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SPECIAL ISSUE

Actualization of Children's Participation Rights: Part 2

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Editorial

The more one is in a position to make decisions for children, to speak on their behalf, the more one is able to silence their voices (Lee, 2001 p. 10).

Following on from our previous special issue of *Global Studies of Childhood* 3(2) on the theme of *Actualization of Children's Participation Rights* this second special issue comprises seven articles that further explore contemporary issues relating to children's participation rights across global contexts. As in the first special issue, our aim is to problematize barriers for children's participation and to explore new ways of thinking about children, childhood and citizenship that will enable greater scope for the actualization of children's participation across a wide range of societal sectors. The idea and impetus for both special issues emanates from the *Research on Children's Rights in Education* network of the European Educational Research Association [1] – a collective of researchers who are placing children's rights at their foreground of their research. Network activity focuses on (1) exploring the ethical, methodological, legal and pedagogical issues that emerge at the intersection of children's rights and educational contexts, and (2) providing an arena for continuous, critical and focused discussion and elaboration on research issues with a bearing on children's rights in interdisciplinary contexts globally. Both guest editors are active members of the network and four members have authored articles in both special issues – John l'Anson (network convenor), Louise Phillips (both in *Global Studies of Childhood*, volume 3, issue 2, 2013), Jenna Gillett-Swan and Vicki Coppock (both in this special issue).

It is now a quarter of a century since the United Nations General Assembly adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). The codification of human rights has long been recognized as a key resource for those who lack power, particularly children and young people, who are often powerless in their interactions with adults. Nevertheless, there is a deep divergence between the concept of human rights, as articulated in law and convention, and the actualization of those rights in practice. In particular, it is widely acknowledged that implementation of children's civil or *participation* rights in the CRC has to date been minimal. Ever

since the first codification of children's rights within the 1924 Geneva *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* children's rights to *protection* and *provision* have been the main emphasis. Thus, although participation is a crucial principle within the CRC and is clearly linked to the assigning of autonomy rights for children (as expressed in Articles 12-17), ambiguities and contradictions in its framing of the child as simultaneously 'not yet adult' (becoming) *and* as morally equal to adults (being), complicates the scope for children and young people to rely upon the CRC's participation rights in practice. For this reason, children's participation rights are viewed by many as aspirational and not yet realised (e.g. Alderson, 2008). 'Participation' connotes active engagement and implies sharing of power. However, although participation implies involvement in decision-making processes, it is not necessarily synonymous with decision-making per se and is invariably mediated by adults. There are many reasons for this, which involve constructs of children and childhood, positionings of children and adults in society, and socially constructed demarcations between children and adults. Participation requires children to be recognized as participants in society. Enabling children to actualize participation rights requires reconceptualizing understandings of children, childhood and children's citizenship.

Theoretical, epistemological and ontological contexts prefigure how adults conceptualize 'childhood'/children and establish judgements concerning their capacity for autonomous decision-making. The emergence of the new sociology of childhood in the 1980s represented a significant paradigm shift in thinking about childhood and children (James & Prout, 1990). In much the same way as feminist scholars and activists had argued that women were once not fully recognized as citizens and rendered 'unknown and unknowable' by patriarchal processes of knowledge production, so too the new sociology of childhood pointed to the denial of children's citizenship and agency, resulting in incomplete or distorted knowledge and understanding about their capabilities, perspectives and experiences (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Christensen & James, 2008; Mayall, 2002). Research generated from within the new sociology of childhood has challenged many of the taken-for-granted assumptions about children and childhood and has contributed deeper and richer contextual knowledge and understanding of children and young people's lives and, crucially, of their capacities for decision-making (Alderson, 2012). For example, critical psychologists have pointed to out-dated developmental age-stage theories and professional practices that exaggerate cognitive and affective differences between adults and children, where children are presumed to be cognitively and affectively 'deficient' in relation to adults simply by virtue of their age (Burman, 1994). Thus, for the most part, children's lack of competence in decision-making has been assumed, setting them at a double disadvantage – (1) it is difficult for them to challenge powerful and dismissive adults and (2) it is harder for them to demonstrate competence than incompetence (Alderson, 2012).

Longstanding children's rights champion Michael Freeman suggests that the CRC is international law's response to this paradigm shift in thinking about children (Freeman, 2012). At the very least, notwithstanding its inherent tensions and contradictions, the CRC represents a provocation for adults and practitioners to think and practice differently. If children and young people are to be afforded due respect (as a human rights-based approach dictates) then myths about their deficits must be challenged and replaced with due recognition of their intellectual, emotional, social and moral capacities. As Alderson (2012) suggests, once adults step outside restrictive developmental age-based concepts of childhood, alternative understandings of capable children emerge. In addition, 'the same thresholds of competence are not necessary for all decisions, nor are all aspects of competence relevant for all types of decision-making or responsibility' (Lansdown, 2005: x). The concept of "evolving capacities of the child" in the CRC represents the attempt to balance recognition of children as active agents in their own lives, entitled to be listened to, respected and granted increasing autonomy in the exercise of rights, while also being entitled to protection in accordance with their *relative* immaturity and youth. The work of Lundy & McEvoy (2012) is also useful here. Applying the United Nations *Statement of Common Understanding for a Human Rights-Based Approach*, they argue that it is the responsibility of adults – whether policy-makers, parents, carers and practitioners – (as duty-bearers) to develop the capacity of children and young people (as rights-holders) to participate in decision-making. This, they argue, requires that children and young people are assisted in both forming and expressing views (Article 12), through being provided with access to information (Article 17) and adult guidance (Article 5). Such a model for practice opens up possibilities for meaningful alliances between adults and children towards the goal of enhanced participation for children.

The articles included in this special issue have been selected for their capacity to bring fresh insights and perspectives to the subject of children's participation rights and the potential for their realisation. Whilst the contexts within which the above issues are explored are varied, the articles share a common concern to explore the multiple and complex ways in which children's participation rights are conceptualized and experienced.

In the context of burgeoning political, academic and professional interest in the subject of children's 'wellbeing' globally (UNICEF, 2013), **Jenna Gillett-Swan** draws attention to the importance of ascertaining and incorporating children's definitions and conceptualizations of wellbeing into policy developments and service provisions. She suggests that this is necessary not only because it is their right within Article 12 of the CRC, but also because they are *capable*. Gillett-Swan conducted qualitative, participatory research with 54 'tween' children

(aged 8 to 12 years) living in South East Queensland, Australia, beginning from an ontological position that 'sees' the children as active participants, capable informants and valid contributors to knowledge about their lives. Using hermeneutic approach to data analysis, she describes how the children demonstrated sophisticated understandings of the complex notion of wellbeing, encompassing social (relationships), physical (health) and psychological (self) dimensions. Not only do these findings challenge prevailing narrow developmentalist (mis)assumptions about children's capacities for complex thought, they also have clear implications for current strategic approaches to the promotion of 'wellbeing' across the globe – approaches that, for the most part, exclude children and young people's perspectives.

In their article, **Anna Housley Juster and Morgan Leichter-Saxby** make the case for community-based *child-directed* play, based on their central argument that self-directed play offers greater opportunities for children's agency and provides a means to build civic learning in the early years. Like Gillett-Swan, they are critical of overly narrow developmentalist theories that underplay children's agency and that focus on the role and function of play almost exclusively within education and development. Rather, they call for a wider conceptualization of the importance of children's play – that is, the role of child-directed play as a mechanism for the development of children's social capital (following Bourdieu, 1984) and the actualization of children's participation rights. Housley Juster and Leichter-Saxby advocate a practice-based community engagement and training model for supporting child-directed play and illustrate this with reference to their own *Pop Up Adventure Play* – a non-profit organization that provides opportunities for free play for children and perhaps more importantly acts as a forum for teaching parents and carers how to constructively facilitate such play. They locate their approach within the traditions of the Adventure Playground Movement, emphasizing the importance of children's agency in the creation of physical and cultural spaces free from adults, and children's right to escape adults' attempts at 'understanding' and 'ordering' their play. This work contributes new thinking to the problematization of children's citizenship and is particularly significant in providing a counter-narrative to the neo-liberal construction of childhood and its obsession with increasing mechanisms of surveillance and control of children. Crucially, the authors demonstrate how child-directed play offers children opportunity to safely take action on their own terms.

Dominique Golay and Dominique Malatesta address the important topic of how institutions that are created to promote and reinforce civic participation of children and young people may, inadvertently, undermine the realization of children's participation rights in practice. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three Swiss cities over several years, the authors investigated the

potentialities and limits of children's councils as a vehicle for children's agency in Switzerland. The authors draw on theoretical analyses of 'the institution' and 'recognition' (Honneth, 1995) to critically explore how institutional participative processes are linked to conceptualizations and practices that influence children's capacity to act. Contradictions and tensions in the structure and functioning of the children's councils are identified that demonstrate the gulf between rhetoric and reality in actualization of children's participation rights. In particular, the authors observe how the refusal to refer to the CRC by the professionals working with children in supporting the children's councils impinges on the children's right to freedom of expression, and to have their voices recognized – legally and socially – thus restricting their participation to the role of consultation.

Eva Arlemalm-Hagser critically explores how children's participation and agency are understood in the context of early childhood education for sustainability in Swedish preschools. Based on critical textual analysis of empirical data derived from applications from preschools for a Diploma of Excellence in Education for Sustainability, she identifies ambiguities in conceptualizations of children's participation. The preschools demonstrated strong rhetorical support for children's participation in their applications, and 'a children's rights logic' could be identified, however, this was not matched in the teaching and learning experiences described as early childhood education for sustainability. Children's participation and agency were primarily conceptualized as 'taking part in' rather than recognizing them as active participants or agents of change. Affirmative processes were evident that served to maintain the status quo rather than transformative approaches to produce shared critical thinking and action.

Vicki Coppock problematizes the tension between children and young people's participation rights and protection rights in the highly contentious arena of state counter-terrorism law, policy and practice. Taking as its focus the intersection of race, ethnicity, youth and young people's actualization, her article exposes the workings of a significant addition to public policy in the United Kingdom (UK) – a toolkit designed to assist teachers in identifying children and young people who may be 'vulnerable to extremism' and therefore 'in need' of a counter-radicalization focused child protection intervention. Coppock provides insight into a significant aspect of governmentality and public policy concerning young people and challenges the extension and legitimization of state-sponsored surveillance practices into the classroom. In doing so, she makes visible the institutional racism at play in the introduction of a school resource that explicitly names "literalism in the reading of Muslim texts" as a warning sign of extremism. Furthermore, she challenges the discursive framing of the toolkit within citizenship education, illustrating the contradictory relationship between the commitment of the British State to upholding and implementing children's social

and political rights (as a signatory to the CRC), whilst simultaneously pursuing policies and practices that constrain and undermine the social and political agency of British Muslim children and young people. In doing so, Coppock highlights the inconsistencies in democratic participation when it comes to young people's active citizenship.

Michelle Salazar Perez adopts a highly innovative and profoundly personal approach to the subject of children's agency within violent circumstances in order to complicate dominant protectionist discourses that construct the abused child as 'victim'. Drawing on Black feminist theoretical perspectives and epistemologies, she shares her personal 'life notes', in which she "renarrativizes" her lived experiences of sexual abuse through a series of juxtapositions – abuse/empowerment, fear/joy and abuse/resistance.

This, Perez explains, makes it possible to see children "as agents of resistance and change in the abusive situations they find themselves in". Moreover, she argues that it enables us to think differently about how survivors of child sexual abuse actualize their participation rights, often in ways that are conceptualized outside of dominant frameworks of meaning such as the CRC. She leaves the reader with a series of challenging questions that urge us to re-imagine dominant constructions of childhood and abuse. The use of personal voice in authorship of academic journal articles is relatively rare. Perez's article disturbs mainstream assumptions about what constitutes academic scholarship and demonstrates the value and importance of evocative personal narratives to foreground embodied learning from lived experiences.

Taken together, these seven articles speak to and challenge the inhibition of children's participation rights as rooted ontologically in how adults 'see' children (in various contexts) and offer insights into professional worlds, institutional contexts and structures where children's rights may be rhetorically promoted but in reality constrained or denied. Importantly, they imagine and signpost possibilities for alternative practices that honour all children's rights to be fully recognized as equal members of the global human family.

Louise Phillips and Vicki Coppock

[1] Please see <http://www.eera-ecer.de/networks/network25/> for further information on the network.

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