



## THEORISING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION: LEARNING ACROSS COUNTRIES AND ACROSS DISCIPLINES

A seminar funded by the Leverhulme Trust

6 - 8 April 2009, Cape Town, South Africa

### Introduction

In April 2009, the Children's Institute of the University of Cape Town hosted an inter-disciplinary and international seminar '*Theorising Children's Participation*' in Cape Town. The seminar was funded by the Leverhulme Trust as part of an inter-disciplinary academic network on theorising children's participation.

This was the first in a series of seminars to be funded under the network. Subsequent seminars will be held in Brazil and India.

The aim of the seminar series is to engage in a process of critical thinking around the participation of children in the public arena in order to develop the theoretical underpinnings of the concept of 'children's participation' which has become a much used phrase within research and policy arena over the past two decades. The specific objectives of the seminar series are to:

- Map out the different theoretical approaches to participation from relevant disciplines as developed in their country contexts; exploring their strengths and weaknesses; exploring their usefulness in relation to children's participation.
- Interrogate the notion of the 'international' and how children's participation can be understood locally, regionally and internationally and how theorisation can be developed that encapsulates these differentiations.
- Develop advanced theoretical frameworks within which to conceptualise children's participation.

The seminar therefore opened the debate beyond the confines of what is normally labeled and understood as 'children's participation', and engaged scholars from a variety of disciplines.

### Seminar participants

The participants at the South African seminar included members of the Leverhulme-funded academic network as well as South African scholars representing a range of disciplines and practical experience.

Name	Organisation
Kristina Bentley	Department of Political Science, University of the Western Cape
Vivienne Bozalek	Director of Teaching and Learning, University of the Western Cape

Rachel Bray	Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
Sandra Burman	Socio-Legal Unit, Faculty of Law, University of Cape Town
Udi Butler	Department of Anthropology, University of Oxford; and the International Centre for Research and Policy on Childhood (CIESPI), Rio de Janeiro
Nazir Carrim	School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand
Glynnis Clacherty	Clacherty and Associates
Andy Dawes	Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town
Deborah Ewing	I-mediate Consulting
Patti Henderson	Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
Rachel Hinton	DFID, Universities of Oxford and Edinburgh
Lucy Jamieson	Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
Zubair Meenai	Department of Social Work, Jamia Millia Islamia Central University
Sue Moses	Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
Denise Newfield	Department of English, University of the Witwatersrand
Marcelo Princeswal	CIESPI, Rio de Janeiro
Anita Rampal	Department of Education, University of Delhi
Monty Roodt	Department of Sociology, Rhodes University
Fiona Ross	Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town
Savyasaachi	Department of Sociology, Jamia Millia Islamia Central University
Kay Tisdall	School of Social and Political Studies and Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh
Gabriel Urgoiti	Independent consultant

### **Seminar papers and format**

The seminar followed a format of paper presentations and discussion in plenary as well as small group work.

The following papers were presented:

1. **Theoretical overview: Children and young people's participation in 'collective' decision-making**  
Rachel Hinton, DFID & Kay Tisdall, University of Edinburgh
2. **Children and participation in South Africa: Exploring the Landscape' Key points**  
Rachel Bray, Sue Moses & Patti Henderson, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
3. **A history and overview of child participatory research in South Africa.**  
Glynnis Clacherty, Clacherty and Associates, Johannesburg
4. **Children's participation: Recognising and promoting agency in unequal power relations.**

Deborah Ewing, I-mediate Consulting, Durban

5. **Modes of participation and conceptions of children in South African Education**  
Nazir Carrim, School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand
6. **Multi-modal pedagogies and children's participation**  
Denise Newfield, Department of English, University of the Witwatersrand
7. **Children's Rights and Children's Agency: Suggesting a deliberative approach to children's participation**  
Kristina Bentley, Department of Political Science, University of the Western Cape
8. **Innovative research methods in collaboration with children: A critical assessment of 'child participation'**  
Patti Henderson, Children's Institute, University of Cape Town
9. **Participation, local governance and attitudes of youth: A Grahamstown case study.**  
Monty Roodt & Sonwabo Stuurman, Dept of Sociology, Rhodes University
10. **Theoretical / normative frameworks for children's participation: Social justice and the political ethics of care.**  
Vivienne Bozalek, University of the Western Cape

### **Central themes discussed**

Seminar participants noted that although the diversity of the group in terms of practices and disciplines presented challenges, it also offered opportunities to view their own and other work through different disciplinary lenses, thus providing for stimulating and generative discussion.

Key themes emerging from the papers and discussions included:

- The need to interrogate key concepts, terminologies and definitions:
  - Different disciplines held varying ideas about terms such as the 'public', 'participation' and 'children'.
  - Terms that might otherwise be taken for granted should constantly be revisited
  - In relation to 'participation' the difficulty of defining the meaning of the concept of was discussed and questions raised as to its usefulness and the possibility of utilising more concrete and precise terms
  - The use of the term 'children' vs. alternatives such as 'young people' was discussed.
- The relationship of 'participation' to 'transformation' (and sustainable transformation)
- The importance of incorporating notions of temporality as well as the historical, social, political and economic context into theorising
- Challenging dichotomies and dualistic thinking in relation to 'children's participation':
  - Child – adult
  - Informal – formal
  - Public – private
- The nature of theorising
  - Non-appropriating theory
  - Theorising to explain but also to 'open possibilities'
  - Defining units of analysis and our epistemological questions
  - The use of models and metaphors

- The need for reflexive practice in theorising (mixing the normative, empirical and theoretical)
- The importance of acknowledging ideological and normative underpinnings of the concept of 'children's participation'.
- Conceptions of childhood and the role of shifting adult perceptions of children for participation
- The usefulness of a child rights framework for participation
- The politics of knowledge (whose knowledge is valued) and access to information
- Individual vs. collective notions of identity; models of personhood
- The politics of representation and how this relates to 'participation'
- Relationality in participation
  - Listening
  - Trust
- Multi-modality (social semiotics/communication) and the role of new technologies in 'children's participation'
- Situated learning
- Guided/scaffolded participation
- Approaches to democracy and democratic practice: e.g. communicative democracy; deliberative democracy
- The need to think about 'youth spaces' and adults inclusion/exclusion from these
- Homogenisation of 'children' – the need for differentiation
- The need to incorporate local ways of talking about solidarity, co-operation etc (e.g. ubuntu) into theories of 'participation'
- Socio-structural constraints
- Children and citizenship
- Inequality
- Participatory parity and its relationship to power
- The link between method, practice, purpose and outcomes

The function of the seminar was not to come to consensus, but to allow the cross-fertilisation of ideas across the various disciplines and practitioners. This outcome was certainly achieved during the vigorous debates and discussions.

A suitable journal is currently being sought to publish the collective of papers.

For more information about the seminar or about the Leverhulme-funded network more broadly please contact Sue Moses at the Children's Institute, University of Cape Town ([sue.moses@uct.ac.za](mailto:sue.moses@uct.ac.za)) or Kay Tisdall at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh ([K.Tisdall@ed.ac.uk](mailto:K.Tisdall@ed.ac.uk)). Further information about the seminar (including Power Point presentations) and the wider network activities are available at [www.cfr.ac.uk](http://www.cfr.ac.uk).