Children's participation, childhood publics and social change: a review

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Abstract

Progress in the implementation of children's participation rights in England is reviewed and situated within a broader agenda of social change. The article argues that much of the energy for 'change for children' has resided within a governance pathway across policy, practice and research. An alternative perspective is offered by re-connecting children's rights debates to those of social movements and asking whether childhood publics are possible, what they might look like and where they might be found. It is concluded that a cross-national and longitudinal perspective grounded in everyday life is likely to provide a more nuanced understanding of change for children.

Introduction

Children's participation rights internationally are framed within a discourse of entitlement and self-determination emphasizing their capabilities, achievements and their agency. Policy and practice have focused on creating environments and practices that nurture and harness children's agency. As such, in creating 'change for children' emphasis has been on those environments, largely institutional, that come into the most contact with children: child welfare services, health services and schools. Research on the other hand has tried to understand what enables and/or constrains children's participation in such environments. In this paper I review the significant strides that have been made in England on children's participation rights since the UNCRC came into existence from the position of a sympathetic and critical observer, and at times participant, in these institutional changes (cf. Nolas 2011). I argue that institutional reform and programmatic practice is but one dimension of social change. I suggest that the notion of 'publics', imagined as a space between the state and the market, offers a complementary understanding of children's participation, one that re-connects the international change for children agenda with social movements and social change.

Children's participation: social change through governance

Participation under Article 12 of the UNCRC is designated as a 'general principle' right sitting alongside and underpinning all other rights: a child's right to be consulted and listened to in matters that affect their life. Since 1989 and UK's ratification of the UNCRC

in 1991, institutions such as public services and schools have been the main vehicles for enacting children's participation.

Legislation (Children Act 1989; 2004) provided the legal framework for many of these changes to take place including the launch by the previous New Labour government of a programme for improving children's outcomes (Every Child Matters 2004) and the establishment of the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, which has only recently, under the Children and Families Act (2013), been able to adopt the promotion of children's rights as its primary function. Two important third sector coalition and partnership organisations, the Children's Rights Alliance for England (1991-to date) and Participation Works (2005-to date) were, and continue to be instrumental in shaping the post-UNCRC national landscape. Established third sector organisations, such as the National Children's Bureau, were early adopters of the children's participation mandate (cf. NCB 1998) and private philanthropy also played a role in forming youth participation in England from the mid-1990s onwards (Carnegie Trust 2008).

The only systematic review to examine the claims[1] made for listening to children and young people's views in public services was carried out a decade ago and covered the period from 1989 until 2002 (Cavet and Sloper 2004). The review found growing evidence of the involvement of children and young people in public decision-making, although such involvement was often limited both in terms of scope (what children and young people

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[1] That such practices will result in more effective and responsive services, that children's development will be enhanced and that children and young people have a right to be involved in the shaping of their public services.

were asked to get involved in and to give views about) and in terms of which children and young people were involved (cf. Kirby and Bryson 2002).

Since Cavet and Sloper's (2004) research a number of literature reviews and reports aimed at assessing the benefits of and means for creating a child- and youth-centred institutional culture across a range of services including early years and social care settings (e.g. Kirby et al 2003; Clark and colleagues 2003) have been commissioned. In the period since 2004 national standards (Standard! 2005; UNICEF UK's Right Respecting Schools 2004; Hear by Right 2005; You're Welcome Quality Criteria 2011) and audit tools (ESQ Handbook 2002; UNICEF Periodic Report Cards 2007 onwards; See Me, Hear Me 2013) intended as a means for implementing institutional reform have burgeoned. Many of these tools were designed for local government children and youth services, health services and charities to audit their current values and practices and to create more child- and youth-centred ways of working.

National service level and third sector innovations also emerged during this period underpinned by a number of agendas including service improvement and user/consumer-centred practices. In mental health for example, children and young people's participation was a key aspect of the National CAMHS Support Service's work (NCSS) (2003-2011) while the Mental Health Foundation launched an ambitious national mental health promotion programme for children and young people (Right Here 2009-2014), and YoungMinds' created its Very Important Kids (VIK) panel (2009-2013). Other smaller grassroots community initiatives were set up to work in child- and youth-centred ways as more funding became available under New Labour (e.g. Youth Development Service Fund).

The education and training of a future generation of professionals equipped with the tools to listen to children's voices entered into the higher education agenda most notably in nursing and health care (Rushforth 1999; Coyne 2008), social work education (Lefevre 2013), child and adolescent mental health (Day 2008) and early years (Clark 2005). The introduction of higher education funding for promoting knowledge exchange and transfer between universities, health and social care professionals, communities and 'service users' (e.g. HEIF 2001), has also given rise to small-scale collaborative child- and youth-centred projects between communities, services, and universities (cf. Nolas 2013b; Thomson 2013)[2].

At the time of writing, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government's policies since 2010 have resulted in a retrenchment of many of these funding streams and programmes as a result of the financial crisis and austerity policies (cf. Ridge 2013). A general contraction of public services across early years, education, youth services and neighbourhood renewal has meant that while the rhetoric of children's participation remains important, the funding to support institutional change and programmatic practices has dried up. The current focus is much less concerned with children's participation rights and much more preoccupied with nationhood, respect, responsibility and community cohesion. To this effect, citizenship education in schools and community programmes like the National Citizenship Service and Step Up to Serve aim to encourage children and young

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[2] Examples of HEIF funded projects focused on children and young people:
http://www.westminster.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/humanities/2010/heif-funding-for-a-collaboration-with-central-ymca (last access 06/10/2014)
http://www.ioe.ac.uk/research/86899.html (last accessed 06/10/2014)

people to take part in social action and youth volunteering programmes in order to develop social responsibility and promote social cohesion in society.

Evidence of impact?

The developments outlined above demonstrate the professional and practice responses to Article 12 and highlight the dominance of an institutional approach to enacting participation in the English context. Reported international trends mirror these experiences (cf. Pelander et al 2009; Thomas 2011). Given the breadth of activities, questions about impact and salience are raised. What has been the uptake of the various tools produced and are children and young people in England more engaged in issues that concern them as a result?

Covet and Sloper (2004) rightly observe that much more has been written about process than outcomes in children's participation. Key stakeholders in promoting the children's participation agenda in England have tried to demonstrate outcomes through their own data collection and auditing practices (NYA 2011) but figures about the uptake of the standards and initiatives vary considerably across sectors, as does their quality, making it difficult to benchmark (cf. Nagra 2010). Practice evidence of exemplary cases of youth participation (e.g. NYA 2011) suggests that when participation works, it can produce both material (built environment) and psychological (self-worth) changes for children and young people, but the absence of analysis continues to leave many questions about which contexts and which mechanisms might achieve such outcomes, unanswered.

More encouraging outcomes in the short-term can be found in the educational and community sectors. The independent evaluation of UNICEF's Right Respecting Schools (Sebba and Robinson 2010), a mixed methods longitudinal study of 12 schools and a cross-sectional study of 19 schools, suggests that the programme had a profound impact on the school ethos, values and practices for the majority of schools involved. The evaluation also suggests some impact on academic performance. The National Centre for Social Research's cross-sectional evaluation of the National Citizenship Service (2013) suggests that the impact of the programme's stated aim of social mixing remains unclear but that young people taking part had a positive experience especially in terms of their personal development. Commenting on the much-touted outcomes of personal development for youth empowerment programmes, Morton and Montgomery (2011) conclude that evidence is insufficient, and that there is a substantial gap in high-quality, mixed-methods process studies to complement impact studies. The development of national, European and international monitoring and evaluation tools to measure change (Kirby with Bryson 2002; FRA 2010; Save the Children 2014) attempts to address the current gap in monitoring and evaluation practices. Yet, experiences of researching the impact of independent children's rights institutions in the UK and Europe in general (Thomas 2011), suggests that tools in themselves are not enough.

Dynamics of institutional reform and programmatic practices

The above review demonstrates that the policy and practice landscape regarding children's involvement and consultation in issues that concern them has changed in

England over the last quarter of a century through a combination of political, professional and activist interventions. These are significant developments that, as well as embedding the values and practices of children's participation into established professional groups, have also given rise to new occupational roles such as that of 'children's participation workers' (Tisdall 2009a), responsible for ensuring child- and youth-centred public and community services.

At the same time the review suggests a number of agendas being satisfied through children's participation - not all of which are about children's rights (e.g. audit and governance). Children's participation in England has developed along institutional and programmatic lines, the boundaries of which became increasingly blurred throughout the 1990s and 2000s with the marketization of public services and the role of third sector organisations in competing and delivering government contracts.

It is also worth noting that culturally specific notions of age, statutory logics for service organization and delivery and changing demographics have all played a role in the development of understanding, policies and practices of 'children's participation'. While the term 'child' under the UNCRC refers to anyone from birth to age 18, the terms 'child' and 'youth' are not always used consistently in practice. Distinctions are often made between child and youth participation with activities organized and resources channeled accordingly as the above review shows. At the same time, the interchangeable use of the terms can also be found (e.g. child or youth being used to refer to anyone below the age of 18) while extended youth transitions (Henderson et al 2007) means that the upper age limit of the youth category is often stretched. While it is important to recognize children's different capabilities and the socio-economic changes that extend youth transitions, taken

together these preoccupations with age-categories detract from more fundamental questions of participation.

A look at some of the analyses that have taken place beyond research commissioning cycles and contractual boundaries (after evaluations have finished) provide further insight into the dynamics of creating cultures of children's participation in schools, local councils and communities. Drawing on the same evidence from the aforementioned UNICEF RSS evaluation, researchers have highlighted the depoliticization of 'rights' and of children's participation in particular (Webb & Crossouard in press). Independent research on participatory practices, such as school councils and pupil voice, suggest that in their representational forms these approaches do not allow for the diversity of children's lives to emerge and, instead, often reinforce inequalities (Wyness 2009). Other analyses have highlighted how the 'new' rights approaches displaced much older child- and/or community-centred traditions such as youth work (Nolas 2013) which had politics and relationships at its heart.

What is clear is the need for theoretical and empirical renewal in how children's participation across the age range is understood and practiced. One starting point is to distinguish between a governance approach to children's participation rights, often underpinned by corporate managerial practices (cf. Hear by Right 2005), and a social movement impetus for improving children's lives (Franklin & Franklin 1996). Such a distinction allows for the suggestion that a renewal might come from paying greater attention to children and young people's everyday lives.

In their everyday lives children and young people continue to be faced with conflicting and discriminatory legislation about their rights and responsibilities (Tisdall

2009b); they are negatively portrayed in the media and excluded from public spaces through the use of technological (cf. 'mosquito device', Little in press) and policy innovations (cf. dispersal zones, Crawford and Lister 2007). Signage forbidding children entrance into local shops curtails their participation in local neighbourhood economies, while in services for children their participation remains contested at best and, in certain circumstances, completely absent (cf. Rotherham & Rochdale sexual abuse cases). The problematic nature of children's participation is not due to funding cuts alone (although this hasn't helped) and recognition of children and young people's worth in society is indeed part of the problem (Cockburn 2013).

It is also the case however that the concepts underpinning *participation*, such as democracy, social justice, equality and fairness, have themselves become even more strongly contested socio-legal categories over the last 25 years; these contestations are rarely addressed in the kinds of governance-based approaches described above. These are live debates from which children are either bracketed out or of which they become objects (child protection or child poverty). Children and young people are less often thought of as contributors or stakeholders to these public debates. For the remainder of this paper I attempt to address this challenge by approaching children's participation through the concept of publics.

Childhood and youth publics

My approach starts, (though does not end), with Habermas's notion of 'the public sphere' described by Nancy Fraser (1990) as 'a theatre in modern societies in which

political participation is enacted through the medium of talk'. The public sphere refers to a

space between the state and the market in which citizens can deliberate and debate common

affairs. Fraser, engaging with the critiques of the original concept as idealised and

exclusionary (e.g. on grounds of gender), puts forward what might be described as a more

practice inspired (Nolas 2014) understanding of public spheres that emphasizes their

messiness: the multiplicities and necessary ambiguities and contradictions of public*s* in the

plural as they encounter and negotiate their social inequalities and differences, and the

boundaries between public and private lives.

Fraser's work, and the more recent reinvigoration of the concept for contemporary

times (Mahoney et al 2010; Barnett 2014; Warner 2002), provides a springboard to think

about how the categories and experiences of childhood and youth fit into this idea of plural,

overlapping and competing public sphere*s*. The point about a space between the state and

markets is an important one to consider in the lives of children and young people.

Childhood in capitalist economies has been described as 'privatised' (Thorne 1987),

'scholarised' (Mayall 2007) and instrumentalised (Lister 2006), leaving little room to

imagine childhood beyond time spent in families, schools, the care of the state, or receiving

public services. Engaging with activities for their aesthetic and intrinsic value has become

problematic and devalued (cf. Sukarieh and Tannock 2011). Furthermore, public discourses

and texts about children's participation rights seldom link participation to other civil and

political rights enshrined in the UNCRC preferring instead to talk about participation and

voice alone in depoliticized terms (Cockburn 2013; Lundy 2007) and to remain within the

space of governance (e.g. audit and service improvement).

Participation has thus ended up narrowly conceptualized as the right to be heard and to be consulted on decisions that affect the child as an interpersonal experience that may only occur at certain institutionally defined moments (e.g. visiting the doctor, being involved in care proceedings, being on the school council). The point holds cross-nationally with children's lives in the Global South having been carved up into a series of fundable issues (e.g. child soldiers, child labour, street children) in a way that obscures any emergent collective action (Nieuwenhuys 2009).

While children, in particular, may spend a lot of their time in institutions, like most people, they also move through and between institutional spaces creating personal, shared and, at times, transformational memories and experiences of those journeys (Tisdall et al 2014; Nolas 2011). It is these journeys that are of interest when thinking about childhood publics as they stitch together the public, personal and political found in contemporary notions of publicness and associated possibilities of agency (Mahoney et al 2010).

The need to rethink children's participation as a form of citizenship has been made strongly by Tom Cockburn (2013) and others. Yet, there is also a need to re-think political agency itself in children's participation. Recent empirical work on publics allows us to do so (cf. Barnett 2014; Mahoney et al 2010). Part of the challenge rests with the popular representations of youth activism ('the student at the barricades'), which shapes sociological and public imagination about what activism might look like. Participating in protest marches and occupying public places may well form part of childhood and youth practices of activism. However, research on historical and contemporary repertoires of activism suggest that such practices have always been, and still are, much more fluid, nuanced, ephemeral and improvised (Warner 2002) than popular representations suggest.

Historical records from the women's movement show that, in the absence of formal political incorporation through voting, women employed a range of 'idioms' (domesticity, motherhood, supporting roles) to access public life and public arenas (Fraser 1990). Contemporary research of children and young people's everyday lives arrive at a similar conclusion. Webb's (Webb and Crossouard in press) analysis of children's understanding of 'children's rights' in a school setting challenges received notions of political practice in the children's participation literature, and invites us to engage seriously with an idiom that children are particularly well versed in, humour. This is far from a trivial point. In a different historical period and cultural context such collectively authored idioms were considered highly political and offered a way of speaking truth to power; heard by the wrong pair of ears could result in the joke-teller's arrest (Lewis 2009). Similarly, Berriman and Thomson's (in press) dialectical analysis of children and young people's everyday online and offline experiences suggest that the new idioms of social media offer not just new sites for play but for politics as well (cf. Triliva, Varvantakis and Dafermos 2014).

Looking for the interstices of the personal, political and public in contemporary publics allows for a more complex understanding of private experiences. This is especially useful when thinking about children's largely 'privatised' (Thorne 1987) lives. Personalising publics allows us to consider the intersections between the affective and the political dimensions of personal suffering, itself increasingly pathologised in public policy (Gaskell, 2008; Lee, Bristow, Faircloth and Macvarish 2014). Children and young people's experiences of domestic violence is a case in point. Research here clearly demonstrates the existence of mature ethical sensibilities around the dynamics of violence in the family (Mullender et al 2002); yet these sensibilities have been found to elude and challenge

practice wisdom (Nolas et al 2012). This suggests a need for further dialogue between different knowledge communities in which I would include children and young people as key actors.

A cross-section of participatory arts projects in public health (Vaughan 2010), theatre (Hanrahan 2013a; Hanrahan 2013b), youth justice (Haw 2010), community development (Askins and Pain 2011) and public engagement (Nolas 2013b; Thomson 2013) in which temporary publics have been facilitated into existence with the aid of creative and visual methods, illustrate the importance of such processes of dialogue, or mediation, in publics formation. Practices of mediation are not only important for the social capital that is created within these communal activities and spaces, or commons, it is also a way of bridging children and young people with outside audiences and allowing them to engage in the necessary claim-making practices involved in publics formations (Mahoney et al 2010). Claim-making are those propositions that are uttered in the process of a group trying to sort out a course of action; they are important utterances for creating relationships and alliances over time (Latour 1994, 2005). Focusing on claim-making allows for moving beyond the problematic notions of representative democracy (Wyness 2009) bringing the principles of dialogue and debate into view instead.

Current research on new publics emphasizes the notion of emergence, 'the sense that publics are formed through processes of becoming – that they are always emergent, rather than mere expressions of pre-existing interests, issues and identities' (Mahoney et al 2010). Barnett (2014) describes public life as 'a family of practices of sharing with others' and argues that any analysis of transformations to the institutional configuration of publics must pay close attention to ordinary contexts of everyday life and to seriously consider

what matters to people, engaging with what he calls 'vocabularies of worth'. This means that while it is not always possible to say a priori what sort of things will galvanize a group of people enough to move towards social action, there is a moment at which a commons will start to 'come into view' (Mahoney et al 2010). Crises broadly conceived and understood as ruptures to the social fabric of everyday life and all that is taken for granted, provide opportunities for such glimpses into public formations and demand that we articulate to each other what matters to us and why. Children and young people are part of these sense-making projects by default; they too are living these 'crises' in their relationships, homes, schools, neighbourhoods and communities (cf. Berriman and Thomson in press; Jeffrey and Dyson working paper; Skovdal et al 2013; Sircar and Dutta 2011). Engaging with childhood publics offers a space in which new ways of being, doing and claiming political agency could be imagined and shared between and beyond groups of children and young people.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been two-fold: to recognize the changed and changing institutional landscape of children's participation in England *and* to re-animate the idea of participation by linking existing efforts to broader debates on social change and publics formation. The governance understanding of participation currently in circulation in policy and practice suggests an ambivalent and contradictory relationship between the categories of childhood, participation, politics and social change. Children and young people are participants of social movements in various ways (Rodgers 2005; Thomas 2009) though

rarely recognized as such, and in this paper the concept of publics, with its overlapping meanings of personal, public and political was employed to reframe children's participation within a larger commons of international and intergenerational social, civil and political issues.

The aim in so doing is not to create a new orthodoxy in thinking about children's participation. What becomes apparent in reassessing children's participation through the lens of social change is the need for multiple avenues of action in any project of change. Indeed, what many of the examples above suggest is that the project of improving children and young people's lives is an intersectional one that cuts across ages, expertise, cultures, domains of activity and issues of concern. The question then becomes one about the ways in which these *connections* are rendered visible and vocal.

From a research perspective, childhood studies finds itself at a juncture (James 2010) and there is still much mileage left in existing efforts to extend the conceptual language of children's participation by linking to broader debates and theories on citizenship, politics, social movements, activism and social change. Making such connections visible also calls for a methodology that foregrounds the spatial and temporal dimensions of personal and social change, and which allows researchers to follow their emergence. Doing so cross-nationally and longitudinally will allow for 'comparative vital conjectures' (Jeffrey 2010) to emerge which, it is hoped, cannot but disrupt and reinvigorate our understanding and practice of children's participation, publics and social change in empirical ways and from the bottom up.

Given the contested nature of participation internationally, recommendations for policy and practice are more challenging to make and such recommendations would need to

go beyond the child and youth sector. Nevertheless, some recommendations might tentatively be put forward starting with a conversation on the wealth of research across the social sciences on children and young people's everyday lives, some of which has been cited in this review. This literature remains largely unknown and untapped by policy-makers and practitioners working with children and young people, yet would, I suspect, resonate with their professional experiences and would be useful for creating an understanding of publics formations and the existing ways that children, young people and their families, respond to and navigate contexts and situations that matter to them. Such literature would be helpful in re-animating governance approaches by re-thinking the meaning of children's participation for today's children and young people and providing a way to support the creation of more meaningful spaces for them by, for example, providing the means with which to sustain discrete and currently transitory publics such as the ones created by academic, community and other collaborations. To achieve this would require broadening research, policy and practice notions of evidence – much of the literature cited in this review takes a qualitative and ethnographic approach – and creating reflective spaces between research, policy and practice to explore the meaning and scope of children and young people's everyday lived experiences for the present and future of democratic, civil and political life.

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