Child citizenship and participation: Bottom-up level change from professional conversations with children

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Abstract: Hart's (1992) 'Innocenti Essay on Child Participation' advocated for increased involvement of young people as active participants in societal decision-making. This paper provides a historical overview of active child citizenship initiatives, using applied research insights from 'bottom-up' approaches and conversations with children and professionals. It explores how current practices exemplified through three case studies can enhance genuine child participation and citizenship. The case study analysis examines the conversational processes involving children in problem-solving and decision-making within their communities. Through these examples, the paper highlights practical strategies for meaningfully engaging children as stakeholders and empowering them as active citizens whose voices substantially influence matters impacting their lives.

Introduction

It has been over 30 years since Hart's (1992) 'Innocenti Essay on Child Participation' called for a more robust and prioritised focus to involve young people as active participants in decision-making processes within civil society. This highly cited article appeals for a more concerted action to enable children to express their views freely and for them to be heard and enacted. Hart (1992) identified the paradox inherent in safeguarding children whilst also promoting their agency within settings such as the family and school; as these very institutions simultaneously serve as significant mechanisms to contain their voice. This led to the assertion that child participation was often patronising and tokenistic and as such a child's pathway to citizenship was seen as compromised. When reviewing early work on child participation and citizenship, examples of tokenism and patronage of children still resonate today. Hart's (1992) example of children being used as 'decoration' in the form of performances or recitals of adult-inspired productions for the distinct purpose of entertaining adult audiences is not uncommon in Australian society today. The rise of kid influencers on social media exemplifies this, where children's daily lives are commercialized and sensationalized as content to engage adult online viewers. This commodification of children's experiences and developmental milestones for entertainment raises exploitation and privacy concerns. Even worse participation of children through manipulating their opinions for adult-initiated socio -political purposes such as children speaking at events or holding placards is evident in socio-political movements (Hart, 2008). While 'tokenism' has seen children invited to speak or appear in panels it has not provided the adequate and developmentally appr[1]opriate information for children to actively participate in conveying their opinions and bring about change (Warming, 2011). These contemporary examples highlight that despite approaches towards active child citizenship, children at best still have partial citizenship.

Within the literature, the recognition and work towards active child citizenship has been documented as a catalyst for transitioning traditional top-down and structural level approaches to more bottom-up approaches (Lúcio & I'Anson, 2015; Theobald et al., 2011; Wessells, 2015). In this paradigm,

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children are actively engaged in shaping policies and practices which directly influence their lives. Bottom-up approaches are grounded by values of empowerment and inclusivity, whereby the involvement of children in decision-making processes results in strategies to amplify their voices, perspectives and experiences (Wessells, 2015). Whilst in theory, bottom-up approaches recognise children as stakeholders and ensure policies and practice are relevant and reflective of children's needs, their level of success and impact remains in question and warrants further research and exploration (Wessells, 2015). Including, what has changed since this time in enabling participation towards active child citizenship?

Have certain global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the global refugee crisis created an unequal burden on children and sacrificed any small achievements that were made in between? Using applied research focusing on both 'bottom-up' approaches to child participation and citizenship and insights gained from conversations with adults in professional roles and children, this paper will give a historical overview of active child citizenship, focusing on stubborn areas of change and how current practices demonstrated through examples can pave the way in improving and increasing genuine child participation and citizenship.

Child Participation

Over the last three decades since Hart's paper important achievements in child participation have occurred and can be closely linked to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which essentially encapsulates and affords individual human rights into child contexts (United Nations, 1989). It is important to note that many of these complex and critical decisions have predominately taken place within high-to-middle-income countries and at the structural level in legal and policy situations (Lätsch et al., 2023; United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], 2019). Such as in family court and child protection matters through to the children's role in matters of school governance and their presence in social media activities. However, despite these advances, there are still areas where child participation remains limited or overlooked. For example, Western conceptualisation of childhood dominates international legislation and policy, particularly the UNCRC. Whereby, any individual under the age of 18 years is considered a child (United Nations, 1989). This is, however, a contested notion given that there are many cultures whereby adulthood is conferred upon an individual through a process of initiation rather than being age-based (Lansdown, 2005). Tensions also exist in terms of cultural variations in the perception of what constitutes child protection. For example, in Pakistan, corporal punishment is viewed as a teaching mechanism rather than abuse of a child.

Despite these tensions being a child does matter. The assumptions about what it means to be a child and the values attached often overlook everyday practices and processes related to children's capacities to participate as active citizens with rights (Morrow, 2013). If we only use age as a determinant of capacity, we run the risk of never critically examining the power relationships that exist between adults and children. Nor do we examine the social, economic, and political structures that see children as passive rather than active citizens. To do so would help to illuminate the power relations that produce discrimination and exclusion of children (Warming, 2011). Using the lens of ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), one can view how the interactions of a child and their environment exist within and between different systems. For example, immediate microsystems, such as within family or school to larger macrosystems which include larger cultural and ideological contexts such as laws or policies (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000).

A key example of a microsystem that can positively influence how active child participation and citizenship can be experienced are everyday situations such as conversations between child professionals and children (Novella Cámara et al., 2022). Viewing this interaction within this microsystem, however, does not exist in a vacuum. For instance, while a teacher having an open dialogue with students about rules in the classroom represents a micro-level participatory practice, it also highlights the more stubborn or complex areas of fundamental structural change needed in the broader education system. Despite such localized efforts, structural barriers like rigid curricula, standardized testing, and top-down administrative policies often hinder the substantive integration of children's voices in key decisions impacting their

learning environments (Wessells, 2015). Thus, the action of bottom-up or micro changes makes the necessary challenges to existing systemic obstacles to genuine child participation visible. Structurally, the role of child participation is often perceived as a mere procedural step without clear evidence of its substantive impacts on socio-political decision-making (Wessells, 2015). Thus, raising questions about the level of authenticity of participation in everyday relationships and interactions between children and professionals. In this way, child participation is seen as something that occurs without adequate evidence and results in scepticism surrounding the exploration of children's knowledge and how it can affect and change the adult-child relationship. For example, many professionals who work with children will espouse the virtue and value of child participation but view the main block to be structural rather than recognise how it may occur in their everyday child-adult conversations (Casley, 2017; Mayall, 2000). This discrepancy between the recognition of the importance of child participation and its practical integration within adult-child interactions requires deeper understanding. Through processes that aim to foster genuine dialogue and cooperation between these two groups a shift from a procedural approach to a more authentic and inclusive engagement with child perspective can pave the way for meaningful changes which contribute to the empowerment, experience and application of child participation and citizenship.

Understanding Child Citizenship

To understand child citizenship, one must first engage with citizenship itself. Citizenship is distinct from human rights in that concepts of citizenship are linked to membership of a nation-state, whereas human rights are rooted in the individual by virtue of one's humanity and are therefore not bound by membership to a nation-state (Basok et al., 2006; Isin & Turner, 2007; Shafir & Brysk, 2006). The conceptualisations of human rights and citizenship are therefore paradoxical in that whilst human rights are regarded as innate, citizenship rights are exclusive to those individuals deemed to be citizens and are created and granted by courts and upheld in the framework of a sovereign state (Isin & Turner, 2007). At a basic level, citizenship refers to primary legal rights that all people are entitled to as members of a nation-state (Linklater, 1992). Citizenship also refers to the right to participate in the political life of a community, and the fundamental duties that occur simultaneously with these rights (Linklater, 1992). It is important to note that the concept of citizenship at a global level is increasingly under threat due to more than 108 million people being forcibly displaced as of the end of 2022 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2022). These individuals, made up of refugees, internally displaced people and asylum seekers, are often faced with rendering their citizenship status and thus their political power and voice (UNHCR, 2022). Children make up 40% of this population and are further vulnerable due to the removal of essential socio-economic safeguards, interruption of public services and humanitarian assistance and exposure to serious human rights violations (UNHCR, 2022). These citizenships are important at all times and all places, however, they become particularly imperative in settings in which children are at increased risk of harm and thus their protection and welfare are compromised (Lätsch et al., 2023).

Historically notions of human rights have been linked to citizenship; a concept that has traditionally excluded women and continues to some extent to exclude children, particularly given that traditionally children's welfare has been indivisibly linked to women's welfare and social conditions (Mayall, 2000). For example, prior to the twentieth century, children were considered small adults and were involved in labour. However, following the initiation of compulsory education in the early twentieth century a separation between the environment of adults and the conceptualisation of childhood occurred (Jans, 2004). Citizenship therefore became the exclusive territory of adults, with children being considered a separate social group (Jans, 2004). While theorists have recognised issues surrounding children and citizenship in liberal democracies, very few have further explored these issues beyond highlighting that children do not hold full citizenship (Cohen, 2005). Similarly, little attention has been paid to the multifaceted nature of child citizenship and its implications for their well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014).

It is understood that whilst citizenship provides individuals with rights, protection and benefits, including access to important services, the dependence of children on adults necessitates the granting of special rights to children (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). The marginalisation of children can be enacted for reasons

of protection, however can also be paternalistic (Qvortrup, 2011). The extent to which children have direct and independent relationships with the state is thus questionable given their dependence on adults and the way in which adults must act as proxies in the relationship between the child and the state (Leiter et al., 2006). If children are however understood as members of a social group not just as individuals it is therefore fundamental to reflect on that group's right to actively participate in society (Mayall, 2000). Here the critical importance of adult-child relationships is highlighted especially in professional contexts where children's rights to participate freely in conversations is directly linked to their rights as citizens and more fundamentally as humans.

Conversations with Children

Conversational engagement with professionals offers children a critical site in their relationship between the 'state' and themselves as active rather than passive citizens. The value of the 'conversation' in the conduct of professional practice is important for children to express opinions, wishes, needs, and to be understood. Much of the literature on child participation and citizenship focuses on the structural approaches often neglecting how the values of these concepts can be applied to everyday practice for professionals. In an everyday practice model professionals work collaboratively with children, using conversational processes to understand how children view their own lives (Cartmel et al., 2024).

Children's view of their own lives happens through dialogical and transactional processes they have encountered through their everyday lived experiences. As children develop, they learn to use communication to represent their identity, and to make sense of their social world (Theobald et al., 2011; Ulvik & Gulbrandsen, 2015; van Nijnatten, 2013). It is through communication that children's feelings are verbalised, and identities revealed. Therefore, having conversations with children is a way of making meaning out of their everyday lived experiences. The knowledge gained about children in this way can work to disrupt the Western view that age is the only determinant of competence and move to a place where children can be collaboratively supported to express their views, to be understood and in turn be given opportunities for participation.

For meaning-making to take place in everyday conversations between professionals and children it needs to be a cooperative process. According to van Nijnatten (2013) make meaning of others only happens if one is seen as a social actor and having a sense of agency, whereby their view of the world is constructed through their daily interactions and relationships. Despite the observable sense of agency children have, professionals often work towards understanding children's needs through processes of surveillance. Meaning that concepts of what it means to be a child are controlled by the professionals' perspective (Bae, 2009). As we know interactions and relationships between professionals and children have been produced over time and context, which calls for professionals to be attuned to what is happening for them in the present and how they are influenced by the dominating discourses around child participation and agency. Presence in this sense can be defined as "… deep listening, of being open beyond one's preconceptions and historical way of making sense" (Senge, et al. 2005, p.13). This leads to professionals gaining a better understanding of how their conversational and relational skills with children can function in oppressive ways (Bae, 2009).

Furthermore, to co-construct meaning with children, professionals must have the knowledge and skills to critically reflect and listen as a simultaneous process. This active process is an exchange of meanings that requires a deep 'suspension of judgement' on the part of the professional and the ability to listen to what children say from a contextual perspective, which involves hearing, interpreting, and co-constructing meaning in a shared dialogue (Rinaldi, 2001; Scharmer, 2018; Senge et al., 2005). This is not always limited to the spoken word, as children can express their views in different ways, therefore the professional must take the time to notice and observe what is going on for a child to help with the contextual interpretation in this meaning-making process. Critical examination of everyday professional practice is imperative if children are to have equity in their everyday conversations and relationships with professionals such as educators, teachers and youth workers.

In this paper so far, the authors have examined child citizenship and participation, whilst also

critically exploring the progress in these domains at a global and local level. It is argued that change from a top-down and structural level has had varying success and impact, and rather that in everyday situations such as conversations between professionals and children that the interchange between active citizenship and participation can take place. By using a case study approach to child conversations, the following section will illustrate through research evidence how theoretical and structural approaches to child citizenship and participation can be employed in conversations with children. The results offer guidance for creating environments of participation and active citizenship in everyday practice with children and thus take an unambiguous approach to creating an environment for further fundamental change in the rights of children in society.

Research Design

Whilst literature surrounding child participation exists, there is limited evidence about the actual circumstances in which children have been afforded opportunities for participation and lived citizenship. Furthermore, despite Articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child forecasting an external framework for the outcomes of conversational encounters, little is known about the nuances of the conversations that ensure that there is authentic participation from the perspective of children. Thus, highlighting the need for deeper level analysis at the micro level.

This research addresses these gaps in the literature by employing a case study methodology to support a comprehensive and in-depth investigation of conversations between professionals and children aged between five and 12 years. Using grounded theory analysis, the phenomenon of the conversational encounters between children and adults is examined to explore the effectiveness of employing a bottom-up approach to foster and promote child participation and active citizenship was conducted. Grounded theory was used as it is recognised as particularly useful in 'natural' settings such as the everyday conversations between children and adults. Using an inductive process, a deeper explanation of the elements of conversations is offered, with the enquiry moving away from more descriptive accounts of 'what happens' when children and professionals have conversations, to addressing questions pertaining to both the 'how' and 'why' children contributed to the conversations.

Presented below are three case studies. with the common characteristic of demonstrating the intention of the professional to provide opportunities for children to have their views heard on matters that affect them and the right to obtain and share information (Article 12 and 13). In each of the case studies, professionals commented on the conversational process and how it linked to children's participation and sense of citizenship. Quotes from children participants are also included to demonstrate the child's voice. The patterns of behaviour and actions as described in the data were coded and reviewed with the intent to explicate "What influenced child participation in conversations between children and adults." The authors of this paper engaged in multiple encounters with the data associated with each of the cases. In revisiting the data, reflection and coding of the patterns of relationship that were happening in each of the conversations occurred. The coded observations of the children and professionals engaged in conversations were linked to the coding of the in-depth interviews with these children and professionals. In addition, reflective dialogues occurred between the researchers as they reported their encounters with each of the case sites. The process reached saturation as the generated data was analysed from the ground up.

An important strength of the case study approach was the ability to undertake an investigation of the process of Talking Circles as a tool to consult with children as a phenomenon in the context of children's services. As Yin (1994) states, case study research is useful to examine a contemporary set of events that cannot be manipulated or controlled; such as the conversations between children and professionals. Hence the data provided through the multiple data sources provides the researchers and readers of this paper with information on how and why the value of conversations in the conduct of professional practice is important for children's participation and active citizenship

Case Studies

Case studies used in this research are summarised in Table 1 and expanded in detail below. Each

case study used multiple data sources including two or more of direct detailed observations, focus groups, interviews, and/or documents. All case studies were conducted in settings outside of school classrooms, however, the dynamics of conversations between children and adults had similar qualities to school and other child services. The focus of the research related to identifying the exchange in child participation and the concept of active citizenship.

The research for each case study was approved by Griffith University Ethics. Parents gave permission for their children to participate, and children were asked for their assent. University students and educators also gave permission for their reflective journals to be shared in interviews and focus groups. The data and findings across the three projects were examined using grounded theory to analyse the findings (Walker & Myrick, 2006). This analysis has provided the discussion about active child citizenship.

Table 1. Summary of collective case studies

	Participants	Age Range	Service Type	Data Collection Tools
Case 1	n=200	5-12	School Age Care	Interviews
				Drawings
	n=20		Pre-service	Informal Conversations
			Educators	Field notes
Case 2	n=3	5-11	Children	Interviews
				Lifeline drawings
	n=4		Child and Family	Informal Conversations
			Professionals	
Case 3	n=13	5-11	Children	Interviews
				Focus group
	n=2		Educators	

Case One – Talking Circles: Action Research Project

The talking circles: Action Research Project was a community-funded initiative based on finding ways to engage with children aged five to -12 years. Its aims related to encouraging the development of a sense of identity, belonging and connectedness to their community. It included creating opportunities to enhance their capacity to express their views, and thus influence matters that affected them. This action research project was conducted over two years and involved 20 School Age Care (SAC) services in southeast Queensland and 20 university students (Cartmel et al., 2024; Cartmel & Casley, 2014a, 2014b; Cartmel & Casley, 2010). As part of their university program, each student was assigned to a SAC service during their field education program. A university study led and facilitated a conversational process, known as a Talking Circle (Cartmel & Casley, 2014a) with a group of 8 to ten children. The Talking Circle format, developed by two of the authors of this study, is based on listening. Listening to oneself, listening to others and listening to what emerges from the group (Scharmer, 2018). After a pilot in one site, the action research was expanded. The university students were educated in facilitating the conversational process with children. To recruit for the study, service attended by the university students for their fieldwork, provided children and their parents with information about an opportunity to participate in "Talking Circles" one-hour activity conducted over a period of eight weeks. The first eight children who returned permission forms were selected. The students Further briefed children on what to do if they felt unfortable in expressing sentive matter and informed them that they could decline participation at any time during the study.

Each week sessions were developed based on what the children wanted to talk about. Sessions were facilitated by the students and with the children; then critically reflected upon in the university class with the facilitator (one of the authors). As sessions progressed, students were encouraged to adapt the process to ensure that there was active participation in the conversations they were facilitating with their group of children.

The findings from this action research project reported that Talking Circles built relational capacity of both the children and the university students. Each became more self-aware, gained confidence in their capacity to problem-solve and subsequently built leadership and resilience skills. Children's capacity to

listen, take notice of others, respect others and be supportive of their peers increased during the Talking Circle process. The children were able to describe the changes they were experiencing. For some children, the Talking Circles gave them a safe place where they could express themselves.

For example:

It's calm, it's peaceful and I feel less stressed (Chani. age 11).

We can talk about things that we can't at the oval. We talk about ourselves (Mitch, age 9).

For other children, the Talking Circle was a place where they felt a sense of belonging. For example:

People like me here. I have made more friends. I can trust people here (Tiani, age 9).

I don't get into trouble anymore at school. We can get tips when we are having hard times. We get to share our life (Zac, age 10).

We can talk about our problems, and we can share our feelings and share about our families (Manni, age 8).

I don't get bullied anymore (Reece, age 9).

The university students indicated there was a transformational change for them during the 'Talking Circle' process. They reported changes in their ability to self-reflect, skills to have open and inquiring conversations with children and enhanced confidence in problem-solving with children. In the weekly feedback sessions, students described how the power differential between themselves and the children started to diminish and noted how both groups were gaining skills and confidence in the ability to communicate with each other. Furthermore, the children were able to open up to the group and talk about things that really mattered to them. For example:

The children actually listened to each other's stories. The children are very open and they are interested in each other's stories. They have an idea about what is fair and an understanding about what is serious in someone's life. Some faces were shocked when they heard some of the other children's stories (Ella, university student).

I was surprised that I could build such a close relationship with a child. In my country this would not be possible. I will take these communication skills with me to use with my own children and those I will be working with (Wyena, international university student).

The opportunity for the university students to meet each week while participating in the action research meant that any negative challenges such as understanding how to manage the power differtial or how to ask questions were discussed and resolved.

Case 2 - Doctoral Project: Conversation between Children and Adults

This doctoral project involved a narrative inquiry into what shapes an adult's ability to understand a child's perspective. It was conducted with child, youth and family professionals and children based on their lived experience about having conversations with children and professionals respectively (Casley, 2017). Professionals worked in a variety of children's services including early education and care, schools, family support, out-of-home care and child protection services. The child participants were aged between 5 and eleven years. The participants were recruited using a snowballing process from the alumni of a university program that prepared children's services professionals.

This inquiry uncovered how time, relationships and the spaces professionals and children occupy shape the professional's ability to understand children's perspectives. It also revealed the metanarratives embedded within each of the participant's stories and how they spoke to the marginalisation of children. Demonstrated through historical and generational views held by professionals regarding the capacity of children to have their views heard and to participate in decision-making. It exposed the impact of trust as a concept, belief and action needed by professionals to enable/ encourage meaningful conversations with children that support their participation in civic society. It examined the notion that power and agency is strongly related to how adulthood and childhood have been constructed and reconstructed over time. Finally, it found that for child-adult relationships to be reciprocal there needs to be a shift in how child-adult relationships are viewed by professionals, children, and the wider society.

The professionals in this inquiry revealed that when trust was established between a child and the

professional it promoted deeper conversations, as the children were more willing to open up to them. This helped to hear and understand who the child is and what the child knows. For example;

> I work with many children that have experienced trauma and going through a tough time. I think trust is a big thing, because there are not a lot of people they trust anymore and sometimes it is hard to gain their trust. I always try to be open and honest with them. I don't promise things I don't think I can keep, and I say that to them. I think they respect that. If they don't trust me, they are not going to build a relationship with me (Natasha, children's services practitioner).

However, there were other conditions mentioned by the adult participants, which needed to be in place for conversation between them to take place and trust to be established. These conditions included: being available to get to know each child, creating safe spaces for conversations to take place, and developing opportunities for the professional to enter into the child's world. Lastly, the professionals said they needed specific skills for having open and honest dialogue with children.

The child participants spoke about trust in terms of whom they would trust to tell things to and what they liked or disliked about the way adults interacted with them. Trust, for them, was displayed by an adult being kind and supportive. The children liked to be acknowledged for doing the 'right thing' and felt empowered when given 'important' things to do, as this indicated the professional trusted them. The children spoke highly of adults who displayed playful behaviours and played with them, indicating to the children the adults liked being with them. For example, John, age 5 liked it when he had a conversation with an adult friend about fishing as that is what he likes to do. He also indicated that his favourite teacher was the one who played with them in the classroom. (Olivia, age 8) suggested teachers could show respect to the children by, "a nice good morning welcome when you come into the classroom".

Awareness of and changing the power imbalance between professionals and children was another key indicator for shaping an adult's ability to understanding children's perspectives. The adult participants in the study attempted to achieve this by seeing children as equal partners in the conversations they had with them and by including children in decision-making. One of the adult participants spoke about changing the power differential by her ability to suspend judgment and be in the present with children. She spoke about not being confronted by a child's behaviour and attempting to control the behaviour. She addressed the power imbalance by talking about what is happening in the present with the child or group of children.

Such as;

> I don't want to make my sessions about challenging behaviour. I want it to come up naturally. Let's just talk about things. Explore rather than suggest (Sarah, children's services practitioner).

One of the other participants highlighted how his skills of listening helped to refocus power imbalance in conversations. For example;

> It's about adults learning that it's not about power and control, it's actually, about listening to them (Angus, teacher).

The children's stories about exercising their sense of agency with adults were different across landscapes and in different social contexts. The children indicated that they liked having conversations with adults that: (a) were interested in them, (b) respected them, (c) made them feel listened to, and (d) worked alongside them to be successful in the social contexts they shared. However, the children indicated they were not often influential in decision-making on the landscapes they occupied with adults. However, when they were given an opportunity to express their opinion it was a valuable experience for them. Such as;

> They [coaches] are always asking somebody, my opinion, or someone else's opinion. It's really good (Toby, age 9).

The children in this inquiry seemed to accept their childhood status. They said they liked adults who were kind and guided them in their endeavours. They did not like it if they felt they or other children were treated unfairly by adults. For example, the child participants liked the reward system they encountered in school, where you were rewarded for being "smart" and "good" and for "doing the right thing" (Olivia at age 8; Toby at age 10). With comments also identifying there was room for improvement. Such as:

Maybe the teachers could do something for the good kids, the ones that are good all of the time (Olivia, age 7).

They also accepted that the teachers set the rules. However, what was not acceptable was teachers or other adults being "mean" or that they "shouted" at them (John, age 5; Olivia, age 7; Toby, age 9). Support for their endeavours was what they wanted from the adults in their lives.

In a later conversation Olivia, age 9 said that sometimes it was impossible to reach the goals set out for them by her teacher. The teacher gave out fake money for accumulated points to bid on stuff, with the first person that gets to 50 points gets the fake money. She said one girl was "smart" and "good so she always had more money to bid for stuff. Hence the other children including herself missed out. Olivia did not think that was fair. When asked about having conversations with her teachers Olivia, age 9 believed the teachers did not have time to talk to her as lunch time was too short and the teacher was not available after class as she was on bus duty. When asked the same question, Toby, age 10 responded with, "schools are more serious places and conversations with his teacher were normally about classroom work and stuff like that." He also felt that talking to teachers about what happened on the weekend or things like that as he said "not everyone is your friend in the classroom", and he wouldn't want to talk like that in front of his classmates. Hence, he felt his classroom was not a safe space for conversations with his teacher to take place.

By laying these stories beside each other, the concepts of power and agency were illuminated. To work from a bottom-up approach, there is a need to rethink the social position held by children. It is necessary to liberate both adults and children from the dominant discourses that see them as separate and unequal and identify the historical and generational structures from which children's social position has been derived (Alanen, 2001; Mayall, 2000 Skott-Myhre & Tarulli, 2008). Hence to consider children as active citizens, professionals need to work alongside children where the key component of listening and actively including children in meaningful conversations takes place in everyday practice in environments where all children feel confident and safe to express themselves.

Case 3 - Talking Circles: A strategy for listening to children's voices in School Age Services

This case study was part of an exploratory evaluation of the Talking Circle tool for listening to the voices of children in School Age Services (SAC) in Queensland, Australia (Smith, 2019). The study was conducted at a SAC service that had 25 educators and 250 children from kindergarten to year six. Two educators and thirteen children opted to participate in the study over a three-month period. The researcher used a realist (evaluation) approach to understand 'what works, how, for whom, in what circumstances and to what extent' (Pawson & Tilley, 2004). According to Pawson (2006), interventions offer resources which trigger choice mechanisms (M), which are taken up selectively according to the characteristics and circumstances of subjects (C), resulting in a varied pattern of impact (O). These three key sources of evidence were used to understand how children and educators perceived the use of Talking Circles for listening to children's voices. The realist evaluation approach to the Talking Circle intervention allowed the mechanisms to be identified and how these mechanisms generated the outcomes and what features of the context affected whether those mechanisms operated. The analysis generated these findings and they contributed to the refined program theory that emerged about the Talking Circles.

The findings endorsed Talking Circles as a useful resource, assisting educators in using effective communication skills for listening to children's voices. It was also revealed the educator's ability to facilitate conversations was the strongest mechanism for creating and sustaining opportunities for listening to children. For example, the educators found the Talking Circles process was beneficial for engaging with small groups of children. The focus on conversations with children assisted the educators to learn more about each child by simply listening to them. The educators in this study had a perception of having a trusting relationship between themselves and the children and through participating in the Talking Circles process that they sensed a deeper level of relationship building. Such as one educator expressing the excitement of a child (aged eight) and another describing active listening;

He was excited because people had listened to him. He was so happy to think that he'd been asked his opinion. I thought that we were doing that, so it was that in itself for me. Sometimes because these are the quieter beautiful

children, maybe their voices aren't heard over, you know the 120 other children. I would like [to] think that we were listening, but in small groups I learnt so much about these kids (Jay, Educator 1).

I've begun to really listen to what the children are saying, especially about their families and how for a couple of the children they wished they could spend more time with their Mum and Dad. I've learnt to be silent and really listen deeply to what the kids say. I've been surprised about their deep feelings about the world (Taylor, Educator 2).

The Talking Circles configuration and explicit use of conversation mixed with the introduction of hands-on activities, led to the engagement of the children as a strong mechanism. The children described this engagement in many ways such as children's rights, fun, listening, and helpful. More than one-quarter of the children responded that their perspective of the Talking Circle was important to children's rights. For example;

I wouldn't normally share stuff like that with certain people. In the Talking Circle we weren't made to share stuff, but we shared something (Henry, 9yrs).

Because it [Talking Circle] lets the kids say what they want to say; it doesn't restrict them. You're open and you can say whatever you want (Harpreet, 12yrs).

Whilst another perspective expressed by several of the children was that the Talking Circles were "really fun" (Chloe, 12yrs) and that they were "really happy" when people are around (Sam, 10yrs).

The educators and the children included the notion that using the Talking Circles process was helpful for problem-solving and for making friends. For example;

One afternoon one of the boys started talking about not being included in a group that he would have liked to be friends with. The others in the group gave him some suggestions about what to do and I noticed over the next few afternoons he tried out what others had suggested, like actually telling the group he would like to play with them. The group accepted his friendship, and this boy seems a lot more settled (Jay, Educator 1).

[The Talking Circles] would help another child I know, someone who doesn't tell lots of people stuff, so I reckon that would help her a bit. It helps people learn about other people. I would not normally share stuff like my feelings with certain people but in the Talking Circles you can (Briony, 11 years).

Only one child expressed feelings of not liking the Talking Circle as it made the child feel scared and mad. The child did not want to talk about the reasons for those feelings at the time. Finally, this mechanism relies on the facilitator having the knowledge and skills on how to create a safe space, using generative listening and the ability to craft a genuine inquiry. The Talking Circles process enhanced child participation and created a new experience of belonging. The process is based on the knowledge that is created from the conversations where children's experiences are deepened by listening to others. This new knowledge is co-constructed between children and the educator and has a sense of embodiment revealed by the educators and children in this study as 'feeling different' at the end of the conversation(s).

Discussion

The concept of child participation and citizenship where children of all ages and in all circumstances can participate in lived and active citizenship needs to be understood from a micro level. Following the examination of the literature surrounding this topic and using a case study approach, the authors postulate a new theoretical perspective. Child participation is an active process where children freely come together to listen, inquire, think and act in their everyday lives. This active process diminishes the power structures that interfere with the opportunity for children to participate in authentic ways and these relational and conversational interactions become the focal point for change. For example, if the social world is considered as a continuous activity of interactional and conversational exchanges, it is more likely that children's agency and the possibility for this taking priority over the macro-structural processes to occur (Rafanell, 2013; Wyness, 2018). The 'Talking Circles' can provide children's perspectives to aid policy makers and those managing programs for children and families (see Barblett et al., 2022; Cartmel et al., 2024). The approach can support meaning-making from a diverse representation of children to influence macro systems of policy decision-making and program planning.

It is crucial to keep in mind that there is a complexity to child participation and that the outcome of a conversation is not a linear process. Conversational structures that are imposed on children for

professional assessment or intervention with an intended outcome in mind do not constitute child participation. But rather is a process that has fluidity and is reliant on the skills of the professional's ability to facilitate or open up conversations that explore children's everyday lives. This approach creates a common ground for both children and professionals and is seen as the process for decision-making with children.

Moving on from Hart's proposition to a more contemporary context some successes of participation and citizenship have been uncovered, despite some impasses. Suggestions for an applied approach that employs bottom-up participation rather than top-down structural procedures are necessary for advancement in child participation. Dialogical and transactional processes through more authentic and inclusive engagement with child perspectives can pave the way for meaningful changes that contribute to the empowerment, experience, sense of agency and application of child participation and citizenship. These bases of meaning-making and lived experience constitute an interactionalist approach to this work.

From examining the case studies the authors have drawn ideas about what effective child participation and active citizenship look like. It was discovered the use of an interactionist approach to understanding micro-level interactions and conversations between children and adults will make a difference in the way we approach child participation from the bottom up. An interactionist approach that explores the social world on how children and adults communicate and listen to the perspectives of others is critical. This calls for a focus on how children understand their world and how these views are produced as a continuous process of interactions and conversations they have with adults. This approach illuminates the notion of how child agency can work to influence and change the social structures imposed upon them.

Implications for practice and future research would include preparing professionals with skills for facilitating open and inquiring conversations with children about their everyday life experiences. Using processes such as Talking Circles may also support a safe space for professionals and children to gain trust, self-reflect, problem-solve and engage in honest dialogue. Furthermore, the notion of structural power and agency cannot be underestimated and thus working from a bottom-up approach requires a rethinking of the social position held by children and actively including children in meaningful everyday conversations. There is also the possibility of rethinking how children can contribute to policy development and other aspects of their lives.

Conclusion

In the 30 years since Hart's 1992 Innocenti Essay on Child Participation, there have been many positive changes in child participation. Such as professionals engaging with children to make decisions in matters of family law, child protection, education and public policy to name a few areas. Additionally, it is acknowledged that there has been much progress in understanding child citizenship and child participation from global and local levels (top-down). This research however has exposed a deeper understanding of the structural features and impact of the everyday conversations between children and adults. It has highlighted the complexity of the interchange between active citizenship and participation as an active process. Using a bottom-up approach to research it has further emphasised the importance of agency in diminishing the power differential between children and professionals. It has also illuminated the notion of understanding child agency using an interactionist approach as a means of changing structures that work to marginalise children's voices. The features of the conversations and interactions between children and adults are forms of active participation and citizenship together that are not linear, but rather a fluid dialogical process for children to engage with each other to listen, inquire, think and make decisions. This paper has provided the necessary tools for professionals working with children to use in practice and move towards true child participation and active citizenship.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

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