Using Participatory Research for Early Childhood Advocacy: Reflections on Methodology

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Abstract

This paper discusses the methodological implications of using participatory research in the advocacy for better care and education services for children and families. The discussion uses the example of a national study undertaken in Singapore to show how participatory research used in collaboration with participants and the commissioning body as key stakeholders can help to galvanise transformative change at the level of policy and provision. It explores the development of a participatory approach in framing a research agenda and the role of participant stakeholders in informing policy. The paper discusses the complex relationships that occur between the researcher, commissioners, and participants during the research process, and the potential strengths and challenges in using a participatory methodology in engendering a social agenda for advocacy and policy change. Drawing on international literature, this paper discusses the findings of the study, ethical considerations, and paradoxes that often relate to advocacy and participatory research.

Keywords : Participatory research, Early childhood, Advocacy, Policy, Singapore

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Introduction

What is the role of participatory research for early childhood advocacy? This article seeks to explore careful reflections on a national study undertaken in Singapore to demonstrate how the use of participatory research can help to serve a social justice agenda to advocate for better preschool services for children and families. The focus of the study was to explore early years professionals' perspectives on early childhood services to improve the preschool sector. This article offers a close examination of the methodology and research process, to provide practical insights for future researchers working within a particular paradigm, as seen through a 'participatory methodological lens', when working in close collaboration with participants to engender a policy-driven, social justice agenda.. The paper begins with a discussion of participatory research as a paradigm, followed by a critical review of the implications that arise from employing such an approach. It evaluates the methodological debates that arise from the study – the strengths as well as challenges, and concludes by highlighting some of the lessons learnt from using such an approach to engender advocacy for young children. By reflecting on a range of methodological issues, the discussion will also draw on some of the interview data collected from the study to demonstrate its impact and policy implications.

What is participatory research?

Participatory research is a prevalent methodology in the social sciences, led in part by emerging calls for more socially relevant research agendas and increased user involvement in the development of social policy and research (Bourke, 2009; Creswell, 2009; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009; Newby, 2010). As a specialist discipline within the social sciences, the field of early childhood has generated burgeoning interest in research underpinned by participatory and advocacy intent, with increased stakeholder participation (Mukherji & Albon, 2010; Nolan, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2013; Rees & Oliver, 2012). Participatory research is based on the premise that the research inquiry is closely linked with a social justice agenda, aimed at some form of advocacy and/or policy reform, and where the research is undertaken to ensure the optimum participation of end users and participants during the research process (Creswell, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Although the idea of including participants' or

stakeholders' voices in research is not new, such an approach has become more established in recent years in the drive towards research-informed policy, where participants are perceived as collaborators   and encouraged to play an active role in influencing policy development and decision-making (Rees & Oliver, 2012). Supra-international organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, The World Bank, and Amnesty International are increasingly encouraging the use of participatory research approaches in the advocacy for marginalised groups in challenging social inequalities (Hickey & Mohan, 2008; Pant, 2008; Uvin, 2007). A report by Ling, McGree, Gaventa, and Pantazidon (2010) for example, describes participatory research as involving 'those who are supposed to benefit from the research in all stages: from identifying research priorities to gathering, analysing and using the knowledge that they generate.' (Ling, et al., 2010). The report emphasises the importance of 'active participation' and 'engaging partners' in the undertaking of research, and the potential for participatory research to offer the possibility of 'social transformation'.

Yet, despite the prevalence of participatory research, debates surrounding the methodology prevail. Proponents for such an approach argue for the importance of undertaking socially relevant research that is underpinned by participatory and advocacy practices. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) contend that researchers have a civic responsibility to employ participatory practices as a means of bringing about much needed change to society for the benefit of a particular group or groups of individuals (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Creswell (2009) suggests that participatory research emerged from an impassioned concern for the inequity and needs of individuals who have been marginalised by society such as the lower social classes and minority racial groups, and this has contributed to characteristics of qualitative research as we understand it today with the emphasis on collaborative and participatory approaches. It could be argued that such a methodology provides an alternative paradigm to the more traditional positivist approach which relies primarily on the researcher's role and 'expert knowledge', and less on the participants' voice and perspective. On the other hand, critics of the methodology have questioned the validity of participatory approaches and its accompanying methods, arguing that researchers are often not sufficiently objective or politically neutral. Adding to the debate, Gristy (2014) describes the 'messy realities of participatory research' (1) given the shifting power relations between the researcher and participants, and the conceptual, methodological challenges that this presents. Researchers have also warned of the ethical and

analytical issues when intertwining the role of the researcher and stakeholders in the development of participatory research (Banks et al., 2013; Byrne, Canavan, & Millar, 2009; Campbell, 2002). Banks et al. (2013) highlight the everyday ethics in using participatory research in a variety of disciplines in the social science where the intention of the participatory inquiry or co-inquiry can sometimes generate tensions amidst competing expectations amongst participant-stakeholder, funders and researchers.

While there is no clear consensus in ongoing debates around participatory research, a general understanding among researchers is that the methodology presents a distinct philosophical approach to research that is focused on participant involvement and social advocacy, to bring about some degree of change in their social reality. Byrne et al. (2009) describe such a process as a way of engaging in meaningful partnerships with participants and 'seeking meaningful data for social transformation' that is often in contrast to conventional methodologies. The underlying principle here is the recognition that researchers have a moral and ethical responsibility to listen to and actively collaborate with participants in their studies, as opposed to 'studying' or 'researching' them (Creswell, 2009). In essence, participatory research seeks to galvanise the voices of participants to make sense of their own situation and contribute to bringing about the societal changes that they desire.

The study

The purpose of the ensuing study was to investigate leading early years professionals' perspectives on improving the preschool sector in Singapore. The study involved a sample of twenty-seven participants, all of whom are established leaders in the early childhood field. A third of the sample participants have more than twenty years of experience working with young children and another third with more than ten years of experience in the preschool sector. The study employed a mixed-method approach, based on a survey questionnaire and follow-up semi-structured individual interviews. A group interview was also carried out with five preschool principals and teachers. Data collection was undertaken over approximately twelve weeks and the interview data was transcribed independently. The interview transcripts were categorised according to emergent themes and analysed by two independent reviewers. The data was also coded thematically and analysed using qualitative research software,

NVIVO7, to ensure the validity of the results. The findings from the interviews and questionnaire responses helped to form an in-depth picture of participants' perspectives of the preschool landscape in Singapore, the issues and challenges. The following research questions framed the overall study:

1. What are leading early childhood professionals' perceptions of the issues and challenges facing the preschool sector in Singapore?

2. What strategies are needed to raise the quality of services for children and families?

3. What can be done at the level of policy to ensure systemic and sustainable change within the preschool sector for the benefit of all children and families?

What makes the research 'participatory'?

Researchers within the field of early childhood have highlighted the potential role of participatory research in advancing knowledge of the field and in some cases, for the monitoring of government policies (Coad & Evans, 2008; Kellett, 2010; Nolan, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2013). As the importance of early childhood and young children's lives continues to garner a high profile in the policy agenda of governments globally, there is an increasing drive towards the use of participatory research to directly influence policy and practice. Some of these participatory approaches are often synonymous with research involving children, where 'participation' entails the engagement of children as participants. For the majority of studies in the early childhood field, children's voices and participation are actively sought at various stages of the research process. MacNaughton and Smith (2005) describe an approach to participatory research in early childhood as an 'ethico-political engagement with young children', as a way of raising social justice and equity concerns. Past and recent research dominating the field illustrated many examples of studies that consult with and actively involve children in research, and which promote the use of 'participatory techniques' designed to engage and establish a rapport with the children-participants (Alderson, 2000; Boyden & Ennew, 1997; Christensen, Pia, & James, 2000; Clarke, Kjorholt & Moss, 2005; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; O'Reilly, Ronzoni & Dogra, 2013). However, this paper argues that in a multi-disciplinary field such as early childhood and the social sciences, the notion of

participatory research for advocacy in a broader sense, adds another important dimension to the field; and one which has drawn somewhat lesser attention compared to the more commonplace child-participation approach. An important and emerging body of research includes participatory methodology for advocacy purposes which focuses primarily although not exclusively, on the role and perspectives of adult-stakeholders as collaborators in the research process and contributors to the ongoing efforts for early childhood advocacy. To this extent, more recent international literature are starting to recognise the political, social and moral impetus for using participatory approaches to promote greater engagement with stakeholders and professionals in the early childhood community to directly influence policy decision-making and initiatives (Bennett & Tayler, 2006; McKinnon, 2013).

Conceptually, social capital theory serves as a useful frame of reference for participatory research in the way that it empowers participants to build on their agency and social capital (their experiences, knowledge, networks and other forms of social interactions) to garner collective action for the better good of society (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1994). The emphasis on participants' voices and engagement in the participatory research process resonates with what Coleman (1994) describes as the 'functional nature' of social capital in mobilising the ability of individuals and their resources to motivate change and alleviate existing social inequities. At its core, the concept of social capital theory focuses on the value of social networks, and the deep interactions and relationships developed over shared norms, trusts and values. This concept can be applied to much of participatory research with its emphasis on the value of participants' role to inform the research process and their contribution as active participants in generating information that can be used to influence policy processes and social change. As a conceptual framework, social capital theory also contributes to the notion of participatory research as a 'pedagogical process', by nature of its 'ongoing and multifaceted process of learning, advocacy and action for social change' in enabling participants a stronger sense of ownership over the research process and agenda (Ling et al., 2010).

Informed by the conceptual framework above, a distinct aspect of the national study undertaken in Singapore is its methodological approach, with the researcher working in collaboration with the commissioning body and participants to advocate for change in the policy and governance of preschool services for children and families. Internationally, a

dominant discourse within the preschool community is to raise the profile of the early childhood and advocate for better policies, governance, and services. This is evident from an increasing focus placed by many governments on policy developments to improve the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) (UNESCO, 2012). Over the last decade, research and advocacy efforts undertaken by international organisations such as the OECD, UNICEF and UNESCO have been significant in moving the early childhood agenda forwards and engendering policy reforms in countries globally (UNICEF, 2012). Certainly, within Singapore and the Asia-pacific region, a plethora of national policies relating to early childhood have been initiated by countries in the region - East Asia, the South and West Asia sub-regions in an effort to improve provisions (UNESCO, 2010; UNICEF, 2012; Rao & Sun, 2010). Policy developments in the region have provided the impetus for much needed public advocacy and research for better governance and increased government investment in the sector. Undoubtedly, strong international advocacy and public interest in children have influenced the emergence of participatory research practices and approaches in the field.

Outline of the research process

From the outset of the study, a participatory methodology was adopted with a focus on optimising the involvement of participants and maximising the impact of the research in order to invoke reforms at a systemic level, in this case at the level of policy and provision. The motivation for the study was initiated by the funding body and its network of stakeholders to raise key concerns which they wanted to investigate and 'do something about'; more specifically, to provide a research-led "ground-up" approach to inform the consideration of government policies in the early childhood sector by engaging the voices of key stakeholders in advocating for better services and provision for children and families.

In any participatory research, the key areas of consideration often relate to how 'participation' is enacted, in what stages of the research process, and the nature of the relationship between the researcher and stakeholders. Researchers have argued for the importance of acknowledging the 'rights' of participants in participatory research and a collaborative process where participants and researchers both benefit (Datta et al., 2014; Finn,

1994; Pain & Francis, 2003). Taking this into account, a first step in the project was to create a platform on which the voices of the participants can be listened to and heard, and actively engaged in a process through which they were able to participate and contribute to the research process. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) assert that a distinctive aspect of participatory research which sets it apart from any other methodology is the relationship between the researcher and participants. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature that considers the shifting, reciprocal relationships between researchers and participants (Datta et al., 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gristy, 2014). By recognising stakeholders' autonomy and rights in contributing to the research agenda at the outset of this study, the researcher becomes a learner and co-constructor of knowledge in the project, rather than a lead researcher; while the role of participants are as collaborators and advocates of their cause, capable of articulating their own agenda for the research. The sample of early childhood participants were consulted from the outset of the study on setting the research agenda and questions. Prior to the start of the research, several planning and discussion meetings were held with representatives of the funding body and emails were sent to all participants to elicit their views about the relevance of the research, and why they felt it is an important and timely area of focus. A scoping review was also initiated through discussions with an advisory group of early childhood professionals in the preschool community to understand their views of the sector and key areas of concern. In this way, the participants were involved in identifying the research focus and key areas of enquiry. This in turn influenced the research questions and informed the design of the questionnaire and subsequent interview schedule that were used during the research.

A combination of purposeful and maximum variation sampling was used in the study as a sampling strategy for participant recruitment. Drawing on the researcher's and early childhood professionals' knowledge of the sector and professional networks, the sample of participants were recruited from the preschool sector in Singapore. The idea of a purposeful sample is to specifically target participants who will best inform the research process and who share a common motivation for advocacy of the sector. The participants were selected based on their professional designation as established leaders in the early childhood community. In the process of drawing up a participant list, a natural snowball effect developed as a few of the participants suggested the names of others who shared similar views on the subject and were

important stakeholders in the field, even if they were not necessarily within the same discipline or sector. To this extent, the participants played an active role in building the sample population. Finn (1994) argues that the central philosophy of participatory research is the ownership of the participants over the research process. In the context of the study, this entailed the involvement of participants right from the start of the research in the sampling and design. By working closely with participants, a much broader range of participant-expertise and networks were engaged in the process, than would otherwise have been available to the researcher. Participant-involvement in the sampling process also ensured that participants with the relevant knowledge and expertise were recruited. In addition, while recruiting the desired sample, a maximum variation sampling was also employed to ensure the greatest variation in participant characteristics, in order to reflect as closely as possible the diversity of stakeholders in the preschool field where professionals often come from different disciplines and work across sectors. One benefit of having a maximum variation sample is to account for the inherent differences among participants across the sample population, as key informants within the target community; in this case the preschool community (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). The final list of participants comprised a wide range of senior professionals who were highly regarded in their fields, including psychology, clinical therapy, child health, social services and education, senior managers, director of services and preschool principals, all of whom work directly or indirectly with children and families. A common characteristic of the sample participants was that they all worked in organisations that were autonomous from the government in order to gain an independent insight into the sector.

The methods of the study: an online survey questionnaire and follow-up interviews were discussed at length with the participant-stakeholders regarding the appropriateness and feasibility of the research instruments. The online questionnaire was devised in the first phase of the study for use as a scoping review to collect a broad survey of participants' views of the preschool sector and their perceptions of the main challenges which they felt required addressing. The aim of the questionnaire was also to gather general demographic details of the participants such as their professional roles and designation within the sector. The questionnaire was piloted with a group of four professionals to assess the design and clarity of the questions. The final participant list and rate of response was relatively high at 96% for both the questionnaire and follow-up interviews. Building on the responses to the survey

questionnaire, the second phase of the study consisted of follow-up telephone and face-to-face interviews. The mode of interviews was dependent on participants' consent and choice. An interview schedule was drawn up with regular feedback and discussions with participants, with the aim of gathering more in-depth data of individual participants' views of the challenges facing the preschool sector and ways in which the sector as a whole can be improved. The aim of this second phase was to focus on key issues that had emerged from the questionnaire responses and to pursue follow-up questions in order to verify uncertainties or fill in gaps in the data. The data collected from the telephone interviews, together with the questionnaire responses, helped to form a much more in depth and richer picture of participants' perspectives. Each interview lasted between forty-five to ninety minutes. The interviews provided early childhood professionals with the opportunity of narrating and elaborating on their views and experiences in their own terms, with the aim of drawing on their local knowledge and insights of the field. To this extent, the participatory model of the study helped to sustain the advocacy agenda of the research, in supporting what Finn (1994) describes as 'a process of enquiry in which private problems become public questions' (27). The unstructured interview schedule and the inclusion of open-ended questions such as 'what other issues do you feel should be explored as part of this research?' and 'what can be done to ensure that the research makes a difference to early childhood policy?' provided opportunities for participants to extend the research agenda and feedback on the research process. The diverse participant responses from each interview illustrated the complex challenges that the sector was facing and more importantly, the level of advocacy that participants felt was needed to bring about changes to the sector.

The collective voices of the early childhood professionals, particularly from the interview data, provided a pivotal drive towards a shared advocacy for children and families. For example, a shared concern highlighted by all participants was the accessibility and affordability of preschool services, where quality early childhood education was largely perceived as unaffordable and unattainable to the lower-income families, even though they have the most to gain from it. Francis, a senior social worker commented, '*you can pay S$100 to S$1,000 to put a child in preschool education and each preschool offers you something different*', and a similar issue is raised by Joycelyn, a preschool principal in the voluntary non for-profit sector, '*We have commercial, private preschools that charge a lot but does the*

average Singaporean go there? No. They can't afford it', thus highlighting that the large disparities in preschool services. A common response raised by participants in the study was that in order to ensure equality and accessibility in the sector, the role of the government is important in either the financing of preschool services or the regulation of preschool fees, in order to ensure the affordability of services. As preschool principal states:

'*If the government is willing to pay, [then] the government needs to invest. The cheapest kindergarten charges S$100 to S$120. It is 10 times more than the primary schools. Preschool is so important and you make it so expensive, much more than primary schools.*'

The participatory intent of the study and participants' contributions as outlined here, helped to articulate the professional stance of the participants in regards to the need for systematic improvement in the preschool sector. This drive to engender social transformation resonates with Finn's (1994) description of the 'promise of participatory research' (25) in acknowledging the centrality of values and politics to the research process for a social justice agenda.

All research, certainly research in the early childhood field, happens in a social context which shapes both the research process as well as outcomes. A key focus throughout the study was the partnership between the researcher, commissioning body and early childhood professionals as collaborators in the research process, in ensuring that the potential impact of the research is relevant to their cause. Datta et al. (2014) emphasise the responsibility of the researcher in building trustful relationships with participants and taking a political stand on behalf of the participant community. In the context of the study, this entailed enabling participants to take ownership over the research agenda to advocate for better preschool services, to better understand the problematic landscape of the preschool sector, and to help participants find possible ways of articulating their views for the advocacy and improvement of services. As Bourke (2009) states, participatory research is 'a means by which community members are given a voice, their concerns raised and inequities made clear'. Ultimately, the 'participatory' nature of the study lies not just in the methods utilised, but in the ethos, attitude and intent of the researcher and participants in determining how, by whom and for whom the research is conceptualised and conducted for.

Reflections on methodology: Lessons learnt

Research relating to young children and families in early childhood has contributed to a growing understanding of children, childhoods and methodologies. This paper has so far discussed the participatory and advocacy intent of a national study undertaken in the preschool sector in Singapore. Drawing on careful reflection on the methodological issues, the aim of this discussion is also to illustrate some of the conceptual and practical challenges that the researcher faced while navigating the complex relations with participants and the different ways in which participatory research can lead to important implications for early years policy and the preschool sector as a whole. Throughout the research, advocacy for better quality services for children and families remained at the heart of the project. One of the guiding principles of the study was to engender transformative change at the level of policy to improve the preschool sector. A strength of the study is that it brought the voices and perspectives of all participants to the fore. The main principles of participation offered different possibilities for participants to become involved in the research process at different stages and levels. However, while recognising the powerful implications of using participatory research, this paper does not purport to promote one approach as more effective than any other. Rather, this paper offers reflections on the research – its process, design and methodology – to consider how research in early childhood with a participatory and advocacy intent comes with challenges and is never straightforward.

Participatory research for early childhood advocacy takes place in a complex social and political environment. The study shows that adopting a participatory methodology can be a powerful tool for advocacy purposes, even if it does not present a ready panacea for the problems besetting the research issue, in this case, the challenges facing the preschool sector. Three key lessons can be gleamed from the study. Firstly, it highlighted the 'situated nature' of participatory research in that the term 'participation' often means different things to different people, and the varying degree to which participants were involved in the research contributed to the complexity of the study. Researchers have emphasised the nature of participatory methodology as being essentially contextually bound, characterised by the shifting power relations between the participants and researcher involved (Herz, 1996; Gristy, 2014). In principle, the research was meant to enable participants to be actively involved

12

throughout the research process - in the design, implementation and evaluation of the project. However, in reality, their 'participation' was rather uneven and discontinuous. For example, some participants' scepticism of the participatory approach which surfaced early on in the study gave rise to some tensions. Two preschool leaders articulated their anxieties about the intentions of the project, voicing their fears of the repercussions of being involved and whether it is worth investing their time and energy in the project, and the fear of being mis-interpreted. One participant, an early childhood professional in the social welfare sector withdrew her consent to participate mid-way in the project, while another initially withdrew her consent but later reinstated her wish to participate. Another participant preferred a more informal approach to participation by engaging with the research and contributing her views from a distance over phone conversations but was reluctant to engage more formally in the interview and questionnaire process. Thus, in a project where stakeholder participation was the primary focus, the process was complicated by the fact that participants' involvement was somewhat unpredictable, even when participation and formal consent were secured. Datta et al. (2014) suggest the importance of being attentive to the role of participants when using participatory research as the interrelationships between participants and the researcher often appears more complex than those described in the extant literature. Despite apparent commitment to the principle of 'participating' in the project to advocate for the sector, the research showed that achieving effective and consistent participation can be a challenge. This is especially the case when there are the different discourses of 'participation' emerging through the perspectives of diverse participant-stakeholders and their perceived involvement in the project. What this suggests is the important role of the researcher in communicating what 'participation' means, and the need to problematise and rethink understandings of research, especially when positioned in a cross-cultural context and undertaking research in a culturally distinct world.

A second key lesson to emerge was the issue of participants' perceived impact of the research and the ways in which their participation could bring about lasting change in the early childhood sector. Banks et al. (2013) raise the issue of conflicts of interest among multiple partners or participants as part of the everyday ethics of participatory research. While the majority of participants valued the opportunity to be involved in the research and saw their participation as contributing to collective advocacy in helping to bring about change in the

sector, a minority had apprehensions. A few participants entered the research with preconceived ideas of the desired outcomes and their own professionally driven idealised agendas. One participant, a preschool teacher, insisted that her participation in the project was not just to advocate for better services for children and families, but to campaign specifically for more funding for her own private childcare setting. Another participant, a senior early childhood manager, wanted to be involved in the research as a way of raising the profile of her setting's services in their work with women and children through their faith-based organisation. Participants' expectations were inadvertently diverse, and for some participants the purpose of their participation and the aims of the project became increasingly blurred as the research progressed. The participants' diverse interpretations of the research and competing intentions of contributing to the study may well illustrate the 'messy realities of participatory research' (1) that Gristy (2014) alludes to, and the responsibility of the researcher to be aware of participants' concerns and to clarify with them the boundaries of the study. Part of the challenge of the researcher was to manage expectations and maintain realistic outcomes of the study, but another aspect was to also manage the tensions between the need to fulfil the advocacy agenda of the research on one hand and the paradoxes of participants' expectations on the other. As a result, much time during the research process was spent clarifying participants' expectations in terms of the research aims and outcomes. Inevitably, this has ethical implications for the strategies and participatory practices adopted during the study and raises questions about which stakeholders would ultimately benefit from the research and whose agenda was being served. In this sense, a third key lesson to arise from the research is the importance of investing considerable time and resources to enable participants to develop their own understanding of the impetus and purpose of their participation. Just as important is the need to be explicit about the overall aims and intent of the collaborative project, in order to develop a more informed and holistic understanding of the realities and complexities of the participant's role. A distinctive aspect of participatory research is the researcher's engagement and partnerships with participants. As Byrne et al. (2009) concedes, the negotiation of the research relationships occupies much of the time and resources of any participatory research project.

Significantly, the study shows that participatory research for advocacy purposes is not straightforward, not least because the relationship between the researcher and participants is

inherently complex and sometimes tenuous (Byrne et al., 2009; Datta et al., 2014; Robson, 2011). The underlying principle of participatory research in promoting a collective sense of empowerment as a process of building reciprocal relationships between the researcher and participants (Datta et al., 2014; Robson, 2011) to bring about social advocacy is more of a challenge in practice than in rhetoric. Some scholars contend that participatory research assumes an 'emancipatory role' in that it acknowledges the central role of participants and their inherent local knowledge and expertise of the field in a way that their values and views are instrumental in advancing the research agenda (Datta et al., 2014; Robson, 2011). It is therefore important that participatory researchers take a critical stance in developing a multi-dimensional understanding of 'participation' when adopting and implementing such an approach. In addition, a key challenge in participatory research for advocacy is also the difficulty in measuring and evidencing the outcomes and impact of the research in informing policy and leading to advocacy, and vice versa. A significant knowledge gap which needs to be addressed, and a potential direction for future research, is how and to what extent stakeholder 'participation' has actually served to bring about transformative change – at a personal, social, institutional or policy level. Certainly within the field of childhood, there is a need for researchers to engage with key stakeholders to develop more socially relevant research, to push methodological boundaries, and to develop new innovative approaches for new knowledge generation.

Impact of the study and policy implications

The project's main intention was to galvanize the views of key stakeholders to advocate for policy change for better governance and delivery of preschool services in Singapore. To achieve the intended aims, the project adopted a participatory methodology through the engagement of early childhood professionals as more than just participants but active agents in shaping the research agenda. Towards the end of the project, a series of press release were published in the local English and Mandarin newspapers to highlight the findings of the study, alongside a couple of televised reports (RazorTv, 2012). The aim was to engage with policy makers and the wider public in raising awareness of the importance of ECEC. A cover article

titled 'A Long Road Ahead for Singapore's Early Childhood Education' was published in a special issue of the local education magazine, Edunation (2012). The article highlighted, 'all twenty-seven experts agreed that a high quality pre-school education would provide our children with a better future, especially those born to poor families. The government was therefore nudged further towards the realisation that an investment in this area is crucial for the country's growth.' (16); The article further notes the project's impact on raising public awareness of the challenges facing the sector, '[t]he independent research has indeed awakened us from our slumber, and caused us to face reality' (41). Another report in the local newspaper Todayonline (2012) highlighted 'a raft of sweeping, urgent reforms to improve early childhood education' with strong advocacy to 'make preschool education free' (Todayonline, 2012: 1).

In the wake of the study, questions were also posed by a Member of Parliament to the government regarding concerns raised by the study on the high turnover of the workforce and building capacity of preschool provisions especially in targeted local neighbourhoods where there is a higher proportion of young children and families (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS) Parliamentary Questions, 2012). The impact of the study not only contributed to important public debates about the role of preschool services in the country but raised significant policy implications. In an article on 'Public Policy in Early Childhood Education and Care', Hassan (2007) suggests there are many competing arguments that shape the way preschool services are governed. He asserts that questions of governance in terms of both the planning and development of strategies for the delivery of early year's services and the extent to which these services are privatised or publicly funded are key dilemmas for all governments to resolve (Hassan, 2007).

The study raises fundamental questions about the way national-level policies relating to early childhood care and education are shaped, including whose responsibility it is to deliver and maintain preschool services, and what type of services are needed- how can policies strengthen the advocacy for quality early childhood services? And how can these services be made accessible and equitable to all children? There are no easy answers but as the findings from the study have shown, these are questions faced by many stakeholders involved in the care and education of young children across the sector.. As Hassan (2007) contends, the way ECEC is shaped in a country is influenced fundamentally by the 'basic value judgements [that]

societies make about the child and childhood' (2). The value that a community or society places on preschool education inevitably determines the overall policies and governance of the sector.

Conclusion

Participatory research for early childhood advocacy is about ensuring that the research undertaken is socially relevant and beneficial to end-users. It is also about respecting and understanding the people with and for whom the research concerns. The use of participatory research in the early childhood field has the potential of offering wide-reaching impact. As a conceptual model, it provokes the need for more philosophical and methodological transformations in the way we approach and conduct research. As the preschool sector continues to evolve in Singapore and internationally, a first crucial step to improving the sector is by involving the voices of stakeholders in research to advocate and raise critical questions about policy and practice. The collective views of the twenty-seven participants who contributed their voices to the study have raised recommendations for further policy development, including the setting up of an integrated inter-ministerial statutory board for the sole purpose of overseeing the early childhood sector.(MOE, 2012). The study offers an example of the strengths, challenges as well as lessons learnt in the use of participatory research for early childhood advocacy, with powerful implications for policy and the wider community.

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