

Theorising creative expression in children's participation

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The paper suggests that phenomenology, the anthropology of the senses and of embodiment, performance theory and multi-modal pedagogies offer a rich set of theoretical ideas with which to consider children's expressive repertoires as overlooked forms of social participation and critique. Four case studies in relation to children's photography, dramatic improvisation, art-making and radio programming are explored as instances of meaningful participation and as forms of research. These "impassioned" forms of expression are contrasted with child participation as invitation to "speak" within the public sphere in ways that are limited and perhaps limiting. The paper therefore questions assumptions around accessing children's "voices".

Keywords: children, creative repertoires, participation, phenomenology, multi-modality, anthropology of the senses, embodiment, semiotics, voice.

Questioning the parameters of child participation

The paper explores the rub between child participation as invitation to participate in the public sphere and children's creative repertoires as expansive forms of participatory expression. I begin by elaborating on the difficulties of employing the notion of participation in too narrow a sense and then move on to discuss four creative projects in which children's participation takes on semiotic depth.

"Participation" within a neo-liberal global context and within the process of constituting democratic states, is often used as a stand-alone concept, as if its meanings were self-evident. Assuming that the parameters of its conceptual use are understood, the term becomes stripped of necessary referents. Becoming aware of the implications of its use within political and development discourse necessitates exploring its imbrications in hierarchical social relations characterised by unequal distributions of power and resources and a lack of spread of socio-economic rights (Robins, 2005: 2). Used authoritatively, the notion sets aside questions as to who is being asked to participate in what, by whom and on what terms. It suggests that people may choose freely to participate, or may equally ignore interpellation. Assumptions about the construction of personhood and of social equivalence between individuals often underpin the term's deployment.

Inherent in an often submerged or obscured *call* to participate, is the possibility that a body of persons have already set out the social ground, the framework within which others, for example children, will be invited to participate (Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses & Seekings, 2010). Participation, therefore, presupposes that something is already in existence to which one is invited to make a contribution. Often denied, yet present within ideas of participation, is a demarcation between those who have set the parameters of its actualisation and those who have been invited into its space, as is the case when children are invited to participate in social space that has been pre-determined by adults.

In being invited to participate in formulating social policy concerning children, children may indeed make important contributions that adults have overlooked or ignored. Participants' contributions may, however, be constrained, capitulating more and more to what is normative within a society, or within the vision a state has of its citizenry, its conceptions of democracy and its supporting institutions. Here participation simply comes to echo entrenched expectations of the responsible exercise of citizenship, and processes of child participation may be used to legitimate state procedures that become formulaic. Forms of social alienation, exclusion and marginalisation within democratic states are then ignored (Von Leires, 2005), and people who occupy such positions are labelled irresponsible, their marginalisation psychologised, rather than recognised as the outcome of structural forms of violence. There is also the

real problem of not being able to hear discourses incommensurate within the parameters of the neo-liberal state. Beth Povinelli (2006) for example, has explored discourses within unequal post-colonial settings in which forms of identity are differently constituted. She refers to various modes of being predicated on differing ideological frames: one in which certain individuals have extreme autonomy and in which ties with others are characterised by what she has called stranger sociality, and the other in which collective ties and responsibilities and inter-subjectivity are conjoined through the trope of genealogy. Here responsibilities to a group outweigh considerations of individual autonomy. Likewise for South Africa, Jean and John Comoroff (2005) write of the social tensions within the democratic state between collective cultural identities and notions of individual citizenship.

Participation not only concerns the creation of an opening for the emergence of children's "voices" within public space, it also has to do with recognising the extent of children's often dismissed or unrecorded social contributions to many aspects of social life, and of which the dimensions, qualities and quantities are underestimated by adults and children alike.¹ Children therefore participate in society in much broader ways than envisaged in discourses of the liberal state and in its attempt to include children in the formulation of policy that affects their position in society (Reynolds, 1995). Children contribute consistently to multiple threads within social worlds: to economies, philosophies, aesthetics, modes of consumption, cultural production, the making and unmaking of social worlds through war and its aftermath, and the improvisation of modes of survival. Running through children's life-worlds are repertoires of embodied dexterity, creativity, playfulness, humour and word-play. One effective way to convey children's "voices" or ideas and experiences is through paying attention to children's repertoires of performance that entail processes of reflection, selection and the attribution of meaning.

Expanding notions of participation through children's creative potentialities

To begin theorising why such forms of expression are important as aspects of children's meaningful experience within the world, this paper therefore turns to four creative and multi-modal participatory children's projects - one from Ghana and three from South Africa. Theories of phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968), embodiment (Csordas, 1994, 2002; Mauss, 2007) and performance (Taylor 2007), together with anthropological explorations of the role of the senses in creating a depth of cultural experience through which memory, space and temporalities are marked (Seremetakis, 1996; Stoller, 1997) provide a set of possibilities for understanding children's immersion within creative repertoires and their generation of semiotic depth. Multi-modal pedagogies within schooling environments, i.e. the exploration of themes through various forms of expression, including writing, oral delivery, drawn images, made objects and enacted scenes, draw on the educative potential of such embodied forms of engagement in rendering learning meaningful for participants in ways that depart from narrow conceptions of learning as purely cognitive engagement (see Newfield's article in this special issue, as well as Stein, 2006, 2007). Pippa Stein's (2006, 2007) work, for example, shows clearly the importance of affective, embodied and collaborative aspects of pedagogy – multi-modal forms of engagement therefore call on both cognitive and emotional ways of generating meaning and consequently, understanding.

I argue that performative acts, including various forms of improvisation frame, mimic and reproduce what children have come to know, yet at the same time offer possibilities of distance, the reorganisation of memory, and a degree of transcendence through creativity and imagination. Such processes mark forms of exchange between children, their worlds and their interlocutors, that leave them with a sense of their own capabilities and a conscious recognition of their own knowledge about the world. In relation to the ways in which both the real and the imaginary are conjoined in such processes, and hence the recognition of lived difficulties, as well as the imagination of possible, different futures, I point to the work of Gilles Deleuze

¹ See Reynolds (1991). She suggests that due to children's social position among Tonga people involved in subsistence agriculture in Zimbabwe, both adults and the children themselves underestimate the quantity and diversity of the work they do.

(1997), whose famous reinterpretation of Freud's account of "Little Hans" traces the sensory encounters of a child journeying in a world traduced with sounds, sights, smells, tactile qualities, animals and persons, and his subsequent imaginative reconstruction of travelled trajectories through a process of mapping.

Exploring expressive potentialities and their use in research and education offers the possibility of paying attention to children in ways that are not overwritten by adult conceptions of and ideological preoccupations with the place of the child. The paper therefore offers examples of agentive, self-reflexive and embodied forms of participation that differ from a narrower formulation of participation as an "invitation" to children to make their views known within predetermined contexts, for example "the public sphere".

The four examples of children's creative and reflexive engagements considered in the paper are as follows: an art project with refugee children living in Hillbrow, Johannesburg; children's compilation of radio programmes in the Ingwavuma District of KwaZulu-Natal; the creation of a theatrical performance by young people from Okhahlamba, South Africa; and lastly, children's use of photography to depict their working lives on the streets of Accra, Ghana. The first two explore the problematic of voice. The second two explore children's depth of knowledge of social worlds and their abilities in representing them.

Problematics of voice

Veena Das (1997, 2007) and Fiona Ross (2003), among others, have questioned the idea that by providing safe spaces for articulation, the accessibility of voice becomes unproblematic. They indicate broader notions of voice that are not confined to narrative speech acts, but that encompass both gestures and the decision to remain silent. In situations of violence and unequal power relations, speaking may indeed become dangerous. In the following case studies, I firstly explore the long, slow emergence of voice among refugee children over an extended time period, noting the difficulty with which some children came to 'speak', and that their 'speaking' had much to do with private processes of image making that enabled some talk, often jagged and painful, concerning their experiences. The study suggests that coming into voice is often a process requiring trust and prolonged engagement. The second case study on children's radio work describes coming into an empowered voice on their part through the power of technology, a power that somehow facilitates new ways in which adults are able to listen to children. The programmes provide a space where the 'mystique' of technology enables children to ask challenging questions of adults, questions through which they are surprised and through which they re-evaluate their conceptions of children.

Refugee children's suitcase stories

The Suitcase Project, initiated in 2001 by researcher, Glynis Clacherty and Diane Welvering (2006), an artist, was envisaged as art therapy, offering psycho-social support for refugee children under eighteen years old, who had found their way to the Jesuit Refugee Services in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. The children had been separated from relatives in their flight from various countries, i.e. the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Angola, ending up in South Africa as "unaccompanied child refugees". Clacherty (Clacherty & Welvering, 2006) recounted their difficulties in recalling past experience through conventional forms of therapy. She had the idea that suitcases decorated by individual children could represent a collage of current and former aspects of children's selves and experience in ways that pointed to memory, survival and current challenges about which they could choose to speak or remain silent.

The young people met regularly with Clacherty and Welvering (Clacherty & Welvering, 2006), beginning a process of decorating the outside of their suitcases with images of their current lives and with the free application of paint, beads and ribbons, and then creating sets of images that recalled aspects of their past to apply on the interiors of the suitcases. Researchers provided a space in which children could form relationships with one another and with researchers and if children wanted to approach Clacherty with some of 'their stories' they could do so privately under a tree in the courtyard of the venue. This

activity enabled the collection of narratives explaining some of the images (Clacherty & Welvering, 2006).

In reading the book comprised of photographs of the suitcases and their accompanying narratives, one becomes increasingly aware of an overwhelming sense of loss, not only of children's family members through death, but the dissolution of the familiar, a palpable sense of mourning for often rural worlds and activities that have been obliterated. There is the theme of flight, flight from immediate danger in the past and the present, flight across borders through often hostile countries, of arrival in South Africa and of the experience of sometimes being unwelcome in a stimulating, yet bewildering urban environment, completely different from places that had once been home.

Among some of the children, a sense of restlessness was paramount in their search for lost relatives and in the haunted nature of everyday life, where severance from relatives suggested to children that on the one hand their relatives could still be alive, and on the other, possibly dead. Any surviving relatives left in the countries from which the children had fled, or who were similarly scattered in different and unknown places - the children assumed - would also live with uncertainty as to whether the children had survived. In the inconclusive space of not knowing whether relatives were alive or dead, and if alive whether they wondered about the children, mourning and death had no resolution, but were indefinitely extended. Everyday life became a haunted space, yet also one in which children attempted ongoing construction of their lives, a process in which memory and forgetting were intertwined.

Pasco, a boy of seventeen, who had moved from the DRC with his sister Aggie after the death of their mother when they were young children, drew a picture of a tree inside his suitcase. For him the tree symbolised a place for conversation, a place of stability. He called it "the peace tree". The depiction of a generic, symbolic tree recalled the memory of an actual mango tree outside his home in the DRC where he and his sister would sit and talk during the heat of day and at night. The re-evocation of this tree and its transformation into a transportable idea enabled Pasco to say that his depiction of the tree now constituted something within himself that he could take to any other place he would go to in the future.

Lawrence Langer's (1997) writing on time seems pertinent with regard to the young people's narratives in the suitcase stories, as well as their suitcases' status as ritual objects in which memory and the present were in conversation with one another. Langer suggests that for survivors of atrocities, "time is durational as well as chronological, and that durational time is experienced continuously, not sequentially as a memory from which one can be liberated" (1997: 55).

The project run by Clacherty and Welvering (Clacherty & Welvering, 2006) offered provided a space refugee children clearly appreciated. Through their protracted art-making and the possibility of speaking or remaining silent about what they had made, the refugee children entered a profound process of memorialisation in which aspects of the past were stitched onto aspects of the present in complex ways.

Coming to voice: Children's radio diaries in a time of HIV/AIDS

Abaqophi bas' Okhayeni Abaqinile (translated from isiZulu as "the strong recorders of Okhayeni" (2007), comprises a group of children between the ages of ten and fourteen, attending Okhayeni Primary School in the rural Ingwavuma District of KwaZulu-Natal. They are involved in an innovative radio project initiated through the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town under the direction of Helen Meintjes. The area where the children live, including KwaZulu-Natal as a whole, has one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS infection in southern Africa, and indeed the world. Many of the children in the radio project have lost relatives, including parents, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts through death as a result of HIV/AIDS-related diseases. The project's aim is to initiate a process in which children develop the technological skills and reflexive abilities to create their own radio diaries that are broadcast on a local radio station.

Preparations for the creation of the existing radio programmes has involved prolonged periods of writing diaries and drawing images depicting children's concerns and everyday lives. Individual children then created story-boards out of which they developed their programmes. Each programme involves a child introducing him/herself, describing the place s/he is in and interviewing other people in the environment

to create the narrative thread s/he wishes to share with the public. In capturing details of children's lives, their worries, celebrations, knowledge and observations, the diaries work against descriptions of 'a typical' or quintessential child living within a context of HIV/AIDS. Each child stands alone, conveying specific circumstances: personality, passions, ties with friends and family; contours of personal pain and loss; curiosity in describing the passing world, for example, a description of cars in the main road; enjoyment of play, for example, the creation of clay animals; and the pride in learning how to travel alone for the first time, for example to run an errand for a mother, and to learn how to buy goods, handle money and account for change.

In listening to the children's broadcasts, the quality or timbre of their voices - something that cannot be conveyed through written transcriptions - became apparent. Their confidence in interviewing relatives, describing surroundings and greeting fellow learners at their schools, as well as idiosyncratic ways of speaking, were immediately conveyed.

Other themes in the unfolding narrative fragments had to do with delight at the return of migrant fathers who worked in the cities far from their rural homes and who on their return often brought presents and undertook special journeys with their children; and the love and support of a mother who, when she heard her son was being discriminated against by a "stepmother", returned from her work as a clothing merchant in a distant town to live with her son. The closeness of their relationship was celebrated by the boy in his descriptions. His bravery was conveyed through a throwaway line indicating that he did not care if the woman who was supposed to care for him was neglectful, because he stilled his hunger by hunting mice and birds. Not only his hunting abilities, but his naming of the trees along his way for part of his journey for the radio diary, conveyed dexterity within his environment and a pleasing knowledge of its qualities and presences. When he made his radio programme, his mother was surprised that he remembered his stepmother's cruelty so well, as he had been very young at the time.

Another girl, whose aunt died, asked her mother why she had not been informed about her aunt having an HIV/AIDS-related disease. Her questioning points to ways in which the mother may have been ashamed of the fact that her sister was dying because of HIV/AIDS, as well as to cultural predilections in which adults attempt to "protect" children by withholding painful information from them when they are very young, including information about the death of a parent. The latter responses are aimed at shielding young children from pain, but may in fact bewilder and isolate them in their experience of pain over the death of a close family member or parent. The girl's interview with her mother concerning her aunt's death led to the mother questioning her withholding of information from her daughter.

Radio diaries are an important way for children to communicate beyond their immediate neighbourhoods and are especially effective, given the high value placed on radio as a form of popular media among poorer people in South Africa. The programmes increase children's sense of their capacities and place in the world. They are an invaluable method of engaging with children in ways that promote an increasing "visibility", an acknowledgement of their wisdom and sensitivities in the public realm. There is also something about the microphone as "power object" that smoothly facilitates children's questioning of adult assumptions about what is appropriate for young children to know in the face of death, for example.

On knowing and representing social life

I present two case studies that demonstrate that if given sufficient space, children show deep knowledge of their social worlds and are capable of using cultural forms to convey their knowledge. The first discusses the creation of a play representing the social circumstances in which a group of children find themselves, while the second provides an example of the capacity of children to surprise researchers with new knowledge through the medium of photography. As adults we do not really know what children know, but it is in the following kinds of undertakings that children's knowledge is made apparent, because it does not rest on the same sets of discursive constraints as the call to language does. Children's capacities to surprise and therefore to destabilise adult conceptions become important here.

Young people's creation of a play in Okhahlamba

From March, 2003, to the end of 2008, I conducted anthropological research concerning people's experience of living with and alongside HIV/AIDS in Okhahlamba, a rural sub-district in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I met regularly with 31 young people between the ages of fourteen and twenty in the neighbourhood of Emfuleni.² Each young person had lost one or both parents as a result of HIV/AIDS.

During a week-long workshop away from their homes, I facilitated a process in which the group produced a play depicting difficult aspects of everyday life that they had identified, as well as portraying people who in their opinion attempted to address such problems. Threaded through the performance, were dances and songs, drawing on highly developed local performance repertoires in which the young people excelled.

In their play, *Imidlalo Yethu* (translated from isiZulu as "Our play"), the group showed that they were astute and often humorous commentators on local realities. They portrayed different characters, age-groups and journeys through bureaucratic institutions with ease, paying particular attention to the bodily comportment of different kinds of people and to styles of address. They mirrored conversations between young and old, between families and personnel at government departments, conversations conducted during taxi rides, and the role of traditional healers and churches in attempting to support people in a context where many were dying as a result of HIV/AIDS. They also portrayed the attempts of groups of older men to control crime and, in particular, theft of money and cattle.

The young people depicted themselves as having more knowledge than their grandparents about new government services and social grants. In one scene, children guided grandparents through encounters with state personnel and told them how to recoup essential documents that "had been burnt in fire", not an uncommon occurrence in the high mountains of Okhahlamba, where bolts of lightning burn down houses and sometimes kill people. The children displayed much wit in depicting a home affairs official working at his computer, and a charming disingenuousness on the part of grandparents who, in the play, had received no formal education, unlike their grandchildren. The play included the sound of taxis in motion, computers in operation, voices in the marketplace, gossip among inebriated grandmothers, and praying congregations.

Whereas in real life, children disowned the term *izintandane* (orphans) because of its association with complete destitution and loss of social place, they used the term openly in the play. They also referred openly to HIV/AIDS, something very rare in everyday life and in private interviews with the children. At funerals, for example, the 'causes' leading to death were often mentioned, but never attributed directly to HIV/AIDS. Children in everyday life were reluctant to take on the identity of orphans, because they feared discrimination. In local philosophical conceptualisations, the state of orphan-hood implied radical social dislocation, a state of complete marginalisation and lack of social place – something the children insisted did not describe their lives (Henderson, 2006; Meintjies & Giese, 2006).

The last scene in the play depicted an Apostolic Church of Zion service. In it, the young people reproduced the impassioned mannerisms of such congregations and of a prophet (*umphrofethi*) who appealed to God to assist his followers in the time of the Mighty Destroyer (*Mashaya Bhuye*), one of the evocative names given to HIV/AIDS in the region. A desire to transcend the harshness of everyday life was conveyed in the scene through the relief that powerful, collective singing, dancing and prayer can effect.

In reflecting on the play, I suggest that enactment, as well as depicting children's consummate appropriation of local worlds and their enjoyment of humorously mirroring social roles, may become an important distancing device through which young people are able to approach painful aspects of life without exposing personal pain. The fact that young people themselves decided to use HIV/AIDS as a theme for their play suggests that in acting out parts they could point to areas of pain without discomposing themselves in the company of their peers.

² Note that this is a pseudonym.

In relation to the theoretical concerns of the paper, forms of improvisation draw on the full expressive range of human beings and generate a sense of being-in-the-world. They demonstrate the satisfaction derived from learning and reflection through serious forms of play. According to Thomas Csordas (2002: 3) a phenomenological appreciation of experience within ritual for example, registers “immediacy, indeterminacy, sensibility ... all that has to do with the urgency of experience”.

Children’s photography in Accra

As Susan Sontag (2002) has shown, representation is about framing, selecting, organising and reflecting. Phillip Mizen and Yaw Ofusu-Kusi (forthcoming) describe a photographic project carried out by children living and working on the streets of Ghana’s capital city in which they are involved in all of the above processes. The children developed photographic accounts of their lives over the course of a day. These formed part of a collaborative participatory research project in which children as co-researchers decided what to depict, frame and isolate through the medium of photography. Their photographs “told vividly of the environs and ecology of street life, its detail and design, fractures and strains, its palpable fragmentation”. They depicted a “physical fabric and infrastructure under stress, and a burgeoning informal economy within and through which the children work[ed] to survive” (forthcoming: 5).

Interestingly, the photographs undermined stereotypical ways of thinking about street children. Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi experienced the fallibility of their existing knowledge of children, living and working on the streets (forthcoming: 15). Although many images confirmed children’s spoken life-narratives, depicting known journeys in pursuit of livelihoods throughout the day, they also showed more delicate, private and personal moments – moments often inaccessible to researchers. Despite the reality of many harsh aspects of their lives, the latter images revealed children in humorous situations, displaying palpable enjoyment and posturing for the camera. They shared moments of mutual compassion, tenderness and friendship (forthcoming: 9). Many photographs showed the importance of sleeping and eating for the children. It was particularly the photographs of intimacy, conviviality, reciprocity and mutual support; of sleeping in protective groups; of creating inventive tents from discarded bags that separated sleepers from the street; of children gathering in groups to share food, to pass food to one another, or to eat from a common plate; to shower together in a public shower; that bore out broader forms of sociality. Their images demonstrated care, friendship and acts of generosity, thus expanding conceptions of street life in which violence, dirt, a lack of social bonding and unscrupulous forms of individuality were more usually described.

Reflecting on the process of taking photographs, we may say that it included journeying through an environment, much as Deleuze (1997) claims, with a child’s leaning towards an exchange with the world in a multiplicitous environment, the selection and conceptualisation of which aspects of an environment to portray, awareness of the meaningfulness of what is selected, and the physical act of taking a photograph. These are a complex and satisfying set of involvements and mediations upon the world through which self, meanings and the imaginary are enhanced.

Conclusion

The call to incorporate children’s participation is an important intervention in democratic life. Its framing in terms of “hearing children’s voices” is more problematic. Liberal models of participation presuppose that all that is required is the space for verbalisation, and that words are sufficient to convey experience. This paper therefore raises questions concerning the sometimes assumed accessibility of children’s voices, as well as the conceptualisation of voice as verbal articulation and narrative. In their introduction to the book, *Makers and breakers: Children and youth in post colonial Africa*, Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck (2005: 2) write:

Children have rarely been listened to, and when their voices are not silenced, their talk is never unconstrained. Children’s voices reach a broader platform only in rare, and sometimes tragic, cases, but even then these subaltern voices are often immediately recuperated, transformed, and inserted into different narratives and agendas set by other interest groups.

We need to be alert to the ways in which “voices” may struggle to emerge and may not be given equal weight in terms of the quality of listening afforded them (Reynolds, 1995).

Forms of children's participation generated in relation to policy formulation or state governance may patronise children by involving them in only a small portion of a much larger, pre-determined social process in which power unequivocally rests in the hands of adults, and through whom a terrain has already been laid out. This leaves little room for surprise, including the surprise of what children know and how they know and represent it. The terms of child participation may become a self-fulfilling prophecy that disables children's critique of their everyday world.

I have argued that performance genres and creative acts offer young people powerful ways of exploring and articulating their concerns. Diana Taylor (2007: 2-3) contends that they “function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called ‘twice-behaved behaviour’”. Through the specific examples of innovative research methods I have drawn upon in the paper, I have therefore pointed out how unusual forms of participation promote embodied experiences that generate meaning, and at times forms of transcendence, through imagining possibilities beyond current experience. The ways in which the young may perform, enact or externalise their experience generates semiotic depth, drawing on often “hidden” capabilities rooted in local forms of comportment and expression.

In exploring creative methods of engaging with children and young people in collaborative processes of immersion, self-reflection and self-representation, I have suggested that such processes are powerful and enjoyable forms of participation, with a range of possible applications and effects in the lives of children, and that do not simply instrumentalise children's participation, but offer them an opportunity to engage in ways that have meaning for their own lives. In taking the latter approach, I have argued against a narrow formulation of what participation may entail by challenging normative assumptions that children's voices are immediately accessible, that children are unaware of the world around them, and that they cannot offer critical assessments of world-making and events. In light of the above critique creative methodologies are likely to elicit important and sometimes unexpected perspectives.

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