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Anne Graham
Southern Cross University

Robyn Margaret Fitzgerald
Southern Cross University

Publication details

Post-print of: Graham, A & Fitzgerald, RM 2010, 'Supporting children's social and emotional well-being: does 'having a say' matter?', *Children & Society*, vol. 25, no. 3. *pp. 447-457.*
Published version available from:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2010.00295.x

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Paper Title:

Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing: Does 'Having a Say' Matter?

Author Names:

Professor Anne Graham & Dr Robyn Fitzgerald

Affiliation:

Centre for Children & Young People
Southern Cross University
Lismore, New South Wales, Australia

Corresponding author:
Anne Graham
Professor of Childhood Studies
Director, Centre for Children & Young People
Southern Cross University
P.O. Box 157
Lismore,
New South Wales, Australia
anne.graham@scu.edu.au
Ph: 61 2 66203605
Fax: 61 2 66203243

Anne Graham is Professor of Childhood Studies and Director of the Centre for Children and Young People at Southern Cross University. Robyn Fitzgerald is a postdoctoral research fellow with the Centre. They are both former teachers whose shared research interests include children's social and emotional wellbeing, participation and citizenship, children's rights in law, education, families, and other everyday contexts, and ethical considerations in child and youth related research.

Introduction

The issue of children's participation in matters that concern their everyday lives, and the potential this offers for contributing positively to their social and emotional wellbeing, has captured our attention for many years. As teachers we share a strong belief in the promise of education for developing social and emotional competence in children. Moreover, we argue quite strenuously about the potential of schools, especially, to develop as sites of participatory practice whereby children are invited to co-construct a learning environment in which they are 'listened to' in the fullest sense, and their uniqueness, subjectivity and rights are recognised. It has been our observation, however, that the deeply entrenched conservatism that permeates many education systems has been slow in responding to new insights emerging from socio-cultural, sociological and human rights fields of inquiry throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), for example, barely registered on the educational landscape in Australia, other than to provoke concerns about disruptions to authority, respect and responsibility should children be allowed to have 'too much' say. Approaches to supporting children's mental health mirrored understandings of children as objects of concern with the consequential effect of framing social and emotional education from a deficit, 'risk' based standpoint. Yet, as De Winter and others (1999) point out:

> Helping children to articulate their opinions on their environment, stimulating them to develop social responsibility appears to be a crucial, but often forgotten factor in the prevention of psychosocial problems and the promotion of health and wellbeing. Therefore, a serious dialogue with children in matters concerning their own quality of life, in other words, encouraging children's participation, should both be considered as a basic right, and as a precondition for the promotion of health and wellbeing. (p.16)

This paper explores the potential of children's participation for promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing. Firstly, we discuss how recent developments in conceptualising and acting upon children's mental health have positioned this field for adopting a

participatory approach. Secondly, we analyse the literature pointing to the importance of participation for children's wellbeing and we posit that at the heart of authentic participation lies a call for recognition of children and what they have to say. Here we also argue the central role that dialogue plays in facilitating such recognition. Thirdly, we briefly examine one program initiative, 'Seasons for Growth', that aimed to incorporate such participatory principles in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of children experiencing change and loss. Finally, we signal a number of issues that require ongoing attention if, as researchers and practitioners, we are to pursue participatory approaches to children's wellbeing, based on dialogue, that can gently hold the rich and complex understandings that emerge out of our conversations with children, so they come to know and trust the recognition and respect due to them.

Key Developments in Promoting Children's Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Over the past 20 years, children's social and emotional wellbeing has received increasing attention, in line with growing community concerns about the numbers of children presenting with mental health problems and major publicity highlighting increasing rates of youth suicide (Sawyer and others, 2000). At the turn of the 21st century, approximately 14 percent of Australian adolescents were identified as experiencing mental health difficulties, with social and psychological stressors impacting on children linked to factors such as parental separation, abuse, death of a relative or friend, friendship problems, homelessness, parental unemployment, illness, injury, disability and failure at school (Sawyer and others, 2000). Schools were identified as appropriate sites for supporting and promoting students' mental health, although evidence at the time suggested many schools considered they were not well resourced to accommodate increasing numbers of 'vulnerable' students (Johnson and others, 1997). Hence, much of the discussion was heavily circumscribed by discourses of 'risk' and 'harm', and responses aimed at the prevention of mental health related problems, mainly implementing strategies to assist early identification such as screening for failure or depression.

What followed was a stronger emphasis on 'health promotion', effectively inserting a strengths-based discourse and opening up possibilities for re-thinking approaches to children's mental health. In Australia, this resulted in the funding of 'healthy schools' initiatives, all generally linked to an emphasis on the health of the school, the quality of school relationships and attention to empowerment and equity. Significantly, there was a shift in language towards notions of children's 'social and emotional wellbeing' and 'psycho-social competence', both conferring agency on the child.

Since then, the mental health education agenda has continued its strengths-based emphases, culminating in a focus on 'resilience'. Needless to say, the language of 'resilience' has captured the imagination of educators and other professionals working in the field of mental health, most likely because it couples closely with the 'wellbeing' dimension of mental health promotion (Hill and others, 2007). As a concept, resilience has positive connotations, with caring and positive relationships, positive and high expectations and *opportunities for meaningful participation* integral to developing resilience (Bernard, 1997). Together, resilience-led perspectives and strengths-based approaches have become a platform for progressing a range of initiatives aimed at improving children's social and emotional wellbeing.

The shift to strengths-based and resiliency approaches aligns more readily to the idea that children are active participants in their own lives, families, schools and communities, hold perspectives that are valuable in their own right and provide critical insights we should know about if we are to be responsive to their needs. At the heart of this work are new understandings about the theory and practice of children's participation (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010). Yet, if such understandings are influencing the shift in how children's social and emotional wellbeing is understood and acted upon, they have remained largely silent in the literature reporting such developments.

Key Developments in Children's Participation

Concurrent with the developments outlined above, a substantial body of research has emerged in relation to 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 matters that concern them (Hill and others, 2004). Such developments have seen a repositioning of childhood, whereby children are viewed as citizens and social actors with their own strategies for participating in family and community life. The benefits of children having a say have been found to be numerous, with 'participation' recognised as a powerful instrument in raising children's level of social and emotional functioning, assisting children to develop a sense of belonging in the community, gain new skills and experiences, meet new people and build a sense of their own agency (Alderson, 2000; Morrow, 1999). Of particular significance is the importance children place on being respected as individuals (Lansdown, 2006).

The emergence of participation as holding possibilities for improving children's wellbeing has been shaped, then, by a number of factors - including an *enlightenment* rationale (children have something important to tell us, and if we know what this is, it will ultimately benefit the children), the promise of *empowerment* (a rights-based approach acknowledging children's competence/capacity), its potential for *citizenship* (children's participation is about their 'place' in society, located somewhere between their current and future status as citizens) as well as its *relational* possibilities (participation is inherently social) (Mannion, 2007).

Yet, while the evidence signals a compelling case for participation, embedding it in practice isn't so straightforward. In many instances, the serious inclusion of children remains elusive, particularly in the context of education (Tisdall, 2010), which is where many mental health programs for children remain located. Most recently, concerns have been raised as to whether giving children a say acts to reinforce, rather than disrupt, existing social conditions hence limiting real change being effected for children (Cook-Sather, 2007). In response to the gap between the promise and practice of participation, a number of researchers have begun to seek out new directions, in particular, by examining more closely the relational basis of children's participation (Fielding, 2007; Thomas, 2007). As Lansdown (2006) observes, 'meaningful participation is a goal that can only be attained if recognition is given

to the importance of the quality and nature of relationships between adults and children' (p. 141).

Implicit in the movement towards enabling relationships that have 'a more explicit, more demanding reciprocity' (Fielding, 2007, p. 305) is the need to focus attention, conceptually and practically, on the conversations and dialogue that sustain them. We contend that at the heart of such conversation rests the notion of children 'having a say' – a term we use to signal a breadth of possibilities for children's participation in decision-making and in everyday life, including in relationships with adults (sustained participatory activities require ongoing adult support) as well as between children (children supporting and mentoring others to participate) (Lansdown, 2006). For us, a productive path for understanding the dialogical nature of participation has been to locate the *recognition* of children as its raison d'être. This is partly in response to the growing body of evidence that children demand and need recognition (Lister, 2008; Morrow, 1999), but also because it is a concept that acknowledges the complex nature of relationships, and the dialogical conditions that underpin them. For this reason, it is useful to briefly clarify what we mean by recognition.

The work of Honneth (1995) is useful here in that his conceptualisation of recognition focuses on the intersubjective conditions for identity formation, conditions which are not dissimilar to well documented evidence regarding key personal resources for resilient children. Honneth proposes recognition as existing in three intersubjective modes: first, love and relationship, the fulfillment of which provides the individual with the *self-confidence* to express personal needs and desires – without fear of abandonment or retribution; second, the civil and juridical recognition of dignity so as to grant the *self-respect* required to view oneself as a competent, moral subject; and third, recognition of the individual's capacities, achievements and potential contribution to social and political life, that is, *self-esteem.* Furthermore, where recognition is denied or withheld, such *misrecognition* or *nonrecognition* potentially brings about damage to the identity of the individual and thus to their wellbeing (Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1995). So, for example, when a child is ridiculed, denigrated or ignored, it not only becomes more difficult for her to value her own sense of self, but it can also set in train a process which gives way to a sense of social isolation,

loneliness and loss (Honneth, 1995). As such, misrecognition and/or nonrecognition are understood as causing multiple harms. Indeed, Charles Taylor (1995) argues misrecognition potentially imprisons individuals within a 'false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (p. 225) a condition which has lead him to claim: 'due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people, it is a vital human need' (p. 226).

Viewed from this perspective, the recognition of children that takes place when they participate in social relationships and political life, is not just about a process of listening to children, hearing their voices or accessing their views. Instead, it holds out possibilities for children to discover and negotiate the essence of who they are and their place in the world. Acts of recognition thus become ethically and morally significant in their own right in that they address and engage children's deepest need to be known by recognising something authentic and distinctive about them (Arendt, 1971). Additionally, when the fundamentally dialogical character of recognition is acknowledged, acts of recognition hold potential for determining the process and outcomes of children's participation (Taylor, 1995). In this way, acts of recognition envisage interpersonal, intrapersonal and social change.

The central role and importance of the recognition of children requires us, first and foremost, to be attentive to the creative and reflexive process of the conversations we engage children in since these create the conditions for identity formation, described above. When participation is understood as inviting children to dialogue, we begin to see an unfolding of opportunities in which adults and children clarify together what is happening, consider new possibilities and create more choices. When framed as a dialogical encounter, participation can be seen to have a far broader focus than just 'listening' to children's voices since its potentiality is *change*.

There cannot, of course, be dialogue that is power-free. For change, reform and progress to take place, relationships of power that are so tightly bound up in taken-for-granted social practices must be unsettled, shifted and redistributed throughout the process (Gallagher, 2006). Hence, for recognition to be realised, our conversations with children should also

generate deeper insight into the ways in which children's agency and their capacity to understand themselves is both accommodated and resisted (sometimes simultaneously).

The dialogic approach described above, with a deepening of the recognition of children as its central intent, begs the question, 'How does this work in practice'? In other words, what would a program aimed at promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing look like if it were based on the philosophy and principles of a dialogic approach to participation? One important implication is that the starting point for a dialogical approach is for such programs to be undertaken '*with* children rather than *on* or *about* them' (Smart and others, 2001, p. 14). This provides more adequately for children to be positioned *alongside* adults such that any conversation between them will potentially result in richer understandings of their experiences and how they might act on these.

A Case Study Linking Children's Participation, Recognition and Wellbeing: *Seasons for Growth*

Seasons for Growth is a loss and grief education program which aims to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of children, aged 6-18 years, as they adapt to changes in their lives as a result of death, separation or divorce. The program was first developed in 1996, largely in response to community concerns about the implications of a burgeoning divorce rate on children in Australia, but also to redress the lack of support resources available for children adjusting to death in their families. A 2nd edition was written in 2002 and over 120,000 children in 5 countries have now participated in the program. The intent of the program is to promote children's *participation*, based on the aspirations of a dialogic approach outlined above, so as to facilitate their *recognition* as the basis of improving their *wellbeing*.

Common to much of the research in the 1990's (in relation to the effects of death and divorce) was a framing of children's experiences in terms of discourses of 'harm', hence largely positioning them as passive victims, vulnerable and 'at risk' (see for example, Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Yet, what was clear at the time, and remains evident still, is

that children's experiences of change in their families – including well documented emotional responses such as sadness, anxiety, anger, resentment, confusion, guilt and loyalty tensions (Worden, 1991; Graham, 2004) – needed to be heard, acknowledged, respected and acted upon.

Less prominent was the idea that such reactions don't, in and of themselves, render the child at risk of harm, nor that children's competence or agency is compromised when their experience of change and loss is acknowledged. At the heart of this tension was, and still is, the view that the way children navigate such events 'appears to greatly influence their psychosocial wellbeing' (de Winter and others, 1999, p.18). Acknowledging the complex interplay between children's vulnerability and agency heralds a deeper respect for the child and the unique and creative ways they interpret and respond to change. Children have a quite extraordinary capacity for coping, problem solving, decision-making and goal setting (de Winter and others, 1999; Graham, 2004) although clearly they do best in developing competence with these in a supportive social environment (Smith, 2002). Given timely and appropriate support, children are capable of reconstructing their experience in ways that enhance agency (a sense of being *enabled* and so acting upon what they *can* influence) as distinct from dependency (being *constrained* by acting upon decisions, processes or family dynamics they *can't* or *don't wish* to influence). Yet even at the time of writing the second edition of the program (2002) children were consistently reporting their exclusion from discussions about their parents' separation and the changes that it brings to their lives (Butler and others, 2002; Smith and others, 2000).

It was this complex social and empirical context that shaped the development of the *Seasons for Growth* initiative (Graham, 1996; 2002). The program is based on small group (4-7 children with 1 adult participant), like-to-like peer learning processes, creating a space for children to 'have a say' and providing an invitation to learn and practice new ways of thinking and responding to changes in their families. The emphasis is on understanding the effects of change, loss and grief, whilst developing skills in communication, decision-making and problem-solving through a peer support network so as to help restore self

confidence and self-esteem. It is underpinned throughout by an emphasis on the development of *identity* ('I am'), *voice* ('I have') and *competence* ('I can').

The program has a sound curriculum structure and incorporates a wide range of age-appropriate activities including art, mime, role-play, stories, discussion, playdough, music and journalling. Whilst these strategies highlight the value of creative, physical and language based activities, their ultimate value lies in children being able to have a say about which options might work best for them. Children's learning is largely generated through conversations with each other and respectful dialogue facilitated (but not dominated) by an appropriately trained adult, through stories shared, questions asked, skills learned, friendships developed and responses documented for later reference if needed.

As the name implies, the different seasons of the year provide a rich symbolic framework in which to explore issues of change and loss. Drawing on the wide variation in the seasons, both in Australia and elsewhere, the metaphor speaks to the 'ups and downs' of life, reflecting the experience of both agency and vulnerability, as well as the unique ways 'seasons' are experienced. There are five different levels of the program and each level includes eight weekly sessions, a final celebration session and two subsequent reconnector sessions (that range from 40 minutes to an hour depending on age). Each weekly session explores a concept theme such as *I am Special, Life Changes like the Seasons, My Story is Special, Feelings, Memories, Choices* and *Support Networks*. Each concept is linked both to the imagery of one of the seasons and to one of the 'tasks' of grief, as theorised by Worden (1991) to:

- accept the reality of the loss;
- work through the pain of grief;
- adjust to an environment in which the significant person or thing is no longer present;
- emotionally relocate the person or thing and move on with life.

The choice of Worden's conceptualisation of grief was significant in that the construct of 'task' signals a shift from passivity to action/responsibility, hence more closely reflecting

notions of children's competence. 'Grief' in this context is not constructed as a pathological condition that positions children as victims or dependent but in a state of being that provides them with space to acknowledge their hurt or distress and to resist powerlessness and passivity in the face of changing and often stressful family circumstances (Graham, 2004). In approaching their experiences in this way, children are implicated in the project of their own wellbeing, that is, they can engage their own knowing to act on themselves in relation to changes that divorce or death brings (Kaganas and Diduck, 2004).

The role of the adult facilitator is usually considered to be critical in any program or initiative that focuses on potentially 'sensitive' issues related to children's mental health. In many of these contexts, the disciplinary expertise, professional qualifications and experience with the subject matter quite rightly take precedent. In the *Seasons for Growth* program, with its emphasis on incorporating the philosophy and principles of participation, being an 'expert' in such matters was *not*, however, the primary consideration. Since the linchpin of the program was always considered to be the *quality of the conversations* with and between the children, the approach and skills of the adult not only needed to be explicitly identified but also clearly differentiated from other roles such as counseling. Hence, the adult facilitator was given the title of 'Companion' to reflect the notion of 'keeping company with' children throughout the conversations considered to be at the centre of the learning process.

We have written elsewhere (Graham & Fitzgerald, in press) that the word 'conversation', derives from two Latin words, *conversari*, 'to dwell' or 'to keep company with', and *conversatio*, 'to change', 'to convert', 'to alter', 'to refresh' or 'to turn'. Hence conversation is understood to be a movement towards the other (*conversari)* and a movement towards oneself (*conversatio*). Conversation thus suggests the need for openness to question one's existing assumptions, prejudices and understandings, and to change. For Companions, a key issue is challenging pre-existing (and often deeply held) assumptions about *power and authority* as they engage in a process with children that inverts broadly accepted understandings and practices of adult-child relationships in learning contexts. Such inversion includes an assumption that adults and children approach the conversation as Lonergan (1972, p.231) suggests, 'Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if

necessary, change'. The challenge is thus not only about having the skills to listen to children, hear their voices or access their views. It is also about scaffolding them to discover and negotiate who they are and their place in the world within a dialogical space that allows Companion and child the opportunity to reflect on, interpret and reinterpret their experiences.

In this sense, the learning in *Season for Growth* is best understood as a relational and dialogical process whereby the active role of children in their own development is recognised and respected within a framework that acknowledges the influence of the individual needs and personalities of the participants, interpersonal factors, and the curriculum context of the group. Most importantly, the role of adults and the way in which the agenda and values of adults are negotiated with children is not overlooked or assumed (Percy-Smith, 2006). Subsequently, Companions are prepared through training and ongoing development to approach their conversations with children open to the challenges and disruptions such engagement inevitably brings forth.

What Have We Learned: Why does 'Having a Say' Matter and What Does it Involve?

The *Seasons for Growth* program has been the subject of a number of rigorous, independent evaluations conducted in Australia, New Zealand, England, Ireland and Scotland, which have concluded that the program has a strong, positive effect on children. All stakeholders overwhelmingly reported the benefits of the program with children reporting that the program had removed their sense of isolation, allowed them to talk about their feelings without shame and helped them to develop trust in themselves and others. Many participants indicated they had been able to seek support, when necessary, from outside the formal processes of the program, form friendships and support networks with others within the program, communicate better with their parents and siblings, understand that life moves on and that changes do happen, and to cope better with their feelings (Muller and Saulwick, 1999).

The major national evaluation highlighted that '*Seasons for Growth* works because it is a safe, sound and creative way for young people to learn' (Muller and Saulwick, 1999, p. 4) and that despite sometimes very challenging circumstances they realise they are 'not the only one', what they experience is a normal and valuable part of life, they have within themselves the confidence, attitude and skills to negotiate difficult 'seasons' and they are a valued part of a larger social network to whom they can turn for support. Subsequent evaluations of the program continue to attest to such findings.

Additionally, Companions are required, as part of their ongoing professional and personal development, to complete self-evaluation forms and participate in de-briefing sessions at the conclusion of each program they facilitate. The insights and issues most frequently reported by Companions centre around the ways in which their own attitudes, beliefs and assumptions – about children, grief and the potential of participatory processes for effecting change - have shifted as a result of their involvement with the program. Significantly, one area that features prominently in Companion reflections is around their *own confidence and skills* to facilitate respectful conversations with children about issues they perceived to be 'sensitive' and critically important to social and emotional well-being. Companions consistently report their understandings (including self-understanding) and practice have been challenged and changed, particularly with respect to a) the diverse ways in which children choose to participate and b) the responsibility children, themselves, assume in ensuring the learning process is safe, engaging, enjoyable and beneficial.

In reflecting on what we have learned from the program and from subsequent research, we turn to some critical issues we think require close consideration in programs aspiring to improve children's wellbeing. Firstly, children yearn recognition. They want to be acknowledged and respected in the midst of the changes occurring around them and program rationales and processes need to keep this goal clearly in view. Significant numbers of children wish to participate a second time in *Seasons for Growth*, primarily because there is no other forum where they can 'think out loud' and feel understood, affirmed and challenged in relation to core issues affecting their lives (Muller and Saulwick, 1999).

Children *are* important and we need to ensure the processes we employ in programs aimed at promoting their social and emotional wellbeing are guided throughout by the key principles of *recognition* discussed elsewhere in this paper, since these are critical for their developing identity as persons of worth in their own right. As de Winter and others (1999) point out:

> Learning by doing, learning by participation instead of exclusion is to be concerned as a powerful tool to promote self-confidence, self-respect and a sense of control over one's own life. (p.21)

Secondly, children's identities and experiences cannot be generalised or universalised. In observing the ways children understand and respond to change and loss in their lives, there are no 'packaged' programs that can adequately anticipate or address their unique needs, potential and what they have to say. Children's own lived experiences - their particular stories – are pivotal to the learning process and to the ways in which they come to self-understanding. Whilst the children in *Seasons for Growth* are navigating a range of change and loss experiences, they generally show themselves to be adept at identifying similarities and differences in their stories, whether these be related to death, separation or other major changes. Such capability challenges traditionally held notions of children as passive, dependent, vulnerable or incompetent when difficult issues are being worked through in their families. A key challenge is in ensuring the program rationale, structure, curriculum and learning processes maximise opportunities for children to 'have a say' in safe, participative environments that don't presume, prescribe, judge, take for granted or silence what it is that children know or find important to share.

Thirdly, the intergenerational nature of children's participation should not be overlooked (Mannion, 2010; Percy-Smith, 2006). Significant implications follow in terms of the role we, as adults, play when children are invited into conversation, particularly in relation to how we listen to, interpret, respond to and represent their experience. Being cognisant about which agendas are being addressed, whose needs are being met and what dynamics of power and authority are at work, is an important *practical* and *ethical* dimension of our engagement

with children. As we have seen, the role of adult facilitators of children's participation is not to 'unproblematically uncover children's own knowledge and views' but 'to realign and transform knowledge' (Mannion, 2010, p. 336). In *Seasons for Growth*, the role of the Companion is intentionally aimed at 'deprivileging' adult status so as to help ensure the focus is on scaffolding quality conversations *between the children* as they make sense of their experience and try out new ideas in ways that don't privilege what the adult has to say over that of any child. Hence, the Companion will often occupy a quite tense and disconcerting space between their own power as the adult in the group, and that of the children whose voices they are wishing to encourage and authorise. This can be particularly challenging as children move between accounts that highlight *both* their vulnerability (associated with their hurt or sadness) *and* their agency (the ways they respond to these issues). In effect, this means any conceptions that adults may hold of children as incompetent, vulnerable and unable to know their own best interests, now need to accommodate the 'Other' of their experience, that is, their competence, autonomy, resilience and influence. The challenge, of course, is whether adults facilitating programs can live comfortably with such messy, ambiguous, paradoxical or contradictory accounts (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Fourthly, it is our contention that it is only through an attempt at dialogue that 'participation' reaches its fullest potential. Such an approach goes beyond mere openness to children's 'voices' in that it challenges, and potentially transforms, the experiences, perspectives and responses of adults as they listen, learn and co-negotiate meaning through dialogue. The role of the Companion thus motions to the hermeneutic idea that dialogue requires something of the interpreter's experiences be put 'at risk', whereby adults are decentered from their role of 'dominant carer to co-inquirer or interpretive learner with children' (Mannion, 2010, p.332). In this way, the program supports and encourages facilitators to approach their work in a dialogic and relational space characterised by 'flexibility, mutual respect and reciprocity in relationships' (Percy Smith, 2006, p.168), whereby *Companions and children alike* participate in, and benefit from, the learning and change that emerges from the conversations that are so central to the program's intent. Hence a dialogic approach to participation underpins the enlightenment, empowerment,

citizenship and relationship rationales signaled earlier, that focus predominantly on the outcomes of the participatory encounter for *children*, and invites us to reflect on how *we, ourselves*, have been 'changed', 'converted', 'altered' or 'refreshed' - as the etymology of 'conversation' suggests. Whilst we do not underestimate the challenges involved in a participatory approach based on dialogic principles, we have found they challenge us to try to ensure the processes we engage in promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing hold utmost, as their intent, the *recognition* of children.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the potential of participation in promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing. It has traced key developments in mental health education and identified how these have positioned the field for adopting more participatory approaches. Discussion has pointed to important considerations in the theorisation of participation, including particular conceptualisations of children and childhood embedded in these, that open up new possibilities for strengthening children's wellbeing. Significant amongst these considerations is the critical importance of developing and implementing programs and interventions that enhance the *recognition* of children. We have proposed that a dialogic approach to participation holds promise in this regard, given its emphasis on mutual understanding, respect and change. Our thinking has been influenced by the learning gained in developing and implementing one particular program initiative, *Seasons for Growth*, which whilst not claiming to have achieved the full potential of a dialogic approach to participation, has incorporated important principles that leave this possibility open and, importantly, provides a learning experience that most participants enjoy and benefit from. In positing the links between participation, recognition, dialogue and wellbeing, we hope to contribute further to 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 made evident.

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