

Theorising children's participation: Trans-disciplinary perspectives from South Africa

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Children's participation is a popular rallying cry among child rights activists and community development groups, backed by the recognition of children's participatory rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Participation is both a guiding principle of the UNCRC and an explicit right. Article 12 establishes the right of children (who are capable of forming their own views) to express them freely in all matters affecting the children, and for their views to be given due weight, in accordance with age and maturity. In South Africa, children's participatory rights are recognised in the Children's Act, the Child Justice Act and, in a more circumscribed way, the South African Schools Act.

Undoubtedly, questions about the nature, extent and conditions of children's participation are pertinent in education, health care, social services, the public sphere and in the everyday life of families and communities. Yet for all the rhetoric and the legal recognition of children's participatory rights, and despite a proliferation of typologies, a good deal of lip-service to the idea of participation, and an emerging scholarly literature on the topic, children's participation remains an under-theorised field.

A special issue of the *International Journal of Children's Rights* sought to ask – and take initial steps towards answering – some of the pressing questions surrounding the precise nature, ethical status and politics of children's participation (Hinton *et al.*, 2008). That publication arose from an intensive seminar which gathered academics from a broad range of disciplines, from the United Kingdom and across the globe. A second intensive seminar was hosted by the Children's Institute of the University of Cape Town in 2009, with subsequent seminars in 2010 in Brazil and India respectively. The seminar series is part of a trans-disciplinary, cross-country academic network aimed at investigating and theorising children's participation in the public sphere.¹

The idea for this special issue of *Perspectives in Education* emerged from the Cape Town seminar. Scholars from a number of disciplines (childhood studies, education, literary and language studies, political science, psychology, social anthropology, socio-legal studies and sociology), as well as child participation practitioners, engaged in the seminar. Members of the network, variously located in Brazil, India, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, were present. Papers were presented by South African academics and practitioners, while network members from other countries offered insights and critical perspectives from their particular research settings and country contexts.

Discussions at the Cape Town seminar teased out a multidisciplinary approach in which ideas around social participation in general, and not necessarily exclusively focused on children, could contribute to furthering the theoretical development of children's participation. Ideas around the ethics of care, participatory parity, deliberative democracy, multimodal forms of pedagogy, phenomenological creative processes, power relations, the constraints of representative democracy, and children's local knowledge were brought to bear on the seminar theme, *Theorising Children's Participation: Learning across countries and across disciplines*.

Differences of approach in relation to key terms – 'the public', 'the child' and 'participation', and indeed to 'theorisation' – created a set of unsettling, yet important tensions. They indicated porosity and slippage in relation to conceptions of 'child participation' and the assumed boundaries of their application.

It was concluded that, in order to render the idea meaningful, instances of child participatory practice needed to be specifically located, taking into account the social, cultural and historical dimensions out of which they emerged. At the seminar, the 'rub' between varied and sometimes opposing positions enabled the foregrounding of different disciplinary stakes invested in the idea, its ideological underpinnings and historical antecedents, as well as its relation to visions of democratic sociality, justice and governance.

Conversations from differing disciplinary points of view not only enabled a widening and deepening of ideas around child participatory events, through processes of grounding within specific research agendas, but also a critical assessment of the overuse and limitations of the term 'children's participation'. At one extreme, the term's application is so capacious as to be of little analytical value. At the other, the confinement of children's participation within too narrow definitional boundaries and social spaces obscures: ideological assumptions around definitions of the child; the capacities of children; 'appropriate' social spaces in which children are called upon to participate; the role of adults and children in processes of participation; and the imbrications of spaces of participation with often unequal power relations.

Returning to the instability of the parameters of 'the child', 'the public', and 'participation' within the seminar, it was clear that what constitutes a child varies in different social contexts and cannot be fixed by age. Children's activities often mirror 'adult' contributions to society. Even where their contributions in terms of work, for example, exceed those of adults, its extent and importance often remain underestimated or dismissed. Some seminar participants suggested that perhaps the loaded term 'child', with its associated infantilisation and often patronising attribution of vulnerability and the necessity for particular kinds of care, should be replaced by 'young person'.

The discussion acknowledged that there are important formal social processes in which children could bring forward their contributions, for example, in the formulation of social policy. Such processes often occur through facilitation with adults. Yet children are equally involved in forms of 'informal participation,' shaping and unmaking sociality in all its dimensions. Too exclusive a focus on formal forms of children's participation could mark a refusal to acknowledge the extent to which children are already involved in shaping, making and unmaking social worlds.

Formal participatory processes engender an arena of meeting and encountering one another, involving both children and adults. Implicit within any such encounter are issues of differential power. Who is left out of formal initiatives, and who 'comes to the table', is a crucial consideration. There is a need, therefore, to question the 'givenness' of participation as inevitably a good, and to ask in relation to those who have vested interests in processes of participation: 'For whom does the good operate?' Children's inclusion in processes initiated by adults may be tokenistic, or used primarily to legitimise already constituted agendas. Moralities and values attached to particular visions of society may, in their effects on processes of participation, result in the inclusion of certain kinds of children who echo and reinscribe normative, conservative interests. What of children who choose not to participate, or who are excluded from processes of participation? What social concerns, points of ambiguity, and ways of being are expunged from view due to the above forms of blindness? Seminar participants therefore challenged the normative conception of 'the public'.

The Cape Town seminar revealed the stakes different disciplines hold in ideas about 'public', 'participation' and 'children'. The fact that none of these terms is settled points to the shifts in knowledge and practice over time, and the need constantly to revisit terms that might otherwise be taken for granted.

One seminar participant suggested that 'theorising is not just about explaining what we see, but looking at problems we can't solve in many different ways. We need to look at theorising as opening up spaces in the mind, not just explaining spaces.' A creative rub existed at the seminar between disciplines that sought to create *models* around the notion of child participation and those that favoured the deployment of local *metaphors* in making processes of child participation salient.

There was agreement that existing typologies of child participation risk being static. They can neither account for historical particularities in which practices of participation are embedded, nor can they account for the opening and closing, or expansion and contraction, of social spaces in which children and young

people participate through time. Typologies seldom allow for an appreciation of how children and adults moved in and out of practices of mutual or separate participation through time, or of the often disabling social conditions existing outside of initiated participative processes that may undercut any gains made within its boundaries.

In South Africa, for example, the first democratically elected state established in 1994 emerged out of the highly politicised 1980s in which children and young people played a seminal public role in resisting the apartheid state. With a sense of urgency in creating a 'normal' society there emerged in public discourse a capitulation to the normative. Generations and genders were called upon to resume their so-called 'proper places'. This was a process that infantilised children. Their vulnerabilities were emphasised and calls for increasing protection were linked to a desire for moral regeneration within the society. Ironically, the latter processes marked movement towards a place of conservatism. The visibility of children and young people in public spaces decreased. There was shrinkage of space of children's informal participation in political space and the emergence of uneven and sparse arenas for their formal participation in processes of governance and policy formation (see Bray & Moses, 2011 in this issue).

Thematic strands and central questions from the Cape Town seminar run through many of the articles published in this Special Issue. Early versions of several of the articles were first presented as papers at the seminar. Other articles came in response to an open call for papers to be submitted for consideration. All the articles finally selected for the Special Issue were subject to the journal's standard review procedures. Each was blind-reviewed by at least three reviewers. In the case of submissions from fields or disciplines other than education, at least one reviewer was a specialist from the relevant discipline.

Although education may not be the primary focus of every article, all of them have a bearing on education, its institutional forms or its social contexts. A number of the articles explore the power of creative ways of working with children and the importance and power of embodied, multi-sensorial and multimodal forms of learning (Henderson; Newfield; and Sonn *et al.*). Dominant, and sometimes inconsistent, discourses in school governance and pedagogy may impede possibilities for children's meaningful participation in the spaces of education (Carrim; Bray & Moses), whereas alternative pedagogies may open real possibilities for even very young children to engage in meaningful deliberation about matters that concern them (Linnington *et al.*). The rich field of democratic and social justice theory yields several possibilities for normative theorisations of children's public participation, in the classroom and other public spaces, and for analysing the relationship between representation and participation in governance structures (see Bentley on deliberative democracy; Bozalek on a normative model for participatory parity and an ethics of care). Children's meaningful participation in educational research presents some difficult ethical dilemmas. Two of the articles focus on children in education research: Walton considers the importance, and difficulties, of research in inclusive education; Sonn and her co-authors report on their work with adolescents in a participatory action research project intended to contribute to a health-promoting school. Participation is itself a contested and not necessarily benign concept, as Roodt and Stuurman show in their tracing of the genealogy of participation within colonial governments and within development studies. They also make reference to a disillusioned body of young people who are not easily called upon to take part in local governmental processes in which their participation is sometimes needed. Their work, like Carrim's, therefore points to who may be left out of processes of participation and why.

Together, the articles in this Special Issue serve as a prolegomenon to theorising and challenging children's public participation in a Southern African context – and beyond. The Leverhulme Network² has shown the need to situate children's participation in social, cultural and historical contexts. It has also shown how possibilities in one context show gaps – and opportunities – in another context, as well as very familiar challenges of tokenism and a failure to impact on (adult) decision-making. Children's participation may be international and national policy rhetoric; its actual realisation remains a key human rights issue.

References

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Acknowledgements

Many of the ideas contained within this Special Issue were developed through the intensive interaction of participants in the Cape Town seminar, as well as by the individual authors who presented papers. From the seminar, it is thus essential to recognise the contributions by:

- Kristina Bentley, then in the Department of Political Studies, University of the Western Cape, currently in the Democratic Governance and Rights Unit, Department of Public Law, University of Cape Town
- Vivienne Bozalek, Teaching and Learning, University of the Western Cape
- Sandra Burman, Socio-Legal Unit, University of Cape Town
- Rachel Bray, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
- Udi Butler, Department of Anthropology, University of Oxford; and the International Centre for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI), Rio de Janeiro
- Nazir Carrim, Department of Educational Studies, University of the Western Cape
- Glynnis Clacherty, Clacherty and Associates, South Africa
- Andy Dawes, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town
- Deborah Ewing, I-mediate Consulting, South Africa
- Patricia Henderson, Children's Institute and Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town
- Rachel Hinton, DFID and the Universities of Oxford and Edinburgh
- Lucy Jamieson, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
- Susan Moses, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
- Zubair Meenai, Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia Central University
- Denise Newfield, Department of English, University of the Witwatersrand
- Marcelo Princeswal, CIESPI, Rio de Janeiro
- Anita Rampal, Department of Education, University of Delhi
- Monty Roodt, Department of Sociology, Rhodes University
- Fiona Ross, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town
- Savyasaachi, Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia Central University
- Kay Tisdall, School of Social and Political Studies and Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh
- Gabriel Urgoiti, Independent Consultant on Children's Participation, South Africa.

The guest editors are also grateful to the referees who provided detailed critical reviews of submissions for the Special Issue.

Core Members of the Leverhulme Trust Academic Collaboration Network as of December 2010

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- Kelly Teamey (Lecturer, Department of Education, University of Bath)
- Kay Tisdall (Professor in Childhood Policy in School of Social & Political Science, University of Edinburgh; Co-Director of CRFR)

(Endnotes)

1. The Network was funded initially by the British Academy and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, and subsequently by the Leverhulme Trust.
2. For further information, see http://www.cfr.ac.uk/researchprojects/rp_theorising.html.