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Negotiating active citizenship: Young people's participation in everyday spaces

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Introduction

Participation and involvement are now common place in policy rhetoric and across service sectors. However, there is a growing critical discourse exploring the way in which participation is understood and realized in practice (Percy-Smith, 2010; Cockburn, 2005; Tisdall, 2008; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Liebel, 2008). To some extent the focus here is about the effectiveness of the workings of democracy and the structures and systems that serve it; in particular the extent to which the views and perspectives of diverse groups are represented in local governance. Yet, as the movement to involve children and young people in local democratic processes grows, there is an emerging parallel discourse that seeks to expose the inequalities and injustices in the way power is exercised and decision-making controlled by adults. To that extent participation and in turn citizenship are conditions imposed from above rather than realized through practice in everyday life or as Pells (2010) argues, a 'tendency towards *performed*' rather than *lived*' participation. In the previous chapter Wood provides a genealogy of the everyday to understand the way children and young people's citizenship is structured, practiced and enacted. However, whilst Wood is concerned with the way in which children and young people's identities shape, and in turn are shaped and reproduced by space, this chapter is concerned more with the active participation of children and young people in terms of agency and action through self-determination as they negotiate the everyday contexts in which they live (Percy-Smith 2012; Percy-Smith and Malone 2001)¹. Lister (2008) makes a useful distinction here between 'being a citizen' – enjoying the rights of citizenship necessary for social and political participation; and 'acting as a citizen' – actively fulfilling those rights. A major dilemma concerning young people and citizenship is that whilst they may not have citizenship status conferred *de jure*, they are *de facto* citizens by engaging in citizenship practices as a result

¹ See also Trell and van Hoven this volume

of their participation in everyday social life. This situation has led some critics to refer to children as *semi or partial citizens* (Roche, 1999).

These developments in discourses of active citizenship have in turn been unfolding within historical global social changes characterized by changing relationships between the state and citizen in what Crouch (2004) refers to as an era of post-democracy characterized by a progressive detachment by citizens from Politics and institutions. Gifford and Mycock (2013) interpret these changes in terms of a tension between on the one hand a decline in accountability and relevance of established structures of governance and on the other, increasing individualization constitutive of late modernity in which individuals no longer seek to show deference to public decision-making bodies but instead exercise their own agency and self-determination as architects of their own lives. These processes of social change pose significant challenges to assumptions about how children participate in organizations, services and society at large. Indeed there is an irony at play in that professionals increasingly seek to involve children and young people in democratic processes, yet these systems are increasingly losing their value and significance for an increasing proportion of the population in different countries. Instead, as the public sector declines and the virtual world of the internet becomes ever more pervasive in people's lives, there are increasing possibilities for children and young people to evolve their own new forms of democratic processes in new democratic arenas (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007).

A key feature of these shifting relationships between citizens and state is a process of *democratic deepening* (Gaventa, 2007) involving a challenge to the professional-led, service-driven agenda of public sector involvement by attempting to reclaim the radical tradition in public arenas (Fielding, 2009; Cornwall and Coelho, 2007; Percy-Smith, 2010; Percy-Smith 2014a). For example, Cooke and Kothari's (2001) critique of participation focuses on the way in which the rhetorical claims of empowerment in participation discourses often fall short in practice in development contexts. Tisdall (2008) on the other hand concerns herself with the extent to which participation is transformatory in terms of children having a real opportunity to bring about change. For Percy-Smith (2010) (as with Jans (2004) in the context of children and play and Fielding (2006) in relation to schools) the challenge is in shifting the balance from professional adult agenda of what Fielding refers to as 'participation for effective services' to participation that supports the well-being and flourishing of human communities. Or in Jans's (2004) terms (following Habermas), a shift in attention from systems to lifeworlds and as architects of their own lives.

Following Jans, there is an emerging shift in discourses focusing on the 'de-institutionalization' of children and young people's participation marked by a focus on

participation in everyday settings where issues of identity, agency and self-determination rather than voice and representation define the nature of participation (see also Marshall and Wood this volume). The underlying rationale is that for young people to participate effectively as active citizens the emphasis needs to be directed towards '*social participation*' and the multi-faceted ways in which young people participate more fully in everyday community spaces through their actions, choices, relationships and contributions. Trell and van Hoven (this volume) also acknowledge the significance of the everyday for young people illustrating how young people in Estonia derive meaningful participation within contexts where citizenship is realised through everyday relations, learning and experience.

This chapter takes a critical look at children and young people's participation in the context of ideas about citizenship. In particular, counter to assumptions about children's competence to participate and their ambiguous status as citizens in waiting, the chapter will discuss how, in spite of their marginalization within society children and young people are in reality already participating *de facto* as active citizens within the spaces of their everyday lifeworlds. To that extent the central focus of this paper is to discuss how participation as active citizenship can be understood in terms of the cultural geographies of children and young people and the way in which the views and values of different young people are articulated through their participation within, and in relation to, the wider social contexts in which their lives take place. The paper will begin by critically reflecting on some of the major issues in the field of children and young people's participation focusing on some of the contradictions and paradoxes at play in reconciling ideals of participation with realities in practice in the context of adult agenda. The paper will then rehearse some of the developments in citizenship studies and crucially how the status of childhood and debates about children and citizenship open up possibilities for reconceptualizing participation as active citizenship. Recent contributions to the citizenship literature are discussed focusing on citizenship as a dynamic process of active negotiation in relation to context. The paper will then draw on empirical findings to discuss how changing trends in children and young people's participation and citizenship are played out in the everyday spaces of local neighbourhood, schools and local services.

Deepening democracy: Evolving discourses of participatory citizenship

In spite of advances in theory and practice with respect to children, young people participation and citizenship, these changes have had limited impact on the position of children and young people in society. Gaventa (2007) talks of a wider crisis of citizenship reflected in a decline in trust and accountability in the state and a growing disillusionment in

governments. Instead he argues for the need to re-examine understanding of rights and citizenship in different contexts and how citizenship is claimed and rights realized through the agency and actions of people themselves (see also Mitchell & Elwood; Marshall this volume). For Gaventa this involves a process of '*democratic deepening*' marked by shifts in modes of citizen participation from voting and civil duties within institutions of the state to more direct forms of involvement in the form of expression of identity and difference in the spaces of everyday life in what Cornwall and Coelho refer to as 'New democratic arenas.' Fielding (2009) reasserts the importance of 'public life' – spaces not controlled by the state or the market, but instead, 'agoras' (Bauman, 1999) or multiple interpersonal spaces (Fielding, 2009: 506) where a democratic tradition can be reclaimed.

At the heart of this democratic re-conceptualization is a contestation of static notions of citizenship as simply encapsulating rights and duties as a member of a community; instead arguing for new models of citizenship as active practices in which citizenship is negotiated in relation to others (Cockburn, 1998; Roche, 1999; Jans, 2004). Cockburn (1998) in his seminal paper argues for a *socially interdependent model* of citizenship in which participation is based on mutual and reciprocal relationships and the negotiation of inter-subjectivity (Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Moosa-Mitha (2005) in a similar vein argues for a *difference centred approach* to citizenship based on rights and equality giving rise to a horizontal model of citizenship (Roche, 1999) where citizenship is not based on status according to a priori criteria, rather involves *Acts of citizenship* (Larkins, 2014) embarked on by empowered citizens as they reflexively negotiate their place in society in the everyday spaces of their lived contexts. Martelli refers to this shift as an emergent form of participatory citizenship that combines participation, civicness and autonomy, which usefully opens up possibilities for rethinking active citizenship beyond institutional structures. Hart (2007: 321) similarly states: "Identity comes through action, that is, through daily activities which are 'acts' of communication collectively shaped," suggesting that the 'everyday' becomes a fluid space in which individuals articulate their own meanings and manifestations of citizenship practice. Hence as Percy-Smith (2010: 114) argues, rather than ask 'Do children have a say?' as a proxy for democratic citizenship, we should be asking whether children are able to fulfil their rights as equal and active citizens by articulating their agency through different forms of participation in a range of everyday settings.

Like Martelli (2013), Cornwall and Coelho (2005) and others (see for example Cockburn, 1998, 2007; Roche, 1999; Jans, 2004; Larkins, 2014) also see possibilities for new forms of active citizenship at the interface between state and society in what can be called the 'participatory sphere' (Cornwall and Coelho, 2007) in which citizens can engage in

democratic processes in more empowered ways. For Cockburn (2007) the participatory sphere in which children's citizenship is realized happens in liminal spaces between public and private domains². It is within these new democratic arenas that Gaventa (2007) and Cornwall and Coelho (2007) see possibilities for moving out of liberal representative models of democracy into new opportunities for democratic participation through direct involvement where identities and agency can be articulated and dialogue and deliberation can happen. Hence as Thomas, quoting Young (2000: 6) states:

On a deliberative understanding of democratic practice, democracy is not only a means through which citizens can promote their interests and hold the power of rulers in check. It is also a means of collective problem-solving which depends for its legitimacy and wisdom on the expression and criticism of the diverse opinions of all the members in society. (Thomas, 2007: 207)

Gifford and Mycock (2013) argue for a distinction between *being citizens* and *becoming citizens*. 'Being citizens' they argue involves integration into pre-existing collective identities such as nation states. Becoming a citizen involves a dynamic process intimately connected to social and cultural learning and the creation of new civic virtues and sources of recognition. Hence as we shall see in the following section citizenship involves the participation of individuals and groups in a 'struggle for recognition' (Thomas, 2012 after Honneth) through 'participation' in everyday spaces. This realignment of citizen and state can be referred to as "the contemporary project of developing and sustaining more substantive and empowered citizen participation in the political process ..." Gaventa (2007:x) involving a shift from *status* to *process*.

Children, young people and citizenship

Just as new discourses have sought to re-construct citizenship as a fluid and active process of negotiation, writers have simultaneously been grappling with the specific issue of children and young people with respect to citizenship (Cockburn, 1998, 2005, 2012; Roche, 1999; Devine, 2002; Jans, 2004; Mooza-Mitha, 2005; Invernizzi and Milne, 2008; Percy-Smith, 2014b; Larkins, 2014). Until recently children have essentially been excluded from discussion about citizenship as a result of the way they have been marginalized in society. Yet developments in the sociology of childhood that have reconstructed children as competent social actors challenge the historical marginalization of children in citizenship debates providing a basis for re-theorizing children as citizens albeit not on the same terms as adults (Jans, 2004). As Cockburn (1998:112) observes: "traditional notions of citizenship

² See also Soja's ideas about 'third space'

will have to change to accommodate children". Roche (1999) states that "The demand that children be included in citizenship is simply a request that children be seen as members of society too, with a legitimate and valuable voice and perspective."(479)³. He contests the argument that children do not have sufficient understanding, competence or moral development to participate as citizens. Instead he cites Coles (1997) who argues that the "reasoning and moral capacities of many 9 year olds are as sophisticated as those of many adults" (481). Roche (1999) goes on to quote Held (1991) who states: "If citizenship entails membership in the community and membership implies forms of social participation then citizenship is above all about the involvement of people in the community in which they live." (20) Such a conceptualization of citizenship has major implications for children, as Liebel and Saadi state: "If participation could be conceived of as not only consisting of speaking and being heard, but also of active and routine inclusion into vital social processes, new prospects could be opened up for the situating of children in society."(Liebel and Saadi, 2010: 152).

The participation and citizenship of children and young people are intertwined with conceptions of childhood and youth as generational categories. Customarily citizenship has been aligned to adulthood and therefore achieved once young people undergo the transition from youth to adulthood. However, both transitions to adulthood and citizenship itself are increasingly problematic for young people as a result of the decline of the youth labour market and increases in house prices. For Martelli (2013) this has given rise to a tension between conventional forms of participation and citizenship and emerging forms of youth participation as young people seek out ways of negotiating a stake in society. Walther (2012) notes the de-standardization and individualization of life paths that make universal meanings of participation in daily realities difficult to grasp. As a result, these changes have initiated debates about participation beyond the neo liberal managerialist assumptions of 'involvement' of children and young people (and indeed adults) as consumer citizens (Jones and Wallace, 1990), to instead begin to widen discourses of participation as active citizenship (Cornwall and Coelho, 2005; Percy-Smith, 2014b) involving new forms of participation and new 'modes' of citizenship devised through action by young people themselves. However as Martelli (2013) argues there is still limited knowledge about new styles of participation of young people.

As new ways of understanding citizenship emerge, the contradictions and paradoxes in conventional justification for children and young people's citizenship (non) status become

³ See also Bartos this volume

ever more evident and indeed flawed. The crisis in citizenship with respect to young people can be most acutely observed in the extent to which they are able to participate as active citizens (Gifford and Mycock, 2013). The contradiction here is that, as Gifford argues, inclusion, cohesion and belonging (see also Hall et al., 1998) are key to citizenship yet it is as a result of adults devaluing young people in society that gives rise to marginalization and alienation. Devine (2002) and Gallagher (2006) for example reveal how the structuration of child-adult relations and power inequalities in schools affects the extent to which children are able to participate (see also Parkes this volume). Gallagher highlights the problematic nature of spaces for the participation of children as a result of the ambiguous interplay between structure and agency as played out through generational imbalances of power⁴. As Devine goes on to argue, power is central to any analysis of children's rights and citizenship (303). "Children's identification of themselves as citizens is influenced by the discourses concerning children and childhood which govern their world." (Devine, 2002: 305). She goes on to argue that a change in children's rights and citizenship status will "only come about by challenging the structural positioning of children and adults in society" (305). For Devine, this comes about by reconstituting the time and space that frames children's lives through institutionalized practices and control.

The changing spaces of children's participation

Participation is the medium through which citizenship rights are claimed. Within representative democratic systems this has traditionally involved voting in local and national elections. Accordingly attempts to increase the participation of children and young people in local governance have tended to surf on the back of representative structures such as community fora, children's councils and advisory groups as well as the involvement of children and young people in research. In the Health sector in the UK it is now almost impossible to secure funding for research without a statement of how you will involve patients or members of the public in the research. However, in spite of the inclusive rhetoric of 'participation' and community/public engagement initiatives these are on the whole toothless vanguards of ailing liberal representative democratic systems. Indeed in many cases these initiatives are not truly participatory in terms of young people being involved on an equal basis as other stakeholders in collaborative processes, rather refer to young people sharing their views with adults who make the final decision. As Thomas states:

⁴ See also Marshall this volume for a contrasting discussion of young Palestinians engaging in resistance in contexts where participation is otherwise constricted.

there is a great deal of activity going on which is much more genuinely 'participatory' .. that is often experienced ... as exciting and dynamic, but that does not connect in any clear way with 'real' politics ... with the result that there is little sign of young people participating in processes that actually produce important political decisions or define the terms of policy debate or even expressing their common interests as a social group (Thomas, 2007: 207).

Consequently many writers have argued for the need to understand children's participation not simply in terms of expressing a view but in collaborative relationships with adults (see for example Cockburn, 1998; Percy-Smith, 2006; Mannion, 2007; Fitzgerald et al., 2010). Percy-Smith (2006) utilizes Wildemeersch et al.'s (1998) interpretation of social learning to develop an alternative approach to addressing community tensions between adults and young people in neighbourhood settings. According to Wildemeersch et al. (1998) social learning can be understood as:

The learning through participatory systems such as groups, networks, organizations and communities, in conditions which are new, unexpected, uncertain, conflictual and hard to predict ... when solutions have to be found for unforeseen contextual problems. ... emphasis is on the optimal use of the problem-solving potential of which a group, institution or community disposes. Social learning is action- and experience-oriented, it is critically reflective, meaning that actors question the validity of particular opinions, judgments, strategies, actions, emotions, feelings, etc. It is cooperative and communicative, which means that the dialogue between actors is crucial, continually involved in implicit or explicit processes of negotiation (adapted from Wildemeersch et al., 1998).

Participation as social learning in this way provides a credible alternative to understanding how stakeholders can be involved in responding to community based issues in ways that community groups themselves can retain, rather than give away, influence over their affairs and more meaningfully realize their citizenship status. Similarly Acharya (2010) provides an account of the Child Reporters of Orissa who identify and 'research' issues in their neighbourhood, explore solutions and report to community elders to bring about change. In contrast to dominant western European approaches to participation where decision-making about solutions to community problems are removed from the community for 'professionals' to deal with, instances such as this provide a credible example of how children can participate in more meaningful ways as active citizens in the context of their everyday community spaces.

As critics are realizing the limitations of mainstream approaches to young people's participation in adult/service-led decision making, increasing attention is turning to how young people participate as active citizens in relations with adults in the context of everyday life settings such as schools, neighbourhoods and public services (Percy-Smith and Malone 2001; Percy-Smith, 2014b; Fielding, 2009; Mannion, 2007) (see also McIntosh *et al.* and Trell and van Horen, this volume). In one sense this signals a shift in attention from formal to informal participation. At the same time it signals a de-formalizing of citizenship practice widening the focus of participation beyond the narrow confines of adult controlled spaces of public sector decision making. The underlying recognition here is that participation, as an act of citizenship, does not just concern the exercise of, and input to, (adult) political power; but also concerns autonomy and self-determination as individuals 'participate' in relation to their own agenda and values. As Percy-Smith (2010) argues the world is not shaped solely by politicians and professional decision makers, but also through the actions and choices people make in the context of their everyday lived realities.

Rethinking participation and citizenship in the context of everyday spaces necessarily places a focus on issues of agency and identity and the contribution of individuals to community and society (see also Wood this volume). As de Winter (1997:24) states: "In practice this comes down to regarding [young people] as fellow citizens, people whose share in society is appreciated and stimulated because of the constructive contribution they are able to make. Participation, which we may provisionally define as opportunities for children and young people to be actively involved in [the decision making on] their own living environment is a major condition." (quoted in Roche, 1999: 484). Hence it could be argued that participation might be better interpreted as: "The democratic action and involvement of individuals and groups in the production and reproduction of their lives and communities" (Percy-Smith, 2006).

Changing the context for participation does not, however, remove the implicit power relations between actors and between young people and place. Mannion (2010), drawing on Massey (1994), points out that space is not simply a back drop to action, rather is part of the action in the sense that it affords different possibilities according to how space is designed. Kesby *et al.* (2007) argue that participation can better fulfil its potential for empowerment if it is conceptualized as a spatial practice involving the socio-spatial interplay of people and settings or as Kindon *et al.* (2007) argue the result of the way power is negotiated as mutually constitutive relations between people, participation and space.

Participation as active citizenship in everyday spaces

One of the key conclusions from Percy-Smith and Thomas's (2010) text *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation* was the importance of *social participation* – children as active citizens making contributions and taking actions within their everyday life settings, where roles and responsibilities are shared and agency rather than voice is the main marker of citizenship. Marshall (this volume) in a similar vein discusses the possibilities for the exercise of agency in constricted contexts of life in Palestine. Social participation can provide for a greater degree of ownership and self-determination than is often possible in public decision-making settings. As Williams et al. (2010) argue, rather than seek out diverse voices in competition for scarce resources which fragment communities, a focus on social participation can provide a basis for an appreciative, asset-based approach to young people's participation building on the skills and knowledge of different groups in the community⁵.

Much formal participation takes place in spaces abstracted from children's everyday lives. Participation in everyday contexts by contrast also allows more children to participate than is possible with representative structures offering opportunities for children to gradually acquire the skills of active citizenship through participation. In this respect 'participation' could be defined as "the social practice of active citizenship" (Percy-Smith, 2014b). Hence participation is not about having a say, but about a democratic process of people working together to increasingly influence and make decisions. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to this as '*legitimate peripheral participation*' in which participation is understood as a situated social learning activity involving the negotiation of knowledge and meaning as well as an individual's own position in any given context of values and power. Relations between children and adults and the quality of their collaboration are therefore key to children's participation as active citizenship. Emphasis on relationships places the focus on agency, learning and cooperation between groups when children participate. As Lave and Wenger (2001: 35) state: "Learning (and therefore participation) is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived in world." However, as critics increasingly raise questions about the efficacy of existing approaches to participation, and indeed participation per se, we need to be critically reflecting on the extent to which variable models of democracy on which manifestations of participation are based, are indeed conducive to young people deriving meaning in their participation as citizens.

⁵ cf..Bartos this volume

The remainder of this paper uses three different everyday contexts to explore further some current issues concerning participation as active citizenship. In so doing issues and prospects for de-formalizing participation as an everyday act of citizenship are discussed and core principles for understanding participation as active citizenship developed. This exploration will focus on three everyday spaces that children inhabit: neighbourhood, school and local services.

Children, young people and community participation in local neighbourhoods

There is now an extensive literature that documents the importance of neighbourhood space for children and young people (Chawla 2002, Valentine 2007). However, the way children and young people value and use local places is frequently marginalised in relation to other adult users of public space (Percy-Smith 1998). Percy-Smith (1998) argues failing to respect the value of urban neighbourhoods as sites for young people to construct their own geographies is in essence a denial of their rights to play and freely associate but also a devaluing of their rights as members of a society. Ensuring children's rights of citizenship is not simply a matter of ensuring they have appropriate spaces to spend time, but equally involves acceptance and accommodation of their local geographies. Intolerance of children's use of space – as an articulation of their values and interests – reflects their value and position in society as somehow 'less than citizens'. However, inclusion is not just about accommodating or tolerating a particular set of values or groups in society, but about valuing and appreciating the contributions they make to the collective as an active part of everyday life. Many of the decisions that shape the lives of children and young people are made within the course of everyday life rather than in more formal decision making contexts.

The extent to which children and young people are able to actively participate with adults as equal members of society with something to contribute is therefore central to children and young people's sense of inclusion and value within society. Yet communities and society are not static entities into which young people contribute rather, as stated earlier, are the result of an ongoing dynamic and reflexive relationship between citizens and society. Whether and how young people are able to participate in the life and future developments of their community is reflective of the extent to which they experience, and are able to derive, a sense of active citizenship. Young people may do this through formal processes of neighbourhood development through representation in local planning and development processes. But evidence suggests that participation is more meaningful when their participation is ongoing and integral to the life and function of the community (ECORYS, 2014). This happens not just through their involvement in local decision making processes

but also by valuing and accommodating their expression of values through their actions and behaviours in the community, for example through their use of local places and presence on the local landscape.

Children's geographies studies in the 1990s were instrumental in contributing to a growing understanding of young people's use of local spaces (see for example Valentine and McKendrick, 1998; Percy-Smith, 1999; Matthews et al. 1999; Chawla, 2002). Percy-Smith (2002) for example drew attention to three different ways in which young people are marginalized on urban landscapes: through inadequate local provision, alienated by active geographies of exclusion as young people are systematically demonized as a polluting presence on the landscape (Lieberg, 1995) and through exclusion in local planning and decision making processes. Projects such as the UNESCO Growing up in Cities project (Chawla, 2002) in which Percy-Smith's work was part, modelled a participatory action research approach to involving young people as researchers in evaluating and improving their local neighbourhoods. Involving young people as partners in research is one way in which they can counteract their marginalization and, through their research, re-author their role as active and equal citizens. Shier (2010) similarly presents the experience of the Promotores in Nicaragua in which children gradually acquire the skills of community and citizenship through a rights based approach and increasing roles in community-based activities (see also Sancar and Severcan, 2010). Projects such as these document the competence of children in roles as actors of change.

The Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010) provides numerous diverse examples of children and young people engaged in acts of active citizenship wherein participation in everyday contexts can often offer opportunities for more direct and meaningful involvement than public decision-making settings. Young people's role as active citizens in communities is not constrained just to 'projects' but goes on all the time as they reflexively engage with local places. Percy-Smith (2012) following in the spirit of the likes of Heft and Chawla (2006), Hart (1978) and Moore (1984) draws attention to the extent to which young people are already actively participating in their local neighbourhoods as they make choices about how they engage with and mediate their local social and environmental context. Wulff (1995), from an anthropological perspective, refers to this in terms of young people being *active cultural producers* as places are shaped by the values of different groups of young people. The quality of children and young people's place experience in relation to each of the three-fold dimensions to young people's marginalization of local neighbourhoods outlined above, is a direct reflection of their citizenship status. Hence, as is argued in UNICEF's Child Friendly City initiative, a good city is one in which

children can participate to the full extent of their abilities. Yet, numerous studies of young people's experience of local environments and community life highlight that young people are not routinely included and respected as fellow citizens rather are constructed as a nuisance and in need of closer guidance, provision and surveillance through what Valentine (1996) refers to as *regimes of regulation*. The marginalization and exclusion of young people in local neighbourhoods in this way highlights the extent to which the citizenship status of young people is intertwined by dominant social constructions of childhood and youth and, in turn, power between generations. In the next section the paper will explore how the structuration of adult-child relations in schools affects young people's status as active citizens.

Children and young people's participation in schools: Active citizenship or passive compliance

Just as young people's use of public space is governed by social constructions of childhood and ideas about 'appropriate' use of public space, the role of schools and young people's experience within them are similarly structured upon the position of children and young people within generational discourses as citizens *in futurity*. Schools have conventionally constituted training grounds for young people in acquiring the skills needed when they leave school and embark on their transition into adulthood. Beyond the acquisition of qualifications, schools have always been understood as a space in which to undergo appropriate moral and social development – although as something to be taught rather than learned through practice - in order to fulfil one's duties and responsibilities as adults. In this sense citizenship education becomes an apprenticeship for adulthood rather than rights for children as citizens now. In the UK the Crick report (1998) on *Education for Citizenship and teaching of democracy in schools* become pivotal in reframing citizenship education in schools and aspiring to produce a nation of engaged citizens (Lockyer, 2008). However, as Lockyer (2008) notes, the transformative potential of the Crick report was undermined by a centripetal tendency towards reproducing the status quo (Parry, 2003). Without spaces for deliberation and conflict the foundation for citizenship is weakened. At the heart of this endeavour are the competing philosophies of liberal and republicanist views of citizenship education (Lockyer, 2003). The former being concerned with 'facilitating the autonomy and maximising the opportunity of persons to live their chosen life'. The latter based on an ethic of civic engagement involving an obligation to duties and contribute to the common good (Lockyer, 2008). However, as Prout (2000) argues so often a tension results between control and self-realization.

At the heart of the Crick report were three key foci: social and moral responsibility, community involvement, and political literacy. Whilst the first two have to some extent been possible within the existing culture of education, equipping young people with the skills of political literacy through the development of capacity for debate and experience of, and involvement in, democratic processes in schools has been evidently more difficult to achieve. In addition Haydon (2003) argues thick descriptions of citizenship based on values and virtues can give rise to tensions within multicultural societies as the values of certain groups dominate over others. What is at issue here is what James *et al.* (2008) refer to as ‘the cultural politics of children’s citizenship’ in which policies and regimes within schools seek to prescribe the social and material environments which affect children’s experience and possibilities for active citizenship. As James *et al.* argue: “As the rights agenda has gained momentum, [...] governments have created a wider net of social control [...] that is permeating more areas of more children’s lives than ever before.” (88). The result is that schools, as spaces of possibility for children and young people to participate and realize their status as citizens within everyday school life, are constricted as a result of the restrictive and overarching anxieties of adults about children and young people being empowered and the economic imperative of schooling a compliant workforce for the future. The enduring hierarchies that characterize schools are therefore not conducive to the development of participatory citizenship.

This tension plays out within social policy reflected in the simultaneous growth in pupil voice discourses within increasingly controlled educational environments. As an expanding literature seeks to promote the value of student participation (see for example Fielding, 2006) there is simultaneously a critical backlash in response to what is frequently seen as tokenistic or ineffective practice (Lewars, 2010). Devine argues that “children’s capacities as active agents are underutilized, with consequent negative implications for children’s construction of identity as citizens within the school “(316) and for their own developing sense of social actorship. Fielding (2006) has been pivotal in advocating for a ‘new wave’ student voice as key to the renewal of civic society reasserting the case for a radical collegiality and ‘reclaiming our radical heritage through learning from past experience (such as Alex Blooms’ Stepney in the East democratic school). Central to this endeavour Fielding (2004) argues for a person-centred education as pivotal in development of education for civic society and human flourishing involving the creation of “spaces and practices within and between our organisations that nurture dialogue, not as exotic or special features [...] but as integral practices of human learning and daily encounter.” (211). Fielding (2009) argues that key to enhancing democracy is *public space* – not dominated by the state or the market, but an ‘agora’ (Bauman, 1999) where people can come together to “reflect on matters of mutual

importance". For Fielding (2007), reconfiguring spaces in schools as public space where children can more readily participate in collaboration with adults, involves "an intended mutuality, a disposition to see difference as a potentially creative resource, and more overt commitment to co-construction which requires quite different relationships and spaces and a different linguistic schema to form such aspirations". Moss and Petrie (2002) also focus on the way in which childhood-adult relations are configured by identifying different spaces for interaction in terms of: a *Physical space* – a setting for children; *Social space* – a domain of social practices and relationships; *Cultural space* – where values, rights and culture are created; and *Discursive space* – where dialogue, confrontation (exchanging different views and experiences), deliberation and critical thinking take place.

In a small action research project to develop participation beyond school councils with a cluster of primary and secondary schools in a Scottish city Percy-Smith (2014a) identifies three key issues at play affecting children's participation. The first concerns the limitations of student voice⁶. Whilst there are a range of structures and systems in place in these schools for students to have a say (class committees, eco committees, pupil councils, suggestion boxes etc.) students widely reflected that they feel they have insufficient voice and influence in sharing their ideas and making suggestions to bring about improvements in the school as previous research has shown (see for example Burke and Grosvenor, 2003). Even when children do express a view they often do not feel listened to and then often do not even hear what was then decided if any decisions or actions were taken at all.

"Teachers don't listen to what you have to say most of the time ..."

"When you tell adults things they say they will try to sort it out but they don't" (Secondary year 8 students)

Yet interestingly staff themselves also talked about not having a voice in the system either:

"There is a paradox that as we seek to empower children, teachers are feeling more disempowered in the sense of having what they do prescribed with no entering into dialogue amongst staff." (Secondary staff)

One of the dilemmas here is that participation is interpreted simply in terms of children's views inputting into adult agenda, rather than a process of active and collaborative learning and action within a context in which enterprise and initiative of staff as well as children are celebrated as part of a culture of participation in schools as learning organisations.

⁶ see also Parkes this volume

The second issue concerns the importance of active collaborative engagement involving respectful relations between children and adults when children participate. Interpretations of participation as 'voice' stand at odds with children's own orientations towards participation as a more active process of collaborative involvement in projects and change initiatives.

"It's about involvement, getting involved – 'doing the idea'; that's different to pupil voice which is giving suggestions to others" (Primary student year 6)

"Participation is about leadership, organising stuff and trying to make things better" (Primary student year 6)

A key challenge for schools is how they can relinquish some control to allow children to get involved more actively in these ways. This relates to Moss and Petrie's ideas about spaces for projects of mutual concern wherein students and staff engage in joint inquiry in response to questions such as: "how might we work together to resolve this"? Key to effective participation in schools therefore is a quality of relationships between staff and students. Yet, unlike primary schools, staff student relationships in secondaries are often confrontational and based on an insidious mistrust of young people reflected in differences between staff and students' views about young people's ability to participate.

The third issue concerns the need for developments in children's participation to be scaffolded by a whole school culture of participation. This needs to involve children exercising greater self-determination in their learning, facilitated through person-centered learning and social pedagogic approaches. But equally whole school approaches need to recognize children as agents of change in wider decisions within the school and with the surrounding community. Finally a participatory culture needs to be characterized by respectful and democratic relations between children and teachers. For children's participation to become an integral part of school life, children need the freedom to participate more as autonomous agents as well as in collaboration with adults to exercise initiative, have their contributions valued and take on roles and responsibilities. This requires a different culture and attitudes towards children and young people and a belief in their ability to participate. As Fielding (2009: 516) states: "the familiarity of questioning, of joint exploration, of adventure, of mutual learning and of shared responsibility woven into the fabric of a school's daily life makes engagement in something like a school meeting a natural extension of familiar norms rather than an exotic exception to quite different realities."

One example of this type of democratic school is *Escola da Ponte* in Portugal, a unique educational model developed over two decades, which includes the participation of children

(6-16 years) as a basic principle. It is organised according to a unique logic of pedagogic and institutional organization, within which students participate in mutual learning. Each student is author and actor of their own educational pathway, enabling active participation in the process of knowledge construction as well as full involvement in the processes of school decision making at all levels. The school agenda is therefore shaped by children (ECORYS 2014).

Service user involvement as active citizenship

Within Health and Social Care settings there is a growing literature concerning the involvement of service users in the design, delivery and evaluation of services (see for example Carr and Beresford, 2012). However, in contrast to children and youth participation which originates in rights discourses and is therefore informed by a philosophy of participatory democracy, service user involvement has emerged within a context of a consumer citizen discourse (Jones and Wallace, 1990) driven by policy (DH, 2012) and guided by a philosophy of giving choice to the service user. However, children and young people have been comparatively neglected within these debates. Where children have been involved as users of health services these roles have tended to be limited to the relatively powerless roles of advisory groups. To a greater extent, the participation of users in health contexts is not about widening participatory democracy rather is characterized simply in terms of involving patients and members of the public in adult professional decision-making to enhance the economic efficiency of service provision.

In social care, however, there has been a growing body of evidence concerning the participation of children and young people in social care matters including Family Group Conferences (Kirby and Laws, 2010); children in care councils (Thomas and Percy-Smith, 2012) and in peer to peer work (Dadich, 2010). In Thomas and Percy-Smith's (2012) evaluation of children in care councils across London, limitations and possibilities were evident in the extent to which children could actively participate. Whilst children and young people were motivated to participate by their desire to bring about change in decisions affecting the child in care experience the extent to which children could influence professional decisions in reality was limited by the socio-structural position of children in the care of the state and conversely the state's responsibility to them. However, young people were able to derive a sense of active citizenship through participation within the informal context of their everyday lives through positive peer relationships with others and developing capacity for self-determination and autonomy in their lives. As Thomas (2007: 206) states:

There is a discourse that is more or less overtly political – that speaks of power and challenge and change. Alongside this there is an alternative discourse of ... participation that is predominantly social – that speaks of networks, inclusion, adult-child relations, and of opportunities for social connection ...

Dadich's (2010) work with a Self Help support group of young mental health service users illustrates how the participation of young people in acts of active citizenship often reveals itself in informal and sometimes hidden ways, embedded in informal spaces of everyday life providing meaningful opportunities for participation.

In the recent evaluation of children's participation across the EU (ECORYS, 2014) some of the most interesting examples of good practice are about children taking responsibility for their own decisions as well as in providing education and support through peer to peer work with others; where children and adults are engaged in mutual learning to reframe the quality of relationships and decision making as a collaborative endeavour, or through child-led initiatives in services. Some of the examples concern children providing peer-to-peer support. For example *Safety Net* involves 20 peer-to-peer counselors providing information and social support to asylum seeking children (12-18 years) in reception centres in Finland (ECORYS 2014). *Navrat* in Slovakia also uses a peer-to-peer approach to provide mentoring support for children coming from institutional care into foster care (ibid). Liebel (2008) refers to these 'grass roots' forms of participation as 'citizenship from below' – "a form of everyday action that may appeal to rights, but can also take place totally independently of these, [... wherein] actors do not wait for their rights to be granted" (38). Lister refers to this as 'lived citizenship' understood in terms of "a dynamic process-oriented understanding of rights." (Liebel, 2008: 34). As Roche (1999, 479) notes: "Children have to start from where they are socially positioned. This means that they have to make their own space in spaces not of their making."

The examples of informal participation in everyday life settings provided in this chapter are not expressions of citizenship according to 'moral' codes, duties and responsibilities laid down by the state and enshrined in law. Nor are they necessarily opportunities to be 'actively involved' (albeit invariably in constrained and limited ways) in adult decision-making according to the agenda, priorities and initiative of adult professionals. Instead informal active citizenship is initiated and constructed by young people themselves in spaces of their choosing and in ways they decide. For young people to participate as active citizens they

need to activate and reclaim their own power as social actors in response to the generational inequalities they find themselves. As Block (2008) argues:

To succeed at transforming the social order, we must be able to recognize and facilitate the process of democratic self-development in the young and to build educational and institutional settings in which their evolving characters and identities can flourish. (Block, 2008)

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