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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Child social participation and active citizenship

Manuel Sarmento¹, Natália Soares² and Catarina Tomás³
Institute of Child Studies, University of Minho (Portugal)

Contemporary childhood (re)institutionalisation and child citizenship inherent tensions

The historical representation of childhood, that has prevailed over the last 250 years, characterises this age group not on the basis of a set of characteristics that give it autonomy or by the different ways children understand and take an active part in the world (i.e. through childhood cultures), nor even by the specificity of the existing material conditions of the younger population, but as marked by multiple and diversified absences. The modern construction of childhood has corresponded to separation from the adult world and to the institutionalisation of children, essentially through setting-up of nurseries and state schools (Ariès, 1973; Ramirez, 1991), symbolically justified by the alleged non-fulfilment of the bio-psychological developing process of the youngest generation. This has promoted a set of exclusions from the social life space-time.

In modern times, children have been studied as a theme emerging from constitutive negativity: it is assumed a child is the one who does not vote, the one not responsible for his or her own actions (and, being so, not capable of blame), the one who cannot elect nor be elected (and, being so, deprived of any power), the one not yet really fitted in society (and, being so, subjected to ‘socialisation’ processes), the one who cannot get married nor make up a family, the one who cannot work nor have an economic activity, the one who does not know nor think appropriately (and, being so, needs to find someone who submits him or her to instructional processes), the one who does not have moral values (and, being so, needs to be disciplined and morally orientated). In the same way as *childhood* is etymologically the age of non-speaking (and, by metonymic extension the age of the practical impossibility to perform a legitimate speech), and the *pupil* is the one who does not have light (and, by metaphoric extension, the one deprived of rational thinking or clarity), the *child* is the one in a creation process (and therefore, by metaphoric and metonymic extension, the incomplete being, in the way to the future, in an heteronomy process inherent to the transitory condition). This process of symbolically representing childhood is constitutive of its own history, particularly in Europe (Ariès, 1986; Becchi and Julia, 1998). Besides, a look at cultural and social practices of other social structures in the east and the south hemisphere or minority ethnical groups in Europe, show childhood representations that are not characterised by excluding children from the collective life but include children in social practices commonly considered as adult ones, namely concerning work, marriage and civic participation (e.g. Silva, Macedo and Nunes, 2001).

¹ E-mail: sarmento@iec.uminho.pt

² E-mail: natfs@iec.uminho.pt

³ E-mail: ctomas@iec.uminho.pt

Modern childhood social representation has historically and consequently brought about the institutionalisation of childhood disciplining processes (Foucault, 1993) that are inherent to the creation of the dominant social order.

It is true that modern times have led to introduce significant advances in favour of child protection and that the development of childhood policies, sustained by a social representation of childhood alterity as a constitutive negativity, has led to introduce a very substantial improvement, even though partially, in most children's living conditions; and that the progress of the last centuries is enormous measured by indexes such as child death rate, the release from oppressive and ignominious ways of working, and also benefiting from information and written culture. It is also true that, from the emergence of modernity, a discourse has been developed, sometimes powerful, defending child autonomy as fulfilled beings concerning their individualities and as social beings, with a criticism - most of the time a radical one - of the institutionalised forms in which daily children's lives were regulated in modern times.

However, we are compelled to acknowledge that the modern construction of childhood has been built up around processes of 'symbolic administration' (Sarmiento, 2001), which have produced a standardisation of children's social representation, losing of the diversity of life forms and social goods affording inequalities, the imposition of paternalistic ways of social organisation and the regulation of everyday life – either inside the home or within social organisations or institutions - depriving intervention disqualifying children's voices in the structuring of their life worlds, and the adult-centred colonisation of children's ways of expression and thinking

The combined effects of standardisation, paternalism, deprivation and colonisation result from the action of multiple regulation authorities.

The provision of child protection strengthens unequal power relations (Mayall, 2002,p.21) and establishes mechanisms of domination that frequently correspond inclusion with forms of exclusion (Santos, 1998), that is, though they result in the immediate satisfaction of children's necessities, they at the same time reinforce their position as a dependent group, deprived of effective decision-making powers.

In a passage from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez, a Colombian Nobel Prize-winner for Literature, we can find this view of childhood depicted

Úrsula did not remember the intensity of that look again until one day when little Aureliano, at the age of three, went into the kitchen at the moment she was taking a pot of boiling soup from the stove and putting it on the table. The child, perplexed, said from the doorway, 'it's going to spill'. The pot was firmly placed in the centre of the table, but just as soon as the child made his announcement, it began an unmistakable movement towards the edge as if impelled by some inner dynamism, and it fell and broke on the floor.

Ursula, alarmed, told her husband about the episode, but he interpreted it as a natural phenomenon. That was the way he always was, alien to the existence of his sons, partly because he considered childhood as a period of mental insufficiency and partly because he was always too absorbed in his fantastic speculations. (1973:15).

Denying a child's viewpoint means understanding it within the parameters of the status of inor, as in a period of time where individuals need protection because they know less, have less maturity and less strength, in comparison with adults. The real translation of this conception in attitudes, speeches and social practices takes place with the unworthiness as a response to what children say or do.

In these circumstances, the affirmation of childhood citizenship - visible and constantly mobilised in the contemporary pedagogic discourse as a regulating metaphor in a major part of the political discourse at this time - appears as a paradox. Indeed, childhood citizenship is something that is stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and is developed through the redeeming of child's vision as a social actor, and hence as a subject entitled to rights, which obviously implies the acknowledgement of the ability to act influentially upon collective life. However, the social/structural and symbolic conditions of citizenship are very far from being gathered...

The development of the conception of childhood citizenship is also inherent to a perspective in the field of childhood interdisciplinary studies. Childhood researchers acknowledge the 'otherness' of childhood, and critics' theoretical perspectives of the child as 'an adult projection in miniature' or as an 'imperfect adult on the way to becoming one' entail significant theoretical changes. This change of perspective - others may call it a paradigmatic change (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998) - leads to the corollary of children claiming their citizenship status.

Public and NGO initiatives all over the world are repeated to guarantee conditions for childhood citizenship. However, the persistence of the conditions that in modern times - at political, social and symbolic levels - have generated child *minoring* is of great impact, turning this complex period of *paradigmatic transition* (Santos, 2000) into a reconstructed hybrid place of social images of childhood, superposing and multiply refracting one above the others, and social re-institutionalisation (Sarmiento, 2004). In this way the concept of childhood citizenship gains ambivalence and polysemy, inherent to the social conditions of their production and reproduction in the society and, in last analysis, result from the contemporary social structure contradictions themselves.

Children and childhood in the *new social order* context: an ambivalent reality

When these changes that have occurred in the last decades are discussed, there is a consensus about the idea that there has been a deep change of and in societies, especially through the decisive influence of globalisation. In recent decades there has been an acceleration in the fundamental reproductive mechanisms of the capitalist system, which has entailed deep tensions and ambiguity; although, on the one hand, individuals experience greater proximity (above all because of technological advances in

communications), on the other hand, the world seems to have become more complex because there is more inequality and heterogeneity in society. Inequality marks the weakest social groups above all, which keep on being excluded and concealed from the action arenas and decision-making centres. The social group of childhood belongs to this setting of inequality, exclusion and protagonist impossibility (Rizzini, 2001).

Within the hegemonic globalisation scenarios, the situation of ambiguity and paradoxical complexity is the best illustration of the childhood social conditions. Despite all the positive transformations in child life conditions, resulting from various modern advances, factors of social inequality still persist, based on structural conditions, and social, cultural, symbolic and ideological representations subjacent to the age/generation (Tomás e Soares, 2004). The most complete and up-to-date depiction of reality is found in the reports the NGOs have been presenting about the global childhood situation (for example, UNICEF 2000; 2002). In these reports it is said that more things have been done for the sake of children in the last 50 years than in the previous 500. However, they also say that the child's situation globally is complex, because though most indices show the situation improved, in other aspects the situation has worsened. Even in middle-wealth countries only from 12 to 14% of their budgets are for basic social services (Annan, 2001, p.3-6), which is obviously insufficient to guarantee minimum services in health, education, drinking water and basic sanitation: 'in comparison with what it is spent world-wide on arms or luxury goods, the necessary resources are modest to guarantee child basic necessities' (ibid, p 6).

Many commitments still remain unfulfilled, not because child provision basic rights are too ambitious, unreachable or technically impossible to implement, but because the childhood agenda is not yet considered a political, economic and social priority, and precisely because of this, the investment is short and delayed.

World leaders must give second thoughts to their priorities in the reallocation of resources and incomes. It will also be necessary to transform the lack of vision and commitment into a real and effective promotion of Child Rights, in order to ensure them a better future.

This is the setting in which the childhood citizenship debate takes place.

Citizenship and social participation

According to Roche (1999, p 483), the arguments supporting the inclusion of children in the citizenship project are necessarily a symbolic and practical reordering of what is a child, an adult and a citizen. First of all, the requirement of this reordering must include the research contribution that has been showing the complexity and heterogeneity of the social category of childhood.

It is also essential that in the theoretical and practical attempts to jointly construct childhood citizenship - because this implies adults' and children's joint efforts - the concept of citizenship itself is rethought, since the traditional formulas and classic principles that supported the old concepts of citizen and citizenship are increasingly

losing legitimacy and acuteness. It is not possible to consider the citizenship debate without including it in the wider-ranging analysis of new social and family organisation forms, the structural changes in social inequalities, and changes in gender relations, in intergeneration relations and even in peer relations. These new forms contribute to a diversification of social life, and imply a redefinition of new parts, new spaces and new voices to exercise citizenship. In the same way, they enable the revelation of restricted rights, which seemed to be guaranteed by law.

Indeed, it is in the field of the real exercise of rights of social participation that the question of citizenship needs to be raised. This statement must be emphasised because subliminally the emerging re-interpreted concept of citizenship subordinates citizenship to neo-conservative, authoritarian and disciplinary conceptions, by reducing the idea of public participation to a duty to submit to converging social norm.

As an alternative, we support conception of an active and critical citizenship, in which children and young people are required to participate as social agents, endowed with the competence of intervention (Hutchby, and Moran-Ellis, 1998), implying not only the formal acknowledgement of rights but also the conditions to exercise them through full participation and a part as a real protagonist in all social life.

Accordingly, childhood citizenship implies the fulfilment of structural conditions concerning the organisation of the society as a whole, for the extension of child rights, institutions *designed for* children that will also be *their* institutions, and the generalisation of a culture that makes it possible for children to be democratically included in all fields of social and personal life.

Citizenship has real contexts of emergency. The real social action systems, where children are inserted (nurseries, schools, leisure work-groups, clubs, temporary or permanent attendance institutions), regulated by adults, are spaces of child subordination or self-sufficient expression. The construction of children's participatory rights, in the corresponding contexts of action, represents a nodal acknowledgement of the child's social competence. *Listening to children's voices* inside the institutions does not only represent a methodological principle of adult action, but a political requisite, through which an intergeneration dialogue of power sharing is established. This expression of sharing needs to find formulas that overcome the formal decision mechanisms, established in the modern democratic organisations, in order to be adapted to a child participation appropriated to the corresponding different age groups. The meetings, surveys, paper games, opinion collection by non-verbal means, or pictographic ones, etc, represent mechanisms to set-up democratic organisations and institutions with children. In short, *organisational citizenship* appears as a determining element to turn the participation of children viable as the core of their social rights.

Finally, child citizenship takes place in the transformation of the social and cultural conditions in which the modern idea of childhood was shaped. The creation of a democratic space-time for children is implied in the field of social interactions; it goes through the home and family, through structural space, and is articulated with intergeneration relationships, in all the fields of social life, supported by the

acknowledgement of a ‘not-minor’ difference. In this way citizenship is rooted in symbolic and representational elements that are put together with interactive attitudes and performances, beyond the political or normative regulation.

In short, childhood citizenship –political, organisational and inner one- is the possibility of a collectively established utopia, in which the intensity of childhood is redeemed, the *intensity of that look* Gabriel Garcia Marquez talks about; in order to re-establish a renewed vision of society.

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