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Children's participation: challenges for research and practice

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Children's participation – challenges for research and practice

Nigel Thomas

Southern Cross University, 28th February 2012

I'm grateful to Anne for those typically kind and generous words of welcome, and for inviting me here to Southern Cross. It's my first visit to Australia, and I'm enjoying it so much. The combination of sunshine and hospitality is irresistible, and the fantastic work being done at CCYP is the icing on the cake.

– 1 –

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

What progress after 20 years?

– Slide 2 –

It's now well over twenty years since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations. It's since been ratified by nearly every country in the world, and Australia was one of the first. I think the latest was South Sudan, and there are even hopes for Somalia. Since that time there have been many changes affecting children's place in society and how it is viewed, in large part because of that Convention. What I would like to do today is to reflect on some of that experience, with particular reference to ideas about children and young people's participation. In doing so I'll be drawing on some of my own research and writing, including work from some years ago as well as more recent material, and also of course on the work of others. The talk is in five parts, so you'll know when we're getting near the end.

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is a comprehensive charter of children's rights, embracing what are frequently characterised as *the three 'P's* – rights to *provision* of the necessities for well-being, rights to *protection* from abuse and harm, and rights to *participation* in society. The provision and protection rights can be seen as an organic development of earlier declarations of children's rights, starting with the one that Eglantyne Jebb wrote for the League of Nations in 1924. The 'participation' rights were wholly new, however, suggesting that the international community was ready for the first time to see children as active participants in society rather than simply as objects of concern, and as having claims to be heard in the present as well as representing the future. Interestingly, both of those are insights which academic writers sometimes attribute to a paradigm shift thought to have taken place in the early nineties, but which actually began much earlier.

Article 12 of the Convention offers to 'the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. Clearly there are moot points here: who, and how, defines 'the child who is capable of forming his or her own views', and what is meant in practice by 'given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'? Notwithstanding these ambiguities, Article 12 has been hugely influential in underpinning campaigns to give children and young people a 'voice' in a wide range of matters of concern to them – not only including individual and private matters, as implied by the phrasing 'the child' and by the reference in Part (2) of the Article to 'judicial and administrative proceedings', but also including collective forms of participation in more public matters.

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Participation in individual decision-making

Who defines ‘the child who is capable of forming his or her own views’?

– Slide 4 –

My own introduction to these issues as a researcher happened through what became, among other things, my doctoral research, and that in turn was born from my experience as a practitioner and manager in social work services for children and families. My work included responsibility for decision-making when children come into care, and for planning and review of their cases thereafter. The Children Act 1989, whose implementation in 1991 coincided with the UK’s ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, gave local authorities in England and Wales the duty, before making any decision with respect to a child whom they are looking after or proposing to look after, to ascertain and give due consideration to the wishes and feelings of the child, the child’s parents or other person with parental responsibility, and any other person whose wishes and feelings they consider relevant. At the same time the local authority has an overarching responsibility to make decisions that safeguard and promote the welfare of children. What was interesting to me as a social worker was how those several duties were to be balanced, and what weight given to different parties’ views. As the research plan developed it became clear that the aspect of that which interested me the most was the participation of children in these processes, and that became the focus of the project which I completed in 1997 with the support of the Nuffield Foundation and the assistance of Claire O’Kane.

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The research was conducted in six small local authorities in Wales and one in England, with children aged between eight and twelve. The first part of the research

was a quantitative survey of all 225 children in this age group who were looked after at the start of the research, using administrative records and brief structured interviews with social workers to get an overall picture of decision-making processes and children's participation in them. The second part was a qualitative study of 47 cases, in which we interviewed the children, individually and in groups, as well as their social workers and carers and some of their parents, in order to understand how and why children do or do not take part in decisions, and what sort of things seem to help them to take an effective part.

The focus of the research was on decision-making generally in children's lives, not only on those decisions which arise from being in care or accommodation. We wanted to look at what children said was important for them, and we used methods that we thought might enable this to happen. However, reviews and planning meetings were a key area for consideration. At the time it had become much more common for young people to attend such meetings, but this was less true for children under 12, which was partly why we studied this group.

In the survey we asked about the most recent decision-making meeting for each child; in 80 per cent of cases this was a review. Children had been invited to the meeting in 55 per cent of cases, and actually attended the whole meeting in 36 per cent of cases. Several factors predicted whether children would be invited or would attend, the most significant being age; the proportion of children invited to meetings rose steadily for each year of age, with a particularly sharp jump between 9 and 10. Children were also more likely to be invited to their meetings when their situations were stable, less so when major decisions were to be made, and more so when the Looking After Children review forms were used; these were being introduced during the period under study.

When we explored with social workers how they decided whether to invite a child to a meeting, age did not feature much as an explicit criterion. They were more likely to talk about assessing a child's level of understanding, although they were unclear about how they did this. Some said that children were not invited if they were unlikely to be interested or to concentrate; others if there was conflict between their

parents, or to make it easier for adults to speak freely. A child's personality, capability and confidence appeared to influence whether he or she was invited to take part in a meeting; but so did the attitudes and values of the adults involved. John Welsby has distinguished 'bureaucratic', 'clinical' and 'value-based' approaches to involving children, and we found evidence of all three in our research.¹ Social workers and carers who positively valued children's participation were more successful in involving them effectively.

Most children to whom we spoke felt that they should be invited to their meetings and given the choice whether to attend, regardless of age; and most children who were invited did choose to attend. In the qualitative study we explored some of the reasons why children do or do not attend. Reasons for attending included: 'it's my life'; 'to find out what is going on'; 'because I'm expected to'; or simply 'to see my mum'. Most found meetings boring, but only a minority were deterred by this. Others did not attend because they had felt exposed or embarrassed in the past, or found that adults did not listen to them; others because they wanted to avoid conflict, or trusted someone else to speak for them. Meetings were variously described as 'boring', 'scary', 'frightening', 'horrible', 'upsetting', 'stressful', 'nerve-racking', 'intimidating', 'embarrassing'. Things that made it harder included meetings going on too long, not knowing what would be said or who would be there, feeling that they were 'put on the spot' and having their lives discussed by strangers.

Although social workers assessed most children as having 'contributed actively to the discussion', children tended to rate themselves as not speaking much. When they did speak they thought that people listened to them, but this did not mean that they had much influence on the decisions made. This was a group of children who included some of the most active participants, who valued the chance to attend meetings and felt supported and listened to, but who wanted better preparation and to know more about who was going to be there and what subjects were going to be discussed. This may give clues as to why other children choose not to attend.

¹ Welsby 1996.

We found many cases where the review meeting appeared to exist in isolation from whatever happened before and after. Our research supported the view of Grimshaw and Sinclair, whose study of planning and reviewing was published while our research was going on, that a review should be defined as a continuing process rather than a single meeting.² It is clear that building relationships of trust, giving clear information in terms that the child can understand, and encouraging children to speak up for themselves in 'little' matters as well as 'big' ones, make a huge difference to the quality of children's participation. Participation is a dynamic process, and real participation by children requires investment in time, energy and commitment. We also suggested that reviews could be made more friendly and accessible to children by moving away from 'just sitting round talking' to use of games and activities, and other more practical tools, including some which had been developed by children with us.

We suggested that what was needed was an approach to planning and reviewing that emphasises relationships and forms of communication that are sensitive and enjoyable, coupled with stress on children's rights to participate, to have the support of friends or advocates, and to challenge decisions with which they do not agree.

It is important to focus on children's competence rather than their incompetence, and to acknowledge the resilience many of them have already demonstrated in dealing with difficult events. We cannot delete negative experiences simply by excluding children from discussions. Children want to be included, given information, the chance to have a say. By being given information in a supportive and sensitive way they can be enabled to make decisions about which meetings they want to attend and about how they want to participate.

We found that there were frequent tensions for adults between taking account of children's wishes and acting in what were perceived to be their best interests. These particularly arose over issues around placement and contact with home. Adults' attitudes, or dispositions, towards children's participation seemed to be an

² Grimshaw and Sinclair 1997.

important factor in determining how these tensions were managed. We also talked to children about decision-making in their everyday lives, and the results of this reinforced the findings of other research about the extent to which control and competence are negotiated in family settings. It looked as if the success of these processes might depend in part on the degree of 'fit' between children's and adults' attitudes to participation.

I recently reviewed the research on care planning and review for the *British Journal of Social Work*. This confirmed my impression that there has been little academic research of substance on this topic in the past decade. It would be instructive to have better evidence of whether practice has developed in the light of the research I and others did in the 1990s, and whether children's experiences are different now. However, the evidence that is available – not so much from academic research as from work by advocacy organisations, often including research done by young people – is that the problems we identified in the 1990s largely remain today. I'm talking here about England and Wales, of course; but I'd be surprised if the situation was radically different in Australia.

Some of the difficulties in practice that were identified in this research clearly relate to the 'moot points' in relation to Article 12 that I mentioned at the beginning:

1. who defines 'the child who is capable of forming his or her own views'?
2. what does it mean in practice to give 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'?

Other problems have more to do with organisational systems and patterns of behaviour, and reluctance to adapt these to children's ways of doing things.

Participation in collective decision-making

Power or tokenism?

– Slide 6 –

More recently I have been involved in looking at children and young people's public, collective participation. This is an area which, it is safe to say, has been marked by an explosion of activity in the last two decades, much of it promoted under the banner of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 12 of the Convention. This is despite some experts arguing that Article 12 was only ever intended to apply to individual decision-making. That may be supported by a literal reading of the text and also by the history of the drafting process; but in reality the Article has served rather well as a support for those who advocate children's right to be heard in matters that affect them collectively, as well as individually.

The range of activity is impressive and hugely varied, on a scale which supports the contention that there has been, at some level, a step change in attitudes towards children's place in public life. As Roger Hart and Gerison Lansdown have pointed out, at the World Summit in 1990 children 'had only one role: nicely dressed in national costume, they ushered delegates to their seats', while 12 years later at the United Nations Special Session several hundred children held their own three-day forum and participated throughout the main event as members of delegations, chairpersons, speakers and contributors from the floor.³ Hart's 1997 survey gives a wealth of examples from around the world, particularly Europe, South Asia and Latin America, of children taking an active part in social and political life with more or less support from adults. Some of this was undoubtedly going on prior to the adoption of

³ Hart and Lansdown 2002.

the UNCRC, but the Convention gave a big fillip to this kind of activity, especially at the official level.

In the UK, and I guess here too, the growth of 'participatory' activity at all levels has been very rapid, particularly in relation to governmental activity. Whilst Alan Prout, writing in 2000, was still able to point to the absence of opportunities for participation, only a few years later commentators were remarking on just how much was happening. Ruth Sinclair suggests that the impetus has in effect been a convergence of new ideas from three perspectives: the consumer movement and the demand for 'user involvement'; the children's rights agenda, in particular Article 12; and the new social science paradigm which challenges the perception of children as incomplete adults.⁴

Perpetua Kirby and colleagues' survey in 2003 captured a wide range of organisations (146 in total) engaged in a wide variety of activity with children and young people. They found that 'most participation is locally based and in small organisations or agencies, and is more likely to involve generic youth work or community regeneration than other areas'; that 'a very wide range of children and young people are involved... but the most common age group is 12-16 year olds'; and that 'most participation focuses on service development or delivery with less attention given to policy or strategic development'.⁵

A lot of activity is better described as consultation, responding to a perceived need on the part of central and local government to be seen to 'listen' to children and young people when developing policy or planning services. Much of this consultation is filtered through 'participatory' organisations such as youth forums and youth councils, some of whom have had to develop strict gatekeeping procedures to protect children and young people from what might be called 'consultation overload'. Other projects make more effort to avoid the dichotomy of

⁴ Sinclair 2004.

⁵ Kirby et al. 2003, p.6.

‘participation/consultation’ by focusing on dialogue between children and policy makers – for example the ‘Investing in Children’ initiative in County Durham.⁶

Questions have increasingly been asked about the real impact of children and young people’s participation, and some attempts have been made to assess this. Perpetua Kirby also reviewed evaluations of participatory projects, and concluded that young people were actually having little impact on public decision-making, although there was evidence that ‘good participatory work’ improved young people’s confidence and skills as well as giving them opportunities to make friends.⁷ An evaluation of the ‘Investing in Children’ initiative concluded that the projects had been successful in improving services, although the precise evidence for this is not clear.⁸

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Some of the work going on in other, supposedly less advanced, parts of the world is actually much more ambitious, with a stronger emphasis on children and young people exercising autonomy and taking action which is more or less political. What we might perhaps call the relative timidity of participatory work in the ‘developed’ world may be partly due to a much stronger emphasis on protection of children and young people, coupled with a culture of risk aversion in both statutory and voluntary organisations, which makes it more difficult for children to do anything much without being supervised and escorted.

If we try to draw some distinctions among this wide range of activity, we could think in terms of:

- One-off consultation exercises;
- Extended consultations;
- Participatory institutions (school councils, youth councils, pupil parliaments, etc);
- Action-oriented groups;
- Campaigning groups;

⁶ Cairns and Brannen 2005.

⁷ Kirby 2002, p.5.

⁸ Williamson 2003, pp.23-4.

- Clubs and leisure-based groups.

No doubt others can be added. These activity types differ according to their purpose and focus, and also according to how far they are initiated, led or directed by adults, or whether they offer a space in which children and young people can be self-directed. Roger Hart has begun to try to map the different spaces that exist for children's independent activity and how the nature of these has changed over recent decades. He argues that the focus on formal participation has been coupled with a neglect of children's social participation. We have seen a sharp decline in the space for children's free play, especially in the streets and outdoors. We have also seen a decline in the activity of membership organisations, which provide a different setting for children to organise themselves with more or less direction from adults on a basis of voluntary participation.⁹

The enthusiasm encouraged by official endorsement of 'voice' and 'participation' should not stop us from noticing the weakness of much of the activity that takes place, which is often more accurately described as consultation than participation. For me the crucial distinction between the two is that those who are *consulted* offer their opinions, which are then taken into account more or less by those making the decision, whilst those who *participate* share directly in the decision-making process and the outcome. Critiques of children and young people's participation, taking a cue from critiques of participation in international development, have focused on two objections to much current activity: first, that it does not give real power to children and young people, and second, that it fails to include effectively certain groups of children and young people, including those who are already disadvantaged. The latter objection applies more to some groups than others, because sometimes a lot of attention is paid to the inclusion of minority groups such as disabled children. Other settings do tend to be dominated by more articulate or 'respectable' children and young people.

My own criticism has been that in the end there is little sign of children and young people really participating in the processes that actually produce important political

⁹ Hart 2009.

decisions, or in contributing to defining the terms of policy debate. Less still is there any sign of children as a social group effectively expressing any common interests, despite the fact that so many big current issues in public policy are to do with children and young people – their education, their leisure, their health and their safety.

Theorising children and young people's participation
A struggle for recognition?

– Slide 8 –

Attempts to theorise about children and young people's participation may be either *endogenous*, in that they are generated directly by reflection within the field, or *exogenous*, in that they import conceptual structures from elsewhere.

Endogenous theorising has focused on adaptations and responses to the 'ladder of participation', originally Sherry Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation' adapted by Roger Hart as a tool for thinking about children and young people's participation. Hart did not expect the ladder to become a model for practice, much less a straitjacket. Initially it worked more as a rhetorical device, with the climb from the 'non-participation' rungs ('manipulation', 'decoration' and 'tokenism') through the middle levels where children are 'assigned but informed' or 'consulted and informed' to the highest rungs ('adult-initiated, shared decisions with children', 'child-initiated and directed', and at the top 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults') representing the challenge for adults working with children and young people, to make their practice truly participatory.

Be that as it may, the 'ladder' has come to dominate discussion and thinking about children's participation, particularly among practitioners. In the process it has provoked criticism, and the development of alternative frameworks which aim to refine Hart's original ladder or to do something different with it. These include attempts to adapt the ladder to the context of private decision-making about children's individual lives, to which I and others have contributed.¹⁰ However, the

¹⁰ Thoburn *et al.* 1995, Thomas 2002.

most interesting modifications are those by Barbara Franklin, Phil Treseder and Harry Shier.¹¹

Treseder omits the three 'non-participation' rungs, and flattens the ladder to remove the hierarchical element, setting out five types or 'degrees' of participation in a circular layout. The thinking is that different kinds of participatory activities and relationships are appropriate to different settings and circumstances, and practitioners should not feel that they are in some way failing when they work in ways that involve lesser degrees of power or engagement, or that the aim in every situation should be to achieve the highest possible level of child-directedness or joint-directedness.

Franklin adds two further rungs at the bottom – 'adults rule' and 'adults rule kindly', and changes the order of the three highest rungs, so that 'children in charge' is at the top, followed by 'children lead, adults help' and then 'joint decision'. Franklin's ladder therefore runs the whole gamut from complete lack of power to complete power on the part of children. In this she is arguably closer to Arnstein's original vision of 'citizen power'. Shier's model of 'pathways to participation' also sees power as crucial; for Shier full participation 'requires an explicit commitment on the part of adults to share their power; that is, to give some of it away'.¹²

In a way we can see here two different takes on children and young people's participation. In one the high point, if there is a high point, is shared decision-making; whilst in the other value lies in the degree to which power is *handed over* from adults to children. I do not suggest that participation workers divide into two camps on this issue, but rather I want to point to two strands in thinking about what it is that is happening when children and young people 'participate', strands which may co-exist in practice despite being in logic somewhat contradictory. I have suggested that this leads us to consider the existence of two competing visions of children and young people's participation: one that sees it in terms of *social* relations

¹¹ Franklin 1997, Treseder 1997.

¹² Shier 2001, p.115.

– networks, inclusion, and opportunities for social connection – and another which sees it in terms of *political* relations – power, challenge, and change.

Exogenous thinking has drawn on theories of citizenship and governance, theories of democracy, and also on social theory, sociology and social geography. In my own work on this I've looked particularly at certain political theories – the late Iris Marion Young's work on inclusion, and earlier work by Steven Lukes on power, Carole Pateman on participatory democracy and Bachrach and Baratz on 'non decision-making' – and also at the social theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Axel Honneth. It seems to me that some of this work is extremely useful for thinking about what we are aiming for when we try to promote children and young people's participation – especially Young and Honneth, to both of whom I shall return in a moment. Other ideas are more helpful in developing a critique – particularly Lukes on the ways in which power is exercised subtly and invisibly to control what can be debated and what can not, and Bourdieu for his critique of the failure of representation to do justice to the weak and powerless (and also for his foundational concepts of *habitus* and *capital*, which I find enormously helpful in thinking about child-adult relations). I regret that I don't have space to explore this more fully.

Returning to Iris Marion Young, the question she asks is, 'What are the norms and conditions of inclusive democratic communication under circumstances of structural inequality and cultural difference?'¹³ Because structural inequalities tend to be reinforced by the operation of formal democratic systems, the challenge, she argues, is always to deepen democracy by making it more inclusive. This means both enabling a wider range of social groups to have access to democratic institutions and processes, and also adapting those institutions and processes to meet the needs of a wider range of social groups. She does not ever mention children as such a group, but the relevance of her arguments to children and young people is obvious.

Young bases her approach on 'deliberative' democracy, which she sees as 'a means of collective problem-solving which depends for its legitimacy and wisdom on the

¹³ Young 2000, p. 6.

expression and criticism of the diverse opinions of all the members of the society.’¹⁴ Young’s argument is that including a range of perspectives in the political process is in the interests of the polity as a whole:

Not only does it increase the likelihood of promoting justice because the interests of all are taken into account. It also increases that likelihood by increasing the store of social knowledge available to participants.¹⁵

Inclusion is not just about bringing groups into existing systems, but also about modifying those systems in order to accommodate new groups with different perspectives and different ways of expressing themselves. In particular, *inclusive communication* is crucial if ‘internal exclusion’ is to be avoided. In Young’s account, deliberation is not only about ‘rational argument’ but includes other modes of communication which she calls ‘greeting’ (communicative political gestures through which we recognise others as included in the discussion), ‘rhetoric’ (orientating one’s claims and arguments to the assumptions, history and idioms of a particular audience) and ‘narrative’ (situated knowledge which enables groups to understand each other’s experience and develop a shared discourse). It seems to me that these ideas have great relevance to understanding how children can engage in the political discourse that shapes our lives. Young acknowledges that ‘when most adults in most societies have nominal voting rights, voting equality is only a *minimal* condition of political equality’¹⁶; like most political theorists, she fails to notice that it is a minimal condition which children and young people generally lack.

Honneth offers us something different in understanding children’s collective participation, and I think also brings us back to the issues we were looking at earlier in relation to individual participation. Underlying his social theory is the concept of the *struggle for recognition*.¹⁷ Honneth distinguishes three modes of recognition: emotional *support*, cognitive *respect* and social *esteem*. These are achieved at different stages in the struggle of individuals and groups to be recognised and

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Young 2000, p.83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

¹⁷ Honneth 1996. Other writers have used concepts of recognition, particularly Charles Taylor and Nancy Fraser, but Honneth’s conception seems to me the most developed and fruitful.

included, and in different social arenas. Emotional support is achieved in primary relationships, expressed as *love* and friendship; cognitive respect is achieved through legal relations and expressed in the form of *rights*; and social esteem is achieved through a community of value, and expressed as *solidarity*.

– Slide 9 –

In an ethnographic study of the work of a youth forum in Wales, I found that these concepts had a high degree of resonance with what I observed and with the kinds of things that young people said about participation. *Love and friendship*, offered by the workers to the young people from the moment they joined and also by the young people to each other, seemed to be foundational for all the other activity in which they engaged. It was clear that without the encouragement and affection shown by the workers to the young people (as unique individuals), many of them might have dropped out at an early stage, or at least not have had the confidence to become fully involved. The young people were also clear that the friendship they received from each other was a primary reason for wanting to be part of the group and to take part in all the activities – some of which were not especially rewarding in themselves. When asked by a visitor at one meeting what made them stick with the group, all the young people replied ‘friends’.

The place of *rights* in the project was more ambiguous. The young people did not often talk about rights explicitly, although they did frequently talk about ‘getting their voices heard’ in a way that may imply a sense of entitlement. The lead worker appeared to see this as a failing:

If I had my time over again I’d start it differently – I’d initially start from their rights, children’s rights, and start from the UN Convention – so they’d know, they’d have a base understanding of why it’s happening.

At a political level rights could be seen as underpinning the whole project, since it is the Welsh Assembly Government’s espousal of children’s rights that has led them to promote an expectation of representation for young people’s voices and has spurred local authorities and other agencies to support organisations such as this forum. In

this context it is interesting that the young people did not 'bang on' about their rights; it is possible that they simply took it for granted that these were understood and recognised.

In the conversations I had with them the young people seemed far more exercised by issues of esteem. This is illustrated by the following exchange:

A: I think getting involved in your community is really important – I love the fact that I'm slap bang in the middle of my community, you know, and sat on various committees there, and it's just, it's really good, d'you know, and then you're walking down the street, and you see a few adults, like, and 'all right A, how are you?' and I'm like 'oh my god, you know me now!'

B: It's like you're walking with your friends and it's like 'I don't like you at the moment' 'Why?' 'Cos we walk through town and everyone seems to know you.'

A: I love it.

C: It's really nice, and just, you know like, all of the adults that we work with like, in Forums and stuff, that if you do bump into them they ask you how things are and what have you been up to, and it's just all about, we've built a lot of relationships up with these adults, and they treat us like equals. They don't patronise us. They don't talk to us like we're little kids.

A: I think some... do

C: Some do

A: But they're the ones that don't say 'hi' in the street!

C: But a lot of them now they accept us and they accept us as equals, and they want to hear our opinion, because they've realised that it's actually valuable?

A: Oh I love it, I love being asked for my opinion

The young people were particularly proud of the contributions they had been able to make to their local communities – more, perhaps, than their contacts with important people at a national level, although these were sometimes a cause of excitement too.

Concluding reflections

The yin and the yang

– Slide 10 –

Robyn Fitzgerald and her colleagues have also been working with the idea of a ‘struggle for recognition’ as a way of understanding participation in individual and collective decision-making, combined with ideas of dialogue. Others, particularly geographers such as Greg Mannion and Barry Percy-Smith, have been developing ideas of dialogue along with ideas of space to understand the different ways in which child-adult relations can present, actually and potentially. This turn perhaps points the way to a vision of participation which allows for different perspectives and interests, and for the possibility of real conflict, while avoiding the danger of reduction to a sterile antagonism of adult power vs child power.

Percy-Smith has argued strongly for participation to be grounded in everyday life and shared action, rather than being institutionalised in formal settings. That was a theme that emerged very clearly from the *Handbook of Participation* that he and I edited together. However, I would still argue that the institutional dimension is important, if children and young people are going to have a real share in public decision-making locally and nationally. Organisations such as youth councils are an important part of that, and so is the campaign to reduce the voting age.

– Slide 11 –

I don’t know how many of you saw the story of Alfie McKenzie the 14-year-old voter back in the last UK Parliamentary elections in 2010. Alfie is a young man in Lancashire who found himself unexpectedly in possession of a polling card – apparently his sister thought the official at the door was collecting census information and gave her the names of everyone in the household, and so they all

went on the electoral register. When Alfie's card arrived he decided to try to use it, and his account is I think instructive as well as amusing:

I dressed as much like a Tory as I could manage... I gave it my slightly eccentric aristocrat's walk and my best self-righteous Conservative accent, walked into St Hilda's polling station, went straight to the table and was directed to the slip which I was to cross. I paused, considered voting for Cat Smith of Labour, and then firmly placed a big cross in Lib Dem Danny Gallagher's box. I was probably the most perplexed person there: no glares or stares, just in and out in less than 30 seconds. My vote went with our local Liberal Democrat candidate for three reasons:

- *The first is that the country clearly wanted change. As an illegal voter I had no right to go against that.*
- *The second is that as a socialist democrat I thought that the Liberals' views were the most democratic out of the three main parties. I sincerely hope Nick Clegg doesn't compromise on proportional representation in his meetings with Dave.*
- *The third was I saw it as something of a tactical vote in an effort to hang parliament – the Lib Dems were most likely to beat the Tories in my constituency (although they didn't). The Daily Mail, being the wonderfully pragmatic paper that it is, has called it "steps to chaos". (Obviously, a Conservative government would be an instant step to economic heaven.) Out of all the possible outcomes, I am crossing my fingers for a Lib-Lab coalition.*

My crime only came out when I confided in one of my teachers. She didn't see the funny side and told the deputy head. I don't blame him for reporting it to the council, he was legally obliged at that point. But it was rather nerve-racking to think that I might be fast on the road to becoming a convict. When the police arrived, I came across way too informed and understanding to claim ignorance; the burly officer's patronising tone lowered as our interview progressed. Fortunately, it seems that I'm not going to be prosecuted.¹⁸

Objections to younger people having the vote tend to focus on competence, for example on the impact of brain development on the capacity for judgement, an argument which perhaps loses some force when faced with Alfie's evident grasp of the issues at stake in his decision. Sociologists have shown convincingly how competence is situated and achieved in social interaction, rather than being an intrinsic quality of individuals. In any case, the political choices that people make are in large part, perhaps even predominantly, about values like justice and fairness and about assessing whether people can be trusted; judgements that children are often pretty good at.

¹⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/09/alfie-mckenzie-14-year-old-voter>

The competence issue is a more challenging one when we consider children's participation in major decisions about their individual lives, where younger children might well, if left to their own devices, take decisions that would be damaging to their interests. This is where I think Young's point about the value of including different perspectives is so important. Even if one would not argue that an eight-year-old should have a determining role in a decision about whether she should go back to live with her parents, it is hard to see that the process of taking such a finely balanced decision will not be improved by including her perspective fully in the process of consideration, and in most cases by enabling her to engage with the pros and cons as fully as she is able and willing.

Citizenship, I would argue, works at both the individual and the collective level. Göran Therborn has noted that children appear to be achieving the components of citizenship in the reverse order to that in which Marshall classically presented them, in that the social rights have tended to come before the political ones.¹⁹ However, while Article 12 gives children the right to be heard, Article 13 gives them the right to freedom of expression, Article 14 the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, Article 15 the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly, Article 16 the right to privacy and reputation, and Article 17 the right to access to information. These are all political rights, and they deserve more attention.

Using Honneth's lens, it makes sense for children first to be recognised with love and emotional support, then with rights and cognitive respect, and finally with social esteem; but they sometimes seem to be faced with the need, or the demand, to earn esteem before they can be awarded rights. The interaction between love and rights is a key issue for private decision-making settings, particularly in families. In the research I discussed earlier, we found a tension between the strengths of social work processes that are based on the recognition that young people in care had a right to be consulted, and the strengths of family interactions which sometimes achieve more effective dialogue through informality and personal relationships, without the support of rights claims.

¹⁹ Therborn 1993.

Interestingly Honneth has discussed elsewhere, in relation to marriage, the challenge of working out how claims to legal rights can coexist with relationships based on love.²⁰ For me this tension seems to mirror the one I was discussing just now, between participation as something grounded in everyday life and participation as something that happens in more formal institutions and structures; and also to mirror the earlier contrast I drew between social and political visions of participation. Perhaps these are the yin and the yang of participatory theory and practice, in that neither really makes sense without the other. And maybe that is a good point at which to stop.

²⁰ Honneth 2007.

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