

# Conclusion: Children as citizens

Lucy Jamieson and Shirley Pendlebury (Children's Institute) and Rachel Bray

(independent researcher, practitioner and honorary fellow in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town)

Through the notion of children as citizens, this concluding essay draws together the main threads from the preceding essays, and points out some important gaps. In so doing, it argues that children's participation in social dialogue has a crucial role to play in building a democratic society in South Africa. Together, the other essays show the many benefits of children's participation. This essay shows that the democratic value of participation is another compelling reason why it is in everyone's best interests to support children's participatory rights.

The essay addresses five questions:

- What is citizenship?
- What is the ideal of citizenship in South Africa?
- Why is social dialogue important for children's citizenship?
- What are the key messages and lessons?
- What are the gaps?

## What is citizenship?

There are competing theories of citizenship and democracy. Some theorists argue that democracy is exercised solely through the vote.<sup>1</sup> It has been defined by some as the competition of leaders for votes.<sup>2</sup> In such minimalist views, where citizenship action is restricted to voting, children do not count as citizens. A more expansive theory emerged in the 1950s, when "citizenship" was defined by TH Marshall as a status with equal rights and duties.<sup>3</sup> One reason for regarding children as non-citizens, or as "citizens in the making",<sup>4</sup> is that they do not possess the same rights as adults.

Contemporary theory defines citizenship even more broadly – as both a legal status (with accompanying rights and duties) and as an active participatory practice that recognises and shapes people's membership in a society.<sup>5</sup> Within this broader definition, citizenship has four "building blocks": *membership, rights, responsibilities, and equality of status*.<sup>6</sup>

*Membership* is about the sense of belonging that comes from being treated respectfully and being counted equally, with a legitimate, valuable voice. Citizens' *rights* and *responsibilities* extend beyond voting to include civil, political and social rights.<sup>7</sup> In

theories of deliberative democracy, participation rights are especially important. Theorists such as Gutmann<sup>8</sup> Cohen<sup>9</sup> and Young,<sup>10</sup> among others, argue that deliberation is central to legitimate governance. The right of citizens to participate in democratic decision-making is therefore a key condition for legitimacy. If people are excluded from democratic deliberation, they have grounds for dissent and discord. This is why the ideal of inclusive citizenship requires concerted efforts to include marginalised groups.

International, regional and constitutional law have accepted that marginalised groups need additional rights to ensure their full participation in society. On the basis of the rights to *equality* and *dignity*, some international treaties<sup>i</sup> give additional rights to women, racial groups, and persons with disabilities. These groups were excluded in the past; today – in most countries – they enjoy full citizenship, in part because they have additional rights. International law and inclusive theories of citizenship also open the way for children to be accepted as active citizens.

## What is the ideal of citizenship in South Africa?

In South Africa the ideal of citizenship is defined in the Constitution. The Preamble depicts the ideal South African society: "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity"; it is a society "based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights", in which "government is based on the will of the people", a society that strives to "improve the quality of life of all citizens, and free the potential of each person".<sup>11</sup> Here citizenship encompasses a set of ideals that aim to overcome inequality and achieve social justice. Accountability, responsiveness and openness are key constitutional principles for the ideal. Participation is integral to these principles.

The Constitution says that all citizens are equally entitled to the rights and privileges of citizenship and subject to duties and responsibilities,<sup>12</sup> and that no-one may unfairly discriminate against anyone on the grounds of age<sup>13</sup>. As Jamieson explains, children have many political rights, including the right to participate in policy and law-making (pp. 22 – 29). Children are thus

i Such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

regarded as citizens under the ideal in the Constitution. But this ideal of citizenship described so vividly in South Africa's Constitution is not as fully imagined in the minds of many of its citizens. A long-standing tradition of gerontocracy prevails in many of South Africa's communities and households, where elders remain the key decision-makers (and younger people – especially children – have little or no say).

While most adults would probably agree that children's best interests should be the key consideration when making decisions that affect them, many adults believe that they know best. Yet what comes out repeatedly in the preceding pages is the wisdom that children have to offer. Treating children as citizens entails listening respectfully to their views and taking them into account in decision-making.

### **Why is social dialogue important to children's citizenship?**

Citizenship is not just about rights and responsibilities; it describes the relationships between people and the state, and our shared membership in a society or a community. Social dialogue lies at the heart of these relationships. Rachel Bray defines "social dialogue" as children and adults working together to explore issues or make decisions that will affect a community or society, or simply the delivery of services to children by professionals such as nurses, teachers, police officials, lawyers or early childhood development practitioners (p. 30).

Regarding children as citizens not only recognises them as "full human beings, invested with agency, integrity and decision making capacity"<sup>14</sup>; it also recognises their relationship to the political order – in everyday life and in national and international politics<sup>15</sup>. Bray argues on p. 28 that it is precisely because children do not have the right to vote that their other participation rights must be taken seriously for them to be active citizens. Children's capacity to behave as citizens develops through connections with others in groups and communities.<sup>16</sup> For children, this usually begins with local forms of participation within their reach. But, as the essay by Nomdo and Roberts illustrates, children's citizenship is also enacted through their engagement with government planning at a national level (pp. 49 – 53).

Children's involvement in decision-making and the respect they receive as members of a community are crucial in developing their political identity and "sense of democratic responsibility".<sup>17</sup> Viviers, Clacherty and Maker show that participation in social dialogue promotes resilience by building children's self-confidence, communication skills and sense of agency, empowering children to make protective decisions about their well-being (pp. 59 – 64). When children experience meaningful dialogue, they learn to respect different views and to take others seriously. As they begin to exercise their civic responsibilities, children learn how

the right of self is related to others and cannot be gained at the expense of others. Understanding and respecting the rights of others strengthens democracy.

### **What are the key messages and lessons?**

Two strong messages emerge in this volume:

1. Children's participation works for everyone when done thoughtfully and with attention to the dignity of all involved.
2. When the soil is good, the crops will grow: Cultivating an enabling environment is critical to the process of participation.

#### **Children's participation works for everyone**

The essays quickly dispel the myth that efforts to engage children are for their benefit alone. When done thoughtfully and with attention to the dignity of all involved, children's participation in social dialogue benefits everyone. Nurses are able to offer better care when children express their feelings; schools can become better learning environments through the activities of Representative Councils of Learners and their sub-committees; South Africa's democracy can be strengthened when children develop their capacities for deliberation and action for the common good. The right of children to participate in matters that concern them also allows parents to discuss the implications of illness and death in ways that build understanding and mutual support within families and households.

Some people fear that a bid for children's participation makes for a head-on collision between children's rights and important social values such as respect for older people. Creative ways of working across generations can help to dispel this fear, and gain legitimacy by acknowledging the traditions that influence social relationships in specific contexts. Children desire better communication between generations; they value the experience of their elders and are looking for open communication and reciprocity in their relationships.<sup>18</sup> The essay on pp. 59 – 64 shows that children respect and value partnerships where adults make decisions that give serious consideration to children's opinions.

Children make up almost 40% of South Africa's population<sup>19</sup> and over 50% of total government expenditure is on services such as health, basic education, grants and housing, where children are major beneficiaries<sup>20</sup>. Nomdo and Roberts argue that, by listening to the views of children, government planners and decision-makers will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of expenditure (pp. 49 – 53).

The essays in this volume demonstrate that the healthy inclusion of children in dialogue and joint activities does not devalue adults' contributions. For example, Meintjes illustrates how much more children can achieve when they are able to talk to adults (pp 65 – 69). Kruger and Coetzee show that a process that supports both children and their parents or carers is crucial for a three-

way dialogue with professionals (pp. 36 – 42). Their findings are a reminder that adult family members may need as much support as children in gaining access to relevant information and having influence in decisions towards a child's best interests.

A common fear that participation places too heavy a burden on children arises when the adult-child interactions inherent to effective participation are not fully understood. Several essays – for example, on school governance (pp. 43 – 48) and on children's participation experiences (pp. 59 – 64) – show that children can cope with the responsibilities that are part of their rights to participate, if they are properly supported. Adults at home, at schools and in various service settings play a significant part in supporting children's fulfilment of their participatory responsibilities.

The experience of listening to children – really listening – can be disorientating and uncomfortable, and sometimes requires both a “head change and a heart change”.<sup>21</sup> Kruger and Coetzee speak of long-established ways of doing things that had to be unlearned in a hospital setting (pp. 36 – 42). Once professionals had made a mental shift and opened up to experiencing children as competent contributors to their own care, there were unforeseen benefits for the entire system of care. Old professional boundaries were overcome, the healing power of simple, positive human interaction re-claimed and a healthier working culture achieved. These lessons could equally be applied by a wide variety of professionals, including probation officers and police officials.

### **When the soil is good, the crops will grow**

Cultivating an enabling environment is critical to the process of participation; it makes the difference between well-meaning efforts that fail, and those that are effective for both children and adults. Creating an enabling environment may take only a few simple steps. It is often about identifying a blind spot that – once acknowledged – is quite easy to remedy. All the essays emphasise the need for adequate time and relevant information, human and financial resources for participatory processes, and certain skills and ethics amongst adult facilitators.

An enabling environment for participation is inclusive and attentive to different styles of communicating. Pendlebury highlights the exclusionary factors that constrain participation in school governance – for younger children, as well as in the electoral processes and within school representative structures where power relations and diversity are key challenges (pp. 43 – 48). Realising the democratic promise of school governance “depends on creating and maintaining conditions that enable learners to engage in effective dialogue – with one another and with adults involved in school governance” (p 48). The indicators for good participatory practice in school governance (p 47) could be applied to other governance structures too – for example, in child and youth care centres. In many ways these governance structures mimic government structures, so children's views

about democracy are affected by how they experience this form of active citizenship.

Meaningful participation in any dialogue requires information, and adults need to provide children with appropriate information in a language they can understand and support them to engage in discussions that seek to find solutions to issues affecting their lives. The media are a vital source of information and shape the agenda for public discourse, yet children are not often taken seriously as consumers of media. The image that the media portray of children is also problematic – they appear as victims of abuse, war, disease or poverty, or worse as non-descript objects with no opinions. Some news stories violate children's rights by identifying child victims and offenders when it is clearly not in their best interests. Bird and Rahfeldt show how, with support from adults, children can become critical consumers and creative producers of media (pp. 54 – 58).

There are many creative methodologies that can be used to give children a voice. The children's radio projects described on p. 57 and on pp. 65 – 69 depict how, with training and a microphone in hand, children have the confidence to ask for information that has been withheld by adults. As adults come to recognise the wisdom in the children's questions and concerns, this experience begins to unsettle the status quo.

Learning along the way is part of the process of taking children's participation in social dialogue seriously. There can never be a one-size-fits-all prescription of how to enable children's participation. All the child participation initiatives mentioned in this volume have planned an approach to the best of their ability, and then adapted working practices along the way. It is in this iterative process that learning happens. Even small steps towards different ways of working with children are helpful. There are huge advantages in starting small and growing slowly – all the time attending to the social dynamics between generations, genders and interest groups.

### **What are the gaps?**

While children receiving care in hospitals or any other service are at least visible in a way that new approaches can be developed, there are children who remain invisible. For example, those with disabilities or learning difficulties, and the large numbers of children who live in poverty but who are not classified as vulnerable. There are gains all round in seeing these children as partners in social processes.

Countrywide research in diverse settings shows that children and their adult carers in poor neighbourhoods have huge gaps in their knowledge around education, training, employment and health.<sup>22</sup> Accurate, relevant information is rarely available in the few services that exist in such areas. And accessing it is often hampered by long-held traditions that demarcate certain topics

as “adult only”. Consequently, many children and young adults do not know what they do not know, so they do not seek knowledge or services vital to their development.

Another glaring gap in our thinking and practice around children’s participation is in their use of social media. So ubiquitous now are cell phones with MXit, and numerous web-based social networking platforms, that an entire world of communication exists that is often simply outside the reach of adults unless they delve into it. To date, we know little about how children in South Africa are using social media to access the information they need to make informed choices, or to express their views in ways that could influence decisions affecting their lives.

One of the issues not addressed in this volume is how children themselves prepare for participation in social dialogue. Essays show how social dialogue takes place at various levels and in each context the interaction between children and adults is different. But one thing is clear: Children need their own spaces too, where they can discuss important topics with their peers. For example, a boy participating in the making of the accompanying poster did not want to “MXit with the Minister” because he sees MXit as a sacred space where children have their own dialogue free from the constraints of sharing with adults.

## Conclusion

Children are citizens and they have rights to participate in decisions that affect them not only in the home, but also in wider society, whether as individual service users, as groups, or in participatory processes with government to shape society. Children routinely act as citizens by taking responsibility for themselves and others in numerous ways, but truly effective participation requires a partnership between children and adults.

Children, especially young children, are often denied opportunities to exercise these rights. They are excluded from social dialogue either because adults see themselves as having superior expertise, or adults lack the time to engage with children or have simply forgotten how to interpret the language of the young. Children’s interests may also clash with adult agendas, making them competitors or opponents that are easy to sideline because of their age.

On condition that it is done with respect for the equal dignity of all who are involved, children’s participation in social dialogue works for everyone. Realising children’s citizenship rights helps to realise the ideal of a just and democratic society envisaged in South Africa’s Constitution.

## Further reading

There is a growing literature on children’s participation, from “how to” guides to theoretical perspectives. Useful publications include:  
 Bray R & Clacherty G (2010) *Child and Youth Participation in East and Southern Africa: Taking Stock and Moving Forward. An Analytical Review*

*of the Literature and Five Case Studies on Child and Youth Participation in East and Southern Africa.* Pretoria: Regional Agency Task Team on Children and AIDS (RIATT) Eastern and Southern Africa.

Children’s Rights Centre (2009) *Including Children: Guidelines on Ethical Practice in Fulfilling Children’s Rights to Participation.* Durban: CRC.

*International Journal of Children’s Rights: Special issue on child participation*, 16(3), 2008.

Lansdown G (2011) *A Framework for Measuring the Participation of Children and Adolescents.* Amman, Jordan: UNICEF MENA Regional Office.

Percy-Smith B & Thomas N (2010) *A Handbook of Children and Young People’s Participation.* London: Routledge.

*Perspectives in Education: Special issue on theorising children’s public participation*, 29(1), 2011.

Upadhyay J (2006) *Child and Youth Participation Resource Guide.* Bangkok: UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office.

## References

- 1 Przeworski A (1999) Minimalist conceptions of democracy: A defence. In: Shapiro I & Hacker-Cordón C (eds) *Democracy’s Values.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Schumpeter J (1942) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy.* New York: Harper;
- Medearis J (2001) *Joseph Schumpeter’s Two Theories of Democracy.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- 3 Marshall TH (1950) *Citizenship and Social Class* (1st edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 4 See no. 3 above.
- 5 See, for example: Isin EF & Turner B (eds) (2002) *Handbook of Citizenship Studies,* London: Sage.
- 6 Lister R (2007) Why citizenship: Where, when and how children? *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 8(2): 693-718.
- 7 See nos. 3 and 5 above.
- 8 Gutmann A (2007) Democracy. In: Goodin RE, Pettit P & Pogge T (eds) *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy, Volume II.* Oxford: Blackwell.
- 9 Cohen J (1989) Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In: Hamlin A & Pettit P (eds) *The Good Polity.* Oxford: Blackwell.
- 10 Young IM (2002) *Inclusion and Democracy.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 11 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Act 108 of 1996.
- 12 See no. 11 above, section 3.
- 13 See no. 11 above, section 9.
- 14 Stasiulis D (2002) The active child citizen: Lessons from Canadian policy and the children’s movement. *Citizenship Studies*, 6(4): 509.
- 15 See, for example: James A & James AL (2004) Chapter 2: Key constructs: Politics, policies and process. In: *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Policy and Social Practice.* London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 16 Jans M (2004) Children as citizens: Towards a contemporary notion of child participants. *Childhood*, 11(1): 27-44.
- 17 Smith AB & Bjerke H (2009) Children’s citizenship. In: Taylor N & Smith AB (eds) *Children as Citizens? International Voices.* Dunedin: Otago University Press: 16.
- 18 Bray R, Gooskens I, Kahn L, Moses S & Seekings J (2010) *Growing Up in the New South Africa: Childhood and Adolescence in Post-Apartheid Cape Town.* Cape Town: HSRC Press.
- 19 Statistics South Africa (2010) General Household Survey 2009. In: Hall K & Meintjies H (2011) Demography – Children in South Africa. *Children Count – Abantwana Babalulekile website.* Children’s Institute, UCT. View at: [www.childrencount.ci.org.za/indicator.php?id=1&indicator=1](http://www.childrencount.ci.org.za/indicator.php?id=1&indicator=1).
- 20 National Treasury (2011) *Budget 2011: A People’s Guide.* Pretoria: Department of National Treasury. View at: [www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2011/guides/Eng%20PGB%202011\\_.pdf](http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2011/guides/Eng%20PGB%202011_.pdf)
- 21 De Wet T, Kruger J & Black V (2009) *Phila Impilo! Live Life! Ways to Healing, Children as Partners in Health. Stakeholders’ Policy and Strategy Workshop: Report.* Durban: Young Insights for Planning.
- 22 See, for example, no. 18 above.