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Deeping the roots of children's participation

Cath Larkins¹

This article is dedicated to the memory of Sophie Cathala Pradal, who through capacity for transversal dialogue, unerring intellect and love has contributed to each of the author's own cited papers.

It was with great pleasure that, in January 2023, I participated in the Congreso Internacional Infancia Adolescencia y Juventud in Bilbao. This was a rich opportunity to learn from the experiences of professionals working across this field in Spain, and beyond. I was privileged to share some of the things that I have learned from children, young people and adults over the past thirty years. This paper builds on that presentation, to celebrate the roots grown by children's participation (as a practice and field of study) and to suggest ways in which these roots can be strengthened in Europe.

In write about Europe, because this is where most of my academic practice is based, but I know that aspects of the contexts we experience – war, growing inequalities becoming further entrenched in different intersecting childhoods, and environmental degradations – are shared in other parts of the world. I also acknowledge the European field of children's participation has much to learn from practices across the majority world. In these challenging contexts, and given these opportunities to learn from each other, a focus on strengthening roots and hope seems timely and necessary.

The entangled roots that those of us working in the field of children's participation already have relate to values, theories and practices – they were shared by many attendees at that conference, and I suspect, by many readers of this journal and people with whom we collaborate. These roots include commitments to supporting children's activism and their hopes for present and futures worlds, to collaborating with children to identify and demand respect for the rights they have, and those they should have, and to resisting what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). That is, refusing to accept that naturalness or inevitability of inequitable distributions of status and resources based on age or other distinctions.

To strengthen these roots, and to try to redress some of these inequalities through more inclusive participatory processes and public decision making, in this paper I reflect on my own journey and what I have already learned from others in this sector. For three decades I have been a children's rights activist living in the Wales and French Catalonia. On this journey, I have learned the importance of understanding the entrenched and systemic nature of discrimination that some people face, particularly antigypsyism; the value of trusting relationships that can be build up over generations; the need to share space and time with people (and to respond to their priority concerns) so that these relationships can develop; and that things *can* change when senior public decision makers demonstrate their commitment to the diversity of people in the communities they seek to serve and represent. In short, as I and others have often written, I learned that direct relationships create the emotionally engaged dialogues and embodied co-presence, through which it can become possible to see things from someone else's point of view. I have seen direct dialogue between a group of young people engaged as young researchers and a Welsh government minister, subsequently inform change in policy affecting housing and education. I have heard officials from the European Commission meet with children and families, and come away with new understandings that appear to have guided future funding programmes. In many of the presentations at the conference too, I recognised examples of this kind of deep listening, willingness to gain understanding and change position, what Yuval-Davies (1997) calls transversal dialogue.

The field of children's participation in Europe is now throwing up all kinds of trees and shoots. But we might question whether some of what gets called children's participation is a species of tree that we would recognise. As the recent EU mapping of children's participation across Europe (Janta *et al*, 2021) confirms, children's participation in public decision making takes many different forms. In at least 12 countries in Europe, some of this is inclusive of more marginalised children's perspectives, and at times it may have an impact on the decisions of local and

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national governments or governmental bodies. In my recent work with the care experienced young researchers and children in three regions of England, children wrote recommendations based on analysis of what they found, and their ideas were heard by a committee (Larkins *et al*, 2021a). Almost all of their suggestions were written into national guidance on working with children in alternative care (NICE 2021). Inclusion and impact is therefore possible. But sadly, evidence also points to the fact that it remains rare (Janta *et al*, 2021). Some colleagues therefore rightly emphasise the importance of everyday spaces of children's participation (Horgan *et al*, 2017) as it is through daily interactions with trusted others that inequalities in children's lives can be more readily addressed.

Whilst this everyday focus is vital, in the accessible summary of the mapping of children participation in Europe (Eurochild Children's Council *et al*, 2021) children from Cyprus and Portugal asked:

"How will children living in conditions of poverty participate? Children without internet, or living in fear, or in abusive homes? The EU need to see how the children of these vulnerable groups will be included in mechanisms of participation"

"Why should I participate... They don't listen to me"

If children are raising these questions, despite the growth of everyday and invited participation opportunities, then we need to pick apart what is being called children's participation, to identify what to replicate, to understand what to avoid, and to develop strategies to overcome the challenges.

This is timely because there are efforts at a European level. This includes the Council of Europe's handbook on children's participation, outputs from their Child Participation 4 Europe project², their 2022 Recommendation on children's participation as a foundation for democratic life, and the European Union's new online platform for children's participation³. But, if these and similar national and local initiatives are to be inclusive of marginalised children's perspectives it is useful to pause and consider how we can pick apart current examples of children's participation, and then irrigate and fertilise the inclusive practices which show potential to be impactful. In this pause, I therefore suggest, that it is useful to learn from children and adults engaged in participatory practice and from social theory and I offer approaches to picking apart the practice and contexts of children's participation by thinking about citizenships, challenges, agency and time.

1. Citizenship

In picking apart children's participation since Covid 19 (Larkins and del Moral-Espín, 2022), I have found it is useful to think about four forms of citizenship (Larkins, 2014). First, children as family members, pupils, workers and volunteers formally and informally provide health and social care support and key services. For example, during the pandemic, they were bringing food to family and neighbours, fetching water, growing food, selling food at the frontline of risk in shops and markets. These can be called actions of social citizenship, contributing to what can be conceived of as the social good. Second, some of the ways in which children responded to the lack of some of the most basic necessities for nutrition, health and education during the pandemic might be thought of as actions of neoliberal citizenship. That is children (and families), lacking state organised support, had to rely on their own actions and resources to safeguard their rights. As with all others, this neoliberal citizenship has existed before and continued after the pandemic. Third, some aspects of children's participation during the pandemic, connected more to notions of political citizenship. Some children helped inform collective responses to Covid 19 conditions by sharing their insight and advice through organising and responding to consultations and engaging in activism. Fourthly, some of the protest end of these activities, and children's individual resistance, might be seen as Acts of citizenship. For example, when children were refusing to accept the ban on their presence in public parks or outside of the ghettoised areas in which essential health services are in short supply. Acts of citizenship are those activities which fall outside of the norm of what is considered political (either because they are performed by children or because they do not match a standard notion of what is political behaviour) and which call for different standards of justice and distributions of resources. (Larkins, 2014).

2. Challenges

To pick apart the challenges that inclusive and impactful marginalised children's participation is encountering, I rely on the insights of colleagues across Europe who, through a project called Reaching In⁴, have been identifying challenges and sharing strategies for overcoming these.

1. Stigma, structural discrimination and marginalisation
2. Lack of trusting relationships
3. Inaccessible information/ language

² <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/cp4europe>

³ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-childrens-participation-platform/about-eu-childrens-participation-platform_en

⁴ <https://www.eurochild.org/initiative/reaching-in-strengthening-marginalised-childrens-participation-in-decision-making/>

4. Absence of enabling environments – possible, safe and worth it
5. Timescales that do not enable children in vulnerable situations to take a lead
6. Barriers to informed consent
7. Lack of awareness of discrimination and of rights
8. Effective, credible and creative methods
9. No transparency about meaning, limits and opportunities of participation
10. Insufficient evaluation over longer timescales
11. Lack of investment in participation responding to the pandemic

We might describe actions we take on this non-exhaustive list of challenges as the fertilizer. And children have again been clear on some of the actions they would like to see (Eurochild Children's Council et al 2021):

- Create national laws and plans that make sure children's ideas are included in government decisions
- Support and strengthen children's participation opportunities
- Make governments include children's views in all aspects of their work
- Give children feedback about the impact of their views
- Encourage local, national and international decision-makers to use their political power to take children's ideas into account
- Change adults' attitudes about children

Here we see an emphasis on accountability and changing the frames of reference, so that the assumption and legal obligation is that children will be heard, and that action will be taken in response to their concerns.

3. Agency

But what if we move away from the notion that children's participation is about children expressing views to other people that those other people (adults) then act on or not? Might we imagine other forms of agency?

I have argued that children express agency in four ways (Larkins, 2019). As individuals, children reflect on their experiences and make decisions about their own goals, and they choose to take on roles (for example, friend or activist). As individuals, children express agency as **selves** and **social actors**. Here we can see children taking on the role of member of a participation group and exercising influence as an individual, expressing their views and priorities.

Children also express agency collectively, in intersecting groups, with other children and with adults. These forms of agency maybe called **primary** and **corporate**. Primary agency involves dealing with the everyday opportunities and difficulties that comes from living in relatively more or less disadvantaged contexts. Many children, can be seen to deal with inequalities based on age and, alongside adults, with intersecting challenges related to other factors (including class, race, gender, nationality and disability). Collective primary agents live and shape circumstances through their actions, but to a limited extent, with little control over the underlying causes of the inequalities they face. Occasionally, however, children can take steps towards **corporate agency**. That is, groups of children may be able to connect and organise with others (including adults), agree shared goals, and together access and use resources. This organised collective action is corporate agency when it helps them affect the conditions that they and other children encounter. Corporate agency of this kind has for example been achieved, in some instances, by some labour movements.

This distinction is important because, in corporate agency, children are not responding to adults' concerns, they are collaboratively setting the agendas and codirecting the action.

4. Time

Corporate agency is hard to achieve, but taking steps towards it can be achieved through raising awareness of time. Here my work is influenced by Freire as well as critical realism (see Larkins, 2016). Applying these understandings in collaboration with young people (Larkins *et al*, 2021) and fellow academics (Larkins, del Moral Espin and Stoeklin, 2023) we have argued for the need for greater acknowledgement that the conditions that children encounter are rooted in diverse relations and processes that spread across time and space. For some this may seem like stating the obvious, that what we do in one place later affects what children experience elsewhere.

However, the concerns that children raise are rarely discussed in this time sensitive way. For example, when children raise concerns about lack of mental health services, they may talk about internal feelings of loss or negativity. They may also talk about proximal relationships and events, with peers or with families, which have exacerbated these feelings. At a meso level, there may be a lack of adapted mental health services, which in turn reflects national policy decisions about spending priorities. In some children's participation processes, this focus on service and policy is as far as discussions ever go.

In contrast, a time sensitive approach to exploring the concerns that children raise can also encourage us (children and adults) to broaden the scope of our activism. Often, the causes of current difficult circumstances are rooted in past decisions and actions, the agency of people in a previous time whose actions led to a particular material

context, or acceptance of a way of thinking. This is most obviously seen with environmental degradations and climate injustice, however it is equally applicable with mental health. The poor mental health that some children are experiencing now may be related to economic restructuring and social inequalities that became entrenched decades previously. Children may not directly name these root causes, but allowing ourselves to work outward in space and backwards in time from the concerns and solutions that children name is vital if we are to successfully address the concerns that children raise which arise from long term injustices.

5. Implication for research and other practice

To summarise, I draw our attention to these four categories of citizenship because, recognition of children's everyday social contributions can help challenge attitudes about children's dependence and incompetence, and because children's more radical and diverse forms of behaviour as well as their words reveal some of the greatest injustices they face. To support children in this activism, we need to avoid participatory processes which reinforce neoliberal citizenship, as they may undermine rather than contribute to the radical collective solutions that are needed to redress the intersecting injustices that children encounter.

I draw attention to challenges and some strategies for addressing these because mechanisms for ensuring that evidence and inspiration from children actually result in improvements in practice remain largely absent. Uptake of children's views tends to depend on local traditions of child participation or on the specific political cultures and openness of policy makers (Larkins and del Moral-Espín, 2022). But, by sharing and learning from each other's experiences we can at least be honest about the barriers to inclusive and impactful children's participation in public decision making. This is important, because it can help to emphasise the need for adult decision makers to create more enabling environments – to radically change processes of public decision making so that it is possible for children to be listened to and that their ideas are acted upon.

I highlight the concept of corporate agency because this provides a counterbalance to the neoliberal tendency to hold children responsible for finding or labouring towards solutions. It is also a complement to the discursive notion of participation as children's individual expressions of voice requesting for action by others. If we are to radically change children's status, children need more than space to voice their concerns. Rather, might we ask that children collectively achieve enough influence to direct some of what happens in the world, in the way that some adults already do. Again, this call for children taking steps towards corporate agency, would require a radical restructuring of the political landscape so that public decision making becomes more inclusive of marginalised populations of all ages.

And finally, I think we might give ourselves permission to overcome the hesitancy to name some of the connections between children's concerns and enduring patterns of injustice. As academics and participation workers we may be concerned that we are unduly influencing children or pushing political agenda. In work inspired by Freire's, the emphasis is often on coming to understanding of deeper issues through action. Where time for action and reflection is constrained in short-term participatory processes, children's expressed views may be used as evidence before they have had time to work these through and come to conclusions. The alternatives to this extractive process might be to allow more time in which children have more space for action, to work outward from children's concerns to make the critical links between their current experiences and the causes of the deep seated inequalities that many of us encounter daily and to form intergenerational collaborations in pursuit of these changes.

I know that some of this work is already underway, much of it outside of Europe, and I look forward to further opportunities to learn from contributors to this journal, and the other vital arenas of participatory practice exchange and transversal dialogue that are emerging⁵.

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⁵ For example, www.CP4Europe.org and www.ucanmakechange2.org

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