 13] and Rebecca [age 13].

there...My friends house, I’m often in there, and there is a park behind the house. [Jagu, School 2]

We took this photo because it is where we sit at lunch time. [Isabelle and Veronica, School 2]

In many cases, how children felt about where they live seemed to depend on proximity to friends. As Maggie [age 15, School 2] put it: ‘I love my house and my area, because there are three parks near me, the town is a 5-minute walk away, the school is close and I can visit my friends without having to take a bus or walk miles. Most of my friends
live in Ward 2, or my area’. Not having friends living nearby was a problem, and this seemed to be more marked in School 1 which, as noted above, was in a quiet, sprawling, suburban locality with few facilities for young people. It was also mostly girls who described this, which could reflect constraints on girls’ independent mobility. For example, Olanda [age 14, School 1] described how ‘I’m fairly happy with where I live but would rather live in my old house...this is because a lot of my close friends live up there. Usually I walk up there most days after school. It would be a lot less hassle if I lived up there near them’. Rebecca [age 13, School 1] described how she does not like her neighbourhood:

It’s boring, there’s not many people of my age living round there. Because my best friend moved away she only lives 10 minutes away, but it’s too much to walk every day there. I’ve been best friends with her all my life, and I’ve never broken up with her once. We do a lot of things together, she’s coming on holiday with me this year as well, I can’t wait.

The longevity and importance of friendship may be one reason why children photographed or depicted their junior schools in their maps (Figure 3). The Year 10 students had left their junior schools 4 years previously, yet boys particularly still visited them and described using the playing fields to play football. For example, Bob and Dave both took photos of their junior school and explained that: ‘this is important to me because I used to go there and I play football there with my mates’ [Dave] and ‘my old school, I often play football there with my friends’ [Bob]. Bob had written ‘my longest known friend is Dave. I have been friends with him since nursery school. He is a good friend and I value his opinion greatly’. Maggie [School 2] described how she had taken the photo of ‘My old primary school, it holds some very happy memories for me’. ‘Chloe and Wendy went here, it’s a junior school and it was a good school.’ Their secondary schools were also photographed, with the captions ‘This is our school playground, we hang around with our friends here’ ‘this is where we sit at lunchtime’. The other forms of data (written and discussions) show how important school is as a site of social interaction and a ‘community’ in its own right.

Use of neighbourhood space

A recurrent issue that arose in School 2, in all forms of data, was the way in which ‘No Ball Games’ signs that are on patches of communal grass led to a strong sense of exclusion for children
in their neighbourhoods. For example, Asa-May [age 13] had drawn a map of her house, with the green opposite and the sign ‘No Ball Games’, and had written ‘After school I play on my bike. Or run around on the grass opposite my house. But we always get told to go away because we’re making too much noise or the ball will hit a car or a window’. In group discussion, she said: ‘The police go round our area, looking for my age playing about, but they don’t do anything about all the ones who have left school, driving around in their cars and everything, they don’t worry about them. And when they’re looking for us, they could be doing other things, instead of looking for kids playing’. Katie [age 13] (Figure 4) had drawn the sign and added the words ‘not fair’. Maggie had photographed a sign saying ‘No Ball Games’ (Figure 5) and explained why she had done so: ‘This is a sign that is on a piece of greenery on my road. It stops children from playing typical games, but little children need somewhere to play...they may not be allowed to go to the park’. This also came up in discussion. She said ‘They’ve got “No Ball Games” signs all over our streets, and there are loads of little pieces of grass where kids could just play, and be like fairly happy and fairly safe, but they put up “No Ball Games” signs and then they can’t play there, and it’s like stopping them from...enjoying themselves’. Another girl asked ‘but what do they expect them to do?’ These data highlight the sense of exclusion these young people appear to feel from the spaces around their homes.

Public parks and urban spaces
The third set of images include photos and accounts of local parks and places children and young people are able to utilize. Tom [age 14] described how
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Fig. 5. ‘This is a sign that is on a piece of greenery on my road. It stops children from playing typical games, but little children need somewhere to play. They may not be allowed to go to the park, etc.’ [Isabelle, age 15]

Fig. 6. ‘I play football here (it’s not my old school)—it’s next to my house. There are no dogs and no adults screaming at you to stop.’ [Rock, age 15]

the field is important to him ‘because I walk my dog here and it is a good shortcut to school; my dog gets its freedom and I can occupy myself by having fun with my dog. A local park was also important to Dave, ‘play football there. Very important. Walk home from school past there’. Rock [age 15] photographed a primary school playing field next to where he lives (Figure 6). It was not his junior school, where he plays football. He commented ‘there are no dogs and no adults screaming at you to stop’. Mostly their comments about parks were not positive—Gemma took a photo of a play area (Figure 7): ‘This is a park down the road from my house. I took this photo because I have come to this park since I was about 11 and it is now too young for me to hang around in now. And it has not changed a bit’. Isabelle and Veronica had photographed the entrance to a park:
‘we go here most evenings, it is beginning to get very tedious’.

In School 1, public spaces were regarded as threatening by some of the girls. Amy explained:

Someone was assaulted down [in the local park], I mean, that makes you scared to go down there, and that was in broad daylight, so God knows what its gonna be like at 10 o’clock at night...

Other young people described their neighbourhoods as ‘trampy’, which meant ‘not very nice, dirty’. For the younger children, not having decent places to play in their localities was a preoccupation:

There’s a park where we live, we call it ‘Motorway Field’ because its right by the motorway, and its just covered in dogs muck, you just don’t like to go there, people let their dogs go anywhere, so we like to play football there, but cos you don’t know where the dogs muck is, you don’t play because you don’t want to get covered in it. [Harry]

Dog mess was nearly always mentioned as a problem in the context of playing in local parks.

One boy in School 2 described roads and alleys near where he lives:

They’re just filthy dirty. People take their dogs through there and dump litter, throw carpets in there, there’s fences all along one side and it used to be factories on the other side. The parks are dirty...cos people’s dogs go in there and everything, and people don’t stop em.

For the children in the study, the centrality of school as a site of social interaction came across clearly, whether it was returning to former primary school playing fields to play football or the secondary school where girls walk around ‘having girly chats’. As Buss notes in her research with children in Los Angeles, ‘on the most basic levels, school still seems to be a bastion or oasis in an increasingly antipathetic urban environment’ ([Buss, 1995], p. 347). School playing fields are often the only decent, dog-free and adult-free spaces available to them to play football in.

**Discussion**

Using a combination of qualitative methods was useful way of exploring the importance of place
in young people’s daily lives and highlighted the relevance of those spaces for their social relationships. Visual methods not only produced data for the purposes of the study, but were a successful way of engaging the research participants. Further, the data generated give a visual approach to understanding their quality of life and everyday experiences. Using visual methods can also act as prompts to encourage research participants to reflect on their physical environments. Research (with children and young people at any rate) is often a matter of ‘finding the right question’ and having a visual image to hang this around either as an elicitation technique or as data in itself was useful. However, a picture or a photograph has no meaning in and of itself, it is the interpretation and explanation that is important—in this case, the participants’ own explanations of why they had generated the images they had (Becker, 1995). Finally, it would be possible to go into much greater depth with research respondents about their neighbourhoods and environments. Using photography is one way of eliciting views, it is cheap, easy to do, fun, and it generates visual data that can then be used to stimulate further data and debate about neighbourhood environments, identifying areas that are problematic and generating ideas about how to improve them.

Where and how do these data relate to Putnam’s (Putnam, 1993) concept of ‘social capital’? If social capital is to be conceptualized as a community level attribute and if neighbourhood-level analysis is likely to be increasingly relevant in UK social policy [see, e.g. (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000)], then it seems plausible to suggest that community profiling should not simply be a mapping exercise carried out by professionals, but should be the product of community members, along with professionals. Community members are (obviously) an essential source of information about neighbourhoods, and subjective views and perspectives should be elicited with and from a cross-section of interest groups in neighbourhoods. This could include children and young people, who are so often seen as ‘the problem’ in urban and suburban environments. Children and young people are frequently overlooked by the participation process ‘precisely the group whose perceived lack of citizenship causes such concern to many’ [(Speak, 2000), p. 31]. The activities of children and young people are often seen to impact negatively upon how adults experience suburban or urban environments. Conversely, the activities of adults (particularly young adults) impact negatively on how children experience the same environments.

In the research reported here, the intention was to explore young people’s views of their social worlds and their experiences of their ‘communities’. However, methods like map drawing and photography could be used much more systematically in community development initiatives to elicit views from a range of community members. The visual element of the data helped considerably in highlighting these views when it was used as a prompt to get young people thinking about and discussing their neighbourhoods. It is important to try to understand whether young people have a sense of belonging in their neighbourhoods if we want to try to bring their perspectives into the policy debates around public health and community well-being. These data show clearly that they have views that they are well able to articulate about their social environments.

Boyden and Ennew [(Boyden and Ennew, 1997), p. 9] point out that ‘In research terms, children present a special challenge...children develop their own concepts, languages and cultures, through interaction with other children away from the influence of adults...Often these are difficult for adults to access or interpret’. This paper has shown that by using a range of methods, including visual methods, children and young people are well placed to reflect upon their situations and environments. The research reported here was by no means genuinely participatory, because it took place in schools, but it has shown that with some imagination, ‘children can be facilitated to express their opinions and describe their reality using a variety of modes of expression’ [(Ennew, 1998), p. xix]. Using visual methods among other methods has helped to explore quality of life issues for children in the here-and-now. This is in marked contrast to
social policy perspectives that prioritize children as future citizens, in terms of human capital (Qvortrup, 1994). This is, however, only one step along the way. Adult power structures inhibit children’s and young people’s participation in community life. As Horelli [(Horelli, 1998), p. 237] notes, there is a huge gap ‘between the know-how of children and the organizational and political capacity of local authorities to respond in terms of environmental arrangements’.

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