


Engaging children to make evaluation products more child-focused



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Dates:

Received: 27 Feb. 2023

Accepted: 29 Nov. 2023

Published: 28 Feb. 2024

How to cite this article:

Jansen van Rensburg, M.S., 2024, 'Engaging children to make evaluation products more child-focused', *African Evaluation Journal* 12(1), a684. <https://doi.org/10.4102/aej.v12i1.684>

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Background: Participation by less-assertive groups is critical to enhancing evaluations. The participation of children is mostly seen in data collection activities. Engagement with children should take place during all the phases of the evaluation process for true transformation of child rights and protection.

Objectives: This article reflects on the process of developing child-friendly materials by engaging with children throughout the process. This article intends to describe the engagement process so that it can be adapted and applied to the development of other materials such as evaluation reports.

Method: The process involved iterative steps from deciding on the content, developing activities to convey the information, creating images and visual elements, editing the information for age-appropriateness and relevance and, finally, testing the activities and disseminating the end product.

Results: The children enjoyed the development of the documents. The documents were more user-friendly for a child audience, which ensured that the information shared was more likely to be understood and used and contribute to child rights work. Flexibility in timing the activities and roles played by children and a celebratory event that acknowledged the contributions of every child contributed to the success.

Conclusion: This process can easily be replicated for the development of evaluation products. This will enhance the likelihood of children claiming their rights and holding programmes accountable.

Contribution: The process as described could be adapted further to enhance child participation throughout the evaluation cycle.

Keywords: child-friendly materials; child participation; innovative process; child rights; evaluation cycle; children in evaluation; Africa.

Introduction

Child participation

While participatory approaches have been used in research and evaluation for many years (Brandon 1998; Daigneault 2014; Greene 1987; Gregory 2000), stakeholder participation focused on the data collection stage in the evaluation process (Campilan 2000; Chambers 2009; Guijt 2014). However, participation is important during all the phases of the evaluation process, including planning, development of methods, data analysis and reporting of results. This is all the more critical as the utility of evaluations and their transformative power increase when evaluation reports and products are more widely accessible. The influence of evaluation findings further increases when stakeholders are involved in the development of the reports (Patton 2008).

The participation of children in evaluation has been debated, and the aim is to have evaluation studies and research to not merely include children in some stages of the process, but that are child-led. According to Hart (1992), participation is the process of sharing in decisions that affect a person's life. According to the National Child Participation Framework (NCPF), child participation is 'the active involvement of children in decisions, processes, programmes and policies that affect their lives' (Save the Children South Africa and Department of Social Development 2018). However, child participation is often not regarded with the same seriousness as participation of other groups. Children are viewed as unexperienced and their participation as ethically risky (Björnsdóttir & Einarisdóttir 2018; Driskell 2002; Freeman & Tranter 2011; Hörschelmann & Van Blerk 2011; James, Jenks & Prout 1998).

Note: Special Collection: UNICEF Engaging with Children and Young People. The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Engaging with Children and Young People in Evaluation Towards a More Equitable World,' under the expert guidance of guest editors Dr. Michele Tarsilla and Mrs. Dalila Ahamed.

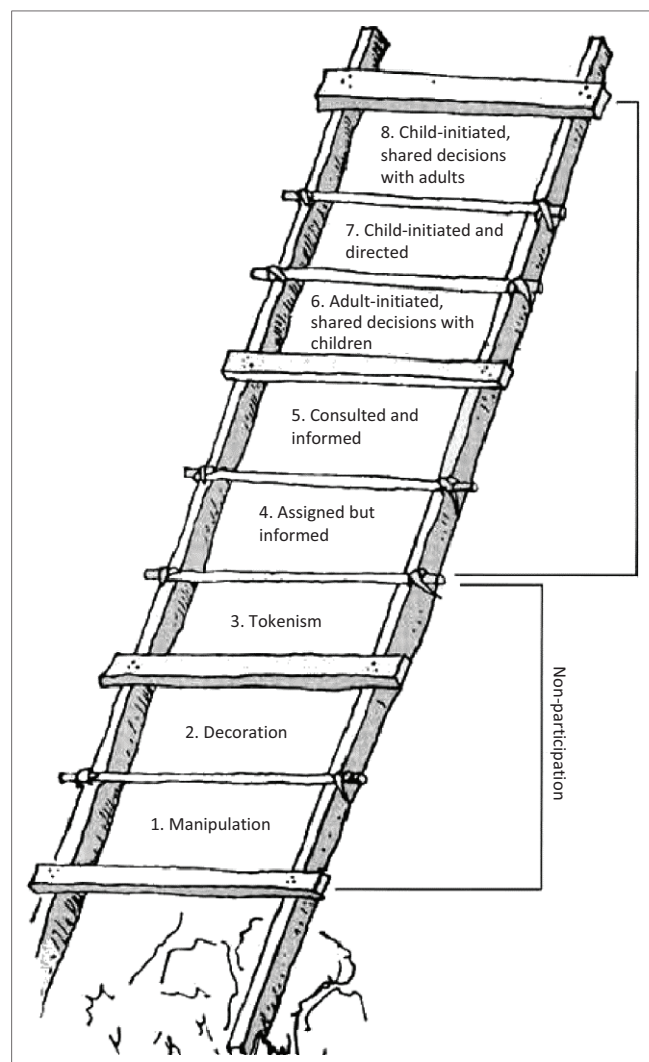
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Hart (1992) divides participation of children into eight levels (see Figure 1). The lowest three are regarded as non-participation and include manipulation, decoration and tokenism. The participation levels range from providing information and consultation (without an expectation of impact on outcomes), to the top level being child-initiated decisions that are then shared with adults. Most child participation today is still adult-led with shared decision-making. Although efforts have been made in advocating for child participation in evaluation (Samaranayake & Zaveri 2014) and in developing materials to enhance skills by thought leaders such as Save the Children and UNICEF, true child-led evaluations are scarce (Bonati 2006; eds. Boyden & Ennew 1997; Jamieson et al. 2021; Lansdown & O’Kane 2014; Plan 2018; Pradhan 2007; Wilkinson 2000).

The main consideration is that children have a right to participation in any decision, process, programme or policy that affects their lives. Participation is also linked to many other rights (e.g. education and health). The obligation to



Source: Hart, R., 1992, *Children's participation: From Tokenism to citizenship*, in *Innocenti Essays*, 4, UNICEF, viewed 22 November 2019, from http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/childrens_participation.pdf

FIGURE 1: Young people's participation in projects.

ensure wider participation by children is stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1990) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (Organization of African Unity 1990).

There are often concerns raised about the ethics of involving children in evaluation processes. Participation should be meaningful, transparent, ethical and safe and, therefore, in the best interest of the child. The consideration should remain, though, if the act of not including children does not create more risks and danger than including them. For example, no matter how well an adult knows a child and acts in their best interest, they cannot bring the child's voice. The danger is twofold when the opinions of children are ignored. Firstly, the interventions, evaluations or documents (such as policies) are not valid. Secondly, the children are not interested in the final product as it does not include them. Consulting with children has legitimate and serious ethical concerns that imply stricter ethical principles to avoid negative mental and physical harm. However, involvement of children does not imply employment or abuse, and these cannot be used as an excuse to exclude children. Following ethical protocols and ensuring age-appropriate involvement are critical. While making all efforts to safeguard children, we can allow them to take their place as active agents and therefore enhance the work with, for and by children. The benefits of including children are not only related to the children themselves, such as raising their confidence but also benefits the society at large (Ansell 2005; Björnsdóttir & Einarsdóttir 2018; O’Kane 2003).

Children as partners in dissemination of information

As the main focus of programmes and evaluations shifted to sustainable transformation of systems, we need to consider including children in more than only data collection activities and isolated parts of the evaluation process (Van den Berg, Magro & Adrien 2021). It is therefore important to develop and include participation processes in all phases of the evaluation cycle, including dissemination of information, documents and reports. Children are then actively involved in developing materials that are important for access to all children.

This article documents the process on how to develop child-friendly materials (CFMs) not only to illustrate that children can indeed be involved in traditionally adult-led undertakings but also to encourage a cascading of the process to engage with children in disseminating evaluation results. This includes evaluations pertaining to children and those that involved child participation on different levels. This might enhance the efforts made to shift evaluations to not only youth but also child-led and enhance system transformation.

Rationale for the inclusion of children in document development

The importance of developing CFM, such as documents, guidelines and policies, is clear. Children can only participate

in the realisation of their rights if they are aware and can claim those rights and the protection of structures developed for the purpose of protecting and improving children's well-being. To enhance this, it is important to develop child friendly versions (CFVs) of policies and guidelines for child protection. The author worked with various child sector organisations such as the Graça Machel Trust (GMT), Save the Children South Africa and the National Department of Social Development in South Africa to develop child-friendly documents (including the NCPF and the CFV of the complaints mechanism toolkit for African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child [ACERWC]). This ensures that the documents are not only aimed at adults but also that children can access the related content in a manner that is understood by different age groups and with different levels of cognitive abilities.

Child-focused documents should also be accessible to children to ensure that children understand their rights and the procedures to claim those rights. To this end, the 'adult' version of documents is often reformatted by shortening the text, simplifying the academic jargon, adding characters or graphics and changing colour to brighter coloured versions. However, the structure and format of these documents are mainly developed by adults with limited consultation with children.

In order to fill the gap, Resilience Analysis Consulting developed a process whereby children are not only consulted and have limited influence on isolated phases of the process but rather drive the process from deciding on the content to include up to the dissemination and distribution of the final document. The development was an iterative process that included reflective sessions with the children who acted as consultants.¹ It included reflection and revisiting the process during and after any given assignment (Jansen van Rensburg & Jansen van Rensburg 2020).

The result of involving children in all phases of the development of the CFV is that the format is totally different from text heavy documents. It results in interactive documents (activity books with board games and other activities) (Graça Machel Trust 2021; Save the Children 2019). These innovative products actively involve children in learning from as young as 3 years up to 21 years to engage meaningfully with the information. The document can furthermore also be used by parents, educators and other facilitators to develop activities.

The value of including child participants in document development is important. This process ensured that the documents are interactive and therefore user-friendly; it is applicable across a wider age range and relevant for wide use (nationally and even continent-wide), the content is relevant and specific, but most of all it is fun. CFV should be more than pretty pictures and colourful booklets.

1. Child 'consultants' does not imply labour but is assigned to recognise the child participant's expertise.

The purpose of this document is to describe the process developed to ensure participation of children in all phases of document development. It uses the example of the development of CFM on child protection but aims to make it applicable and relevant for the development of other documents such as evaluation reports.

The collaborative process of developing child-friendly materials

Firstly, you need a team of two adults who can facilitate the process. Two adult professional team members facilitated the process and provided technical expertise in the development of documents (including selecting content and activities that compliment the content) and graphic and visual art, including layout and design. The lead consultant facilitated the different processes, managed content and overall document design. The graphic artist provided technical visual expertise, coordinated, edited, scanned and manipulated the electronic visual elements and layout. The conceptual leader managed the overall process, searched for literature and ensured that each group had access to resources and materials. She guided the group processes and collated products. The graphic artist managed the visual elements and the child artists to develop images from different prompts. The artists incorporated the elements and ensured a flow of the visual images throughout the document that complied with technical requirements such as printing and layout. Child 'consultants' assisted with the development of the content, visual elements, editing and testing of the document.

Then you need to provide children with a menu of options of roles and responsibilities to play during the activity. Role and responsibilities include the following:

Children's roles

Content developers and decision-makers

Older children (ages depending on the content and topic) were included to develop the content and make decisions on the relevant materials to include. They also brainstormed different activities to be included in the document that fit the content they selected to include and which was relevant. In some cases, these content developers were already familiar with the materials and information as they also contributed to the 'adult' version of the document. In other cases, children were not involved in the development of the initial materials and a new group had to be formed. This necessitated a restructuring of the first phase to allow more time and more iterative processes working through the original document individually and in groups.

Artists developed visual elements, interactive activities, front page

Child artists assisted with the design of child-friendly activities after briefings about the content to be included (as decided by the content development group). They were

actively involved in selecting and developing visual materials for the document. Some of them also contributed to the conceptual aspects and testing of the activities at different stages of the study.

Editing group

The group edited and validated the document and ensured that it was age-appropriate. An independent group of children edited, tested and validated various versions of the document to ensure that the content and visual elements are age- and cognitively appropriate. They ensured the relevance of the type of language used and the ease of comprehension.

Individual editors

Individual, independent children tested the different activities. A wide range of ages were included in this group and notes made of the age group that would benefit from each activity. Adjustments for content were made to ensure all ages would benefit from information targeting their specific age group.

Child advocates

The child advocates provided feedback on the final version and assisted with decisions such as the front page visual element. They were involved in the launch and distribution of the final printed copies. This ensured that the copies were not distributed to spaces and organisations where it would merely be shelved or rendered useless.

The 10-phase process

An iterative process was followed that included a revision of certain aspects and repeating tasks such as developing visuals and editing for language and comprehension. The following phases were included in the development of the CFV (Figure 2).

The adult facilitators were not only guiding the process but also actively collected feedback about both the product being developed and the process being followed. Adjustments to the process were made as issues arose, such as allowing more time for a specific activity or recruiting additional group members.

Phase 1: Identify the content to be included

This step involved repeated reading of the material and identifying what should be included in the CFV. Having children make decisions about what should be included ensures that adults did not decide but children decided what to communicate and what children should and want to hear.

Some organisations had a child committee or similar structure in place of children who are consulted regularly. Although it might be easy to involve and rely on these individuals, a note of caution is needed. It is important to involve children from outside the organisation (such as artists and editors) to ensure

that there are fresh views and open criticism allowed. It also avoids tokenism or exhausting the same children.

The group then brainstormed possible activities that could be used in the CFV to communicate the messages. They then linked the content to the most appropriate methods. They ensured that all age groups were included by doing an audience or stakeholder analysis (e.g. gender and age groups).

The adult team facilitated the steps in the group process that included a number of sessions according to the familiarity of the children with the material. Some suggestions on activities were contributed by the adults, and actual technical restrictions (such as page layout and numbers) were highlighted.

The adult team worked on the overall structure of the document and aspects such as the interlinkages between sections and activities. The necessary written content was extracted at this stage and the finer details of the activities developed (e.g. the words for the puzzles, instructions for games, etc.) by the adult consultant and presented to the group for their sign-off.

Phase 2: Simplifying the language

The activities and written content and suggested visual elements for the document as a whole and the activities were then presented to the editing group. They made suggestions to improve the text and scrutinised the language to ensure that there was no jargon or unclear words. The main aim was not to focus on the grammar of a single language, but to make it comprehensible for children.

Phase 3: Developing visuals

The artist group was briefed about the content and the activities linked to each one. They also provided input on suggestions by the adult team on visual elements such as interlinking icons, stories and narrative elements and images for each activity. Some images were created by prompts from the adult artist (e.g. creating a colouring-in image about healthcare). The children decided what they wanted to work on; some visuals of the document were created by group work, and some were done by different artists after which the group choose the most appropriate one.

One aspect that has been dealt with differently by commissioning organisation was the adherence to templates and organisational formatting. In one instance, the front page had to be done from stock photos while the other was a painting created by a child artist from prompts given by the organisation.

Phase 4: Editing

The editing team edited the text as the activities were being developed to ensure that the messages were still being conveyed and that activities did not distract from the message.

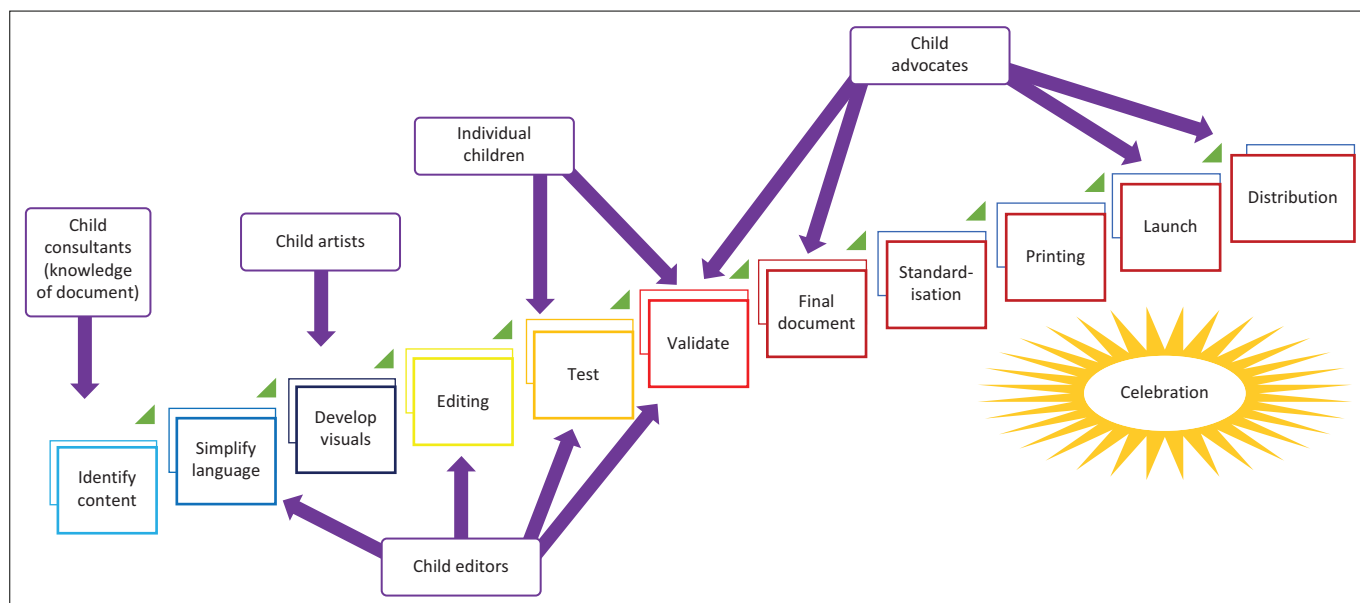


FIGURE 2: Phase and role of child participants.

Phase 5: Testing

Both the editing team and the individual editors tested all activities and checked that every aspect works. This included cutouts such as dice and tokens to be used for the board game, puppets and other aids.

Phase 6: Validate

The editing team and individuals continued to test the activities to see if different age groups would be able to follow the activity and the messages. Care was taken to avoid judgement bias created through testing the same activity by the same individual. Additional editors were recruited when needed. The child advocates (who were familiar with the organisation) were involved to ensure that they understand the method followed and the main aim of the activities.

Phase 7: Final document

The advocates reviewed the final document before printing and made final suggestions. One example was shifting the acknowledgement section to the front.

Phases 8 and 9: Standardisation and printing

This phase included consultation between the graphic artists and the printing team. They formatted, scanned and did the final layout of the document. Subsequently, this stage was moved to start at the beginning due to the different requirements from printers and organisations regarding the electronic version programmes to use (Photoshop vs Illustrator) and different budget implications of printing.

Phase 10: Launch and dissemination

The launch and distribution phases fell outside the scope of work of the consultancy and were part of the commissioning organisation's responsibility, which determined, according

to the budget and other aspects, the type and format of the event. The child advocates formed part of these processes. The aim of their involvement was not for showcasing the child involvement, but to ensure that the appropriate children and child service organisations were aware of the documents and received the documents.

Formal feedback sessions and celebratory event

Various formal feedback sessions were included to monitor the progress and welfare of the participants. The most important of these were the formal closure of the project and the celebratory session held after the final printed copies were available. Certificates of appreciations, small gifts and copies of the books were handed to each participant during an event with their caregivers. This was arranged by the consultants as an appreciation event. This was highlighted by the children as a critical event when a reflective study was conducted (Jansen van Rensburg & Jansen van Rensburg 2020).

Ethics

This article describes the processes followed during different assignments and did not involve any participants, including children. This article is a meta reflection and did not involve any new data collection. All ethical protocols were followed during the initial processes, guarded according to the commissioning organisations and followed internal ethical clearance procedures at the time of the assignments. The initial ethical behaviour included that all team members signed and abided by the commissioning organisation's child safeguarding code of conduct and underwent background checks. All engagements with children were age-appropriate, ethically sound, and upheld child rights and rights of research participants. Informed consent was obtained from parents or caregivers prior to any engagements and assent was obtained from children themselves before any interactions.

Key elements to enhance the documents

There are a few aspects that are important to consider when developing the documents:

1. The use of icons as linkages throughout the document enhances the flow of the book and it provides supports for the information. These can be key aspects such as principles or simply icons that represent the audience and are then used throughout the document. This is important to ensure that information is not overwhelming and that linkages are easily traceable throughout the document. The icons can simply represent the principles or spaces (e.g. a little house for home, a stethoscope for healthcare). Common African birds were used as narrators in one instance and different traditional hats in another book.
2. Wordless stories are stories that contain no words and can be used by young children and caregivers who are illiterate. These pictures are rich in information and visually attractive. Children can identify details in the picture and develop their own characters and stories. These are powerful to include in CFM (Wiesner 2021).
3. Interactive games convey information more effectively. This can include boardgames printed as part of the document. For example, snakes and ladders or other board games can use prompts and questions about the topic at each step or block. The player then moves forward after answering correctly. This allows learning by all the participants and not only the specific player. It is not difficult to develop paper-based tokens and dice as cutouts that are then included in the printing of the document.
4. It is important to include a variety of activities. Activities for different age groups should be included. This can range from identification and linking simple objects as symbols for key concepts, simple colour-in activities, instructions for developing lyrics for songs with a specific theme or designing a breaking news story about a specific topic. Some activities can be in the book such as word searches or can be prompts to play games outside such as hopscotch with a specific theme.

Lessons learned during the process

Enjoyment of the children

All the different children's groups who were engaged with during the process felt proud to be part of the process (Jansen van Rensburg & Jansen van Rensburg 2020). They enjoyed themselves in the role that they fulfilled.

Participation of children

The level of participation of children was above expectation. The competency of children is often underestimated (Malone & Hartung 2010). For example, children are able to incorporate aspects such as equality into their work without being prompted or made aware. Adults can learn from children in this regard.

Early engagement of different stakeholders

Early inclusion of the persons, organisations or departments responsible for the final document (e.g. graphic or layout aspects) is critical. This will ensure consistent use of technological applications and other requirements. This will in turn save time and resources.

Defining roles and responsibilities

The role of the visual artist can never be underestimated. It was a critical factor to have an artist that not only understands children but also actively engages with child artists on a daily basis. Children's roles were also fluid, and they were allowed to be part of other tasks (e.g. artists as editors, etc.), bringing new insights into the development of the document. The first engagement with children to define the audience, content and format of the document was important.

Flexibility

The success of the project rested mainly on the flexibility that was allowed. This includes flexibility around roles mentioned earlier, reacting to unexpected events (such as cancelling of the second group due to unrest) and the validation workshop. All these challenges were solved in a manner that actually presented a more robust product.

Debriefing and celebratory session

The debriefing sessions were important informal events that checked in on the children's energy levels, enjoyment and to obtain feedback about the process in general and debriefing of possible effects of participation. The final celebratory event provided an important space to show acknowledgement and to provide feedback to the children on the value of the final document. The event was a bit more formal, included family members and was in the form of a party. Printed copies of the documents were handed to each child, with a small gift and a certificate of appreciation. Most schools in South Africa give awards to children for community service, and the certificates of participation and appreciation were also submitted to the schools for points. The children marvelled at seeing their work and names in print, sharing their copies with friends, family and in some instances very proud grandparents. These events are small with about 6–8 children in each group and of low cost with budget only for some refreshments and small gifts. These were covered by the consultant and did not form part of the assignment budget. This was for two reasons: firstly, to prevent any misunderstanding that children were employed, and secondly, because it was a personal appreciation and not on behalf of the commissioning organisation. Organisations contributed the printed copies at no cost.

Recommendations for replication in evaluation dissemination

Child-focused documents are essential versions of policy and process documents in the child rights and protection sectors.

These formats need to be developed for all documents related to children. The uptake of evaluation recommendations and the sharing of findings are also important to reach children to hold duty bearers accountable. It is, therefore, important to not only share information with children as audience members, but also to involve them in selecting relevant and important information to be shared. The audience for evaluations are wider than donors and other adults, such as programme staff. We should include children as readers and writers.

Children should be involved in all the stages and decisions made in the development of these documents. In evaluation studies, children are often only included in data collection, either as source of information or in collecting information. Similarly, we can include children to develop images or to edit documents for age-appropriate use of language. This process involves children from the early phase of audience analysis and selecting content to the dissemination phase. This would be possible for evaluations as certain key principles can be selected and applied. For example, during some evaluation phases it would be more appropriate to engage with children who are familiar with the organisation (including the specific aims of the programme interventions), while during other phases this is not a requirement (development of images or child-friendly data collection tools). The key is to be flexible and design a participatory approach that includes all stages of the evaluation cycle.

The role played by each individual child and the impact of their contributions should be formally acknowledged and celebrated. This aspect was highlighted in the reflective study that followed after the development of this process (Jansen van Rensburg & Jansen van Rensburg 2020). This study was co-conducted by a child author.

Including children in child-friendly document development is critical if we want to really make a difference in their lives. It is not difficult, and children have an especially important role to play to ensure that these documents are reaching the intended audience in a way that is relevant and appropriate. The recommendation is that more documents are reworked in this manner and that existing policies, frameworks and guidelines are reworked to ensure they are used more widely. Documents that focus on specific vulnerable groups (including visually impaired and deaf children) will be enhanced by including children from those groups in the process.

The applicability of this process and design for evaluations are twofold. Firstly, it illustrates that children can be meaningfully involved in all stages of the evaluation process, including making decisions about evaluation aims and designs up to disseminating the information more meaningfully. Secondly, the process itself can be replicated to the development of child-focused materials and CFMs from evaluation studies. Using the same process that was

used here for child-focused guidelines and policies can also be used for evaluation reports. Children have a right to have documents that communicate key findings, recommendations and obligations that pertain to their lives. This will enable greater accountability and system transformation.

Conclusion

This description of the process followed to develop CFM illustrates the possibility of including children in all phases of the dissemination process. The contribution of this work is to highlight the relevance and contribution that children make to the process of disseminating and applying evaluation findings. The process was designed to include different steps or phases that were iterative in nature and adjusted to fit the circumstances that arose. Different types of expertise were needed at different stages similar to the evaluation processes. This can be applied to the evaluation cycle and will need only recognition that children are able and capable of contributing meaningfully at all stages. Apart from the relevance of the process and design for evaluation studies, this description can be implemented to the development of more CFM from evaluation findings. The phases and instructions can be applied to written documents to ensure that the child audience is reached, that they are informed and able to claim their rights and hold programmes and organisations accountable. The inclusion of children in the development of various evaluation products in itself will contribute to systemic change that could transform child protection and child rights work at all stages of child development.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

M.S.J.v.R. contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship or publication of this article.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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