

Mannion, G. (2007) Going Spatial, Going Relational: Why 'listening to children' and children's participation needs reframing. In *Discourse*, Vol. 28, No. 3, September 2007 Special Issue on Pupil Voice in Educational Research, pp. 405 – 420.

## **Title: Going Spatial, Going Relational: Why 'listening to children' and children's participation needs reframing**

G. MANNION<sup>1</sup>

University of Stirling, Scotland

This article explores the consequences of the view that the identifications of children and adults and the spaces they inhabit are undergoing a continuous co-specification. Firstly, the article describes and critiques the rationales provided that suggest we should consult with children and young people and encourage their participation. In response, the author suggests that policy and practice and research on children's participation are better framed being fundamentally about child-adult *relations* and that the emerging field would benefit from becoming more sensitive to socio-spatial aspects. Examples of research projects in three different contexts (school grounds, an arts centre, and the 'childfree zone') are reviewed for evidence to show that they how they were centrally about the emergence of spaces for new child-adult relations. The goal for a reframed 'children's participation' project could be to understand better how child-adult relations and spaces get constructed and how they can be improved.

Keywords: *Pupil voice, participation, child-adult relations.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Education, University of Stirling, Scotland, FK9 4LA, UK. Email: [gbgm1@stir.ac.uk](mailto:gbgm1@stir.ac.uk)

## Introduction

In this article I suggest that the current discourse around listening to children and children's participation has grave deficiencies and needs reframing. The article explores the emerging policy and social practices (including research practices) that involve 'listening to children' / consultation (where children's views are sought) and participation wherein children may have involvement in decision making (see Hill *et al.*, 2004). International reviewers have already noted the need for a reframing of this field:

It is clear that, given powerful adult agendas at play, "having a say" is insufficient to achieve effective and meaningful participation for young people. Instead, there is a need to more fully consider the complexity and interplay of values and interests in local decision-making and everyday social processes. (Clarke and Percy-Smith, 2006, p. 2)

By bringing together the critiques of this emerging field of study alongside emerging theoretical frameworks, the article goes some way towards providing starting points for what this reframing might look like. Firstly, I describe the rationales provided that suggest we should consult with children and young people and encourage their participation. While doing this, I explore the critiques that suggest there are problems with these rationales. One main critique, for example, is that the context for children's self-advocacy, 'hearing their voices' and their participation in the broadest sense, is as much about outcomes for adults as much as children. As a result, I first suggest policy and practice and research on children's participation is better framed as being about child-adult *relations*.

The second suggestion concerns the role of the overarching socio-spatial contexts for children's participation. In order to bring these two aspects into view, I will argue that we need to take an approach that is sensitive to the socio-spatial aspects of the processes around children's voice participation (or the lack of it). By addressing the spatial alongside the dialogical and intergenerational aspects of children's participation as the main focus, we can begin to usefully move the discourse on children's participation on. Reframing voice and participation research as the study of

and in the *spaces* of child-adult *relations* is not only a better reflection of the lived experience of children and adults, but it opens up new important and fertile territory for this expanding field.

A premise of the paper is that the identifications of children and adults and the spaces they inhabit are undergoing a continuous co-specification and that this emergent process varies according to whose voice is heard and what forms of participation are enabled. By pulling the context for voice and participation research out of the background and into centre-stage, we can see how space itself plays a role in the production of the ever-changing relations between and cultures of childhood and adulthood. I suggest that some particular ‘emergent child-adult spaces’ in society are more noticeable as places where the relations between adults and children are in greater flux because of the way culture, space and opportunities for participation interact.

I explore examples of empirical work on ‘children’s participation’ to see if and when research foci could be better reframed with a focus on the relations *between* children and adults. Three emergent child-adult spaces are given attention in the paper: school grounds, an arts centre and a web-based interactive space for adults that see themselves as living a childfree lifestyle. I argue that once we use a relational and spatial lens, many different kinds of spaces can help us understand how childhood *and* adulthood are socio-spatially co-specified. The conclusion of the article revisits the tenet that we need to ‘go relational’ and ‘spatial’ if we are to ‘get real’ when researching lives of children because children’s lives are interdependent with the lives of adults. By reframing children’s ‘voice’ and participation research as socio-spatial and relational research, I argue that we can avoid the problems and deficiencies associated with the field which has come to a variety of impasses.

### **Rationales for Voice and Participation Research and their Problems**

Many governmental bodies and non-governmental bodies have now got initiatives on children’s participation and listening to children (for example Blake & Francis, 2004, Children and Young People’s Unit, 2001). There are now many different rationales

being offered about why this sort of work is deemed appropriate. The Children and Young People's Unit (2001) lists better services, the promotion of citizenship and social inclusion and personal and social education and development as worthwhile outcomes. Interestingly, they, and most others in this field, do not foreground any outcomes that especially relate to adults per se or to relations between children and adults. First, let us take a closer look at the separate rationales that are commonly put forward.

### *The Enlightenment Rationale and the Potential for Delusion*

Warshak (2003) separates out the rationales for listening to children in the following way. The first is *an enlightenment rationale*: children have something important to tell us (adults) that may change the decisions we make on their behalf. This rationale has been strong when research has involved children as users of services and has been critiqued as being adultist because the main driver is to improve the services adults deliver to children. The model here implies children are in deficit and that the adults are best placed to attend to children's welfare (see Mannion, 2003). Children's voices and participation in this context provides information to adults about how they might better care and provide for children's health, welfare and education. But, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that what children say can be easily scripted by adults with their own agendas. In addition, the rhetoric around participation is not always matched by the delivery (Badham, 2004). Warshak (2003) warns that we may be deluding ourselves because children's voices are easily distorted by cultural and other factors. In other words, despite our best efforts to discover and understand children and young people's views, we may fail. We need to put the processes that give rise to potential delusion and mis-communication under the spotlight and current practice does not always do this.

### *The Empowerment Rationale and the Need for Reflexive Critique*

The second is the empowerment rationale. Here the agenda is political and the imperatives usually begin with a children's rights agenda; the UN Convention is regularly cited as the basis for this. In countering ideas about the child as an 'incompetent' (Wyness et al. 2004), the empowerment rationale positions children as complete individuals or citizens with quite adult-style rights and responsibilities – this

shift is sometimes captured by the idea that children are ‘beings’ rather than ‘becomings’ (Qvortrup, 1994). Within this view, children’s voice and participation research will look at children as a minority group who seem to have their ‘interests’ served (Qvortrup, 1994). Critics have argued that there are real tensions and ambiguities here as children’s rights pertain to both having their needs met and having a say in matters that affect them (see Lee, 2001). Also, others have noted that the spread of the UN Convention can be seen as inappropriately ageist and culturally biased, positioning children as the bearers of some ‘adult-sized’ rights and Westernising children from other parts of the world (Stephens, 1995; Wyness, 2004).

This analysis suggests that any reframing of the field will need to attend to the ongoing tension around children’s participation rights on the one hand, and their right to have their needs met on the other. The following quote exemplifies this tension:

Children’s capacities to make decisions are not fully developed, and they are consequently dependent on their guardians and the state. Nonetheless, we argue for a position where children can be considered in the present—as human *beings*—rather than only in a future perspective as a human *becoming*.  
(Skivenes & Strandbu, 2006, p. 13)

The main problem with a rights-based approach relates to culture and context and related tensions that arise. Jans (2004) reminds us that childhoods are highly determined by the spirit of the different times in which we live. Similarly, Kirby and Bryson (2002) ask us to be sensitive to the context for children voice research and studies of their participation and to look again at the agendas that construct how and in what ways children and young people participate. Children’s participation research needs to move towards a model where these tensions and the cultural problems associated with a rights-based approach are more reflexively addressed. This may involve challenging the almost now fossilised notion that children are better thought of as ‘beings’. Indeed, there are signs that this approach is no longer sustainable. Lee (2001) points out that *adults and young people* are experiencing an increasingly less stable identifications, protracted transitions and recursive career pathways. As a result, there has been a call to reconsider *both adults and children* as ‘becomings’. I suggest we need to take seriously this new and less stable positioning of children and

adults. Once we begin to consider these positionings in relation to each other in relation to each other, we can begin to see the different directions a reframing of the field of children's participation might take.

### *The Ambiguity of the Citizenship Rationale*

A third rationale that is often provided, closely related to the empowerment rationale (above), is that of children's citizenship. The rationale here is that their preparation for and participation in civic activities develops a sense of responsibility and obligation to society (Steele, 2005). Projects using this as their rationale seem to sit within two different camps depending on whether children are positioned as 'needy' or as requiring their current political interests to be served. The first camp positions children as future citizens and thus their citizenship becomes a deferred activity. For now children learn *about* citizenship while they are young and less competent; an educational rationale is put forward here too. The second camp sees children as citizens *now* who, as a minority group strive to be heard and be socially included. Perhaps school pupil councils are examples of practices where these competing rationales sit in tension. Interestingly, Alderson (1999) has shown that pupil councils were not that widespread or effective. As with the previous rationale, our inability to handle the current cultural ambiguities around children's participation and children's 'place' in society is a valid reason for reframing the field.

### *Outcomes for Children / Outcomes for Adults*

Lastly, Steele (2005) identifies outcomes for adults and improved relationships between young people and adults as another rationale. This rationale is often lost in research and in the grey literature on listening to children's voices. When it does get mentioned, it sometimes appears as almost an unexpected outcome or an 'added value'. But, as practitioners and theorists realise the centrality of these sorts of outcomes for the success and sustainability of their projects, outcomes related to relations between young people and adults (professionals and non-professionals) are finding a growing emphasis (for example Davis *et al.*, 2006; Percy Smith, 2006). Christensen (2004) demonstrates that the adult-child relationship in ethnographic research is a very influential part of the process and cogently argues that we reflexively investigate our own ideas about what it means to be 'an adult', including

the categories used to describe generational categories and life-course stages. Tisdall and Davis (2004) also note that children and young people's voices are likely to be heard within the context of *adult* support and partnership. Altered roles for adults and altered child-adult relations are therefore two critical components of a reframed project on children's participation that I am advocating. In research, to fail to capture data on the role of adults may be to miss a key part of the story. But in addition to the relational aspect, there is a spatial dimension to this field that also has gone unrecognised or, at least, has been mis-recognised.

### **The Spatial Dimension**

As the social study of childhood became influenced by geographers, there emerged a view of children as social actors who construct their own childhood *spaces*. Some suggest that the structures for children and youth (such as schooling, and play parks) continue to exclude them from society into a form of 'Youthland' from which they need to be released (de Winter, 1997). Horelli (1997) argues that, as children expand their own territory through participation, their cultural status is altered, and they become less relegated to spaces for 'play and leisure'. Matthews and Limb (1999) advocate that we should continue to focus on children as an excluded grouping undergoing socio-spatial marginalisation while still emphasising the agency of children themselves who may at times resist the cultural politics that shape their lives. The inclusion of spatiality as a focus made for a more interactive approach but the sense of children as a marginal group who contest and negotiate the (adult) rules of access to spaces has dominated much of this work (Holloway and Valentine, 2000).

A more recent contribution that is also spatially informed comes from Moss and Petrie (2002) through their introduction of the concept of 'children's spaces'. Interestingly, these are spaces wherein children and adults can context understandings, values, practices and knowledges but they are also spaces wherein children can relate to each other in ways that are 'adult free'. Following Moss and Petrie (2002), Waller, (2006) suggests that "we need to rethink participation in terms of 'spaces for childhood' within which children can exercise their agency to participate in their own decisions, actions and meaning-making, which may or may

not involve engagement with adults” (p. 93). Here, we notice the maintenance of the ideology of children as active agents who create their ‘own spaces’. Yet this is somehow equivocal because these spaces are invariably created out of the contested *intergenerational* knowledges and practices. The term ‘children’s spaces’ perhaps misleads us to think that the context for children’s participation is not invariably mediated by adults and mainstream culture in some way. At its root, the ‘children’s spaces’ approach is arguing for a set of changed relations between children and adults (and professionals and their child-clients in particular) which is very welcome. My issue is that calling these emerging spaces as ‘children’s’ seems to miss the intergenerational contextual dimension even for the times and places where adults are not physically present. (Later, I will demonstrate how spaces that are childfree can also be understood as evidence about changing child-adult relations.)

Spatially, I suggest, the question to ask is not solely ‘How are children marginalised by structures and discourses / spatialities?’ or even, ‘How do they subvert the limitations placed upon them and create their own spaces?’ More important questions, include ‘Where are the new spaces of engagement wherein adult-child relations get reconfigured and they participate in new forms of identity formation and learning?’ ‘How can we identify emergent intergenerational spatial practice?’ and ‘Can we indicate where shifts in power relations are occurring in order to understand emerging reconstructions of child-adult relations?’ What I am suggesting is that we need to focus on a different and more worthwhile empirical topic: the child-adult spaces for intergenerational dialogue, learning and identity formation. But where are these spaces and how will we recognise them when we see them? In one way, all space and practice could provide some indications of how child-adult relations create the effect of children’s participation in its various forms: the street, the home, the school and organisational and institutional contexts are ripe for this sort of study. Some particular spaces may be more fertile for investigation, however, because, as these spaces change, they show us how child-adult relations are changing.

### **Going Relational and Spatial**

Next I take three examples of empirical work over a ten-year period that have been



informed by a relational and spatial turn in the social study of childhood to demonstrate what a reframed project on children's participation might look like.

### *Example 1*

In an extensive study of children's participation in school grounds changes (Mannion, 1999; Mannion, 2005), a key finding was that different identification opportunities for children were evident when children engaged in different kinds of school grounds developments with adults. Constructions of the participants included the 'child-as-pupil', 'the child-who-needs-protecting', 'the child-who-makes-a-difference', and so on were at times competing and overlapping in the sites visited. The research shows that spaces and identities are co-produced through webs of connections with wider social and global processes. Critically, it was the role of adults as gatekeepers on children's participation that would be most powerful in deciding whether a project would begin and in what direction it would go. In some cases, this meant children had to step aside while adult volunteers from the community did the 'work'. In another small rural school the children resisted my questioning around who had had a say in different aspects of the projects they undertook saying that in their school they worked more 'as a family'. As with example 2 (below), supported by the insight from geography and the sociology of space (Massey, 1994), the analysis suggests that places and identifications for children and adults co-specified each other. In the case of school grounds, adults were key in initiating projects and were the ones to circumscribe the space for children's participation in and through the manner in which they related with children. This project did not collect data from adults; I hindsight, I feel this was an oversight and that I was driven by the then prevalent discourse about children's agency in creating their own spaces.

### *Example 2*

Next, I outline briefly a 'participatory research project' that was conducted as part of the refurbishment of a children's arts centre (see Mannion and I'Anson, 2004, for a fuller exploration). As with many project that seek to work with young people as researchers, this project involved some young people to varying degrees in clarifying the initial aims of the research, nominating possible key adult informants, contributing to interview schedule construction, and posing questions during interviews with adult

respondents. However, a key reframing (for one phase of the project) was that the respondents would be the adult *professionals* involved in the centre and its refurbishment. Data analysis suggested that new alternative professional identifications for adults were co-emergent with an alternative vision of participatory spaces for children and adults.

*Interviewer:* Has it changed you as an architect or as an adult?

*Architect:* I would say both . . . quite profoundly under both those headings. . . . one has been annoyed that you didn't take on all the users' views in the past.

Why did we miss out on an obvious group of people?

The research showed that effects for adults were more than additional or incidental outcomes. The indications were that both adults *and* children can be conceived of as 'becomings' co-habiting overlapping and emergent spaces. The resultant refurbished arts centre would not be a 'children's spaces' in a segregated 'Disneyesque' sense:

Architect: We would quite like in the design for people to use all the spaces . . . that it wouldn't overtly be for children, it wasn't overtly for adults.

### *Example 3*

The last example crudely tries to expand our view of the sorts of research that might be possible if we were to reframe the field of children's participation as 'the study of child-adult relations'. The focus here is on a different sort of space - the 'childfree' zone.<sup>2</sup> The data presented here come from an initial desk-top survey of some of the main 'childfree' web sites I could find that were representative of this movement on the web during the spring of 2006. The term, 'child-free' has recently entered the dictionary as adjective that "describes people who choose not to have children, or a place or situation without children". (Cambridge Dictionary). The perceived need for the new term comes from the failure of the term 'childless' to capture what it means to have a lifestyle without children. Childfree.net's homepage, offers an explanation:

We are a group of adults who all share at least one common desire: we do not wish to have children of our own. We are teachers, doctors, business owners, authors, computer experts - you name it. We choose to call ourselves "childfree" rather than "childless," because we feel the term "childless" implies that we're

---

<sup>2</sup> This empirical work is on-going.

missing something we want - and we aren't. We consider ourselves childFREE - free of the loss of personal freedom, money, time and energy that having children requires (Childfree.net homepage, block capitals in original).

*Kidding Aside*, the UK counterpart of the 'childfree movement', aims are to promote a childfree lifestyle as a positive, equal and legitimate alternative, to lobby to advance their cause, and help connect 'childfree' people with others who are likeminded:

The government believes that parents need a hand balancing the demands of a career and the demands of home life, a balance needs to be struck if the British people are to be as productive as possible. We all have demands upon our time which interfere with our careers, be it raising a family, dealing with a plumbing problem, pursuing academic qualifications, or looking after an ageing family member. If helping Britons to balance home life and work is a boon to British productivity then the government must help us all be maximally productive and not just those of us with children. (Kidding Aside, The British Childfree Association)

Space here does not allow for a fuller analysis of the data but having reviewed a few of these sites from the USA, Australia and the UK, I suggest that the main arguments that get aired are:

1. The economic argument: Why should the childfree have to pay through their taxes for the childcare and education of children?
2. The equal rights argument: People who have not got children are discriminated against because society is pro-child.
3. Personal freedom and choice: Not having children, it is claimed, allows people to enjoy life in a different and 'better' way.
4. The environmental argument: The 'local' low birth rates in western society is validated alongside arguments about the health of the planet.

Perhaps more revealing are the threaded discussion fora found in these organisations' web sites. Some comments reveal a distinct irritation with the trappings of parenthood these days, particularly the 'Baby on Board' stickers on car back windows. Others even exhibit the desire to do away with children in a violent manner though we should

be aware that the genre of the web-based blog may encourage this sort of comment to be made tongue-in-cheek.

I must admit that I honestly don't see the rational point behind these stickers. Isn't ALL human life equal, not just a priority of those small children? Shouldn't we be having stickers saying "**HUMAN BEINGS on board**" instead? [prodigy, Posted - 13/11/2005]

[...]

I find them HUGELY irritating.....I should get some made up...."no baby on board, just dogs, so f\*\*\* off !!"

Love Lynda XX. [Lynda, Posted - 26/11/2005]

Good one Lynda. I'm going to make some of these when I get my dogs as I feel that they are just as important (if not more so) than kids...[Beanie, Posted - 26/11/2005]

As I'm taking driving lessons at the moment I actually saw my first one of these while at the wheel of a car. I actually commented about them to my instructor and made a joke about intensionally ramming them out of sheer spite.

Obviously it was on a huge BMW estate job. [Jonathan McCalmont, Chair of Kidding Aside, Posted - 26/11/2005]<sup>3</sup>

Clearly there are those who hold strong views about what it means to be 'childfree'. Space here does not permit a fuller analysis. For the purposes of this paper, the presentation of discourse from the 'childfree' movement is indicative of something that is central to my argument: that adulthood(s) and childhood(s) exist in a form of relational coupling. The data suggests that certain kinds of adults and adulthoods are now only possible because they are defined in a *negative relation to children*. In constructing childfree adulthood, some people define themselves against the child who is 'other'. The evidence I present above is not any less relevant to current debates on children's participation than that found on say school grounds or a children's arts

---

<sup>3</sup> Taken from Kidding Aside discussion forum, [http://kiddingaside.forumco.com/topic~TOPIC\\_ID~215.asp](http://kiddingaside.forumco.com/topic~TOPIC_ID~215.asp), not all fonts sizes are reproduced. Bold, italicization and spellings as in original.

centre. Taking a relational and spatial approach to researching a wide range of site types can expose the processes that delineate how, when and for what purposes children's participation gets enacted or constrained. Interestingly, reframing children's participation research as the research of child-adult relations and spaces does not necessarily mean that (a) children need to be involved in this research or (b) that they need to be the key respondents.

## **Reframings**

### *Adults are Important Players*

Discourses of the 'socialisation of children' constructed the child as a developmental and biological 'becoming'. The 'New' Social Studies of Childhood sought to redress the balance by seeing children as present day 'beings' or competent social actors, interpreters of the world and creators of their own life-worlds (Qvortrup, 1994). Using the 'child-as-being' analytical frame now common in most 'participation research' has resulted in two possible and limited narratives. Either projects have emphasised how children have become marginalised or excluded by adults or adult structures (sustaining an adults as-oppressors vs children-as-resisters dualism) or they have tried to demonstrate how children have constructed their own spaces and practices as agents of their own destiny. Either way, the adult dimension has been ignored. As Cockburn notes:

In order to bring this forward attention must be paid to issues of engagement, co-construction and partnership in participation. Adults need to check their own motivations and assess their readiness to work in partnership with children. They need to work on whether they accept the validity of young people's agenda and whether the processes they adopt are more effective and respectful to children. Furthermore, children's views must be placed alongside with other adult stakeholders who may have conflicting agendas. (Cockburn, 2005, p. 115).

### *Space plays a role too*

The analysis presented here suggests that the children's places and voices and participation are not 'stand-alones'. They are tied up with the attitudes, empowerment

and participation of adults. Conversely, however, adult participation is affected by their own childhood experiences, by prevailing constructions of children / childhood, and adults / adulthood, and by the agency of children today. But our empirical lens needs to widen beyond this aspect too. Spaces, (inclusive of their practices and objects) too play a role in how intergenerationality, and hence 'participation', is constructed. What the analysis of the emergent spaces of child-adult relations suggests is that the strategy of listening to children's voices is of use only if we are prepared to consider the bigger issues regarding relations, identifications, the perceived lack of agreement in society about the place of children in the scheme of things, and the rapid changes that continue to affect these places. A research agenda dedicated to listening to children's voices alone will not suffice to help us understand these processes which are as much about adults as they are about children's right to have a say. Similarly, advocating for children's agency and their participation in decision making may play a role as an antidote to the control and gatekeeping of adults in the construction of childhoods but it is not a sufficient strategy. The analysis suggests that the constructions of agency, selfhood and relationality are in need of re-theorisation too. Some authors do suggest different ways of operationalising the sort of reframing I am suggesting wherein the child-adult binary is addressed and relations between generations takes centre stage.

### *Adulting and Childing*

'Generationing' is a term offered by Leena Alanen, for practices through which one becomes, or is made, a 'child'. Crucially, Alanen and Mayall (2001) suggest that becoming a child happens in relation to others, particularly to adults and adulthood - 'the adult'/ childhood and 'the child' are mutually and inextricably interdependent. Generationing practices, are what help us delineate between the generations, position us as adults and children and demarcate how we relate to each other at different ages. Here we can think of how at different times and places we perform the relations between generations. The performance of a childhood requires certain 'childing' behaviours while the performance of different adulthoods requires reciprocal 'adulting' behaviours. Punch (2005) uses this approach to subtly explore how power circulated in intra-familial relations while Johansson (2004) looks at generationing in the context of children's consumption. Prout (2002) further fleshes out the

implications of taking on board a generational perspective:

... generational ordering is most usefully seen as an active, open-ended and unfinished process. The central analytical task would then be not only to describe relationships between children and adults but to discover how (and when) they are given a generational aspect or meaning. (Prout, 2002, p. 71)

### *Child-adult Becomings*

Other avenues of inquiry may require we move beyond modernist notions of the rational self for a theory of becoming. Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) more relational and processual view of the self offers scope here. For them, relationality is central and subjectivity is always immanent within the assemblages of practices, objects, places and people. In this view of endless 'becoming', nothing is fixed or still and flows or 'lines of flight' are what we must attend to. Perhaps the term 'intergenerational becoming' captures this approach to researching child-adult relations. Again, there are possible areas of inquiry here worth exploring.

### *Poststructural Performativity*

Poststructuralist feminist theories also offers some ways of answering Lee's question; what happens to childhood when adulthood becomes less stable? Butler (1990) uses the term performativity to sum up the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed (for our purposes, this could mean how one inhabits the category 'child' or 'adult'). Within this view of the subject, one's identity does not give rise to action but is constituted through action and the discourses or words we speak and behave. Taking Butler's view seriously would encourage the reframed field of children's participation research to ask new and different questions. For example, under what discursive and institutional conditions do the culturally located differences between the adults and children allow for different performances of children's participation?

### *After Agency*

What I am arguing in these analyses is that childhoods and adulthoods are interdependent features of social processes – we can't understand one with out understanding the other and we can't understand either without widening the lens to take account of how they are assembled or networked into other flows. The empirical

work may suggest that looking for signs of children's own *agency* holds sway outside of the child-adult relations is to look in the wrong sorts of places for something that does not exist. An alternative reading of children's agency (and adults' agency for that matter) is provided by Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Callon, 1986). The ANT perspective suggests that the interaction of a wide range of human and non-human entities are seen to mutually constitute each other and produce the social world. ANT suggests that interpersonal relations do not account for all factors influencing the social – things and people, as well as identities, spaces and stories, are all implicated in the power relations between children and adults. Children's agency becomes an effect of the networks of heterogeneous objects that allow new becomings and spaces to emerge. Where these new spaces of adult-child becomings exist, alternative forms of identification for adults and children will follow. Again, working out how to use this theoretical resource is an emerging project for the field (see Ogilvy-Whyte, 2004).

### *Intergenerational Approaches*

We seem to live at a time when there is a perceived gulf growing between the generations, social inclusion and regeneration problems are hard to solve and the contestation of public space centres around the respect the young have for the old and vice versa. Increasingly, we are seeing policies that delimit children's rights outside of adult control. ASBOs, curfews and a raft of newer adult controls are currently sweeping into many child-inhabited spaces. The spaces of children's childcare, education, health and leisure are increasingly supervised and professionalized. Out-of-school hours are increasingly timetabled and leisure time relegated to times and places. But to research childhood and adulthood in a spatially sensitive way may challenge the mainstream critical view that it is solely the relations between adults and children that enact the management and gatekeeping of their participation. Children's childhoods emerge within spaces which enable networks of objects, practices feelings and discourses and power to be distributed or dispersed.

In a recent report to the Deputy Prime Minister (UK), Pain (2005) recommends a policy shift towards taking a relational view when it comes to the development of sustainable communities. Intergenerational practice (IGP) is the advocated 'new'



approach that brings old and young together around various activities and projects.<sup>4</sup>

Building on the IGP community development model, I offer the following recommendations for researching children and childhood relationally and spatially:

- If projects see it as important to involve young people, they should have an equal footing and equal status with older people in the research.
- Research topics should consider the effects of regeneration models, on spaces of conflict, successful intergenerational communication and on the effects and attitudes related to ageism.
- Data that is spatially sensitive, the voices of young people as well as those of adults should be considered as potentially relevant data.
- Research projects taking a more critical approach ‘for’ better relations between the generations should work for shared compromises and solutions to intergenerational problems.
- Research projects are likely to focus upon engaging with ‘hard to reach’ older as well as young people through participatory approaches.

### *Getting ‘Real’*

My argument is that children’s participation research can usefully become more spatially and relationally sensitive. Clearly, doing children’s ‘voice research’ can be a useful starting point in getting a conversation going between the different stakeholders in any given context but it should not be an end in itself because it is not a sufficient portrayal of the story. For participation initiatives, to fail to acknowledge the critical part adults play in the dialogical process around the negotiation of participation may be to completely miss the point. There is a need to deal with the intergenerational aspects of the processes we are investigating if we are to more fully understand them. This may mean collecting data from or with adults but data can also come in the form of objects, pictures, practices and other processes involved in bringing children adults and spaces together (or apart) in different ways.

Without a focus on the relations between adults and children and the spaces they inhabit we are in danger of providing a narrow view of how children’s ‘voice’ and ‘participation’ are ‘produced’.

---

<sup>4</sup> Pain (2005) defines intergenerational *relations* as the interactions between generational groups. Intergenerational *practices* are the targeted strategies which seek to enrich intergenerational relations and lead to positive outcomes for all.

This paper has argued that research and policies claiming to foreground children's voices or advocating the agency of children can only be successful if the net is cast wider. While 'voice' and 'participation in decision making' are important markers and useful starting points, we need *at the same time* to understand how the spaces for children's lives are co-constructed by the actions of adults and how child-adult relations in fact are central in deciding which children's voices get heard and what they can legitimately speak about. The review of the field indicates that participation / voice debate is in danger of ignoring a key outcome: improved relations between children and adults. I have attempted to outline the main problems with the rationales for much of the current research on children's participation research and suggested why a reframing is desirable. I outlined some possible theoretical resources that could be used to enact this shift. The goal for a reframed 'children's participation' project could be to understand better how child-adult relations get constructed and changed and how they can be improved. To that end, whichever theoretical and methodological resources one decides to use, I suggest, that we 'go relational' but also that we 'go spatial'.

## References

- Alanen, L., & Mayall, B. (2001). (Eds.) *Conceptualizing Child-Adult Relations*. London, UK: Falmer.
- Badham, B. (2004). Participation - For a Change: Disabled Young People Lead the Way. *Children and Society* 18 (2) 143-154.
- Blake, S., & Frances, G. (2004). *Promoting Children and Young People's Participation through the National Healthy School Standard* [online]. Available: <http://www.publichealth.nice.org.uk/page.aspx?o=502733> [21 February, 2006].
- Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge.
- Callon, M. (1986). Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of Saint Brieuc Bay. In J. Law (Ed.), *Power, Action and Belief: a new Sociology of Knowledge? Sociological Review Monograph* (pp. 196-233). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Children and Young People's Unit (2001). *Learning to Listen: Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People* [online]. Available: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/listeningtolearn/downloads/LearningtoListen-CorePrinciples.pdf> [23 January, 2006].
- Christensen, P. (2004) Children's Participation in Ethnographic Research: Issues of Power and Representation. *Children and Society* 18, 165-176.
- Clark, A. and Percy-Smith, B. (2006) Beyond Consultation: participatory practices in everyday spaces. *Children, Youth Environments*, 16, (2), 1-9.
- Cockburn, T. (2005). Children's Participation in Social Policy: Inclusion, Chimera or Authenticity? *Social Policy and Society*, 4 (2), 109-119.

Davis, L., Williams, C., Yamashita, H. with Ko Man-Hing, A. (2006). *Inspiring Schools: Impact and Outcomes*. London: Carnegie Trust Young People's Initiative. Available On-line: <http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/cypi/publications> [Accessed 2 July, 2006]

De Winter, M. (1997). *Children as Fellow Citizens: Participation and Commitment*. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press.

Deleuze G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hill, M., Davis, J., Prout, A., & Tisdall, K. (2004). Moving the participation agenda forward. *Children & Society* 18 (2), 77-96.

Holloway, S., & Valentine, G. (Eds.) (2000) *Children's Geographies*. London: Routledge.

Horelli, L. (1998). Creating Child-Friendly Environments. Case-studies on children's participation in three European Countries. *Childhood*, 5 (2), 225-239.

Jans, M. (2004) Children as citizens: towards a contemporary notion of child participation. In *Childhood*, 11(1), 27-44.

Johansson, B. (2004). Generationing in Consumer Contexts. Goteborg: Centre for Consumer Science. Available on-line: [www.hgu.gu.se/files/cfk/artiklar/generationing\\_in\\_consumer\\_barbrojohansson.pdf](http://www.hgu.gu.se/files/cfk/artiklar/generationing_in_consumer_barbrojohansson.pdf)

Kirby, P. with Bryson, S. (2002). *Measuring the Magic? Evaluating and Researching Young People's Participation in Public Decision Making*. London: CYPI.

Lee, N. (2001). *Childhood and Society. Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Mannion, G. (2003). Children's participation in school grounds developments: creating a place for education that promotes children's social inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 7 (2), 175-192.

Mannion, G., & I'Anson, J. (2004). Beyond the Disneyesque: children's participation, spatiality and adult-child relations. *Childhood*, 11 (3), 303-18.

Mannion, G. (2005). Borderland voices in the labyrinth: the ambiguity of children's participation in school grounds greening. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 10, 241-255.

Massey, D. (1994). *Space, Place and Gender*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Matthews, H., Limb, M., & Taylor, M. (1999). Young people's participation and representation in society. *Geoforum*, 30, (2), 135-144.

Moss, P., & Petrie, P. (2002). *From Children's Services to Children's Spaces: Public Policy, Children and Childhood*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Ogilvie-Whyte, S. A. (2004) An analytical ethnography of children's agency, power and social relations: an actor-network theory approach. Stirling: University of Stirling, PhD Thesis.

Pain, R. (2005). *Intergenerational Relations and Practice in the Development of Sustainable Communities* - Background Paper for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Durham: University of Durham, International Centre for Regional Regeneration and Development Studies.

Percy-Smith, Barry (2006). "From Consultation to Social Learning in Community Participation with Young People." *Children, Youth and Environments* 16(2): 153-179.

- Prout, A. (2002). Researching Children as Social Actors: an Introduction to the Children 5–16 Programme. *Children and Society*, 16, 67-76.
- Punch, S. (2005) The generationing of power: a comparison of child-parent and sibling relationships in Scotland. *Sociological Studies of Children and Youth*, 10, 169-188.
- Qvortrup, J. (1994). 'Childhood Matters: An Introduction'. In J. Qvortrup, M. Bardy, G. Sgritta and H. Wintersberger (Eds.) *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Skivenes, M., & A. Strandbu (2006). A Child Perspective and Children's Participation. In *Children, Youth and Environments* 16 (2): 10-27.
- Stephens, S. (1995). Children and the Politics of Culture in "Late Capitalism". In S. Stephens (Ed.) *Childhood and the Politics of Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Steele, R. (2005). How the Rights-Based Approach to Development Contributes to Building Citizenship in Childhood and Adolescence. Posted on-line at Child Rights Information Network (CRIN)  
<http://www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=6620&flag=news>
- Thomas, N. (2006). *Towards a Theory of Children's Participation*. Paper presented at the *Choice and Participation Conference*, University of Sheffield, England, July 4-6.
- Tisdall, E. K., & Davis, J. (2004). Making a Difference? Bringing Children's and Young People's Views into Policy-Making. *Children and Society* 18 (2) 131-142.
- Waller, T. (2006). 'Don't Come too Close to My Octopus Tree': Recording and Evaluating Young Children's Perspectives on Outdoor Learning. *Children, Youth and Environments*, 16 (2).

Warshak, R. (2003) Payoffs and Pitfalls of Listening to Children. *Family relations*, 52 (4), 373-384.

Wyness, M., Harrison, L., & Buchanan, I. (2004). Childhood, politics and ambiguity: towards an agenda for children's political inclusion. *Sociology*, 38 (1), 81-99.