

Actualisation of Children's Participation Rights

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Editorial

Childhood is that period during which persons are subject to a set of rules and regulations unique to them, and one that does not apply to members of other social categories. Moreover, childhood is a period in a person's life during which he/she is neither expected nor allowed to fully participate in various domains of social life (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994 p.251).

Children's human rights and citizenship perspectives frame this international, multi-disciplinary special issue of *Global Studies of Childhood*. Polish doctor and pedagogue, Janusz Korczak first proposed the idea of rights for children in the early decades of the twentieth century. The legacy of his vision and devoted advocacy for children's rights led to the establishment of legislation for children's rights. Children first received social rights through the 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the League of Nations, which was then endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1959 (Van Bueren, 1995). However, there was no reference to civil or political rights, as the purpose of these rights was to protect children and not to increase their autonomy (Coady, 2008). Children have been considered better served by human rights legislation in that such legislation has worked to protect the rights of those not protected by the state (Isin & Turner, 2002). The formulation of the UNCRC in 1989 went beyond protective social rights and included some civil and political rights.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) organises children's rights into three categories: provision, protection, and participation (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The provision and protection categories address social rights and are largely supported by what Archard (1993 p.77) refers to as the "caretaker thesis" – a perspective that claims children are not capable of making rational autonomous decisions and that caretakers should make decisions for them. According to Archard (1993), the participation category of children's rights advocated by child liberationists has been accepted and supported less than the provision and protection categories. For example, Article 12 of the Convention particularly emphasises children's participation through voice by assuring children's right to express their views freely in all matters that affect them (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Some consider Article 12 to be the most important article in the Convention (Lansdown, 2001; Van Bueren, 1995), however the extent to which it is translated into enforceable rights for children varies among countries (Lister, 2007).

Almost a quarter of a century has passed since the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, yet, to date, implementation of children's participation rights has been minimal. It remains the case that social practices and structures do not fully recognise children as participants in society, instead confining them to the private worlds of home and school. Some observe that, as defined in the UNCRC, children's participation rights are aspirational, not fully realised (e.g., Alderson, 2008a, 2008b). Indeed, it is suggested that the notion of recognising children's participation rights requires a significant shift on the part of adults that may be viewed as a threat to traditional boundaries between adults and children (Lansdown, 1994). Lansdown explains that this is linked to children not possessing civil status and having limited access to civil institutions that provide the means to ensure that their interests are acknowledged. Another factor that potentially inhibits the realisation of children's participation rights is the use of the core principle of the UNCRC - "in the best interests of the child" - to justify adult decision-making in children's lives (Coady, 1996). According to Coady, this principle establishes that an adult or group of adults is in a better position than the child to assess the interests of that child. She suggests that this "ignores the central liberal insight about freedom rights: that the individual is usually in the best position to know what is in her own interests" (p. 20). This principle is "a powerful tool in the hands of adults" (Lansdown, p. 41) as it is "a woolly concept...incapable of being tested and monitored" (p. 42). To make a decision on behalf of another is susceptible to manipulation. Understood this way, the principle of "in the best interests of the child" is paternalistic and denies freedom rights - the right to autonomous decision-making. Metanarratives, that cast children as innocent, vulnerable and incompetent, feed the thinking behind this principle and impact the realisation of children's participation rights (James & Prout, 1990).

Limited actualisation of children's participation rights has prompted some to advocate for children's citizenship (Lister, 2007). This argument is based on a view that citizenship offers more than rights in that it may increase children's status in society so that their voices can be heard through active engagement in decision-making that affects their lives. Enabling children to possess political, social, and civic rights according to the theory of citizenship espoused by Marshall (1950) requires reconceptualising understandings of children, childhood and children's citizenship. Reconceptualisation is necessary to cultivate spaces for children to claim rights by having their voices heard and being active decision-makers. Unless children lobby and claim rights themselves, children's rights will remain paternalistically conferred. Children's claims for rights may not present themselves in the same way as adult claims. New ways of thinking about children, childhood and children's citizenship are required to open avenues for children's claims for rights.

This special issue aims to problematise barriers to children's participation and explore new ways of thinking about children, childhood and citizenship that will enable greater scope for the actualisation of children's participation across a wide range of societal sectors. Perspectives from across the globe and across diverse disciplines are shared, including public health, education, anthropology, and feminism. The articles explore a wide range of children's lived experiences of

participation rights, provoke discussion of issues pertaining to the actualisation of children's participation rights in global contemporary contexts, and question forces that complicate, block and distort possibilities for the actualisation of children's participation rights. Our call for contributions to this special issue attracted 48 submissions. Those that were selected were chosen for their capacity to bring new insights and perspectives to the concept of children's participation rights and potential for their realisation, from under explored contexts and critique of the inherent difficulties and complexities of the social constructs of children, participation and rights.

The idea and impetus for the special issue emanates from the *Research on Children's Rights in Education* network of the European Educational Research Association (<http://www.eera-ecer.de/networks/network25/>) – a collective of researchers who are placing children's rights at their foreground of their research. The network explores the ethical, methodological, legal and pedagogical issues that emerge at the intersection of children's rights and educational contexts. A particular concern of the network is the ways in which children's rights provide a provocation to think and practice differently. Both guest editors are active members of the network and two members have authored articles in this special issue, John I'Anson (the network convenor) and Louise Phillips.

John I'Anson explains difficulties with the actualisation of children's participation rights via theoretical lenses constructed from Western styles of thinking. Inspired by what Ingold (2011) refers to as 'logic of inversion', in which thinking focuses inward, away from movement and change, I'Anson suggests that western thinking has been quite contrary to the experience of childhood. He describes how childhood, children and their scope for participation are constructed in liberal theory stemmed from Locke and poststructuralist theories of Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault and Butler. Following this survey of the recent thinking on the social construct of children and childhood, I'Anson then problematises 'children's voice' as a popular trope of contemporary education and sociological research, a signifier of children's participation rights, to highlight and question the inherent ambiguity and singularity of the term and scope for authentic enactment. After alerting our attention to the messiness of the terrain of actualisation of children's participation rights, I'Anson offers considerations for ethical engagement with children, as possibilities for children's participation rights to become realised.

Andrew Hickey and Louise Phillips challenge social, cultural and political understandings of children and their scope for active participation in public spaces, through a study that employs movement (in contrast to 'logic of inversion') via the method of walking in a community cultural development project, *Walking neighbourhood: Hosted by children* - a project conceptualised to unsettle widespread emphasis on children's protection, which casts children as invisible and incompetent in public spaces. They explain how common adult-child social practices were inverted and issues pertaining to supervision of children and child safety were exposed and problematized, via child curated and led walks of a local urban neighbourhood with unknown adults. The authors

discuss how the corporeal and relational experience of walking offers potential to alter adult patterns of thinking and practices pertaining to children in public spaces, opening scope for adults to change their future practices to enable children's participation.

Lisa Gibbs, Carol Mutch, Peter O'Connor and Colin MacDougall share children's experiences in disaster recovery from a health and well being perspective of children's participation rights. Their research partnership titled 'Citizen Child Collaboration' focuses on research with, by, for and about children in disaster recovery contexts. Through empirical evidence from three case studies involving children in natural disaster stricken regions in New Zealand and Australia they argue a case for children to articulate their perspectives and the right to participate in decision-making, which affects their lives. The team of researchers also critiques children's participation rights during the research process, discussing methodological and ethical issues for the scope they may offer to children's participation. They place an emphasis on researchers engaging in long-term commitments with communities and propose further specific considerations for the roles and practices of researchers to support children's active community participation pertinent to disaster recovery and research in general.

Katie Wilson and Judith Wilks also argue for the importance of establishment of genuine community engagement in research with Indigenous school children in rural New South Wales, Australia to honour community concerns and attend to cultural protocols. Concern for participation rights is a significant factor in Indigenous research, with value placed on the research process and building relationships (Dudgeon, Kelly, & Walker, 2010; Smith, 1999). Wilson and Wilks explain how policy, history and community informed the design and ethical practices of their research that sought views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students learning Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in New South Wales schools. They sought to emphasise participation rights to actively counter past experiences of marginalisation in research practices, especially important as outsiders, being non-Indigenous researchers. Through an account of their research processes Wilson and Wilks describe methodological and ethical considerations that embed Indigenous research approaches, question institutional research assumptions and research practices that deny the participation and collaboration of participants, and apply ongoing reflexivity and dialogue to ensure accountability and reciprocity in research outcomes with the participants.

Marisa Ensor problematises the tension between children's participation rights and protection rights in a context where such a tension is alarmingly fraught: the participation of child soldiers in South Sudan's armed conflict. In a newly formed country, where armed conflict has reigned for decades, and where economic advancement opportunities are limited, enlistment in armed conflict offers a viable and culturally acceptable opportunity for male youths. Though we readily recognise the immanent dangers of armed conflict, Ensor argues that the opportunities afforded must also be recognised, and proscribed participation rights (such as the UNCRC & African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the

Child) do not provide scope for consideration of children's motivations, and understandings of their local, cultural circumstances to inform decisions regarding participation in military structures. The scope of children's participation rights in this context attracts very different meanings to those considered for children in stable, democratic, economically wealthy nations. Ensor thus critiques current normative assumptions guiding both child advocacy and Disarmament Demobilisation Reintegration policy, which positions child soldiers as victims in opposition to local positioning as heroes. A way forward is proposed with careful attention to the inclusion of children's voice, and local political and cultural contextual complexities.

Allison Moore discusses another highly contentious area of children's participation rights: sexual decision-making. With childhood being socially demarcated as asexual or pre-sexual (and enforced by age of consent laws), those below the age of consent's participation in consensual sexual decision-making can be often over-ruled by legislation established under the guise of protection. The right of children to participate in decisions that affect their lives is central to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, yet Moore elucidates that children and young people are routinely excluded from sexuality policy formation and decision-making processes, due to assumptions about their sexual immaturity and lack of competence. Though adults wish to ascribe children as asexual, Moore notes that this is not what children want, desire or feel. Policy and legislation discursively act to limit children's sexual participation rights, and exercise power over children. Moore advocates that children and young people are simultaneously recognised as sexual beings and sexual becomings with a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

Emily Bent addresses the underexplored scholarly topic: girls' political participation. Her article provides insights from her study that investigated how girl delegates at the UN Commission on the Status of Women understand and challenge their political marginalisation in order to actualise their participation rights. From a feminist standpoint theoretical position, girls' experiences of being politically marginalised or made invisible are acknowledged, and forms and possibilities for girls' political participation (re)imagined by privileging their voices and experiences as political beings in the here and now. The girls' experiences of political invisibility, via institutionalised structures of power, were seen to shape the realisation of their participation rights. Following informing interview excerpts with eleven adolescent girls of their experiences as delegates at the Commission on the Status of Women, Bent invites us to re-think how girls are engaged in formal 'adult' political spaces.

With the recent wave of interest, policy and activities in children and young people's participation and the challenges that have arisen as people have sought to translate the rhetoric of children's participation into realities, Kay Tisdall proposes 'transformative participation' as a potential way forward that has been advocated from a research collaboration with representatives from Brazil, India, South Africa and the UK. The concept of transformative participation attends to both "top-down' and 'bottom-up' interests. Tisdall explores the possibilities of 'co-production'; and performative and multimodal pedagogies for their

capacities for transformative participation for children, through descriptions of a wide range of global examples. The concept of transformative participation is carefully unpacked and critiqued, acknowledging transformation as a necessary unsettling process to bring change for not only those directly involved but to reach broad societal transformation to enable children's participation.

These eight articles offer a small window into the extensive breadth of work taking place globally with children to promote and actualise their participation rights. Taken together, they alert us to the complexities at hand, yet offer possibilities worth exploring to enable children's participation across varied domains of society. Due to the sheer volume of work in this area, a further special issue will follow in volume 4 issue 2 of *Global Studies of Childhood* on the theme of *Children's rights in a global context: Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats*.

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