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Progressing children's participation: Exploring the potential of a dialogical turn

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Abstract

Children's participation is increasingly ambiguous and contested. Such complexity emerges in response to its emancipatory possibilities as well as unresolved tensions and power practices. The authors argue that closer attention must now be given to the interpretative milieu of children's participation, that is, to the act of dialogue that has emerged as central to the participatory process. They point to the need for a critical examination of dialogue in facilitating and resisting the recognition of children. The article concludes with a number of questions to be addressed, if a dialogic approach to participation is to be more fully realized.

Keywords

dialogue, hermeneutics, participation, recognition, voice

Children's experience of participation, and its representation in debates concerning their place in social and political life, is increasingly characterized as ambiguous, uncertain and contested (Kjørholt, 2002; Komulainen, 2007; Wyness et al., 2004). These patient accounts of the unresolved tensions of children's participation detail a record woven with ambiguity, of progress and emancipatory potential on one front and unresolved tensions, questions and power practices on another. Such ambiguity suggests we have not yet resolved how best to theorize, interpret and practise children's participation in everyday social and political life.

The following discussion focuses on four key issues we hope will invite further critical thinking about children's participation. First, we describe the ambiguity that is now more readily acknowledged as constituting children's participation. Second, we emphasize that the complex interplay between the possibilities and limits of participation should be further informed by what children and young people have to say about their participation, which we suggest is underpinned by a call for respect and recognition. Third, we posit that one way to move beyond the tensions is to reimagine children's participation in terms of recognition and, as such, to reflect on what might constitute a deeper acknowledgement of the status and voice of children as participants in contemporary life. This focus on recognition segues into a fourth issue, that being the critical role of dialogue in facilitating the recognition of children which is so essential to their participation in contemporary life. We conclude the article by signalling a number of questions that will require our ongoing attention if, as researchers and practitioners, we are to pursue a dialogic approach to participation capable of recognizing, respecting and integrating the rich and complex understandings that emerge through our conversations with children.

Our interest in conceptualizing participation as a dialogic encounter derives primarily from our work in the Centre for Children and Young People, at Southern Cross University, Australia, that seeks to link a range of research, education and advocacy activities such that these contribute to better outcomes for children.¹ A core focus of our work is to progress the theory and practice of participation in the various contexts in which children live their lives. This currently includes a critical analysis of the central role of dialogue with children, as adults seek to include and facilitate their participation in political, social, educational and family-related matters that concern them. We draw on our experience in involving children in research as well as in the development of a youth consultative committee, Young People Big Voice (YPBV),² integral to the activities of our Centre. Where possible, we have included what some of these young people have had to say concerning their participation, so as to guide and moderate our reflections on the potential of a dialogic approach.

The ambiguity of children's participation

Over the past two decades, a substantial body of research has focused on the importance of affording children the rightful and legitimate claim to 'have a say' and for adults to 'listen to the voices of children' in relation to the decisions and activities that influence their lives. In Australia, a diverse range of organizations promote participation as a social 'good' and seek to represent the interests of children in the development and implementation of law, policy and services. While the strongest leadership has come from the community sector, the government is committed to a policy platform of social inclusion which will support participatory initiatives that include children (ALP National Platform and Constitution, 2007; Wierenga et al., 2003). Indeed, it can be said,

in Australia and overseas, that discourses of children's participation are now so evident in a range of policy and programme initiatives that these have become a policy mantra and 'article of faith' (ESRC Seminar Series Participants, 2004: 103).

A number of theoretical influences about childhood are closely bound up with contemporary understandings of children as having strengths and competencies which have transformed them from invisible objects into subjects with legitimate voices of their own (Neale and Flowerdew, 2007). Key among these is the emergence of childhood studies, sociocultural theory and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Each of these has contributed independently and collectively to shaping understandings of children as having the voice and status of citizens and thus capable of participation in various aspects of social and political life. No longer an ideal, children's participation is accepted as strengthening the status of children, challenging issues associated with their social exclusion, emboldening the accountability and responsiveness of institutions, as well as contributing far-reaching benefits for children's well-being, their families and wider communities (Kirby and Bryson, 2002; Kjørholt, 2002; Smith, 2007).

Parallel with such developments, however, are growing concerns as to whether policy claims about participation reflect practices that facilitate the serious inclusion of children. Much of the discourse on children's participation points to a gap between the principle and practice of participation (Cashmore, 2003; Davis and Hill, 2006; Thomas and O'Kane, 2000). At the heart of this debate is whether the progress made in promoting the *case* for children's participation has been matched by *evidence of change* for children in their everyday lives. For example, Davis and Hill (2006: 9) assert that young people's involvement is often 'tokenistic, unrepresentative in membership, adult-led in process and ineffective in acting upon what children want', a concern shared by Morgan (2005), who singles out initiatives where organizations consult with children, but then provide little feedback or action in response to their views.

Alongside this dissonance around the promise, practice and outcomes of participation has been an increasing questioning of the well-intentioned but not unproblematic appropriation of 'voice' as the most effective framing of children's participation (see Cook-Sather, 2007; James, 2007; Mannion, 2007). Such critiques call our attention to competing values and interests and the 'powerful adult agendas at play' in the opportunities we afford children to 'have a say' (Clark and Percy-Smith, 2006: 2). Paradoxically, then, just at the time we are witnessing increasing numbers of government and non-government organizations (in education, family law, health, community services, research institutes and so on) laying claim to the value of participation, we are simultaneously querying whether 'listening to children's voices' guarantees any benefits for children, and whether public or private decision-making outcomes are shaped or impacted as a result of children's participation.

The discussion, thus far, has pointed to a complex interplay within and between the potential and ambiguity of an *enlightenment* rationale for children's participation (they have something important to tell us, and if we know what this is, it will ultimately benefit the children), the promise of an *empowerment* model (a rights-based approach where children's competence/capacity is acknowledged) and a *citizenship* rationale (where children's participation is about their 'place' in society which is located somewhere between their current and future status as citizens). Mannion (2007: 408) adds one further element to this rich mix, which he contends is 'lost in research and in the grey literature on listening', that being the possibilities offered by a *relational* model, an approach we return to later in this article. However, before considering further how we might progress children's participation in this complex and contested landscape, we focus now on one other important aspect of the current debate, that being what children themselves tell us about participation.

So what do children say participation is?

In this section, we briefly outline a number of key themes children identify as integral to their participation in social and political life. These themes are drawn from data collected in recent research we have undertaken with children about family law decision-making (Fitzgerald, 2009; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006) and from a consultative forum held with YPBV seeking their views in relation to the nature, purpose, benefits and challenges of participation. In presenting the views of young people, we are mindful of the limitations we have signalled in the preceding section, that their voices are undoubtedly inflected with relations of power at multiple levels, which invariably limit, constrain and enable what they have to tell us. Similarly, our interpretation of what young people say about participation is imbued with complex power relations that cannot, and should not, be ignored when incorporating their narratives. Indeed, we acknowledge at the outset the interpretative complexities that arise as we seek to better understand young people's views of participation, views that are often expressed in highly colloquial and metaphorical language – a language quite different to that of many adults, including researchers and policy-makers. Our aim in presenting the views of young people, then, is not to appropriate what they have to say to legitimate our particular view but rather to assist in the project of reimagining what participation could do or become if we can straddle its inherent tensions.

The first consistent theme identified by children is that participation should be respectful. Children tell us that they want to be respected as persons in their own right, that is, as different from their parents and other adults, and having something to offer that should be seriously considered (Neale, 2004; Stafford et al., 2003). This involves being offered the opportunity to be listened to, being asked for a viewpoint, being given choices, having choices respected and checking that decisions suit children as well as adults (Smart et al., 2001; Taylor, 2006):

. . . when I am listened to, I don't have to say it ten thousand times and I have just to say it once and they will talk to me. (Avril, in Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006: 34)

Just know that children aren't just children. That they have opinions, that they are not stupid they know what goes on and they are capable of being able to recognize what they want. (Anna, in Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006: 34)

Second, children say opportunities for participation should be genuine and focused on change. While they may want to participate, children are clear that any such participation should serve a useful purpose, for example, deeper understanding of an issue or a decision that might lead to a better deal for themselves or other young people. Stafford et al. (2003: 365) make reference to this when they refer to the young people in their study wanting to know in advance whether there was likely to be any change as a result of their involvement and, further, that any consultation 'should be honest and open' about negotiating such matters. Similar concerns about the need for participation to be linked to 'change' were raised by YPBV members at a 2008 forum where we sought their views on the nature, purpose, benefits and challenges of participation. Four of the members expressed their views as follows:

Participation is about making a difference.

I think it's about contributing to society. When the international researchers came we were given the opportunity to contribute to how youth are portrayed . . . so that's making a difference.

To make a difference . . . that they'd actually change what we felt was dodgy . . .

A third consistent theme identified by children is that participation includes having access to information, so as to allow them to make informed decisions and to help them to cope with the actual events around which decisions are being made (Butler et al., 2002; Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006):

It would be good to have some sort of information package or something, just something that you could read about, like directed at kids, not just adults, and explain what it is and what your rights are . . . I think if more was made known to people going through it [children] would think about it then rather than later . . . it is too hard to change. (Anna, in Graham and Fitzgerald, 2006: 34)

Conversely, McCredie and Horrox (1995) report that when participation does not facilitate information sharing, it may inhibit children's adjustment to changes in family structure in much the same way as reported by a young person in Fitzgerald's (2009) study:

. . . you don't even know about the thing . . . so you don't know if you should have a say, you don't even know about it . . . so then you wouldn't have information. (Dylan, in Fitzgerald, 2009)

Fourth, like adults, children differentiate participation in decision-making from responsibility for the decision. Most children, while wanting to be consulted, often do not want to take all the responsibility for decisions (Smith et al., 2003). Rather, children conceive of participation as *taking place at different levels, in different contexts and in a diversity of ways*. In distinguishing between participation and choice, we see the desire of children to work collaboratively with supportive adults in a democratic process of decision-making during, for example, family transition rather than seeking to make autonomous decisions (Taylor, 2006). At the same time, while children readily distinguish between 'having a say' and 'having their way', for some children, particularly those who have reported abuse, there is a stronger claim for respecting their views as an equal shareholder, that they want taken into account in the decisions and actions (Cashmore and O'Brien, 2001).

Finally, children reveal an understanding of participation as not being tied to the efforts of an individual child asserting a claim, but rather emerging within a *mutual interdependence, recognition and respect* for children and their views. For example, one member of YPBV described the role of the group's facilitator in supporting their work as:

You're like – see that brick wall – and there's the bricks and there's that grey stuff in between? You're like the grey stuff in between!

Other members of our YPBV group conveyed a similar view of participation by emphasizing the importance of what they referred to as ‘discussion’ with adults, citing particularly the potential for more meaningful conversations with teachers. They spoke of opportunities opened up through conversation for affirming, challenging and developing them:

As teenagers get older we want to discuss things . . . the sooner that’s introduced to youth . . . they learn how to interpret their thoughts better . . . so discussion is a really good thing.

When students start to talk more they mature . . . gain confidence . . . that’s why I like participating in as many things as possible.

There’s too much for kids to live up to, but not enough discussion about what matters to kids.

While the accounts of children and young people can potentially inform the theory and practice of participation, a critical challenge remains as to whether and how we respond to such insights.

Children’s participation: A call for recognition?

The narratives presented in the previous section suggest that children’s conceptualization of participation turns on the need, and sometimes the demand, for *recognition* – of who they are (their identity), of their place in social and political life (their status) and of what they have to say (their voice). Such a view resonates with Neale’s (2004) posturing of participation as children’s entitlement to recognition and respect. This reframing of children’s participation in terms of recognition begs some explication before further asserting its relevance in the current context.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (2008) defines recognition as acknowledgement of someone or something’s existence, validity or legality; according notice or consideration to; discovering or realizing the nature of; to treat as, acknowledge for, realize or admit that; and to know again or identify as known before. The question of how the concept of recognition is to be translated, however, has proved far more complex, and continues to be the subject of extensive academic debate. For example, both Taylor (1995) and Honneth (1995) have developed theories of recognition within a broader paradigm of self-realization, maintaining that recognition is a precondition for fulfilling self-identity. Honneth’s (1995) elaboration of recognition links recognition and its attendant implications for identity formation to three intersubjective conditions: self-confidence, which is about a child’s underlying capability to express needs and desires without fear of abandonment but instead with a high estimation of ability; self-respect, which is understood as having less to do with having a good opinion of oneself than with the possession of the universal dignity and self-reflexive agency of persons, that is, to have a sense of oneself as a person; and self-esteem, which is a sense of one’s uniqueness and difference, that which makes a person feel valuable. Honneth’s three conditions for identity formation are not inconsistent with a large body of research that identifies key elements of children’s resilience including their need for security, self-esteem and self-efficacy (e.g. Masten et al., 1990). Viewed from this perspective, ‘participation’ is not just a process of listening to children, hearing their voices or accessing their views, experiences, fears, desires and uncertainties: it holds out possibilities for children to discover and negotiate the essence of who they are and their place in the world. Furthermore, Honneth and Taylor argue, the converse is true: misrecognition consists in the depreciation of such identity by the dominant culture, and has the potential to inflict damage and harm, imprisoning individuals within a ‘false, distorted, and reduced mode of being’ (Anderson, cited in Honneth, 1995: xi).

Other philosophers, however, insist that the ‘identity model’ of recognition, such as that taken up by Taylor and Honneth, is deeply problematic (Lister, 2008a). Most prominent in this debate is the work of Fraser, who argues that constructing recognition in terms of damaged identity places an emphasis on the importance of human agency over social institutions (Fraser, 1997, 2000). Instead, Fraser proposes a ‘status model’ under which recognition is not so much a question of identity, but rather of social status. This view suggests that what requires recognition is ‘not group specific identity but rather the status of group members as full partners in social interaction’ (Fraser, 2000: 100). Accordingly, misrecognition refers not to the depreciation of identity, but to the social subordination that results when individuals or groups are prevented from participation as peers in social life (Fraser, 2000).

For the purposes of this article, we suggest both formulations of recognition are helpful in that they attest to the importance and relevance of recognition itself – both of children’s identity and status. We agree with Lister (2008a) that reframing the debate in terms of recognition *and* redistribution has implications for the way in which children are represented and treated at all levels of society. For this reason, as Neale (2004) suggests, recognition should be viewed as a precondition of children’s participation, precisely because it is as crucial to children’s well-being as well as their need for care and protection. In terms of translating the conditions and elements for recognition and resilience into possibilities for progressing children’s participation, it then becomes obvious that *relationships* with important others (adults and children) potentially feature as a key locus of self-

discovery and self-affirmation. Such opportunities are not simply social courtesies but instead constitute a ‘vital human need’ (Taylor, 1995: 226).

At the same time, one hardly needs to add that children do not enjoy a priori recognition nor do relationships with adults necessarily afford them this. Indeed, as Lister (2008b: 13) puts it, ‘a common theme in the literature is the lack of recognition and respect for the responsibilities that children exercise’. When participation is postured as intimately connected to the recognition of children and the development of their self-identity, we must therefore also acknowledge that recognition has to be won through an exchange or struggle (Taylor, 1995). This is consistent with Hill et al.’s view that ‘almost all discourse about young people’s participation refers back at least implicitly to notions of power; less often, however, does that involve explicit identification, clarification and deconstruction of what is meant by power and how power operates’ (Hill et al., 2004: 89). However, in order to gain insight into the workings of such power relations, we suggest it is neither useful, nor possible, to simply assert that particular institutions (such as the family, school, legal system or government) are powerful influences over children. Nor is it merely a straightforward case of constructing participation as the giving or taking away of power by the adults involved, or in juridical terms, as states possessing and distributing power (Kögler, 1999). As Foucault (1979) asserts, there is no such ‘thing’ as power but rather a network of relations within which power is exercised. Such a theorization acknowledges the power practices at work within and around participation as a more complex endeavour which must identify and analyse *networks* of power. In other words, any analysis of children’s participation must recognize power as ‘a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege one might possess’ (Foucault, 1979: 26–7).

From this perspective, the power at work when we ‘do’ participation is understood as predominantly pervasive and productive, and as varying according to the nature of the relationships and power struggles among and between the adults and children involved. Gallagher (2006: 159) captures the complex interplay between individual agency and institutional structures, when he posits that participation is ‘the locus of an ongoing struggle, where the will of an organisation and the will of its subjects engage with and attempt to influence and realign one another’. Such a conceptualization is useful in that it attends to the myriad ways in which power is at work in the processes and strategies we employ in any participatory project. Further, though, it challenges us to acknowledge that when we speak of children’s participation as a ‘struggle over recognition’ we must tune in closely to the more subtle ways in which power shapes and informs what it is we are prepared to recognize in these participatory encounters. By its very nature, then, the process of participation is imbued with networks of power relations as we attempt to respond to the ‘ever shifting, contextual and relational, and language-and-culture-based identities and voices as they are constructed and played out within various webs of power and practice’ (Cook-Sather, 2007: 396).

In the first instance, we suggest that approaching children’s participation as a struggle over recognition requires a focus on the workings of power and the ways in which this facilitates, limits and/or mediates the meanings produced through dialogue between children and those who govern their lives and activities. Hence, the critically important role dialogue plays in creating the conditions for recognizing children, including facilitating and supporting the development of children’s agency, their capacity to understand themselves and to define their identity, while always cognizant of the practices of power embedded in dialogue itself. Lodge (2005: 134) refers to this in her work on participation in schools as the critical need for the ‘building of shared dialogue’, which similarly accords with the ‘intergenerational dialogue’ that Mannion (2007: 410) calls for in negotiating child–adult spaces.

Given the debates and tensions about children’s status and the fact that children’s identity can be ‘precarious, contradictory and in process’ (Weedon, cited in Cook-Sather, 2007: 393), it is important to turn our attention to how we respond to such complexity when endeavouring to engage and respect a voice that is not fixed or absolute but rather evolving in *dialogue* with adults. We now wish to turn attention towards the ways in which we think about, invite, engage in and respond to dialogue with children given our belief it is integral to the participatory project.

Rethinking the recognition and participation of children: A dialogic approach

On the face of it, calling for a dialogic approach to children’s participation seems self-evident and uncontroversial. Indeed, we write at a time when there is a ubiquity of calls for dialogue in contemporary social and political life. For example, in Australia, the former prime minister, Kevin Rudd, called for ‘new dialogue’ with indigenous communities about disadvantage, representation and indigenous rights, a ‘principled dialogue’ between Australia and China about matters of contention, including a ‘bilateral dialogue’ on climate change and the need for the resolution of human rights problems in Tibet through ‘nonviolent approaches and dialogue’. However, in the following discussion, we use the term *dialogue* with a specific meaning and purpose. Drawing on the insights of critical hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1979; Kögler, 1999), we highlight a number of distinguishing features of the etymology of the word ‘dialogue’, in order to bring to attention its depth, complexity and

potential for progressing the way we conceptualize and practise participation such that it facilitates the recognition of children.

The word *dialogue* derives from two Greek words – *logos* meaning ‘the word’ or ‘what is talked about’ and *dia*, meaning ‘through’, thus suggesting a flow of meaning ‘among and through us and between us’, including within oneself (Bohm, 1997). When approached from a critical hermeneutic perspective, these two words, *logos* and *dia*, beg further focus on the question of whether, and to what extent, meaning is possible in dialogue, as well as to reflect on the ‘in-between space’ wherein such meanings are produced and negotiated. The corollary to dialogue, commonly used to describe our interactions with children in the context of participation, is ‘conversation’. The word *conversation* is derived from two Latin words – *conversari*, which means ‘to dwell’ or ‘to keep company with’, and *convertere*, which means ‘to change’, ‘to convert’, ‘to alter’, ‘to refresh’ or ‘to turn’. Put together, we arrive at an understanding of conversation as a movement towards the other (*conversari*) and a movement towards oneself (*convertere*). ‘Conversation’ thus suggests the need for openness to question one’s existing assumptions, prejudices and understandings, and to change if necessary (Bernstein, 1991). Further, the etymology suggests that engaging in conversation implies submitting oneself and one’s point of view to interpretation and reinterpretation (Whelan, 2007). Gadamer describes conversation in the following way:

[Conversation] is a process of two people understanding each other. Thus it is a characteristic of every true conversation that each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says. (Gadamer, 1979: 347)

For our purposes here, we interpret conversation to be dialogic in nature as it implies that understanding is not simply reached by reproducing our conversation partner’s intent or meaning, but rather on producing shared mutual meanings. In other words, dialogue is productive rather than reproductive in its nature. When framed in this way, conversation can be seen to have a far broader focus than just ‘listening to children’s voices’ since its emphasis is on *change*. As Horn (2000: 70) asserts, ‘All change, reform or progress must start with conversation. The status quo can be changed when conversation occurs.’

Understood this way, both ‘conversation’ and ‘dialogue’ hold much potential for more fully recognizing children as we invite them into a participatory encounter. First, we are *ontologically* forced to consider how we understand the nature of dialogue itself. According to Taylor, if we are to better understand the close connection between identity and recognition, we must take into account the overwhelmingly monological bent of mainstream modern philosophy which has ‘rendered almost invisible’ the dialogical character of human life:

We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence defining our identity . . . always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things that our significant others want to see in us. (Taylor, 1995: 230)

For our purposes, Taylor is suggesting that while children’s identity is crucially dependent on their relationships with others, the ongoing tension that prevails in western societies between monological and dialogical understandings continues to limit how we conceptualize participation. Such tension, we suggest, goes to the heart of children’s struggle over recognition.

Second, we are *epistemically* required to take the self-understanding of children seriously. When our conversations with children are guided by an orientation towards their self-understanding, children’s ‘participation’ is not simply constructed or perceived as the exercise of the individual agency of each child. Consequently, their competence, determination, dependency or vulnerability does not determine their inclusion or exclusion from participatory processes, but rather informs the way in which their participation takes place. Of course, while dialogue engenders epistemological posturing, this does not immediately translate into change. It can, however, be the starting point for directed and reflexive social action which sets into motion a process of thinking critically about how assumptions about children (for example, about their capacity or vulnerability) act to exclude them from participatory processes. This intimate relationship between dialogue and change is examined in greater detail in the following section.

Third, approaching children’s participation as a dialogical encounter presupposes an *ethical* dimension because it implies our conversations with them begin from a standpoint of respect for their views, perspectives and assumptions. A dialogical approach thus draws attention to participation as a space for a certain kind of ethical practice, that is, one which is comfortable with the provisionality and messiness that listening, reflecting, interpreting and engaging in conversation and dialogue inevitably bring (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). This includes acknowledging the implications of dialogue for adults engaged in the conversation. While inviting children is an important first step in facilitating their participation, the extent to which our own knowledge, values and assumptions are open to question will largely determine the process and outcomes of the encounter, including what we select to report or act upon. A dialogical approach to participation requires an openness to new understandings and insights which cannot be generated by one of the partners alone, particularly given the notion that children’s perspectives can ‘place a stutter’ in adult narratives (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005: 160). How we respond to new insights generated through dialogue will significantly influence how children are recognized and how their sense of themselves, and what matters to them, is shaped through the encounter. How, then, do we

approach dialogue such that it is oriented towards children's self-understanding and individual agency, as well as to the self-understanding of the adults involved? It is towards this challenge that we now turn.

From listening to dialogue

In this final section we bring into focus a number of questions, iterative in nature, which may be useful for prompting further thinking and debate. While hermeneutics asserts there is no 'starting point' for dialogue (Gadamer, 1979), it is possible to discern a number of interpretive 'movements' which are integral to the workings of dialogue, and so, to the workings of children's participation (Veling, 2005; Whelan, 2007). Together, these movements provoke us to reconsider the dimensions of children's struggles over recognition within a broader ethical and methodological framework. These movements are broadly captured in the following questions that we hope might direct us to think more critically about how we understand and 'do' dialogue with children.

What are you saying to me?

This first question concerns the ways in which we invite and engage children in conversation as part of their participation. The question reveals a 'movement' towards the 'other' which, according to Whelan (2007: 2) conveys a sense of 'I . . . take the initiative and make a choice to be with you in some positive and creative way.' When we invite children into dialogue, we signal a willingness to listen and to take the conversation seriously, or as Veling says, 'it directs my attention to *you* and allows your words to speak to me' (Veling, 2005: 56). So while the question 'What are you saying to me?', does not, in and of itself, create, effect or transform their participation in everyday life, it nevertheless prompts us, as researchers and practitioners, to acknowledge the child and their viewpoint, to listen, respond and clarify. Failure to ask this question will almost certainly prevent or close down a conversation and consequently deny the emergence of interpretative understanding (Veling, 2005).

For those working with children across any number of settings, we suggest the question 'What are you saying to me?' is rarely asked in relation to many of the decisions made about matters that concern them. As earlier discussion has highlighted, there are a number of consequences for children, families and communities when we fail to create a social or political environment in which children can participate. Children miss out on the opportunity to talk about their views, experiences, fears, desires and uncertainties. There is less likelihood that informed, relevant decisions will be made – whether the decisions concern post-separation residence and contact arrangements, choice of schools or social policy issues of a more public nature such as planning, public housing or transport. Inviting children into dialogue through this first movement, then, offers them the opportunity to discover, negotiate and, if necessary, transform understandings of who they are and their place in the world.

Do we place our own experience at risk when we 'listen' to children?

This question signals a second 'movement' that is, a movement towards myself. It motions to the hermeneutic idea that dialogue requires something of the interpreter's experiences to be put 'at risk'. As Whelan (2007: 2) puts it: 'I . . . open myself to discovery and change through the encounter.' For understanding to develop within a dialogic encounter, we as adults are required to follow the conversation and the questions that emerge from it no matter how strange or unfamiliar and no matter how far outside the realm of our experience it might take us. Placing our own experience at risk requires us to acknowledge our prejudices and pre-understandings, many of which are hidden from view or so deeply embedded in our assumptions and behaviours that we may not readily recognize them.

The question of whether, and to what extent, we place our own experience 'at risk' is significant in that it directs attention towards ourselves and the environment within which we work. So, while children's participation in various settings is often accompanied by the rigorous evaluation of the risks that may or may not accompany their inclusion (for example, in legal decision-making processes, research ethics committees), we rarely conceptualize 'risk' in terms of our own experience or, indeed, in terms of its productive or generative potential in dialogue. To do this creates disequilibrium in existing power relations and in social and institutional norms that are firmly fixed on the capacity of the child to participate, rather than on our own capacity to respond to what children have to say. A relevant example can be found in the context of research, where considerations of whether to invite children to participate are predominantly focused on children's capacity to consent and to adhere to other aspects of formal ethical guidelines that 'protect' them, rather than attempting to ensure that the researchers involved are capable of responding to what children have to say and to establishing the conditions for recognition through the dialogic encounter. Having acknowledged our own prejudgements and prejudices, and the fact that these may largely be hidden from us, the second movement draws attention to our own stance in the conversation, in particular what personal, political, social, moral and ethical commitments we are willing

to risk by opening them up for interpretation and reinterpretation as part of the dialogic encounter of participation (Kögler, 1999; Whelan, 2007).

Does what the child is saying help me to see the matter of concern ‘differently’? Are we (together) able to generate new understandings?

The third ‘movement’ draws attention to the ‘in-between’ space of conversation, that is, to its productive potential, as well as to the power practices imbued within any dialogical exchange.

From the perspective of this question, the subject matter is irrelevant unless we are drawn into consideration of the particular concerns it raises (Veling, 2005). Accordingly, the purpose of conversation is not to identify the other’s meaning but to relate to the possibilities of what she or he says to one’s own perspectives and assumptions; in other words, to be open to the other in a way that allows what they say to be brought to bear on oneself (Kögler, 1999).

Within this ‘in-between’ space, a dialectic of question and answer is allowed to flourish where meaning does not manifest as assertion, but instead as something to be responded to and engaged with. Indeed, it is only through the formulation of this question around ‘seeing differently’ that dialogue can be set in motion, but in a way that the other’s as well as one’s own views are treated as substantive and potentially true (Kögler, 1999). Through dialogue there is potential for long-standing assumptions to dissolve, new questions to be asked, mistrust to be overcome, mutual understanding generated, visions shaped, new insights and perspectives gained and new levels of community strengthened (Seet and Tee, 2003). The productive intent of conversation implicates the partners well beyond merely talking and listening, particularly when taking into account the kind of ‘rules’ described by Tracy (1987):

Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by your conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, to change your mind as the evidence suggests it. (Tracy, 1987: 18)

This description of conversation signals the critical importance of the interpreter being open to influence – both their own and that of the other. Having opened up our own assumptions and prejudgements, this third movement suggests that children, too, actively shape and are shaped within the productive process of dialogue. In this context, the relationship of partners in conversation is understood to be not simply one of cognition or cohabitation, or of discussion and debate. In keeping with the peripatetic heritage of philosophy, the dialectic of question and answer demands a willingness to follow the question wherever it leads, an adventurousness ruled out or limited in many forums of public discussion that appropriate the term ‘dialogue’ for what in reality are more constrained outcomes (Bruns, 2003). In addition, the reiterative approach imbued in a dialectic of question and answer draws attention to the agency of the children in the interpretative process and their role as ‘shapers’ of interpretation. In this way, the conversations we engage as part of any participatory endeavour offer rich possibility for modifying the views of what makes sense to us.

What do you say? How will you choose to respond?

This question (which is not a final question, but rather the last in a movement of question and answer) invites us to consider how we choose to respond to children and what they have to say. Children’s participation involves an individual or organization reflecting critically on what it is that dialogue with children is and isn’t asking for and an acknowledgement of what it likely will and will not change. This includes the child’s capacity to participate and the adult’s capacity to acknowledge, reassess and reposition existing understandings such that the conversation opens up a new space for transformation and change. This fourth movement, then, builds on the assumptions of the previous movements in that it again requires us to approach dialogue from a position that strives to understand, and to trust, how children themselves make sense of the world. It is important to note, however, that while entering into conversation with an openness to change is a precondition of conversation, change is a possibility not a necessity nor a given. As Lonergan (1972: 231) puts it, ‘Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.’

In reflecting on the movements, as outlined in this section, it bears noting that ambiguity and tension are weaved throughout each movement of dialogue, that is, within partners in dialogue, as well as within the dialogic encounter itself. For us, the key challenge for children’s participation is to better understand and feel comfortable with such ambiguity in dialogue. As Komulainen (2007: 13) says: ‘Before we can simply “give a voice” to children, we need to acknowledge that there are ambiguities involved in human communication, and that these ambiguities result from the “socialness” of human interaction, discourses and practices.’ This movement towards responding to the complexity of identities and voices calls us to be more attentive to children’s ‘languages, lived (context-specific) experiences, and how and by whom those are represented’ (Cook-

Sather, 2007: 396). This view emphasizes ‘translation’ as the conceptual bridge between how we interpret and render ourselves, and how we can work with children to interpret and render themselves in participatory contexts and so, together, reimagine children’s participation.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has suggested the need for a critical re-examination of how we theorize and practise children’s participation. With the growing movement towards inviting children to be included in participatory processes, we suggest that now, more than ever, there is an urgent need to better understand the dialogue that is evidently so integral to children’s participation. Consistent with what children tell us about their participation, we have sought to foreground recognition as a critically important aspect of participation. In doing so, we have signalled further possibility for contributing to children’s sense of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem through their participatory involvement. We have suggested that a participatory approach that seeks to facilitate the recognition of children entails much more than ‘listening to their voices’, but, instead, points to the potential of a dialogic approach. Such an approach to participation is based in relationships, that is, oriented towards children’s self-understanding and individual agency, as well as to the self-understanding of the adults involved. We have posited that it is only in engaging in such an approach that ‘change’ grounded in respect is possible. In positing the critical links between participation, recognition and dialogue, where the critical explication of dialogue is informed by critical hermeneutics, we hope to have contributed further to the development of what Neale (2002) describes as a more nuanced understanding of children in relation to adults, where mutuality as well as authority is acknowledged, and interconnectedness and the relational is emphasized.

Notes

1. For further information about the work of this Centre go to www.ccyp.scu.edu.au
2. Members of YPBV are young people, aged 13–21 from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences who meet regularly to advise the Centre for Children and Young People on important issues for its research, education and advocacy activities.

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