

WLC 2016 : World LUMEN Congress. Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty 2016 |
LUMEN 15th Anniversary Edition

The ‘Good Society’ and the ‘Good Citizen’ Children’s Right to Participate

Rareş Alexandru Miron^{a*}

* Corresponding author: Rareş Alexandru Miron, mironraesch@yahoo.com

^a“Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Romania, mironraesch@yahoo.com

Abstract

<http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.09.75>

This article discusses how the children’s participation rights and competence has maintained unchanged and unchallenged over the years. However children are still not considered apt to be included as an opinion giver in the polity. Although there are international projects which give voice to children, society is not ready to allow children to participate in decision making process.

Participation rights have been established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Article 12 under ‘the right to freely express one’s opinion’, on the condition that the child is capable of taking it, and in matters that affect them. The article shows that children’s opinions should be given due weight depending on their age and maturity. Children are unique and gifted and it is the adults’ duty or task to bring out the spark within them.

Children’s participation rights have not been the result of children’s own mobilization and dispute over their social condition of subordination and oppression, but there are granted by their representatives (parents, school, government), who could speak in their ‘best interests’. Children’s participation rights did not enhance a clearer understanding, from the point of view of children themselves, about the directions in which relationships of subordination and oppression between children and adults that involved them should be changed.

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Keywords: Children; citizen; participation; children’s rights; citizenship; society.

1. Introduction

The notion of children's participation is still meeting significant difficulties. In the first place, the acknowledgement of children's participation in the convention is couched in conditional terms, that is, only if the child is able to demonstrate it and in matters that directly affect them directly.

In practical terms, this means that children's participation is understood as the expression of their opinions which become admissible and legitimate when children are already practicing it, which means that the children are being capable of it and it is showed by their action itself. Therefore, the legalized notion of participation is opening up novel ways to include children's voices, bowing to the conventional wisdom that participation depends on 'maturity', and not the other way round, that 'maturity' is acted out through and by participation.

Children's participation rights as disposed in national and international laws have been subsumed under the prevailing notion of citizenship based on a model of subjectivity geared to act rationally, to express oneself through dialogic, to act with emotional independence, self-control and subjective autonomy.

In order to participate and be considered a legitimate 'opinion-giver', children would have to conform to such established conventions of public debate which, even for most adults, pose enormous difficulties. Such codes of behavior and acting have to be learnt as situations demand by all who wants to participate in the society.

Children's participation has become dependent on their possibility of showing the very same capacities which adults are supposed to show, in conformity to the requirements of a "good – citizenship" (James, 1992). On this point Wyness (Wyness, Harrison & Buchanan, 2004) has noted that adults' inclusion in the polity is not based on competence, but on status. So we must recognize childhood as a status so that children can have the possibility to make a change in the world, to have a word to say in the society in which we all live.

We as guides must know how to empower children to become active members of the society and to guide them as they learn how to communicate with others from different cultures and to create their own place, which will become the world of tomorrow. We must let children know that what they bring from home and from their culture has significance and in order to do that, we have to incorporate their beliefs within the society and also in the laws, by which the society is led by.

The promotion of children's participation has been followed by the search for authentic forms of participation, particularly in relation to voice of children. There is critical engagement within childhood studies over the extent to which we can talk about the child's voice free from adult distortion or mediation. It has been argued adults have played a dominant even overpowering role in children's lives.

2. The Notion of Development

The notion of development has been explained that human subjects are born in a supposed condition of incompleteness, gradually becoming 'complete'. Under "developmentalism" the opinion of humans have been construed as a sequenced and cumulative process of *individual preparation* towards

adulthood whereby one's species potentials would flourish under the stimulation of legitimate "universal" social and educational intervention.

The ordeal/pain of children's preparation put them in a world aside under the guise of protecting them from the "real" world, thus producing an irrevocable disjunction between participation and protection.

A lot of discussion on children's participation is still couched in terms of their developmental capacities. Shier, in his *new* theoretical model of children's participation, concludes that 'children should not be pressed to take responsibility they do not want, or that is inappropriate for their level of development and understanding. However, in practice adults are more likely to deny children developmentally appropriate degrees of responsibility' (Shier, 2001).

Current literature and articles on the topic, which is children's participation has insightfully noted that participation can often stand in a relationship of tension and opposition as far as protection is concerned.

Sinclair (2004) points out that 'taking responsibility for someone resulted in taking responsibility away from them'. She questions whether the participation agenda will effectively promote the restructuring of institutional cultures and adults' expectations so that children's participation becomes an integral part of how adults relate to children.

3. The Notion of Participation

The notion of participation that has been lately introduced as a new paradigm in the regulation of children and adults' relationships has not radically changed the normative conception of children's subjectivity which establishes:

- a) a straightforward trajectory of attainments, abilities and performances whose finality is defined by the conventional wisdom of what it is to be an adult – a rational, socialized human being;
- b) the positioning of the child at the initial point is attributing to him/her the restricted participatory role of adhering to such demands of socialization;
- c) the granting of 'participatory competence' as the child assumes a more adult-like subjectivity.

Participation demands inclusion of different partners in the process of establishing goals and values of conviviality. School goals – in an adult-centered society – have been established so as to prepare children for adult roles (Blanchet & Rainbow, 2006).

Such unequivocal goals need to be problematized if children are to be included in the construction of school life. Alderson (2000) has put it cogently: 'Schools cannot simply ignore democracy; they can either promote democratic practices or actively contravene them, there is no neutral middle ground.' Maybe some anxieties about what future awaits schools – and what unknown challenges are to be faced – are constraining the advances of our participation momentum.

Findings about children's citizenship in my research lead me to see that children can take action through methods which are seen as actions of citizenship (broadly contributing to dominant definitions of social good) and acts of citizenship (transgressing established norms to rebalance distributions of rights, responsibilities and status).

Acts of citizenship are distinct from the actions of citizenship identified above, because they do not contribute to citizenship in currently accepted ways. Acts of citizenship claim shifts in rights and responsibilities, new distributions of resources or a new political status that stretch beyond existing boundaries, bringing 'into being new actors as activist citizens (claimants of rights and responsibilities) through creating new sites and scales of justice'. Acts dispute how social goods and attitudes are 'shared, cared for, encouraged, protected or transformed, disciplined, outlawed, abandoned' in a specific time and place.

This article tries to reveal four ways in which children's agency can be seen as practices of citizenship.

1. Negotiation of rules (Wyness, 2009);
2. Contribution to social good (Lúcio & I'anson, 2015);
3. Contribution to the achievement of individuals' rights (Balahur & Quarsell, 2008).
4. Transgressing existing boundaries of citizenship to dispute balances of rights, responsibilities and status, enacting activist citizens answerable to justice (Graham & Fitzgerald, 2010).

Recognizing children's activities of social contribution as actions of citizenship challenges dominant definitions, because it values children's current rather than future contributions to social good.

Recognizing that children exercise freedoms to enact their individual rights, whether these are rights in the UNCRC or fulfilling appropriate responsibilities of neoliberal citizenship, challenges notions of childhood dependence and acknowledges how they are at times called upon to fulfil their own rights in the absence of social provision (Balahur, 2001).

4. Conclusion

This article may generate understanding of the different citizenships children live and aspire to. This is not to deny the importance of participation, but to also value the practices through which children do not participate in the citizenship they are offered, but enact citizenship of a different kind.

To have a good society and to have good citizens we must recognize the right of children to participate in all aspects of life, to encourage them to take actions, to speak their minds, to make a change in the world where they live.

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