

Charting change in the participatory settings of childhood¹

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Introduction

Participation has become a word that everyone seems to use today to legitimise their programmes with groups that are considered in some way to be marginalised. This includes a wealth of discussions about the growth of ‘children’s participation’ in society in line with the call of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The phrase is used with people working within very different ideologies concerning the appropriate roles of children, but almost all of them write about children’s programmed activities. In the UK, most of the emphasis seems to be on children’s participation in decision making in formal settings with adults or consultation of children by adults, even though the rationale that is commonly given is the much broader goal of the promotion of citizenship. In this chapter I argue that the emphasis on children’s decision making with adults and consultation by adults in formal settings is a much too narrow view of children’s social participation for citizenship.² We need to address not just children’s voices in governance but also children’s participation in civil society. I use the term children’s social participation in this chapter to refer to all of those instances where children collaborate with other children or with adults, to make decisions or plan activities together from building a play house to organising a football game. If we are to reflect fully on how children are, and could be, involved in the processes of building a more participatory democratic society we need to simultaneously map out the formal changes in governance alongside the dramatic changes that have been taking place in children’s everyday social lives with peers and their non-formal relations with adults in their communities. I believe that these have greater importance for the reproduction of a

democratic civil society than that brought by any mandated, or formal, participation in the form of children's forums, councils and local government consultations, or from school citizenship curricula.

In this chapter I will begin to sketch out the range of domains of social participation of pre-adolescent children in the UK that I believe have been changing. While valuable research has begun on some of these domains there does not yet seem to be any recognition of the need to map these out comprehensively and in relation to one another. First, we need to carefully chart how children's autonomous activities with peers have changed over just one generation. Children have always learned social skills and participated in the reproduction of their communities through their non-formal activities with other children and the state has often tried to intervene and control these processes.³ For example, there has recently been much concern by the UK government with youth delinquency in the UK. But there is a larger story that we need to map – of the multiple ways in a range of settings that the state, and national institutions, have chosen to set the stage for the socialisation of citizenship by influencing how children interact with one another – in neighbourhoods, schools, play resources, sports facilities and after-school programmes. In discussions of the development of children as citizens in the UK, the child-to-child dimension seems to have been greatly under-recognised and under-theorised. Even those who promote the UNCRC write of the triad of 'the child, the family and the state', as though other children themselves are not an important part of the processes of social reproduction and transformation. But we also need to systematically assess how children's non-formal participation with adults has changed. I will therefore briefly summarise some of the changes that I believe have been occurring in the nature of children's social participation in the family, in the school, in after-school activities, in membership organisations and religious institutions, in community holiday rituals and, of course, through the internet.

I will be relying partly on reflections from my own childhood in the UK for making a rough sketch of what has changed. I will try to balance these with the observations of a social scientist who cares a great deal about the subject. Using one's own childhood memories as a reference for thinking about change has some serious limitations. Not only are the dangers of nostalgia clear but there is also an inevitable tendency to see one's childhood as some kind of baseline rather than as an arbitrary moment in time. Additionally, and not surprisingly, I find that I am able to reflect much more fully on the social relations of boys than girls. I can only say that I find this strategy useful as a

first step, while knowing full well that the result will only be a pencil sketch of a complex story.

Formal opportunities for children's voices to be heard in governmental and institutional settings

There can be no doubt that there are many more opportunities for children to have a voice in the official deliberations of government agencies and services than there were a generation ago. What is meant by the word 'participation', and what its primary benefits are considered to be, varies greatly. I will not review all of these different positions here, but simply say that I believe that the right to have a voice, as called for by the UNCRC, has been an extremely important benchmark in the growth of children's right to protect themselves from abuse or neglect. This has been particularly important for children in some majority world countries, but also in nations like the UK. This has involved the individual empowerment of children as individual defenders of their rights as well as the participation of groups of children. The UNCRC has also led to some progress in giving children a voice regarding governmental provision of resources and services for them. But there does not seem to have been much progress in bringing more participatory engagements between groups of children and adults in institutional settings and programmes, from schools and after-school clubs to sports and recreation programmes.

Most of the progress that has been made in the UK on the social participation of children relates to the fulfilment of those Articles of the UNCRC that are normally thought to refer to participation – Articles 12 and 13 on the rights to have one's views heard, to express oneself and to have access to and share information. But there are a number of other ones that have important implications for children's social participation in their communities. These include the rights to play, to have access to the cultural and artistic life of the community, to form associations and to non-discrimination.

Children's autonomous social participation in play with peers

In many ways, the 1950s in the UK were perhaps a special time for children's non-formal participation with peers in their communities. There was a sense of stability and security in the welfare state and, due to increases in wages for most families, children were commonly no longer relied on to be economic providers – there was pocket money

and freedom to play. From all that we know of the dramatic reduction of children's spatial freedom in their communities since the 1960s, it seems likely that the opportunities for free play, independently organised by children with their peers, have also diminished.⁴ The reasons are complex and overlapping, but they include:

- the increased percentage of parents who work away from home;
- parental fear and paranoia related to the media coverage of dangers, especially crime;
- the growth of individual competitiveness, particularly through the school system;
- the privatisation of public space;
- the commodification of children's lives through increased channels of marketing; and
- the internet.

In their free play, children learn how to participate with one another. Opie and Opie (1969) described richly the content of the rhymes and games that children passed on and transformed. But children also pass on different ways of relating to one another that range in varying degrees from the authoritarian or bullying to the participatory and considerate as they go about the serious business of picking teams, forming 'gangs', inventing membership rituals, building dens, making rules and so on. We have seen a modest growth of social science research inside child cultures in recent years, but we have much to learn about how children's social relationships are changing and how they variously contribute to the making of culture (Corsaro, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2003; Thorne, 2003). Children do not just internalise adult skills and knowledge; they also contribute to the processes of social reproduction by appropriating and reinventing culture (Bruner, 1986). Children do this both through creative communal activity with their peers and by negotiating and creating culture with adults (Corsaro and Miller, 1992; Corsaro, 1997).

In the long hours of freedom from adult constraint, children in the past generation built their own local participatory cultures all over the UK in ways that were very different from today. I do not want to romanticise childhood as some kind of glorious place full of the likes of Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher. Children often bullied each other and it was sometimes ugly. For example, in choosing sides for a football team there was usually no sense of democratic process. Typically, two of the most popular, athletic, boys would place themselves as captains to take it in turns to pick the best and the fastest of the bunch and leave

the fattest or clumsiest boy lonely at the end of the process. But although many hours were spent free from direct adult supervision, children were not as segregated from unrelated adults in their community as they are today (see also Smith, this volume). They were the dominant actors in public spaces of residential areas – more aware of what was happening in the streets, pavements, parks and playgrounds than were the adults in their lives, but they came into contact with adult neighbours, greengrocers, dog walkers and others in the normal course of being free to explore their community. There is no doubt, however, that this was truer for boys than for girls.

Research tells us that free play, which is play directed by children themselves, has decreased in the UK as it has throughout the countries of the minority world. In addition to all of the restrictive forces described above, parents have been told that unless they programme their children's out-of-school time they will not be able to compete in the newly competitive global economy. I know from my research that many parents in the US struggle to make sense of this given the freedom that they knew as children, and I suspect that this is true of parents in the UK too (Hart, in process). Many of them wonder about the loss of their children's free playtime with peers but the dominant advice they receive is that children's play needs to be guided by adults. There certainly are values to play with adults but not to the exclusion of 'free play' with peers. In free play, children organise their activities and make decisions with one another in a qualitatively different way than when an adult is involved. We know from contemporary developmental theory, building on the work of Vygotsky (1978), that children in groups of mixed ages and abilities learn a great deal from one another by 'scaffolding' their learning on the shoulders of one another (Winegar and Valsiner, 1992). Newson and Newson (1967) described convincingly the different kinds of opportunities for age and social class mixing and the building of community that occurred on the streets of Nottingham before children moved to the housing estates on the edge of the city with their low density, recreation grounds and private gardens for children's play. They also described the awareness that parents had of much of these relations between children as they all lived together in close quarters. We need to think what these kinds of changes have meant for children's participation in their communities, and with their identification with their communities, especially in this era of privatisation of play and recreation.

There has long been a fear by government authorities of children being socialised on the streets, because of both the uncontrolled influences of adults and the unguided and unbridled processes of

children learning from children. Many social reformers and politicians presented playgrounds, recreation grounds and centres as the solution for building healthy and responsible citizenship (Goodman, 1979).⁵ While this was initially because the reformers were anxious to get the children under their control, the model of isolated playgrounds seems to have later become a norm, largely through bureaucratisation. Funding for play provision has been closely related to the fear of losing control, as with UK funding after the Toxteth riots. This goal of segregating children needs to be seen as part of a larger historical movement since the 19th century in Western countries to segregate children from the adult world, and to stream children into age groups in all aspects of their life (Hareven, 2000). But research in many parts of the world has since shown that children generally prefer not to be isolated away on playgrounds but to be in a closer, interactive relationship with others, including family, friends and neighbours, as described by Jane Jacobs (1961). In her very different vision of civil society, she argued that streets and pavements were appropriate spaces for children because they were able to learn social values and skills from one another and from neighbours. Some policies have occasionally been developed that support Jane Jacobs' vision such as the 'woonerf' concept of the Netherlands, involving the closing off of streets to through traffic, and, more recently, 'home zones' in the UK.⁶ But the more common approach continues to be a simpleminded belief in segregating children.

Planning policy has played an important part in the erosion of children's self-generated activities because of the loss of accessible and appropriate space. Spaces available to children in the UK have become increasingly controlled (Hart, 1978⁷). The more space is demarcated for a specific function, the more it comes under the sway of those who define that function. My childhood community, on the edge of Nottingham, has a small river and next to the river there are wild fields of long grass, known to us all as 'Geoff's'. It was an excellent space for free play invented by children. As Lefebvre (1991, p 83) put it, 'the more a space partakes of nature, the less it enters into the social relations of production', or for a child, the wilder a space is the less it is demarcated and the less power it has to demand certain behaviours from that child. Since my childhood, the local authority has expanded the sport field but left some of the long grass. A local planner tells me that he is aware of the value of this wild land for children and dog walkers but the primary reason it survives is that it is a flood plain that cannot be built on (Hart, 1982). As it happens, most parents do not

seem to allow their children to go to play in this non-specific place for children anymore.

I knew from an early age that planners did not like wild land. I lived in a council house, my father was a professional gardener and we did not have a wild garden. My father let me commandeer a very small space at the end of the garden but the garden that was most interesting to all of us children who lived in the cul-de-sac was Nigel's. It was wild, with grass sometimes waving above our heads, and we used it to full effect for many adventures until the local authority kicked the family out because of their unkempt garden. Planning policies all over the UK have destroyed small areas of unused land that was in effect 'common land' for children through residential infilling. But we should not see children as passive recipients of these changes. Children themselves participate in changing the nature of social space. As they develop new kinds of activities with one another, many previous uses of the land in their communities decay and disappear. Through their collective actions, children not only alter their surroundings but also the social practices that take place in certain places. In this way, children themselves contribute to the way the landscape affords opportunities for the play and social participation of future cohorts of children.⁸

In addition to space, the materials made available to children have changed. Toys are heavily marketed directly to children through television, the internet and video games and they come with ready-made scripts.⁹ Illich (1973) wrote long ago how some materials and technologies lend themselves more than others to 'conviviality'. By this he meant 'the creative intercourse among persons and the intercourse of persons with the environment' (1973, p 11). Many modern toys lend themselves to group play of children just as much as older ones – transformers are no different in that sense from toy soldiers. But palm-held electronic games are different in that they call for closed use by individuals. Along with all of the electronic media that children now play with indoors, they need to be put into the mix of factors that affects the degree of children's conviviality through play.

With fewer opportunities to play with peers and to be spontaneously engaged informally in the lives of adults, we can say that children are less embedded in their communities than they were – at least in 'communities' in the geographic sense. This loss of a sense of community with known adults and peers affects parents' confidence to let their children have freedom outdoors, which in turn further diminishes their spatial freedom. All of these things together mean that community in the spatial sense is less made by children and we may hypothesise that their sense of identity with their surrounding community is also

diminished from what it used to be for children. We may expect that children now contribute less to the 'bridging' form of social capital, that is cooperative connections between people from different walks of life, which theorists of community development consider to be more valuable than the 'bonding' type of social capital found between family or closely connected people (Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Whether social capital is an appropriate concept to apply to children's social lives is apparently a point of debate in the UK (Morrow, 1999). But we know from past research that children do play a role in building community social relationships beyond that of family and immediate neighbours and that these are different from those of adults, although today, for pre-adolescent children, these out-of-school friendship networks are more under the influence of adults than they were.¹⁰

There are many benefits from children being able to play with one another in a self-directed manner: learning the skills of cooperation to achieve their goals; experimenting with different roles, including leadership and power; negotiating rules for their play; resolving conflicts; struggling with fairness or morality; planning and creatively using their resources; and so on. Much of this learning is made possible by the absence of adult authority – leaving children to learn to self-organise. Interactions among peers provide distinct developmental opportunities because unlike adult-child interactions with one-way instruction they are usually characterised by a bi-directional give-and-take. Children actively construct the parameters of their relationships. This greater flexibility allows children to test their understandings and adapt them to the requirements of ongoing interaction. Same-age interactions might seem to provide optimal conditions for such experiences, but there are other benefits that may be derived from mixed-age interactions if there is not too great a difference in ages; adolescents and preschool children will typically result in the same differential of power and knowledge that characterises adult-child interactions.

In my research In New England I have found that a most revealing question to ask is 'Can you tell me about when you get to do things with friends that are not organised by adults?' This question, which no one has ever asked them before, instantly receives an enthusiastic response. Even the most programmed of children describe small cracks between adult-organised events where they eke out some free time with peers such as waiting for an organised sport to get started or time with friends on the school bus. These hidden times, which are so important to children, are important indicators for us if we are interested in knowing how to improve affordances for children's self-initiated activities.

Having argued for the benefits of free play with peers it must be recognised that there are important roles for adults even in the non-formal settings of play outdoors, as role models and sometimes to resolve conflicts or intervene in situations of abuse. So the problem is not one of finding a way of letting children be free but of finding a better balance, to allow 'free play' with adults nearby. Children reveal that they too would not want this extreme vision of a segregated culture of children (Hart et al., 1997).

Finally, in thinking about the extent to which children are involved in self-generated communal activities we need to consider the internet. Some believe that the internet, along with video games, is the primary reason for the loss of children's outdoor activity because it seduces children indoors but research in the UK has revealed that this is an exaggerated view that falsely separates the virtual world out from children's direct social contacts (Holloway and Valentine, 2003). Research with adolescents and youth suggests that to some degree the internet has created a substitute for the loss of free direct contact between peers. However, at the present time at least, pre-adolescents rarely use the internet for social networking and so I will not dwell on it here. But clearly this is a part of the complex charting of children's societal participation that we need to understand.

Participation in the family

Politicians in the UK frequently blame families for what they see as a loss of control and discipline with children and a failure to cultivate responsibility. They typically imply that parents have failed, as though discipline was something entirely delivered from above. Parents have been facing a barrage of societal changes that affect their parenting and are struggling to work out how to address these changes – a task not necessarily made easier by the battalions of child 'experts' like us offering contradictory advice! There is a great deal of research that shows that parents have distinct ideologies of childrearing. Many parents try to establish a climate of self-determination without losing control, and this 'authoritative' style of parenting, in contrast to 'authoritarian' and 'permissive' parenting, is the subject of a considerable body of research (Darling and Steinberg, 1993). Whether or not a child is raised with a participatory style that leads to greater self-determination and cooperative activity would seem likely to have important implications for the degree of participatory orientation to society that they will have and perhaps even their later political orientation.¹¹

Much attention is given by the popular press to the decline in family meals as an important indicator of the loss of the family as a socialising unit. But there are other dimensions to consider. For example, how has the family changed as a setting where children participate in the care and management of things, and does this have implications for the more general development of children's participatory competencies? We know that parenting guides still promote the importance of household chores in the primary school years as a way of promoting a sense of responsibility as well as the learning of practical skills. In most families in the UK, children are no longer really needed for the functioning economy of the family, but many parents still seem to believe that chores are important for the development of their children as competent, responsible children. How much are children doing this with a sense of truly contributing in a significant way is an important question (Morrow, 1994).

Most parents are aware of all of these kinds of big changes in the nature of childhood and some of them are so concerned that they try to find ways to resist them. I am finding from my research in a New England town that some parents are concerned about the loss of free play and autonomous activity with peers. They choose homes that they know will maximise their child's freedom – notably those on cul-de-sacs or at the end of a lane – and they seek out other parents who they know recognise the value of free play outdoors and consider this in their choice of 'play date' locations for their children. But for most parents it is enough of a struggle to keep up with the demands of balancing work and parenting and they follow the norms established by other parents around them.¹²

Schools as settings for social participation

Schools seem to have played a central role in the move to a more individualistic orientation to the socialisation of children. British primary schools in the 1960s and 1970s were impressive to the rest of the world because they had pioneered and evolved child-centred learning where children were more in control of their learning and could co-learn with each other in groups. The physical design of schools evolved in ways that afforded group learning, with the teacher as a 'facilitator'. This model was valued not only for its pedagogic merits but also because autonomous learning and cooperative behaviour was seen by some educators, at that period of history, as a valued dimension to develop the society. The progressive 'open classroom' is a much more weakly classified space; that is, the functions of the spaces, the available

materials and the rules for their use are not precisely spelled out.¹³ The theories behind this more democratic pedagogy were highly progressive and so it should not be too surprising that this model has not continued as the standard of British public primary school learning.

Citizenship education, fostering the active civic engagement of children, has now become a formal part of the school curriculum in the UK.¹⁴ Unfortunately, it is generally not conceptualised sufficiently broadly to incorporate the kinds of everyday opportunities for social participation and cooperation that are the focus of this chapter.

Schools are central settings in children's lives for learning about political power, participation and justice. Even five-year-olds after entering school quickly develop a fairly accurate understanding of the roles of different people in the schools. By the end of their elementary school years they have a very complete understanding of political authority and power.¹⁵ Yet the official position is that rather than working to establish democratic schools as models for the society we want, we teach about democracy. Education on democracy is like education on rights: give people information and they will show indifference, give people power or responsibility and they will pursue knowledge because they see the need for it. It is almost a hundred years since Dewey (1916) wrote about creating democratic microcosms in classrooms but democratic classrooms in public schools today remain the exception. If children are given the opportunity to participate in democratic settings in their everyday lives in school or in clubs and if they are the partners in the making of rules and in maintaining the effectiveness of their group's functioning, then they each can become the democratic educators of one another. Research on progressive schools has shown that children come to represent social systems differently when they discover that one can have authoritative systems that are not necessarily authoritarian ones and that one can achieve social consensus through discussion and negotiation (Hart et al., 1997; Rogoff et al., 2003). From such schools we can expect children to learn about personal obligation, mutual responsibility and the importance of self-restraint – qualities that the government has been so concerned about in its contemporary criticisms of the social and moral behaviour of children. Unfortunately, the emphasis in training today is not to have teachers seeing their roles as setting up the social ecology of the classroom to maximise children's abilities to learn from one another in this way.

In Colombia, officials at the highest level of government, as well as in non-governmental organisations, have been developing participatory approaches to working with children as a way of breaking the culture of

violence in their country. But the Colombians not only recognise the importance of the kind of active citizenship work that is most frequently discussed in relation to the UK school system: children researching neighbourhood quality and organising campaigns on issues beyond the school walls. They also give great emphasis to building '*convivencia*' – the values and skills of mutual living – within the school. This philosophy has been operating the longest in the '*escuelas nuevas*' or 'new schools'. Rather than one-shot conflict resolution programmes to reduce bullying or the introduction of some other social programme, they provide a sustained attempt to change the norms of social relationships by how programmes and schools are run. In the best of these schools there are so many committees for a very broad range of dimensions of school management that all children are involved, not just the select few popular children. But they also have child-centred individual and group learning as a core philosophy, adopted from the English primary schools of three decades ago (Escuela Nueva Foundation, 2007). So effective are these schools that a recent comparative study found that the democratic behaviours fostered in the *escuelas nuevas* reach the surrounding community of adults via the children: the Escuela Nueva Foundation found statistically significant higher levels of social capital in the communities that had an *escuelas nueva*. This is a very important result in a nation that is struggling to escape its violent history but it is also important data for any nation that cares about building a more civil society and participatory democracy.¹⁶ The recently developed 'rights respecting schools' in the UK now seem to be offering a valuable experiment in this direction.¹⁷

We are still living with an age segregation in schools that was invented at the time of the Industrial Revolution, even though many educators now know of the multiple benefits of age mixing in learning. Furthermore, the degree of age segregation has probably become worse now that children are spending less time in non-formal settings outdoors. Children's after-school programmes are typically segregated, just like school. Building on Vygotsky's (1978) ideas of co-learning between children, we now have a theoretical basis for understanding why so many small, mixed-age, village schools were good. Also, many years ago, ecological psychologists had a fascinating counterintuitive finding about children's participation in schools but unfortunately the research findings did not reach the school planners. They found that even though larger schools offered more resources, children in small schools participated in a greater range of activities (Barker and Gump, 1964). This was because even a small school wants a diversity of activities such as a football team and a theatre programme but with far

fewer children there is greater opportunity for each child to participate in a range of these alternative experiences.

The classroom is inevitably a more vertically organised behaviour setting than the school playground. But lunchrooms are a kind of space that lies somewhere between the free play of the school playground and the directed learning of the classroom, and for that reason they deserve attention in this chapter. In many primary schools of the 1960s in the UK, lunchrooms were in many cases important spaces for informally promoting sharing and caring, both in their design and in the rules for setting up tables and serving. In the best of schools, children were encouraged to take over responsibilities for organising the meal experience, with some freedom, with children inventing what happened at their table, decorating it, choosing who was going to carry out different tasks and so on. Somehow the collective values of this kind of participatory learning experience were forgotten in the rush to privatise and to offer total freedom of choice to individual children.

Participation in after-school programmes

In response to the forces described at the start of this chapter, organised after-school activities have grown dramatically in one generation in the UK. Today it is commonly seen as bad parenting to allow children to play unsupervised in the streets, and when the children become adolescents they tend to be seen as minor criminals. The children of better-off families send their children to a cornucopia of private after-school opportunities for all kinds of extended learning. For the children of less wealthy families, the children's clubs of the UK, like the after-school programmes of the US, are frequently programmed by adults as more schooling; they are typically not about free play or child-designed activities in a safe space (Smith and Barker, 2000). Furthermore, these clubs are commonly held in a school building, bringing with it all of the affordances and symbolism of the school. The clubs that self-consciously try to be democratic in allowing children to choose their activities are the exception. As a result, the clubs seem to offer considerably less opportunity for autonomous peer group activity than did the children's membership organisations that were once used by a large proportion of the nation's children.

Participatory opportunities in membership organisations

Children's membership organisations have decreased dramatically over the past few decades. Boy Scout and Girl Guide troops were ubiquitous. They had a heavy emphasis on social and moral development but they were not organised in ways that maximise children's democratic participation. They were loosely structured on a military hierarchic model of leadership. They nevertheless offered many young people a relatively high degree of autonomous activity, including time away from home where children organised activities with their peers. We do not seem to know enough about the reasons for the decline in popularity of these organisations and whether there are other forms that might work. Was the hierarchic and programmed nature of these organisations a factor and, if so, could highly participatory membership organisations be more successful?¹⁸ Given the existence of children's groups with high levels of self-management in other countries, the issue is clearly not one of children's limited capacities (Rajbhandari et al., 2001; Hart and Rajbhandari, 2003; see also Johnson, this volume).

The decline of children's membership organisations may well be just the result of too many other attractions in a media-saturated hyper-commercialised society but the problem may also be that the UK has not experimented sufficiently with opportunities and supports for children to come together to self-organise. Perhaps the failure to experiment is related to a fear of children and youth. Whatever the reason, we need to ask what the 21st-century version of the Scouts and the Guides would look like. We need to think of new kinds of sustained opportunities for children as democratic citizens. Contrary to the popular public image, adolescents in the US have revealed from recent research that they would like to have opportunities to be involved in membership organisations if they were able to take some control in the management of these settings, with caring supportive adults alongside rather than directing them (Hart et al., 1997).

In all cultures, the idea of supporting children and youth to form their own groups is new and has many challenges. Even though other nations have some valuable lessons to teach us about participatory organisation with children, all of the talented youth workers that I have met overseas are quick to insist that they have a lot to learn on this theme. For example, they commonly support very dynamic participatory groups of children for a few years but these groups tend to mature and die, as older children do not want younger children to join the group (Hart, 1992). In rare cases, I found that an organisation has some form of

‘shadowing’ or apprenticeship by younger children as a self-generative strategy. We need to enable children and young people to experiment with many such alternative strategies for sustaining groups. Knowing how to animate children to feel free to initiate their own activities and then to remain available on the sidelines rather than directing them is a very different training from that given to most educators.

Children’s central participation in festivals and holiday celebrations

There are few instances where children play a central role in reproducing traditional events in the UK. Even in the 1950s, the preparation for Bonfire Night was one of those rare instances in our culture of how children pass on a festival tradition largely through child-to-child communication. Primary school-aged children commonly organised this event with their peers. Guy Fawkes was stuffed with our fathers’ clothes, and dropped onto soapbox carts made by us. We dragged these wagons around our neighbourhood, collecting funds from adults with plaintive cries of ‘Penny for the guy’. From the proceeds we bought fireworks and carefully, admiringly, placed them into boxes and took them out again, and again, to look at them or sometimes to ‘test’ them out with our friends. There was danger in this of course, and some families did take it upon themselves to try to graduate exposure to this risk. But the weeks of preparation for Bonfire Night were an entirely child-organised process involving high levels of cooperation between children and a great deal of negotiated participation with adults. It is now a largely adult-programmed affair.

The night before Bonfire Night was known as Mischiefous Night. Such pranks as knocking on front doors by tying of front-door knockers with string were so ubiquitous that the folklore was that it was legal, or at least semi-legitimate, and that the local copper would not arrest us. Again, this particular ritual was truly a child-to-child organised affair. There were repercussions with individual adults but they were generally not seen as negative for the community. I remember one night when we exchanged gates between houses all over the community. I can still see in my mind dozens of adults wandering around on a sunny morning trying to find the correct owners for one another’s gates and generally having a good laugh about it. I understand that rather than seeing children as having a degree of licence to play pranks, this kind of activity is now seen as serious anti-social behaviour. But for most children in the UK, Mischiefous Night has been replaced by Halloween, imported from the US through the media and all of the pumpkin regalia

sold in supermarkets. It is a family affair rather than a children's event and is a much more tame event commonly involving accompaniment by adults to neighbours' houses to collect sweets – 'treats' without the 'tricks'. Other countries have similar traditions such as St. Martins Day on 11 November in The Netherlands where children go from house to house singing songs, like many English children once did alone with Christmas carol singing. The tradition continues in The Netherlands but again it is with adult supervision.¹⁹ These changes are undoubtedly largely related to reductions in children's freedom within their communities and changing ideas of risk-taking and the control of children (Gill, 2007).

It is worth noting that it is still common in many countries of the majority world for children to have very central roles in reproducing community rituals. In contrast, in the UK, these kinds of traditions seem to have retreated entirely into the privacy of the home, such as putting up the Christmas tree and decorating it, or they have become commercial events. In neither case do they have the same significance for the reproduction of community.

Social participation in organised sports

School sports and organised games for children have always had the double goal of fostering both individual skills and group cooperation in the form of competition with others (Goodman, 1979; Cavallo, 1981). But organised games have become a much more adult-programmed domain than in the past generation of children. Informal games organised spontaneously by children have become a relatively rare phenomenon. This is partly due to the loss of children's spatial freedom. It is also related to the planning and recreation policies described previously that create more spaces that dictate their function for specific activities rather than allowing children to appropriate spaces to create their own organised games and sports (See Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 2000). We will need to include these changes in our overall assessment of how we enable children to develop their cooperative capacities and to participate in the building of community.

Social participation through work activities

It is easy for us to forget that many children, especially in the past, learned a great many skills of social participation through work. Newspaper rounds, a rather romanticised work of children in the past in the UK, was an activity offering high degrees of autonomy

to children and the jobs and the training were typically passed on between children. But many other jobs involved children apprenticing themselves informally to adults – typically people known to the family. The ease with which children were able to work with adults in non-formal ways in their communities in the past is captured by ‘Bob-a-job’ work, which involved tens of thousands of Cub Scouts earning money for their troupe by finding work in homes all over their communities for one week in the summer. Children’s engagements with work vary greatly with social class of course and the knowledge and skills gained through participation in work reproduces class differences (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). But this work also introduces many children to meaningful participation through collaborative work with adults and how this story has changed should be a part of our survey.

Some ways forward

I have argued that the nature of children’s non-formal social participation in their communities should be thought of as central to the making of civil society and should be investigated by social scientists with a similar vigour to the study of children’s formal participation. We have choices about the kind of society we make for, and with, children. We are already beginning to see some fascinating signs of change in Europe and North America related to public concern over the spaces that we make available for children. The transatlantic concern with children’s obesity is largely a top-down movement but there is also a groundswell of parent concern over the loss of children’s contact with nature and a concern over the loss of free-play activity. There does not yet seem to be any broad concern by parents or policy makers in the UK or any nation over the erosion of children’s opportunities for non-formal social participation as a fundamental part of the reproduction of democratic civil society but some good research on this theme might make a difference.

A major area for improving opportunities for children’s social participation is in after-school programmes. The UK government currently has an emphasis on social exclusion and sees children’s participation as a strategy for bringing excluded children into the mainstream as responsible citizens. But the programmes do not typically seem to be trying to replace the kinds of losses I have described in this chapter, that is, high levels of autonomy in children’s after-school programmes with caring adults working alongside. A recent review of participation programmes in the UK concluded that only a minority of participatory programmes involve working relatively intensively with

small numbers of children over sustained periods and involving children directly in the management of projects (Evans and Spicer, 2008).

We need to help many adults see their professional roles with children less as planners and managers and more as role models, stagehands, and sometimes arbitrators and emergency aides. The 'play work' profession has evolved these qualities since its emergence after the Second World War. Adventure playgrounds were developed to provide a microcosm of physical opportunities and challenge for city children but now, in a changed era, many play workers have been pulled into more programmed settings and even privatised ones. In reaction to this, play workers have become strong advocates for the promotion of free-play opportunities.²⁰ Good play workers are models of the kinds of professionals we need in large numbers to support children. They are experts at observing and listening to children in order to know how to support them rather than directing them in play (Benjamin, 1974). Unfortunately, play work remains a relatively under-recognised and understaffed profession given the changing needs of society.

Finally, I would like to return in a full circle to the issue of children's formal participation. I join many of my British colleagues in criticising the kinds of participation strategies that are typically used – one-shot consultations or children's forums (Hallett and Prout, 2003). In contrast, I propose that if we wish to involve children in community governance it should be at the very local level, it should involve all children, not representative children, and it should equally involve adult residents. Intergenerational community planning events where parents and grandparents share what they valued as children alongside children's own evaluations of their communities today have particular potential. When adults truly speak from memories of their own childhoods they seem to engage with children in more horizontal ways than is typically the case in adult-child exchanges. Whether or not this particular strategy is developed, we need to go beyond simple strategies for listening to children's voices if we are to build more democratic communities. We need to consider how children and adults come together, and could come together, in meaningful dialogue.

Notes

¹ This chapter is based on a lecture given at University of Wales Swansea in November 2006, which was recorded on video and later transcribed by Cath Larkins.

² Attempts by government agencies to involve children have become common in the UK, but these are commonly criticised as being largely limited to

'consultation', and are often token in scale and sustainability. In recent decades, government agencies and NGOs have come to deliver their priorities for children through participatory programmes such as 'Agenda 21' for sustainable development, HIV prevention and violence prevention. These are not open agenda opportunities for children, but settings for delivering messages in deeper ways than the teaching and information strategies of the past. They are often disguised as being participatory when in fact they are highly programmed affairs. The rationale that is given is the UNCRC, but the UNCRC clearly calls for children to have a voice on all matters of concern to *children*.

³ In addition to calling for children's voices to be heard, the UNCRC more generally recognises the value of self-determination in children's development and also articulates children's right to gather with their peers.

⁴ Many of the articles in the journal *Children's Geographies*, and even the emergence of the journal itself, support this observation in the UK. In my own longitudinal and cross-sectional study of the changing geography of childhood in a small town in New England, I am documenting the same dramatic erosion of children's self-directed play with peers and how parents are dealing with this (Hart, in process).

⁵ Goodman (1979) describes the ideological struggle behind the attempts of the reformers who tried to fish children off the crowded streets of Manhattan and into playgrounds in the early part of the 20th century.

⁶ Home Zones: www.homezones.org/links.html; for the UK Children's Play Council: www.ncb.org.uk/cpc/publications

⁷ These programme notes to the BBC film *Play and Place* include an account of the importance of opportunities for children to have free, undemarcated space. The second half of the film focuses on children living on the edge of Coalville, Leicestershire. Their favourite play places were dens, located in fields that were being rapidly covered by housing while the film was being shot.

⁸ In a valuable effort to contribute to the evaluation of children's participation in communities, Chawla and Heft (2002) have drawn on concepts from ecological psychology to consider qualities of environments that are likely to afford children opportunities to develop a sense of competence. In addition to a child's own sense of self-efficacy from taking action, they recognise Bandura's (1997) evidence that observing someone like themselves accomplishing something they would like to do, also fosters a sense of self-efficacy.

⁹ The integrated selling of toys with television scripts of how to use them appears to have influenced the degree to which children make their own play scripts versus play that is pre-scripted by the things that they are seduced into buying. Some play theorists argue, however, that this kind of thinking under-recognises the remarkable transformative power of play and that children will always modify the scripts they are given (Sutton-Smith, 2001).

¹⁰ In my current research in a New England town, one of the greatest challenges to parents is to offer 'play dates' that successfully balance children's preferences with their own concerns for children's socialisation (Hart, in process).

¹¹ Unfortunately, research on the political socialisation of children within families has generally looked naively at the relationship between the political party orientations of parents in relation to those of their children rather than at family politics and the everyday way in which power is exercised as a factor influencing children's ideological orientation to participation (see Jankowski, 1992).

¹² These conclusions come from my current research in a New England town but I suspect they have some relevance to the UK too.

¹³ Bernstein (1973) describes how this model involved an 'invisible pedagogy' where a child has a large diverse space in which to operate in contrast to the 'visible pedagogy' of the traditional classroom with its blackboard, chair and book as its clearly displayed key features. Bernstein points out, however, the irony that in this kind of space the child's learning activities are made highly visible, enabling strategic intervention by a teacher.

¹⁴ www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/

¹⁵ Before adolescence, children tend to think that societal decisions emanate from the free will of individuals; they do not recognise the formal impersonal component of role relations (Hart et al., 1997).

¹⁶ A recent comparative study of 25 schools in two of the more violent areas in Colombia found that the 15 schools using the *escuela nueva* methodology had a direct and significant impact on the participation and democratic behaviour of its graduates within the community and on the parents (Forero and Rodríguez, 2002).

¹⁷ Rights Respecting Schools, UNICEF-UK: <http://rrsa.unicef.org.uk/>

¹⁸ Even the more progressive organisation, Woodcraft Folk, seems to have only a limited commitment to building children's participatory skills and capacities to self-organise.

¹⁹ Personal communication with Lia Karsten.

²⁰ www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk; www.playwales.org.uk; www.playengland.org.uk

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