CHILDREN, POLITICS AND COMMUNICATION

Participation at the margins

Edited by Nigel Thomas
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This challenging book had its origins in the seminar series convened by Nigel Thomas when he was a colleague in the Department of Childhood Studies at Swansea University. From its inception the Department, now the Centre for Child Research, has featured a strong shared commitment to interdisciplinary work informed by a discourse of children’s rights, and in particular to exploring the potential and meaning of children’s ‘participation’. Our disciplines include sociology, education, psychology and health sciences, each with its own knowledge base and values, and implicit and explicit ways of thinking, acting and meaning-making. Viewing the child as competent is thus contextualised and interpreted within the frame of particular disciplines. For example, in relation to my own discipline of education, a commitment to children’s rights and participation has underpinned our explorations with early years teachers of the significance of the strong, ‘rich’ child of the Reggio Emilia pre-schools. It is also reflected in our involvement in an exciting study (Waller et al., 2006), inspired by the work of Mary Kellett and led by Nigel Thomas, in which colleagues formed a research team with children from two local primary schools and provided them with research training and support, so enabling them to explore issues which they identified as being important or of concern.

The research seminars organised by Nigel Thomas were especially challenging. First, while the three extended seminars which have led to this book were underpinned by a shared commitment to children as competent social actors, collectively they moved us into unexplored territory, challenging participants to explore the intersections between children’s and young people’s participation, children and young people as refugees, and children’s and young people’s use of language. Second, presentations were given by speakers from an even more diverse range of disciplinary backgrounds, and focused on children of different ages in different contexts engaged in ordinary and, as it appeared to many of us, extraordinary activity. Third, the seminar series attracted regular attendance from academics across the University (including colleagues from geography, law and medicine), as well as local practitioners (from headteachers to staff from non-governmental organisations). As a result, the seminars not only led to lively debate but also provided a focus for, and extended, the multidisciplinary work routinely being undertaken...
within the Department. In short, it encouraged us to become involved in interdisciplinary inquiry.

Interdisciplinary inquiry is neither easy nor comfortable, although it is often exhilarating. It requires us to move out of our disciplinary comfort zones, to use other ‘frames’ to interrogate our own ways of thinking and vice versa, so gaining greater insight into implicit as well as explicit values, ideas and practices. One of the particular strengths of this book is that this challenge is handed on to the reader; indeed, while it is possible to dip into individual chapters, and certainly each chapter is of importance in its own right, there is much more to be gained from reading the text as a whole, exploring themes and engaging with key ideas. The concept of ‘autonomy’ is one that I found particularly fascinating to track and consider. Is autonomy interpreted as being independent (doing things oneself) or self-governing (having the right to decide)? How is it achieved, and is independence seen as a worthwhile aim for children and young people in all cultures?

The text is also important for the fascinating evidence and detail it provides of the lives of children living in difficult circumstances – as Nigel Thomas puts it, children at the margins, including those who are displaced and dislocated. In this respect, the text provides exceptional insight into the ways in which children manage their lives and relationships, and the strength, resilience and linguistic creativity that children demonstrate as active players within their own contexts and cultures, particularly when not overly – or overtly – controlled by adults.

Finally, as the title makes clear, this text also highlights and explores issues of power and politics; in this respect, also, the book makes a significant and groundbreaking contribution to the field. As Nigel Thomas indicates, there is often a reluctance, even among those who express their commitment to children’s rights and participation, to engage with the complexities of adult–child and child–child power relations, and a tendency to view children as apolitical. This book demonstrates through a close examination of children’s activities that this is not the case, and explores within different contexts how (and how well) children use language and communication to manage their lives within an adult-dominated world.

Before reading this book I was aware that the term ‘participation’ has become almost a slogan, and that much of what is currently done in its name in formal settings could be described as artificial, narrow and tokenistic. Collectively the authors reminded me that while children may be excluded from various aspects of social life, they are already, both formally and informally, actively participating in many others. What
is needed from us as adults is a willingness to consider why and how
children are excluded, to broaden our interpretation of ‘participation’
and, in our interactions with children, to demonstrate that we recognise
and value their contributions. As Nigel Thomas eloquently reminds us,
if children are willing to communicate it is important that we listen
and take seriously their concerns and ideas – even if we do not always
like what we hear!

Reference
Waller, T., Morgan, A., Thomas, N. and Waters, J. (2006) ‘Children as researchers:
affordances and constraints’, Learners’ Voices, British Psychological Society
annual conference, Open University, November.

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Introduction: children, politics and communication

Nigel Thomas

This book is about how children and young people communicate about matters of importance or difficulty, how they decide what to tell adults and what not to tell them, how they organise themselves and their lives and how they deal with conflict in their own relationships and in the world around them. It is also about how adults can interact effectively with children and young people, on both an individual and a societal level, in ways that are sensitive to their feelings and empowering and supportive of their attempts to be autonomous. All contributors start with two assumptions: that children are not only developing competence for the future, but are also actors in the world today; and that they have things to teach us, both about their own lives and about society.

The contributors are all social scientists of one kind or another. Between them they bring perspectives from disciplines as diverse as psychology, geography, anthropology, sociology, social work, linguistics, political theory and development studies. They are pursuing research, and in some cases are engaged in policy debates, in three areas that at first sight may appear distinct: children and young people’s participation, children and young people as refugees, and children and young people’s use of language.

The contributors were originally brought together in a series of three extended seminars, which were explicitly intended to explore the common ground between these areas. This was the result of a perception that there was work going on in the analysis of children and young people’s participation, and in the study of migration and displacement, that deserved to be brought together; and further, of what was little more than an intuition, that social research into children’s use of language and communication might be relevant to both of these areas. What was remarkable in the experience of the seminars was how strongly the same themes and issues recurred across the series. In particular, all the contributors found themselves reflecting on the ways in which children and young people manage under difficult circumstances, and how they take responsibility for their own present
and future lives. The chapters that follow have in the main developed from the work presented in those seminars.

This book is predominantly about children at the margins, in one way or another: children in communities in revolt in rural Mexico, children growing up in Chinese families in England, children with ME who are isolated at home, children living under occupation in Palestine, children negotiating their way through the asylum system in the UK. However, it is not about children as victims. Rather, it shows children taking charge of their lives: whether that be running ‘kid’s clubs’ in Nepal, making links with each other on websites, finding ways to manage their disagreements, or defending their national identity.

The contributions to this book question many of the conventional ways in which children are still perceived, even after 20 years of progress in children’s rights and of critique and reconstruction of ideas about childhood. Children are still frequently seen as apolitical, and even when they are ‘listened to’, what they have to say may be (bracketed and) discounted. In contrast, the contributors to this book show how much of what children do can be understood as political – either in terms of the issues with which they engage or in terms of what we may call the micropolitics of their interaction with each other and with adults.

Although there has been a growing emphasis on ‘participation’ in recent years, much of this activity is firmly adult-led. Spaces for children’s autonomous activity, especially in a collective form, are severely restricted in all parts of the world. The particular shapes taken by these processes vary in different contexts, and the contributions to this book represent work from every continent.

We hope that the book will be useful and relevant for policy makers and practitioners engaged with children and young people. Understanding childhood better is of limited benefit if it does not affect what happens in the world. Many of the authors have strong links to policy and practice, and are able to point up the implications of their work in their individual chapters. In the concluding chapter I attempt to draw these implications together and develop them further.

Chapter One, by Roger Hart, is based directly on a lecture that he gave in Swansea in 2006, and introduces our overarching themes of the spaces for children to self-organise and the ways in which they can or cannot exercise control over their lives. Using a deliberately broad-brush approach, Roger Hart reviews 40 years of ‘progress’ in children’s participation, suggesting that the same period has seen an erosion of children’s visibility in public space and of their opportunities to organise for themselves, and a reduction in their interaction with adults. He begins to develop a model for mapping children and young people’s
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participation visually, and argues for a move away from looking simply at ‘participation’ as currently defined, to focus more broadly on how public and communal life can be revived for all generations.

Chapter Two, by Vicky Johnson, is also about children and young people’s self-organisation. Vicky Johnson uses her own experience of conducting evaluations in the UK and other countries to ask whether adult acceptance of children’s organisations may depend on how far adults are involved in the process of initiation – whether, in fact, adults really want children to organise autonomously. Examples from community consultation processes in the UK, and from international programmes in Nepal and South Africa, are used to show that understanding how children and young people comprehend their own situations, and identify their own solutions, is an essential starting point for policies and projects that seek to give children and young people space to communicate and organise in a positive way. In turn, this may enable spaces to open for communication across age groups and generations, rather than only inviting children onto adult territory – again, echoing a theme of Roger Hart.

Chapter Three, by Anne-Marie Smith, is based on ethnographic research carried out in Oaxaca City, Mexico. It focuses on the lives of the displaced children of Loxicha, in particular their involvement in their community’s political struggle, and explores the challenges this involvement presents for existing notions of childhood and of child participation, as framed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The children of Loxicha have played a key role in their community’s struggle, going on marches and participating in sit-ins and hunger strikes. At the same time, they also play, work and go to school. Drawing on current debates in childhood studies and children’s rights advocacy, Anne-Marie Smith questions the ways in which the childhoods experienced by the Loxicha children are redefined to suit adult notions of ‘lost childhood’, overlooking the complex and multilayered nature of their daily realities.

In Chapter Four, Jason Hart looks at the ways in which displaced children may take part in political violence, including the young people often described as ‘child soldiers’. He examines how their activity is often explained away in terms of child immaturity or adult exploitation, and argues instead for a greater respect for such young people’s understanding and agency, and for a more rigorous analysis of the conditions in which they live their lives over time. He also asks that research and policy examine the interaction between the lives of children displaced by conflict around the world and the policies
of Western governments, which simultaneously feed the conflict and define those displaced as unwanted ‘asylum seekers’.

The following two chapters are specifically about asylum, currently one of the dominant, even defining, issues in child rights and welfare. As Heaven Crawley points out in Chapter Five, the experiences of separated children who seek asylum in the UK, and their attempts to negotiate the complex array of individuals and institutions with whom they come into contact, are increasingly well documented. Less well considered is the extent to which the success, or otherwise, of these children in securing access to international protection and to appropriate housing, welfare and educational support is determined, not only by the individual experiences and abilities of the children concerned, but also by a particular conceptualisation of childhood that pervades the asylum process. Heaven Crawley’s chapter examines how children’s experiences of conflict, of human rights abuses and of loss are assessed and interpreted. She draws in particular on the experiences of children whose physical appearance and personal stories lead them to be ‘age disputed’ and treated as adults. For this group of children, a conceptualisation of childhood that requires them to be apolitical, asexual and passive has concrete and significant implications for their ability to rebuild their lives.

In Chapter Six, Ravi Kohli examines how refugee and asylum-seeking children, when they have arrived in industrialised nations, often remain silent, or speak in guarded ways, about their lives and circumstances. Not only their presence, but also their limited talk, can be the occasion of suspicion among citizens of host nations. Ravi Kohli’s chapter looks at how silence and limited talk are used as powerful protective shields, when refugee children feel their sense of safety and belonging to be threatened in hostile contexts. The chapter reviews research evidence about ways of establishing trust for refugee children, as a foundation for resettled lives. It proposes that only with the establishment of such trust, combined with an unthreatened future, can such children begin to talk about their lives in depth and detail.

The next three chapters extend the focus on language and communication, using methods from sociolinguistics, conversation analysis and literacy studies to show what we can learn by attending closely to the detail of how children and young people use and adapt linguistic codes, and conversational and textual rules, to achieve their social objectives in real-life interaction.

In Chapter Seven, Li Wei, Zhu Hua and Chao-Jung Wu examine the strategic use of code-switching – the alternation of languages in conversational interaction – as a symbolic and creative resource by
Chinese–English bilingual children in the family and classroom. While code-switching, a uniquely bilingual behaviour, has been studied extensively by linguists and psychologists, it has not been taken seriously as an effective tool for speakers themselves in resisting the dual pressures of traditional values and institutional policies. Using audio-recorded interactional data collected in families and schools, Li Wei and his colleagues demonstrate how bilingual children use code-switching creatively as a symbol of resistance in the face of traditional cultural values and language ideologies.

In Chapter Eight, Amelia Church shows how the methods of conversation analysis can help us to understand processes of conflict between young children. Examples of spontaneous arguments between four-year-old children show that, although conflict is not always resolved, one can distinguish three possible outcomes in children’s disputes: resolution, abandonment and teacher intervention. Close analysis of these three dispute ‘closings’ reveals that very specific linguistic resources are used by young children to manage disagreements with peers. The linguistic concept of ‘preference’ is found to be an organisational property of children’s verbal conflict, and the outcome of disputes is determined by the way in which children mitigate each turn at talk. This chapter exemplifies children’s competencies in social interaction and demonstrates that close attention to features of talk-in-interaction affords a rich understanding of children’s social worlds. In particular, Amelia Church draws attention to some specific ways in which young children develop communicative repertoires and strategies to get noticed, achieve their objectives and manage different situations.

In Chapter Nine, Julia Davies reflects on the ways in which many young people are using the internet as a way of keeping in touch with likeminded others, thickening existing social ties with those whom they know from face-to-face contact, and also developing new relationships with others whom they only know ‘online’. Her analysis, drawn as it is from the study of literacy as a social practice, uses different methods from the two preceding chapters, but is similar in being centred on close attention to features of actual conversation. Julia Davies shows us how young people use textual devices and affordances as a way of marking out affiliations and shared values, how they often use online arenas to present particular ‘online versions’ of themselves, and how this can help them to collaborate in constructive ways to deal with problems.

In the Conclusion, I draw together themes from all the preceding contributions in order to ask some questions about child–adult relationships, questions of theoretical interest that are also salient
for practitioners and policy makers. Political and social theory are beginning to engage, from different directions, with questions about how communities of meaning and action are constructed when communicative styles and competencies are divergent. In the Conclusion I attempt to explore the nature of this engagement, and point to some future directions, both for research and for social action in communities.
Charting change in the participatory settings of childhood

Roger Hart

Introduction

Participation has become a word that everyone seems to use today to legitimise their programmes with groups that are considered in some way to be marginalised. This includes a wealth of discussions about the growth of ‘children’s participation’ in society in line with the call of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The phrase is used with people working within very different ideologies concerning the appropriate roles of children, but almost all of them write about children’s programmled activities. In the UK, most of the emphasis seems to be on children’s participation in decision making in formal settings with adults or consultation of children by adults, even though the rationale that is commonly given is the much broader goal of the promotion of citizenship. In this chapter I argue that the emphasis on children’s decision making with adults and consultation by adults in formal settings is a much too narrow view of children’s social participation for citizenship. We need to address not just children’s voices in governance but also children’s participation in civil society. I use the term children’s social participation in this chapter to refer to all of those instances where children collaborate with other children or with adults, to make decisions or plan activities together from building a play house to organising a football game. If we are to reflect fully on how children are, and could be, involved in the processes of building a more participatory democratic society we need to simultaneously map out the formal changes in governance alongside the dramatic changes that have been taking place in children’s everyday social lives with peers and their non-formal relations with adults in their communities. I believe that these have greater importance for the reproduction of a
democratic civil society than that brought by any mandated, or formal, participation in the form of children’s forums, councils and local government consultations, or from school citizenship curricula.

In this chapter I will begin to sketch out the range of domains of social participation of pre-adolescent children in the UK that I believe have been changing. While valuable research has begun on some of these domains there does not yet seem to be any recognition of the need to map these out comprehensively and in relation to one another. First, we need to carefully chart how children’s autonomous activities with peers have changed over just one generation. Children have always learned social skills and participated in the reproduction of their communities through their non-formal activities with other children and the state has often tried to intervene and control these processes. For example, there has recently been much concern by the UK government with youth delinquency in the UK. But there is a larger story that we need to map – of the multiple ways in a range of settings that the state, and national institutions, have chosen to set the stage for the socialisation of citizenship by influencing how children interact with one another – in neighbourhoods, schools, play resources, sports facilities and after-school programmes. In discussions of the development of children as citizens in the UK, the child-to-child dimension seems to have been greatly under-recognised and under-theorised. Even those who promote the UNCRC write of the triad of ‘the child, the family and the state’, as though other children themselves are not an important part of the processes of social reproduction and transformation. But we also need to systematically assess how children’s non-formal participation with adults has changed. I will therefore briefly summarise some of the changes that I believe have been occurring in the nature of children’s social participation in the family, in the school, in after-school activities, in membership organisations and religious institutions, in community holiday rituals and, of course, through the internet.

I will be relying partly on reflections from my own childhood in the UK for making a rough sketch of what has changed. I will try to balance these with the observations of a social scientist who cares a great deal about the subject. Using ones own childhood memories as a reference for thinking about change has some serious limitations. Not only are the dangers of nostalgia clear but there is also an inevitable tendency to see one’s childhood as some kind of baseline rather than as an arbitrary moment in time. Additionally, and not surprisingly, I find that I am able to reflect much more fully on the social relations of boys than girls. I can only say that I find this strategy useful as a
first step, while knowing full well that the result will only be a pencil sketch of a complex story.

**Formal opportunities for children’s voices to be heard in governmental and institutional settings**

There can be no doubt that there are many more opportunities for children to have a voice in the official deliberations of government agencies and services than there were a generation ago. What is meant by the word ‘participation’, and what its primary benefits are considered to be, varies greatly. I will not review all of these different positions here, but simply say that I believe that the right to have a voice, as called for by the UNCRC, has been an extremely important benchmark in the growth of children’s right to protect themselves from abuse or neglect. This has been particularly important for children in some majority world countries, but also in nations like the UK. This has involved the individual empowerment of children as individual defenders of their rights as well as the participation of groups of children. The UNCRC has also led to some progress in giving children a voice regarding governmental provision of resources and services for them. But there does not seem to have been much progress in bringing more participatory engagements between groups of children and adults in institutional settings and programmes, from schools and after-school clubs to sports and recreation programmes.

Most of the progress that has been made in the UK on the social participation of children relates to the fulfilment of those Articles of the UNCRC that are normally thought to refer to participation – Articles 12 and 13 on the rights to have one’s views heard, to express oneself and to have access to and share information. But there are a number of other ones that have important implications for children’s social participation in their communities. These include the rights to play, to have access to the cultural and artistic life of the community, to form associations and to non-discrimination.

**Children’s autonomous social participation in play with peers**

In many ways, the 1950s in the UK were perhaps a special time for children’s non-formal participation with peers in their communities. There was a sense of stability and security in the welfare state and, due to increases in wages for most families, children were commonly no longer relied on to be economic providers – there was pocket money