CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Children’s Citizenship: A New Discourse?

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Over the past few years we have seen burgeoning interest in the broad but often nebulous notion of children’s citizenship. Anybody can attempt a very rapid exercise to see what is available. A search on the internet using the key words ‘child’, ‘children’, ‘citizen’ or ‘citizenship’ will lead to an overwhelming number of sites concerned with children’s citizenship in the most disparate manner. Is it about the acquisition of a nationality by the ‘child citizen’? Is it about the ‘modern’ (and disputable) place that industrialised countries have made for children, mainly in school, family and protected environment beyond the public sphere? Is it about the place children need to have in contemporary welfare systems in so-called developed countries? Is it about education both as a right and a duty of children in order to become good citizens? Is it about children’s rights in a world where basic rights such as the right to life, to an adequate standard of living and to health are so often threatened by natural and human lead catastrophes or by unacceptable economic performance? Or is it about the inclusion of the child as a subject, the last touchstone to be put in place in order to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child? Is it instead about political participation, whereby political rights are the key ones in adult citizenship? Considerably more issues could be added to this list of questions.

Thus, the success the notion of children’s citizenship is having at present is far from being based on a clear concept or, at least, on a set of possible concepts. When putting together this special issue of the JSS on children, our first question was accordingly: ‘What is children’s citizenship?’ or ‘what can children’s citizenship mean?’ A major component in much of the discourse is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), which somehow shapes its concept around the idea that children enjoy their own specific set of human rights.

Clearly there is a great deal of optimism borne with the widespread concern with children’s citizenship; it brings with it a strong commitment toward thinking about and improving the place of children in contemporary society. On the one hand, the fact that new concepts of children’s citizenship are so often rooted in the UNCRC certainly brings with them the ideal of a better world for children. The idea of an implementation of the UNCRC allows us to imagine a world without extreme poverty replaced by decent standards of living. It lets us envisage a world free of many diseases that still kill children worldwide and adequate healthcare provision. It suggests provision of appropriate education that promotes children’s talents and shows respect for their cultures. Such standards are far from application only in developing countries but would also considerably improve the lives of children of ethnic minorities and such marginalised groups as asylum seekers and refugees who are at present often deprived of many of these provisions wherever they are.

On the other hand the reference to citizenship suggests not only changes in the image of and practice toward children but also in legal standards and policies which have proven to be oppressive in many respects.

Good reason for considering citizenship is found in the most classical of works on the topic as Lister (2004: 5) illustrates:

T.H. Marshall’s classic exposition of modern citizenship incorporated the idea of “an image of an ideal citizenship against which achievement can be measured and toward which aspirations can be directed” (Marshall, 1950: 29).

As we progress further into the 21st century an optimistic view of the world is one in which all of the things universally seen as negative or pejorative will be eradicated as each new generation sets out to achieve that to which it aspires. Logically, it would take very little effort to include the eradication of age discrimination along with elimination of poverty, racism, sexism and so on. Despite a veil of gloom that came with such phenomena as international terrorism and global warming there is a glimmer of optimism that the world will be a better place for those who are still young or yet to be born into.

However, there are also reasons for an attitude
of ‘healthy’ scepticism. Both the notion of children and citizenship demand careful examination. Key works on childhood as a ‘social phenomenon’ (Qvortrup et al., 1994) and as a ‘social construction’ (James and Prout, 1990) have largely proven the need to examine children’s experience and adult wishes to shape it in a critical manner, scrutinising any naturalisation of childhood. Impressions of children are those linked with high levels of emotion as in the modern mythical ‘walled garden’ of ‘happy, safe protected, innocent childhood’ described by Holt (quoted in James and Prout, 1990: 2) which, however, makes their subordinate position in society invisible. Chombart de Lauwe (1984) observes that images of children connect their inferior position with emotional dimensions in two ways that do not entitle children to say who they are themselves. On the one hand dominant images of children are constructed on the basis of adult experience of their own childhood, this becoming a means by which to compensate real contact with children. On the other hand, compelling images of children appear to be embedded within social critique discourse, whereby children do prove that the world and the environment in which they live needs to be changed. Thus, a healthy scepticism suggests at least the following question: How much is current discourse on children’s citizenship biased by these two mechanisms and voice adults’ feelings about an idealised childhood or a disagreement with social and political change rather than speaking about children?

The notion of citizenship also demands prudence. Firstly, that is because it is clearly a western concept albeit it is also discussed in non-western countries. Furthermore, it embraces formal aspects that relate to status of citizenship as rights but, as observed by Schnapper (2000) in the French context, its popularity correlates with an idealised view of membership and interpersonal relationships which make ‘citizen’ synonymous with ‘friendly’ or ‘nice’ to describe any kind of initiative in public spaces. According to her argument, it is suggested that citizenship is at one and the same time interconnected with a set of formal and legal instruments and to a set of beliefs promoting social cohesion, whereby this function was ensured by religion in the past.

Thus, are initiatives labelled ‘promoting children’s citizenship’ intended to be promotion of a ‘child friendly’ environment, structure and organisation or are they somewhat more an attempt to formalise their place and empower them? Can we separate these two questions at all? However taking this route suggests some even more critical questions. How far is the idea of children’s citizenship becoming an essentially emotional issue which one scarcely dares to criticise? Similar observations appear to apply to critics of the UNCRC which, as suggested by King, has become a ‘modern-day heresy’ (in Pupavac, 1998).

We could further ask why when adult citizenship (at least at national level) appears as though it is being eroded (for instance, Turner, 2001) and when adult civil and political participation appears to be so limited, for instance in the UK, are we turning to children’s citizenship?

It is, thus, with the intention of developing a critical approach to the topic, that the question of children’s citizenship has been visited. Initial questions for the call for papers were formulated as follows:

a) At base we have a number of questions that contributors may wish to examine, beginning with these key issues:
   o Why do children need to be considered to be citizens?
   o Is the UNCRC the tool with which to give them citizenship?

b) Then we need to consider children’s own views on citizenship:
   o What does it mean to and/or for children?
   o Where and in what would they like to see and/or enjoy greater involvement?
   o Are they at all interested in the duties and responsibilities full membership of their nation would give them?

c) There are several theoretical considerations that form the foundation of the notion of the child as citizen:
   o How do we specify ‘children’s citizenship’ as distinct from that of adults and should we do that at all?
   o How do we deal with socially and culturally constructed versions of childhood and citizenship?
   o Is it appropriate to understand citizenship as a membership associated with duties, responsibilities and rights? What do we learn from such analysis?
   o Which conclusion can be drawn with an analysis in terms of social, civil and political citizenship for children?
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- What does a notion of ‘partial citizenship’ mean and imply? Should we understand it as interdependence stressing the duties and responsibilities of adult caretakers or as a restriction of children’s rights?
- How far can existing gender critiques of citizenship be applied to children?
- Does children’s citizenship imply greater participation? And does greater participation mean children’s citizenship?
- In the space between an outright denunciation of the lack of citizens’ rights for children and the consideration of largely trivial forms of children’s involvement in limited areas of civil society, which form of children’s involvement must be included in our analysis? Does their resistance, rebellion, deviance and other manifestations of opposition to adult domination, and the apparent lack of protection that would imply, mean greater or lesser inclusion in democratic society?
- What democracy is available to children? What does democracy mean to children? Does participation in democracy mean full citizenship?

Historically it may be said that the separation of ages of minority and majority that differentiate the difference between becoming and being a (full) citizen is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is clear that the gradual removal of children from the early industrial labour force and then growing moves until the present to eliminate child labour have more clearly described that demarcation. Likewise, compulsory education and child welfare provisions over a little short of two hundred years have made children and youth far more distinct from adults.

- Does history provide a justification for ‘turning back the clock’ to restore the balance between childhood and adulthood by allowing children to catch up with adult men and women?
- Does history in fact give us a reasonable basis for arguing for their full inclusion and participation as citizens?
- Assuming children have some understanding of citizenship or citizenship-like activities and events, what do we know or what do we need to learn about:
  - The political involvement of children?
  - Civil participation and citizenship?
  - Which involvement for which child?

Can we allow segregation by ages and stages of childhood based on existing experience of children’s participation?
- Does children’s citizenship need children’s structures? Or do we need to understand it as inclusion and collaboration with adults?

The contributions in this issue touch only some of these questions whereas others remain entirely unvisited. Each text has a different point of entry into the question: the comparison of participatory processes (Wyness), a presentation of theoretical issues related to children’s active citizenship (Cockburn), a discussion on the strengths and limits of the UNCRC as a basis for full citizenship (Milne), an examination of children’s image as competent actors in the jurisprudence of the European Charter of Human Rights (Roche), an analysis of children’s views and opinions about participation in the family, school and community (Morrow) and an examination of children’s experiences in the very specific context of a neonatal unit (Alderson et al.)

Each presentation provides an appraisal or reappraisal of a diversity of notions: children and childhood, rights, participation and citizenship. This collection indubitably points out the importance of integrating multiple perspectives in order to fill the gap between the dominant image of children and young people and the dominant image of a citizen.

Michael Wyness presents research findings on UK participatory processes within educational and civic contexts. Comparison of case studies is valuable in typifying models of participation as well as in identifying strengths and weaknesses of different structures. Their threshold is described by institutional agendas and objectives and it is particularly in the school context that a significant amount of control is exerted over pupils’ active involvement. Adult agendas considerably limit pupils’ pursuit of their own interests through the work of school councils. Rather than being the outcome of practical or technical problems, those limits appear to reflect the more general contradiction where the commitment to increased participatory structures for children is doubled by a growing demand to regulate the participatory spaces. Civic participation based on school representation structures appears to suffer restraint of the same nature as school councils and, paradoxically, tends to be depoliticised. Wyness highlights these cons-
taints in comparison with a ‘youth oriented approach’, a non-representative model whereby councillors are members of a broader network of organisations and groups. In this context, young people are able to build an autonomous space wherein a political dimension is maintained despite the general control over participatory processes.

Tom Cockburn’s essay provides vital elements for a theorisation of children’s active citizenship which contribute to explain both obstacles to children’s participatory processes and underlines dangers and boundaries of formal and universal concepts of citizenship. Drawing lessons from feminist scholars, Cockburn examines the changing relationship between private and public spheres. Like Wyness, he observes that the growing number of processes in which children are consulted is far from guaranteeing that they are listened to and can influence policy making and political decisions. Explanation is provided by an examination of the distorted communication between the private and public sphere. In doing so, he introduces the reader to elements of a ‘radical and pluralistic’ conceptualisation of active citizenship that should be able to accommodate children.

Brian Milne addresses the question of applying UNCRC participatory articles to any claim for children’s full citizenship of a nation state. As an example for his examination, he contemplates working children’s movements and their action in the context of the campaign against child labour1. The article begins by looking at pertinent articles from the UNCRC, the core potentials and limits children’s participation inexorably has to face when compared to equivalent adult rights. His contribution furthermore visits fundamental ideas about citizenship as they emerged within philosophy (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Mill) and essential ideas about children and childhood based on ‘classical’ social science theory (Durkheim, Piaget, Mead). The latter are largely influenced by rapidly changing social and economic contexts during the height of European industrialisation. With these three perspectives in mind, Milne interchanges notions of children’s rights with those of child welfare and services for children, for instance, in health provision and compulsory education in industrialised countries. In doing so, he makes use of some of the assumptions the UNCRC carries explicitly, particularly the vision of children’s participation. It also contributes to an explanation of the existing gap between the rights contemplated in the UNCRC and those that apply to adult full citizenship.

Jeremy Roche’s contribution is an examination of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) provision and jurisprudence. He sets his argument within a children’s rights position focusing on their autonomy and competence for which the social sciences have provided considerable evidence. Questions thus arise about the way the image of children as competent is reflected in the provision and jurisdiction of the European Convention of Human Rights? His exploration of that theme includes cases of physical punishment in schools and the family as well as rights of children in family and public care settings. His analysis pinpoints the constant contradiction between parental and children’s rights, whereby the former clearly tends to prevail in decisions made by the European Court of Human Rights. Roche thus discusses the potential of the UNCRC in challenging the image of children as dependent and incompetent, mainly by referring to Article 12 in order to advance their engagement as subjects.

Virginia Morrow examines young people’s participation within the background of UK policies of ‘cohesive communities’ and ‘social capital’ framework. In her study, young people’s experiences and views on participation were explored in terms of ‘being listened to’ and ‘having a say’ in three different domains - family, school and the community. Her research provides evidence and discussion on different issues; for instance, the notion of participation and shared decision-making, contradictions and tensions in social policies and images of children in which they are embedded. Data show diverse views and experiences and illustrate some of what might be seen as children’s interests in different contexts. This contribution, like Alderson et al, proves that there is great need for a holistic and contextualised approach to children’s participation.

Priscilla Alderson, Joanna Hawthorne and Margaret Killen’s contribution is the most challenging. Research findings from their study of premature babies in a neonatal unit in the UK are presented in an exploration of ‘the edges of citizenship’. The challenge is clear because of the general assumption that newborns almost certainly lack any form of maturity and basic
competence that would normally allow them to be considered subjects, persons or citizens. Babies’ behaviour such as crying, expressions of discomfort and pleasure and activities such as sleep and breastfeeding provide the basis for discussion of their rights as persons and citizens. Alderson et al. provide an enlarged framework for thinking of children as citizens, whereby the notion of rights is redefined in order to accommodate their experiences as well as in relation to those of (for instance) parents and staff. It is a holistic rather than segmented application of the UNCRC. Provision, protection and participation rights are taken into account and criteria for approaching newborn babies as subjects and ‘active meaning makers’ are put forth. Their work is certainly more than persuasive in showing “how rights are realistic and relevant to premature babies and, therefore, to all older children too”.

In the conclusion we have tried to blend aspects of what we have learned in this interesting journey through a relatively little understood issue. In the course of so doing, we appear to have probably accumulated more questions that need to be raised than necessarily answering the initial ones. What we offer here is, therefore, an attempt to open the door to far more serious consideration of the issue.

The debate about children’s citizenship clearly needs to be expanded far beyond what we are attempting here. One might be ‘suspicious’ about any kind of commitment to children becoming full citizens. What are the possible reasons for this? One of them is certainly the genuine awareness of children and young people’s exclusion and the fact that they are at present objects of conduct, negotiation, practices and purposes rather than subjects. The UNCRC both states and promotes the image of the child as a subject. Other possible and less ‘positive’ reasons have, however, been suggested. One might wonder if the idea of children’s citizenship is advanced at times when its adult counterpart is not in vogue.

A reason for promoting children as citizens might be found in changes in policies that now steer clear of the cause of adult workers and citizens and tend to promote investment in children. If this is the case then young citizens will maintain the status that Qvortrup (1994) qualified as ‘human becomings’ rather than ‘human beings’ and children’s citizenship, as too children’s participation, is at risk of becoming a new label for ‘socialisation’ (Ennew, 2000).

A further reason could be found in the move from citizens’ rights to citizens’ duties, whereby rights and entitlements are conditional to ‘responsible citizenship’. Involvement in children’s participatory activities might, for instance, be promoted by schools who select successful pupils to become pupils’ representatives and also more young representatives in the public arena generally. Pupavac’s observations suggest that this is a more general trend in children’s rights: “The current focus on children is also one of the symptom of the retreat in the West from the universal welfare to a return to the division of people into deserving and undeserving recipients: children are not responsible for their circumstances and therefore represent the ultimate deserving objects of welfare.” In addition, as an example: “There has been a major refocusing of social policy recommendations on all sides of the political spectrum from the issue of poverty to the role of parents and the effect of their behaviour rather than tackling poverty itself.” (1998: 7).

Another important point we feel must be introduced at this point is that all contributions were written by people within the United Kingdom, broadly speaking much of that refers primarily to England and Wales specifically, and therefore much of the emphasis is on knowledge gained there. That was not our original intention. We very carefully attempted to find contributors on all continents and in very different countries. At the very least we might have expected a far richer contribution from Europe and North America. All contributors are naturally very well aware of vast differences between understanding and application of childhood and citizenship from one nation to another and, very often, within them as well. It should therefore be understood that we consider this to be example of what we hope will be a fruitful and vigorous exploration of the many facets of this topic wherever it develops away from the starting point we offer here.

**REFERENCES**


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