

Chapter 2

Citizenship, Rights and All Things Nice: Key Discourses Underpinning Children and Young People's Participation

Abstract This chapter employs a critical lens to understanding some of the popular discourses that emerge and intersect in the field of children and young people's participation, in particular discourses of rights, citizenship, childhood and youth. The chapter argues that these discourses have helped strengthen the case for children and young people's participation but that they also rely on and reproduce an idealised image of the young citizen that may limit and exclude those who fail to fit the mould.

In late 2016 I attended a public lecture by Professor Michael Freeman, renowned legal scholar from the University College London (UCL), and the Founding Editor of the *International Journal of Children's Rights*. The year prior, he had delivered his Hamlyn Lectures, the UK's most prestigious series of public lectures in law. Freeman's focus was on children's rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), nearly 30 years on from its initial drafting and almost universal ratification. The lecture I attended was similarly themed and titled 'From Article 12 to Votes at 12'. Over the course of an hour, Freeman traced the development of children's rights since the UNCRC,¹ particularly Article 12 and the right to participate in decision-making, and put forward his case for why it should be extended to include children's right to vote in elections. The lecture was attended by a mixed assortment of academics in fields of law, education, psychology and social work, as well as policy-makers, practitioners and interested members of the public. As with most lectures of this nature, Freeman's talk was followed by a short time for audience questions. What was interesting about this particular question time was what the types of questions indicated about the different perspectives among the audience, even while all seemingly shared the same concern and interest in children's rights. Questions and comments included:

¹Much of the content was also strongly tied to his relatively recent edited book, 'The future of children's rights' (Freeman 2014).

- *Can't neuroscience tell us the appropriate age for voting?*
- *What if children and young people had to pass a competency test in order to vote?*
- *Could lowering the voting age increase civic engagement and strengthen democracy?*
- *I know young people who don't believe that they're mature enough to vote;*
- *How would we prevent teachers from influencing their students' voting preferences?; and*
- *Enough with us adults; I see there is a young person in the audience—what do you think?*

These audience questions and contributions are underpinned by a range of discourses—from the medical and biological to the managerial—that position children and young people in particular ways. It is taken-for-granted who or what provides the most legitimate or valuable knowledge; is it the neuroscientists, the politicians, the test examiners, the children themselves? This taken-for-grantedness is often what gives such discourses power. As socially constructed ideas that are propagated by various institutions, not all discourses are created equal, and may be understood as hierarchical and closely linked to notions of power and agency. Discourses work to legitimise and regulate some ideas and subjects while excluding or dismissing others. Within the field of children and young people's participation, discourses are a powerful weapon to justify action, but they can inadvertently limit what is possible. To problematise such nice and well-intentioned 'weaponry' without appearing opposed to the 'greater good' can be difficult. Yet, this chapter will do just that, tracing the emergence of some of the most popular discourses within the field.

Far from harmonious and fixed, discourses of participation can support quite contradictory 'truths' about children and young people and the reasons for their participation. Speaking of citizen participation in development more broadly, Cornwall and Coelho (2007: 14) argue, "[d]iscourses of participation are, after all, not a singular, coherent, set of ideas or prescriptions, but configurations of strategies and practices that are played out on constantly shifting ground". Such an argument is equally true for the discourses operating within the field of children and young people's participation. While never entirely stable or aligned with each other, what these popular discourses do have in common is an underlying or implicit emphasis on power. Yet, it is rare that the meaning of power is clarified or its complexities highlighted or challenged.

While there are countless relevant discourses that are worthy of analysis, this chapter will focus specifically on three: discourses related to *childhood and youth*, discourses related to children and young people's *rights*, and discourses related to children and young people's *citizenship*. The following sections have been structured accordingly, with a Foucaultian exploration of how different discourses have emerged, how they overlap or conflict with other discourses, and how they produce particular understandings of power and the subject.

Discourses of Childhood and Youth

A variety of discourses of childhood and youth—from the romantic, to the medical, to the political—coexist at any given moment to inform understandings of children and young people. These discourses have lengthy histories within philosophical, political, theological and scientific thought. Take, for example, seventeenth century English philosopher John Locke (1693/1996) who rejected the notion of innatism and instead conceived of the child as *tabula rasa*, blank slate, with parents and teachers responsible for controlling the conditions of their appropriate socialisation. Eighteenth century Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1991) also drew on the notion of *tabula rasa* in *Emile*, his fictional work that presents a highly romanticised view of a naturally good and authentic child whose purity could be ‘preserved’ through nature.

It has become almost formulaic to mention well-known philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau when tracing the emergence of discourses of childhood and youth. Their ideas are still taken up in a myriad of ways today, and certainly form part of the discursive mix circulating within the field of children’s and young people’s participation. Take, for example, the work of bestselling American author Richard Louv. In the introduction of Louv’s (2005: 1) international bestseller, *Last Child in the Woods*, he begins with this personal anecdote:

One evening when my boys were younger, Matthew, then ten, looked at me from across a restaurant table and said quite seriously, “Dad, how come it was more fun when you were a kid?” I asked what he meant. “Well, you’re always talking about your woods and tree houses, and how you used to ride that horse down near the swamp.” ... He was right. Americans around my age, baby boomers or older, enjoyed a kind of free, natural play that seems, in the era of kid pagers, instant messaging, and Nintendo, like a quaint artifact.

This excerpt provides a useful example of how discourses of childhood and youth are often evoked in order to make meaning of the world around us. Louv uses this introductory anecdote to set the scene and capture the overarching thesis of the book; that an increasing disconnect between the child and the natural environment is causing what he describes as a ‘nature-deficit disorder’ among the young. Although the book is now over 10 years old (most evident in his reference to ‘kid pagers’ rather than say, iPhones, Snapchat or Instagram), it has been celebrated as sparking a global movement to remedy children’s decreased exposure to nature, with Louv described as a “significant force” in the ‘child and nature’ movement (Malone 2016: 391). Louv has since published a number of books with a similar focus, including ‘Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature-Rich Life’ (2016) in which he continues to draw on pseudo-medical terminology to outline ways to ‘combat’ nature-deficit disorder. A major appeal of these books is that they weave personal anecdotes—of being with his children, of being a child himself—with scientific research from a variety of academic disciplines.

Given ‘we were all young once’, drawing on past experiences to shape how we understand children and young people today is understandable and powerful. Indeed, I chose to begin this book with an anecdote from my own experience as a

young person, albeit serving a very different purpose. Such personal accounts can offer useful ways to introduce a variety of readers to new ideas; they ‘humanise’ what might otherwise appear unfamiliar and clinical. Yet, due to their personal nature, these accounts of childhood and youth often avoid close scrutiny. Such a discourse can romanticise and reify childhood of the past as a time of purity devoid of adult interferences, what Taylor (2013) calls a “Disneyfied childhood”. It produces a sort of White utopia that not all children and young people around the world necessarily relate to.² Such a dreamy discourse downplays the complexities of the natural world and childhood while reinforcing a false human-nature binary. Ultimately, Louv’s conceptualisation of childhood reproduces a “white, middle class, male, heterosexual cultural past that obscures race, class and gender politics” (Dickinson 2013: 7).

Discourses of childhood and youth based on personal recollections are at once *experienced* and *represented*. This presents a paradox for understanding childhood, whereby we have all been children, yet we can only *represent* that experience through autobiographical stories that selectively define and contain what is understood.

The use of autobiographical experiences from childhood and youth can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and the development of Freudian psychodynamic talking therapy. It was during this period that uncovering childhood experiences became a ‘professional craft’ drawn on in various institutional and disciplinary contexts. Within the field of environmental psychology in particular, the value given to childhood experience has supported an increasing number of studies that emphasise a correlation between a person’s experiences of nature as a child with the likelihood of their becoming environmental educators and activists later in life.³ Yet it remains questionable whether contact with nature as a formative experience can provide enough of a foundation for future pro-environmental behaviour. Further, simply having been a child does not necessarily translate to what it means to be a child or young person today.

The broader field of ‘academic’ psychology has been particularly sceptical of the validity of autobiographical accounts, arguing that it is prone to self-serving biases, suggestion and selective reporting. Yet drawing on more scientifically ‘valid’ discourses to understand childhood and youth also presents a range of biases. The emergence of many of these discourses can be traced back to broader disciplinary and institutional developments in the human sciences. As a starting point for tracing these contextual developments, the late-nineteenth-century is a particularly significant due to the dramatic developments of the industrial revolution. These developments highlight tangible correlations between macro-structural changes and changes in childhood and youth. During this time a number of professions

²See, for example, Hordyk et al. (2014) research with immigrant and refugee children in Canada whose experience of local forests was full of real and potential dangers from human and animal predators.

³See, for example, Chawla (1998, 1999, 2006), Horowitz (1996), Ewert et al. (2005), Bixler et al. (2002), Lohr et al. (2005), Wells and Lekies (2006).

concerned with the care of children and young people emerged. Over time these professions were organised into particular fields of human science, including developmental psychology, child psychiatry, paediatrics and pedagogics. Millei (2007: 24) argues that the emergence of these fields and professions in the late nineteenth century produced “systems of classification that defined who could be a subject of these sciences” as well as particular discourses for the purpose of describing and governing subjects. These fields have become increasingly institutionalised and professionalised toward the end of the twentieth century. For example, a rising number of academic programs are specialising in ‘childhood studies’ and ‘youth studies’, representing disciplinary fields of powerful ideas and effects. As with many popular discourses of recent times, academia has played a significant role in the production of contemporary ideas about childhood and youth, engaging both theoretically and empirically and across a broad range of local, national and international contexts.

Childhood and youth studies are interdisciplinary in nature, traversing such areas as education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, law, political science, history, geography, philosophy, literature, economics, medicine, religion and cultural studies. Such a coming together of disciplines has been likened to the evolutions of women’s studies and race studies, in that each has been seen to begin with the purpose of bringing together different disciplinary perspectives that had been fragmented and consequently underrepresented. However, while the merging of such a broad range of disciplines and discourses might seem to allow for a broadening of thinking and plurality, such a merger is also a key source of conflict and ambiguity as disciplines compete for legitimacy. In disciplines such as sociology and cultural studies, for example, the focus tends to be on examining and/or deconstructing childhood and youth, whereas for disciplines such as psychology and education, the focus is more specifically on fixing, fostering or educating the child or young person (Kehily 2004).

Not surprisingly, discourses of childhood and youth are deeply embedded in the field of children and young people’s participation. These discourses have emerged from a range of sites, but three that will be analysed here are those associated with the disciplines of developmental psychology, social constructivism and sociology.

Within the discipline of developmental psychology, Jean Piaget dominated thinking around children and young people in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly Western legislative and educational initiatives regarding children and young people’s competence (Hendrick 1990). Broadly speaking, Piaget (1967) sought to construct a universal, ordered and staged scientific approach to understandings of children and young people.⁴ He developed four sequential stages of cognitive development. His empirical research came from a biological perspective of learning, based on the assumption of naturalness and the universality of

⁴While Piaget is the focus here, there are a number of other influential developmental thinkers and models worth mentioning (e.g., Lawrence Kohlberg’s model of moral development and Sigmund Freud’s model of psychosexual development).

childhood (Taylor 2007). However, since the 1970s Piaget's studies on children have received a significant amount of critical attention (see, for example, Donaldson 1978; Bronfenbrenner 1979; Morss 1991; Burman 2001). A major criticism is that Piaget conducted his research in artificial contexts and therefore failed to recognise "the part played by contextual sensitivity in the acquisition of understanding" (Light 1986: 183). In other words, as Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979: 19) observes, Piaget's laboratory experiments involving children represented "the strange behaviour of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time".

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism of developmental psychology relates to the assumption, legitimated by biological sources, that children and young people's development equals progress; that individuals get better over time (Morss 1990). Within this developmental paradigm children and young people are in a state of "not yet being" (Verhellen 2000); a "human becoming" rather than a "human being" (Qvortrup 1994: 4). From such a developmental perspective, children and young people's participation is often reduced to 'inclusive play' (Casey 2005).

Sociocultural theories offer a somewhat, though not entirely, different perspective on children and young people that became increasingly popular in the late 20th century and into the 21st century. Derived from the work of theorists such as Lev Vygotsky (1978), a sociocultural perspective considers early development as highly dependent on the social context rather than biological factors, developing through children and young people's participation in shared activities and social interactions. Vygotsky's ideas broadened the notion of children and young people's development beyond the acquisition of logic and skills to include the development of "initiative, responsibility and independence in the other" (Taylor et al. 2007: 67).

Both psychological and sociocultural theories remain highly influential, yet both have also received substantial criticism. Piaget and Vygotsky view development as unidirectional; possessing a predetermined and predictable goal. For Piaget, the goal is scientific logic, for Vygotsky it is Westernised high culture. Matusov and Hayes (2000) describe their ideas as universalist, decontextualised, ethnocentric and adultocentric. As subjects 'inserted' into these discourses, children and young people are positioned in a state of 'becoming'.

While the ideas produced by Piaget, Vygotsky and their followers still shape many institutional practices, in the last several decades a number of alternative theories of childhood have received increasing academic attention, particularly from the sociological discipline. Considered to be a major influence behind the increased interest in children and young people's participation (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie 2006), the 'new' sociology of childhood⁵ declared itself to represent a 'paradigmatic shift' in how children and young people are viewed within society, moving from the developmental discourse constituted in the work of psychologists such as Piaget, to a sociological discourse of childhood (e.g., Qvortrup 1994; Corsaro 2005; James and

⁵While 'the new sociology of childhood' has been used for the purposes of this book, the field is also commonly referred to within the literature as 'the new social science of childhood' and 'the sociology of childhood'.

Prout 1997; Jenks 1998; James and James 2004; Prout 2005; Matthews 2007). The new sociology of childhood, which gained significant traction toward the end of the 1990s, encourages an interdisciplinary understanding of the complex nature of childhood and youth and highlights the limitations of drawing on a single discipline such as developmental psychology. More specifically, this sociological discourse calls for recognition of children and young people's roles in actively constructing their lives and the lives of others. This saw a shift from research *on* or *about* children and young people (popular among developmental psychologists and socio-constructivists) to research *with* and *by* children and young people.

The new sociology of childhood rests on six central tenets (James and Prout 1997). Firstly, childhood is socially constructed; secondly, childhood is not universal, but intrinsically socially variable; thirdly, children are human beings, not simply human 'becomings'; fourthly, children are competent social actors capable of contributing to society; fifthly, researchers involving children should foster a genuine dialogue with child participants and ensure they are given a strong vocal presence in the resulting data; and finally, researchers must be reflexive about their research practices and recognise how it also contributes to constructing a particular image of childhood. These six tenets are most often reduced to two assumptions; that childhood is socially constructed and that children are social actors. Such assumptions have become "ubiquitous, almost in danger of becoming a mantra to be repeated ad nauseam in the introduction to every journal article, book chapter and text within the literature" (Gallagher 2004: 32).

The new sociology of childhood has also been subject to significant critical debate (Morss 2002; Gallacher and Gallagher 2008; Woodhead and Faulkner 2008; Ryan 2008; Prout 2011; Tisdall and Punch 2012). It is questionable whether the ideas are indeed 'new' or truly representative of a paradigm shift. It is also questionable whether a rejection of children and young people as 'becomings' is useful or if a sole emphasis on 'beings' simply creates "a mirror picture of the developmental paradigm" (Strandell 2005: 2). As Woodhead and Faulkner (2008: 35) contend, "[c]hildren are 'becomings' at the same time as they are 'beings'" and "[l]ooking beyond the dichotomy is more productive than perpetuating it". Further, children and young people may perceive their state of 'becoming' as useful. For example, Emond's (2009) ethnographic research in Cambodia explored the way orphan children constituted their own subjecthood. Emond found that children focused on preparing for their future lives, even at the potential expense of their present lives, and regarded themselves as in a process of becoming that was enabled via their status as orphans. Similarly, it is fair to argue that adults are also necessarily in a state of becoming rather than fully formed individuals. Ultimately, conceiving of children and young people as social actors is strongly underpinned by liberal humanism, something Hart (2004: 244) argues is a "seductive fantasy" that "many of us regularly fall foul". This is a key point that will be returned to over the chapters to come.

Fundamental to all of these debates is a paradox between children and young people as objects of knowledge and as subjects who 'know' (Ryan 2008). As these

paradoxes and debates about how best to understand children and young people continue, so too will the field of children and young people's participation. It is clear that all of these discourses—the psychological, the socio-cultural, the socio-logical—still permeate the field of children and young people's participation, shaping the conditions for what is possible.

Discourses of Children and Young People's Rights

Concurrent and overlapping with discourses of childhood and youth are those discourses related to children's rights⁶ (Taylor et al. 2007; Smith 2002; Mayall 2000; Freeman 1998). Rights embody a powerful moral and legal language. This language is used to both elevate the position of children and young people in society while also justifying actions based upon a perception of essential conditions that are required by children and young people to achieve optimal wellbeing. Historically, rights were considered a luxury for 'rational men' (Gadda 2008), so the emergence of rights movements for children and women in the mid-nineteenth century represented a key turning point in struggles against dominating and exclusionary patriarchal systems. Where once those concerned with children and young people drew predominantly on a 'needs' discourse, the language of rights is seen to go one step further, moving beyond a general statement about moral or personal entitlements toward a contractual (if not legally binding) obligation by those involved. Rights elevate particular ideas above competing social demands, with "an aura of timelessness, absoluteness, and universal validity" (Alston 1987: 2).

The notion of children and young people's rights has a lengthy history. However, it was not until the arrival of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989 and almost universally ratified during the early 1990s,⁷ that the production of an international normative standard of rights for children and young people emerged. In 'solidifying' children's rights, the UNCRC has had a significant impact on a wide variety of contexts; it is both a 'product' and a 'facilitator' of childhood (Twum-Danso Imoh 2012).

While the twentieth century saw the emergence of numerous international and national declarations and charters of children's rights,⁸ the UNCRC is particularly significant in terms of the production and dissemination of discourses around children's rights. The UNCRC is considered to be so comprehensive in scope that other resources have become comparatively 'redundant' (Mesrati 2009). The

⁶In line with the literature and the UNCRC, I use 'children's rights' to encompass children and young people's rights.

⁷As of writing, the only country not to have ratified the Convention is the United States.

⁸For examples, see Veerman (1992) who has collated 42 separate international and national declarations and charters of children's rights.

Convention moves beyond 'basic needs' to cover over fifty separate rights attributed to children and young people under the age of 18. It is also the only UN document to contain civil, social, economic, political and cultural rights altogether.

As a comprehensive document the UNCRC attempts to encapsulate a range of rights that are underlined by a variety of discourses. Within the literature on the UNCRC, this has led to a preoccupation with the development of definitions, fitting the notion of children's rights into various contexts through the further construction of various categories and sub-categories of rights such as the 'three Ps' of provision, protection and participation (Wringe 1995). In line with the traditional classification of human rights more broadly, the UNCRC is also categorised according to 'civil' rights, 'political' rights, 'economic' rights, 'social' rights and 'cultural' rights. The UNCRC has also been divided according to three main objectives of self-determination, protection and specific rights that apply exclusively to children, such as the right to play (Article 31). Finally, the UNCRC is also commonly discussed according to four 'general principles' of non-discrimination, best interests of the child, survival and development, and participation.

The UNCRC's ability to be divided into various sub-categories is generally considered its strength. However, isolating particular components of children's rights may also produce a range of conflicting and exclusionary effects. Based on research with policy-makers and educators in Canada and Scotland, Mitchell (2005: 322) argues that the Convention ignores "the interdependency of all of its texts". This is particularly evident in the way that distinctions are made between participation, provision, and protection rights.

In regards to participation rights, the UNCRC draws predominantly on the aforementioned psychological and sociocultural discourses that focus on the developing and productive capacities of children and young people. This is particularly evident in Article 12, which stipulates 'States Parties'⁹ should ensure that the views of the child who is "capable of forming his or her own views" should be "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (UN 1989). However, the children and young people's participation rights are far from universally accepted, initially proving to be the most contentious of the three categories. As Reid (1994: 28) states, "[f]ew governments have any philosophic problem with the first two [provision and protection]. It's the third part [participation] that worries them". Even with these initial worries, 'the right to participate' has sparked a substantial literature. Open any UNICEF report, academic journal article or book chapter on children's rights and participation and you are bound to find reference to both the UNCRC and the Articles associated with participation rights (Articles 12 and 13 in particular).

However, the way that Article 12 and 13 are accounted for in relation to competing concerns with protection and provision has proven highly contentious over the last 25 years. Moses (2008) argues in her research on children and young people's participation in South Africa that if a child is not provided with enough

⁹'States Parties' refers to those countries that have ratified the UNCRC.

food and water (i.e. provisional rights), their ability to attend school or participate in decision-making (i.e. participation rights) will be affected. Furthermore, there remains a tension between budgeting for participation (potentially quite costly) and addressing basic needs and the lack of essential services (Moses 2008). Conversely, drawing on case studies from developing countries, Boyden and Myers (1995) argue that protection rights (namely Article 32 which recognises children's right to protection from exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education) may disenfranchise children from participating in the workforce on which their own and their family's survival depends.

In attempting to move beyond the tensions and debates between protection and participation rights, the concept of 'the best interests of the child', as identified in Article 3 of the UNCRC, has become an increasingly popular term. Although widely accepted during the drafting of the UNCRC, the concept of 'the best interests of the child' has proven problematic and contextually malleable (Flekkooy and Kaufman, 1997). For example, in Eekelaar's (1994) analyses of children's rights, he argues that court decisions that claim to be upholding a child's 'best interests' without recognising the child's right to express their views are not protecting their rights but represent a form of 'coercive paternalism' that undermines the child's 'dynamic self-determinism'. While discussions such as these were common place in the first 10 years after the ratification, according to Piper (2000), once the concept of 'best interest' became incorporated into the 'legal knowledge' of international legislation (namely through its position as the 'primary consideration' within the UNCRC), any serious questioning of its truth ceased. Similarly, Woodhead (1997) asserts 'best interests' is fundamentally no different to a needs-based justification, as both are open to all kinds of cultural, and potentially contradictory, interpretations. Guggenheim (2005) also believes the best interests of the child standard is inadequate and that it is impossible and undesirable to isolate the children's interests from those of the parents. In this respect, Guggenheim (2005: xiii) presents a view of children's rights as, on the one hand, fairly weak in substantive content, but on the other, effective for "masking selfishness by invoking a language of altruism".

Critiques of the UNCRC highlight the potential for contradiction when it comes to effective implementation. The UNCRC suggests a power struggle between the "minority of adults who seek to use law as a means of giving rights to liberate children, and the majority who seek to use it as a mechanism for giving care and protection to children, a mechanism that simultaneously also keeps them dependent upon adults and thereby also defines the cultural politics of childhood" (James and James 2004: 211–12). Recognising these tensions and contradictions inherent in ideas around childhood that underpin children's rights is crucial if we are to avoid giving "the already vulnerable, disadvantaged, and often abused, an even more onerous responsibility and burden to carry" (Britton 2002: 4).

The UNCRC is based on a mix of developmental and sociological ideas about what children and young people are like and how they should be treated. For example, a number of the Articles explicitly emphasise children's 'development' (e.g., Article 6 and 32) and similarly the importance of listening to children

according to 'age' and 'maturity' (Article 12).¹⁰ To draw on developmental understandings of childhood can be useful in recognising different children's needs. However, it also runs the risk of downplaying the varying social and cultural contexts that influence children and young people, particularly those living in the majority world. Conversely, there are also numerous Articles in the UNCRC that correlate with the new sociology of childhood and the notion that children and young people are social actors rather than passive subjects. For example, Articles 13, 14 and 15 emphasise the right and capacity of children to enjoy particular 'freedoms', such as expression, thought, conscience and religion, and freedom of association and peaceful assembly.¹¹

Attempting to 'liberate' children through rights presents a dilemma. Such Articles are far from neutral. In predetermining fixed rights children should possess, they also produce a predetermined and fixed conception of the child. Underlying the perspectives of psychology and the new sociology of childhood is a humanistic or liberal notion of the subject, whereby every child is seen to 'possess' rights that are 'universal'. This is a generative process that may leverage important actions, but it also binds children to a predetermined identity, one dependent upon adults. As Ruddick (2007a: 514) argues, "the child is a limit condition to the liberal subject: it is, *de jure*, an impossible subject since, by liberal definition, the child cannot speak for him or herself without adult authorization". Because universal rights are imagined in relation to a particular cultural identity they fail to reflect the variety of heterogeneous subjects and their changing contexts and relationships.

While attributing particular characteristics to child subjects can have many productive and beneficial outcomes, it is also potentially quite limiting and open to use by a range of political agendas. For example, in describing the impossibility of ascertaining the 'truth' in regards to knowledge about children, Ruddick (2007a: 514) argues that some children's rights advocates are using the 'ventriloquist' quality of the child subject in order to "undercut the rights of children themselves and a whole range of 'unruly subjects', and to re-establish neo-conservative, patriarchal and neo-liberal boundaries of the subject". This humanistic language of rights and freedoms is granted to 'the child', an abstraction, rather than individual children and young people. This means that liberation is only possible when power over oneself as an individual is relinquished (Newman 2001).

The humanistic language embedded in popular understandings of children's rights has enabled it to become increasingly synonymous with children and young people's identities. This is reflected in the evolution of the children's rights movement, which began with a focus on children as the property of parents, to the adoption of the welfare-based approach where parents had responsibilities towards their children, to a view that children have their own individual rights to participate. Put simply, this evolution demonstrates a shift from a focus on *protecting children*

¹⁰See Woodhead (2003) for a more detailed analyses.

¹¹See Freeman (1998: 435-437) for a more detailed outline of the links between the new sociology of childhood and children's rights.

to a focus on *protecting their rights* by “propagating the personhood, integrity and autonomy of children” (Freeman 1998: 434–435). Stoljar’s (1984: 120) *An Analysis of Rights* takes this language one step further, arguing that the ultimate justification for children’s rights is tied to “our human endeavour to replenish the human community”.

Regardless of our stage of evolution, ultimately the notion that children are individual entities that ‘possess’ rights is problematic, as is the notion that this is something with universal appeal and applicability. In assuming a certain level of universal applicability, UNCRC fails to recognise that the meaning and experience of childhood can be substantially different due to the unique political, social, cultural and economic contexts in any given country. And while there is little doubt that the interpretation of children’s rights will inevitably be affected by these contexts (the UNCRC explicitly acknowledges this), it has been extensively argued that discourses favouring Western ways of operating remain dominant (see, for example, Boyden 1997; Pupavac 1998, 2001; Mesrati 2009). One of the major concerns behind these arguments is that the UNCRC promotes an ‘individualistic’ approach to rights, rather than a ‘collectivist’ model which is seen to align with many countries in the majority world. This concern was one Mesrati (2009) identified in his doctoral research on interpretations of the UNCRC in Libya. However, while Mesrati (2009: 56) acknowledges that “the attitudes of the Committee [involved in the construction and assessment of the UNCRC] are, as in any collective institution (or any grouping or society), influenced by the predominant cultural paradigm—in this instance western individualism”, he also argues a culture is never strictly collectivist or individualistic, but a mixture of both. Furthermore, Mesrati (2009: 57) argues that the UNCRC is far from immune to criticism or inflexible to change, particularly evident in “the addition of protocols as nations acknowledge a growing understanding of the implications of the principles being applied, and also in response to challenges that face them over time”. However, the ultimate authority on the UNCRC remains the committee appointed by the UN, which the more cynical have declared a “global children’s rights industry” (Reynaert et al. 2009: 527).

Most engagement with children’s rights is fairly unadventurous and limited when it comes to theory¹² (Quennerstedt 2014; Reynaert et al. 2012; I’Anson 2016). Some use the language of rights uncritically or even perhaps as a replacement for theory, while others provide rigorous critiques that become almost paralysing, making it difficult to find ways forward. Responding to these theoretical limitations, I’Anson (2016) offers a critical assessment of the UNCRC’s tropes and tensions, as well as productive ways forward drawing on the theoretical work of various scholars, including Latour (2004, 2013) and Brown (2005). I’Anson (2016)

¹²One notable exception is Archard’s (1993) book, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, which is considered the first book to offer a detailed examination of the philosophical nature of children’s rights. Theoretically, the book draws on oft-cited philosophers in the field childhood studies (e.g., Ariès, Locke, Rousseau) as well as some reference to other classic philosophers, including Rawls, Kant, Plato, Aristotle, Sartre, and Freud.

argues that the UNCRC may be a product of a legal mode, but it is ultimately extra-legal contexts that allow it to be mobilised. These contexts run through various discourses, spaces and cultures that set the conditions for children and young people's lives in the 21st century. Arguably these conditions have changed dramatically since the UNCRC was drafted in the late 1980s, making the Convention look rather 'old' (Veerman 2014). Furthermore, at the other end of the spectrum, there is little empirical research that offers deep insights into how the UNCRC is implemented in practice (Lundy 2012).

The tensions and debates raised in this section of the book suggest that discourses of children's rights are far from stable, objective, and complete. Yet, in the field of children and young people's participation, the UNCRC remains a significant and productive tool, even if interpreted and implemented in a variety of at times contradictory ways. These varying interpretations will continue to be explored throughout the book.

Discourses of Children and Young People's Citizenship

What we have in mind is education from childhood in virtue, a training which produces a keen desire to become a perfect citizen who knows how to rule and be ruled as justice demands (Plato's *Laws*).

Though there is no single recognised definition of citizenship, the classic liberal theory of T. H. Marshall (1965) remains a key reference point, whereby citizenship is made up of equally shared rights and duties that enable civil, social, and political membership and recognition by the state. How these and other more recently recognised forms of citizenship (which emphasise its increasingly cosmopolitan or denationalised nature) have informed interest in children and young people as citizens is long and layered. Take, for example, the above quote from Plato's *Laws*. Far from diminishing over time, this interest in creating the 'perfect citizen' has intensified in the past few decades with competing pressures of globalisation and immigration. This intensification also corresponds with numerous reports of decreasing civil and political participation among the young, particularly in Anglo-American democracies (Putnam 2000; Sotkasiira et al. 2010; Cockburn 2010; Chou et al. 2017).

Arguably it was the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that first saw approaches to participation based on a framework of political citizenship (Fitzgerald et al. 2010), though a 'significant' connection between the agendas of participation and governance did not occur until the early 1990s (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999). Up until that point, participation was primarily related to community and political participation, with the former generally limited to development projects and the latter concerned with conventional and indirect forms of representation, such as elections. Merging participation with citizenship was seen as a way to persuade government to make its services more accessible and responsive

to the disadvantaged within the community. This is particularly evident in the increasing international pressure to decentralise governance toward more locally based initiatives. Otherwise known as ‘citizenship participation’, such an approach requires that citizens have direct influence and are able to exercise control in governance.¹³

This interest in citizenship was not just limited to government. Indeed, the language of citizenship is also seen as a useful tool among activists concerned with widening traditionally exclusive political spaces. Dagnino (2005: 150) argues that citizenship is recognised as a “crucial weapon” in both the struggle against exclusion and inequality, but “most importantly in the widening of dominant conceptions of politics itself”. The merging of citizenship and participation resulted in significant changes in the conceptualisation of both. In terms of citizenship, a much broader definition emerged which included not only social and economic rights, but participation as a basic human right. Similarly, the concept of participation was also redefined, moving from a concern with ‘beneficiaries’ and ‘the excluded’ to a concern with “broad forms of engagement by citizens in policy formulation and decision-making in key arenas which affect their lives” (Gaventa and Valderrama 1999: 4).

Within the field of children and young people’s participation, the discursive ‘weapon’ that is citizenship is increasingly employed to justify certain participatory practices. Reflecting the debates of whether children and young people are ‘beings’ or ‘becomings’, citizenship discussions constantly move between positioning children and young people as *future* citizens and positioning them as *active* citizens. The latter positioning reflects broader shifts in citizenship reform concerned with a deepening democracy approach (Gaventa 2004) where citizens are encouraged to be actively involved in decisions affecting their lives on increasingly deeper levels. This attempts to go beyond ‘listening’ to children and young people to take into account their rights as citizens.

Discourses of citizenship provide practitioners and advocates within the field of children and young people’s participation greater legitimacy by linking participatory practices with wider structures, spaces and objectives. These structures, spaces and objectives can be social, political, cultural or economic, but it is the political, or more specifically the democratic, that tend to receive the most attention. Positioning children and young people as active democratic citizens can create greater governmental accountability; encouraging decisions of social policy to be made *with* children, rather than simply *for* them. Furthermore, the merging of the idea of citizenship with children and young people’s participation can create the basis for more inclusionary practices that not only strengthen rights-based agendas but extend upon them to include non-Convention rights such as service provision and sexual rights.

¹³Governance, simply stated, is the act of controlling, influencing, or regulating a person, place, system, or event.

Couching children and young people's participation in terms of democratic citizenship is utilised by traditional sites of democratic governance, the state and the UN, as well as less traditional sites of governance, such as the academy and non-governmental organisations. From within the academy, there is now a significant body of research concerned with children and young people's citizenship (Theis 2010; Thomas 2007; Lister 2006; Bessell 2006; Invernizzi and Milne 2005; Wyness 2001). Percy-Smith and Thomas' (2010a) *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation* demonstrates the extent to which the discourse of children and young people's citizenship has become ingrained in the literature on children and young people's participation. While the book includes the work of researchers from diverse international contexts, many of the chapters mention citizenship in relation to children and young people's participation. For example, Theis (2010) views the notion of children as active citizens as key to the way forward within the field of children and young people's participation. He sees citizenship as providing a much broader and concrete conceptual and political framework than participation alone, requiring specific skills relevant to NGOs, youth movements and civil society organisations rather than government departments or large international development agencies. Putting forward this alternative vision, Theis (2010: 347) notes "[t]his is an ambitious agenda, but only a bold new agenda will move children's participation out of its relative obscurity and bring it into the mainstream of political discourse and development practice".

Citizenship is a powerful mechanism for 'mainstreaming' participation that increases opportunities for children and young people to make choices about their lives. However, this can also result in the value of participation being taken-for-granted, making it difficult to challenge. Further, the focus of citizenship is often limited to those forms of participation aligned with predetermined democratic objectives. This presents a paradox between the celebrated agency of young citizens and the predetermined structural constraints, whereby the citizen is educated into aligning their interests with the goals and processes of liberal democracy (Rose 1990).

Educational approaches to children and young people's citizenship are particularly useful at highlighting the paradox of citizenship discourses. For example, Wyse (2001) interviewed students and teachers from four English schools, two primary and two secondary, to find out how citizenship was understood. Wyse (2001: 215) found that while citizenship was an increasingly explicit component of school syllabi, its interpretation was limited to students' learning outcomes and was rarely used to support children and young people's participation in everyday school processes beyond the tokenistic. Wyse (2001: 217) concluded that to achieve active citizenship the UK needed to take steps to "dramatically enhance" students' participation in their education. Wyse's (2001: 216) conclusion is also informed by the language of rights and presents young active citizens as "those who are fully informed of their rights and who have the capability to ensure that their rights are respected".

The rights-based argument for active citizenship is popular among scholars, policy-makers and educators. Veitch (2009), for example, draws on research on the emergence of school councils in the UK to argue that the dominant citizenship

framework used within schools results in participation that is defined very broadly as ‘taking part’. Veitch (2009) argues that a broad definition enables the legitimisation of school councils regardless of the significance or scale of their outcomes. To avoid such tokenism, Veitch (2009: 19) emphasises the need for a strong focus on discourses of rights as well as the new sociology of childhood, arguing that “[w]ithout a stronger focus on the purpose of children and young people’s participation, a recognition of the agency and competence children already possess, and the rights that school children hold to participate in the ‘here and now’ of their schooling, school councils will continue to be tokenistic”. Veitch argues it is not the democratic ‘principles’ that require critique but the ‘processes’ that are used to implement democracy.

However, taking into account the relations of power that support its legitimacy, this notion of children as ‘active’ citizens may also be seen to operate as a mechanism of self-regulation. Bloch and Popkewitz’s (2000: 17) conceptualisation of the ‘envisioned citizen’ presents a prime example of this mechanism, where “liberty and progress” is achieved through the construction of a child who can “contribute productively to the transformations (development) of their ‘being’ through their own self-discipline”. This view is also reflected in the United Kingdom, where the idea that children should provide feedback to improve the running of the school has been connected to the interests of New Labour’s notion of ‘active citizenship’ (Whitty and Wisby 2007). Moreover, Ennew (2000) suggests it is unfair for individuals deemed powerless to be given the responsibility for changing the dominant structure within which their lack of power is written. To do this, Ennew (2000: 5) argues, “is to blame them for their situation, and reproduces the same inequalities in political and economic structures, while reinforcing the economic structures that produce and maintain inequalities”. Ultimately, the methods used in constituting the ‘active’ citizen not only have the potential to link the subjectivity of the individual to their subjugation, but link activism with discipline (Brin Hyatt 1997). In other words, government-led or formal participatory approaches that seek to simultaneously liberate and incorporate children by constituting them as self-regulating citizens, may work to shape children’s subjectivities in line with state discourses of citizenship.

Another key issue with dominant understandings of citizenship is that being inextricably tied to state institutions means those not legally or institutionally ‘recognised’, say refugee children, are not granted the same rights. In other words, citizenship works to include some at the expense of others, as Shaheed (2007: 24) contends, “citizenship is about both inclusions and exclusions: about who belongs and is a citizen but equally—and simultaneously—who is not a citizen, and therefore, does not belong”. In line with this argument, Lister’s (2003, 2006) examination of citizenship, informed by feminist theory, has highlighted how notions of citizenship has the potential to be both inclusionary and exclusionary.

Responding to these criticisms of popular understandings of citizenship, and to better account for the conditional, precarious and multidimensional nature of contemporary citizenship, an increasing number of scholars are developing more

spatialised, relational and socio-geographic framings of citizenship (Nordberg 2006; Isin and Nielsen 2008; Skelton 2010; Wood 2013; Nicoll et al. 2013; Wood and Black 2014). This literature recognises that citizenship is always “an ensemble of different forms of belonging” (Nordberg 2006: 526) that is “formed through scalar configurations and engagement with place” (Desforges et al. 2005: 444). Useful in this endeavour is the notion of ‘acts of citizenship’. Popularised by Isin and Nielsen (2008), acts of citizenship are events through which subjects are constituted as ‘activist citizens’. Activist citizens contrast with the sort of ‘active citizens’ previously mentioned because they are not simply acting in formal and predetermined ways (e.g., voting) but involved in creating and acting in a diverse number of ways. From this perspective, citizenship is not restricted to rights, responsibilities or state borders but is a form of subjectivity that is *performed*, increasingly through digital and visual practices. This is an arguably more inclusive understanding of citizenship as it suggests even those ‘non-citizens’ without state-recognition (e.g., refugees, ‘illegal’ immigrants, etc.) can belong.

What this analysis of discourses of children's citizenship suggests is that while the notion of citizenship can act as a helpful ‘weapon’ within the field of children and young people's participation, it also has the potential to exclude those who do not fit the mould. It also hides some of its contingent relations of power that shape and constrain what is possible and construct children as both ‘the problem to be solved’ and ‘the solution to the problem’. In the name of ‘inclusivity’, children are attributed the label ‘citizens’, in turn aligning children's subjectivity with their subjugation through the democratic interests of governing agencies (whether it be the state, the UN, NGOs or the academy). Consequently, far from ‘freeing’ or ‘empowering’ children, the adoption of a children's citizenship discourse has the potential to increase the governance of children.

Conclusion

This section has identified some of the contemporary and overlapping discourses of children and young people's participation and examined the broader context in which such discourses have come into being. Interrogating the emergence of these discourses and the critical debates that have unfolded helps us to understand how they promote and regulate the conditions for children and young people's participation. Rather than a singular and coherent set of ideas, this analysis has shown how these discourses reflect a range of different ideas that operate on “constantly shifting ground” (Cornwall and Coelho 2007: 14). Among the discourses of childhood and youth, this analysis highlighted how different psychological, socio-cultural, sociological and autobiographical accounts are used to produce and support ways of understanding and responding to children and young people. The section has also shown how these discourses intersect with those circulating in children's rights and citizenship, each of which has its own particular historical emergence and debates. These discourses are never entirely stable or aligned with

each other, but what they do have in common is their often taken-for-granted 'goodness' in offering universal 'truths' about children and young people's role in society. Yet the production and dissemination of these ideas is far from straightforward and is governed by particular relations of power between a variety of institutional sites. Consequently, the next chapter will more specifically focus on key sites of power-knowledge that help shape the conditions of the field of children and young people's participation.

Conditional Citizens

Rethinking Children and Young People's Participation

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