Edited by
Sue Cox, Anna Robinson-Pant, Caroline Dyer
and Michele Schweisfurth

Children as Decision Makers in Education

Sharing Experiences Across Cultures

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Notes on Contributors

Sheila Aikman is Senior Lecturer in Education and Development at the University of East Anglia. She was formerly the Policy Adviser for Oxfam GB and has been researching and publishing in the areas of quality education, gender equality in education and intercultural education.

Jane Bañez-Ockelford was the Development Director for Asia, South America and the Caribbean for *EveryChild UK* until October 2008 and continues to provide strategic management and technical support to the *EveryChild Cambodia* Liaison Office. Jane currently works within Asia as a consultant in governance and strategic management based in the Philippines.

Juan Carlos Barrón-Pastor (Juancho Barrón) is a PhD candidate and assistant tutor at the School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, and was recently Visiting Professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). He has seventeen years of experience in coordinating, administrating, consulting, teaching, and researching for community develop-ment projects in Mexico. His current research explores how to interpret the theory of becoming (Deleuze; Braidotti) through an inter-subjectivist approach (Lenkersdorf), taking collective emotions into account (Forgas; Marina) to better understand culturally diverse education spaces.

Teeka Bhattarai has been associated with the School of Ecology, Agriculture and Community Works (Seacow) and Forum for Popular Education – Education Network, in Nepal since their foundation. Currently undertaking formal studies on education in Belgium, he continues his work as an education activist, campaigning for education for all as the 'great equalizer'.

Fiona Carnie is a Visiting Research Associate at the Institute of Education, University of London. She is currently working in the fields of Student Voice

and Parent Voice. Her books, *Alternative Approaches to Education* (Routledge Falmer, 2003) and *Pathways to Child Friendly Schools* (Human Scale Education, 2004), explore ways of involving key stakeholders such as parents and young people in shaping educational provision. Fiona is Vice President of the European Forum for Freedom in Education www.effe-eu.org.

Gina Mumba Chiwela has been working as Programme Development Manager with the Peoples Action Forum, Zambia, since 1994. She has particular responsibility for training adult learning facilitators in the Reflect approach, policy research and advocacy and HIV/AIDS programmes. She led the programme on participatory school governance, an initiative to bring communities into active participation in the planning and management for schools. Gina currently represents the Reflect Network in Zambia on the PAMOJA Council that oversees the Africa Reflect Network.

Sue Cox is a Senior Lecturer at the University of East Anglia in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning where she teaches on postgraduate initial and continuing teacher education courses and undertakes research. Her particular area of interest is primary education (including philosophy of education, art and design education and citizenship education) and her research has included projects with children and teachers in primary schools on children's participation and decision-making.

Lynn Davies is Professor of International Education in the Centre for International Education and Research, University of Birmingham. Her main interests are in education and conflict (the contribution of schools to peace and to conflict), and in education for democracy (pupil voice, school councils). She is also working in the area of education and violent extremism, and her book *Educating Against Extremism* (2008) is being used by educationists and governments in the UK and beyond.

Rohit Dhankar is Secretary of the Indian non-government organization Diganter, of which he is a co-founder. A curriculum expert, he has served on the Government of India's National Curriculum Framework advisory team and currently teaches on the MA in Elementary Education at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

Caroline Dyer is a linguist by training and works at the Leeds University Centre for International Development, where she lectures in development practice. Her research interests focus on early years and adult literacy, and the educational inclusion of nomadic and migrant groups; she has authored numerous papers on these topics, and in 2006 edited an international volume on the *Education of Nomadic Peoples: current issues, future prospects* (Berghahn Books).

Allan Fowler is a former high school teacher turned researcher who has taught for over 35 years in comprehensive education. He now works part-time for the Open University.

Clive Harber is Professor of International Education at the University of Birmingham. He was previously Head of the School of Education at the University of Birmingham and the University of Natal in Durban, South Africa. He has a long-standing international research interest in both education for democracy and its opposites.

Karen Lindridge has been a primary school teacher for twenty years and has taught all age groups from 4 [pre-school] to 11. She is currently Deputy Head at Old Bexley Church of England Primary School, Bexley. In addition, she spent three years as a teacher trainer at the University of Greenwich where she specialized in early years and physical education. She is currently interested in the area of providing children with opportunity and empowerment, which includes her involvement in the area of children as researchers.

P J Lolichen heads the Centre for Applied Research and Documentation at The Concerned for Working Children, Bangalore, India. He has been spearheading rights-based information management by children for the past 12 years and is a recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship for Leadership Development. His most recent publication is 'Taking a Right Turn: Children Lead the Way in Research', and he has published other works on information management by children, enabling their participation in governance.

Daniela Mamaliga has been *EveryChild Moldova*'s Programme Director since 2004. She joined *EveryChild Moldova* in 2001, initially as their Press Officer, becoming Project Coordinator and then Programme Director. Prior to that, Daniela worked for the government news agency *Moldpress*.

Esmeranda Manful is a Research Associate at the Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University. Her interests include children's rights, particularly the interpretation of the concept to improve the welfare of children.

Tristan McCowan is Lecturer in Education and International Development at the Institute of Education, University of London. His current research focuses on education and citizenship in Latin America.

Colin Richards is Emeritus Professor at the University of Cumbria and has been a senior HMI and a visiting professor at the Universities of Warwick, Leicester and Newcastle.

Anna Robinson-Pant is Professor of Education at the Centre for Applied Research in Education, University of East Anglia, UK. Her research has included projects with children and teachers in Norfolk schools as well as with international students studying at the university. For around ten years, she worked in education, research and development with various NGOs, in Nepal. Publications include: *Why Eat Green Cucumber at the Time of Dying? Exploring the Link between Women's Literacy and Development: A Nepal Perspective* (UNESCO IOE, 2001), *Women, Literacy and Development: Alternative Perspectives* (Routledge, 2004) and *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Educational Research* (Open University Press, 2006).

Payal Saksena joined *EveryChild India* in 2008 as their Advocacy and Communications Manager. Before this, Payal worked for four years as a gender and law consultant for Global Rights: Partners for Justice, a US-based organization implementing an 'Access to Justice' project in Karnataka and Rajasthan in India.

Michele Schweisfurth is Reader in Comparative and International Education, and Director of the Centre for International Education and Research at the University of Birmingham. CIER's 'Educating for Global Justice' theme reflects her research interests. She is also joint editor of the journal *Comparative Education*.

Anne-Marie Smith is Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at Liverpool Hope University, where she teaches in Childhood and Youth Studies. She previously worked as Children's Partipation coordinator at Liverpool World Centre. Her research with displaced children in Mexico has been published in *Children, Youth and Environments* (2007).

Doug Springate, now retired from the University of Greenwich, has teaching experience in primary and secondary schools and was a teacher trainer for the primary age phase for more than thirty years, lecturing in four institutions, including an American university. He was a Primary Ofsted Inspector. He has considerable international experience and is ex-chairman of ETEN, the European Teacher Education Network. He is currently further exploring the primary school as a democracy and researching and promoting the area of 'Children as Researchers', including an European Community funded project with institutions from seven European countries.

Liz Trippett worked for *EveryChild UK* as the Programme Officer for Asia, South America and the Caribbean for three years until October 2008. She currently works in a psychiatric hospital in the UK with children and adolescents experiencing mental health problems.

Lionel Vigil has been *EveryChild Peru*'s Programme Manager since March 2008. Prior to that, Lionel worked for *Management Science for Health Inc*. in Peru as a Programme Manager for a USAID-funded community health project, for the Peruvian NGO, PRISMA, and for the Peruvian Ministries of Health and Education.

Chris Williams is based at the Centre for International Education and Research (CIER), University of Birmingham. He has also held posts at the universities of London, Cambridge, Cairo, and the United Nations. His engagement in global justice and participation includes: street-working children in South Africa, Turkey, Lebanon and Afghanistan; disability rights in Britain, Egypt, China, Thailand and Japan; environmental victims in India; cultural diversity in Korea; and education for all in Palestine and Liberia.

Hiromi Yamashita is Associate Professor at Nagoya University Graduate School of Environmental Studies, Japan. Previously, she worked at the Centre for International Education and Research (CIER), University of Birmingham, UK. Hiromi's interests include issues of participation (at all ages), democratic decision making, environmental risk communication, sustainable development and global citizenship.

Introduction

Sue Cox, Caroline Dyer, Anna Robinson-Pant and Michele Schweisfurth

Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child came into force in 1990, there has been an increasing recognition that, globally, children need to have more input into decisions concerning their own education. Researchers, activists, policy makers, international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and educational institutions have been looking at ways of promoting children's involvement in decision-making. This book explores how children can, and do, actively participate in decision-making. It brings together perspectives from developed and developing countries,[1] with the aim of extending the current debates on children's participation by engaging a range of researchers and practitioners with differing practical agendas, philosophical orientations, and methodological approaches.

At the heart of questions over what decisions children should make, and how and when, is how we conceptualize children, their abilities and their rights. The UN Convention itself stipulates that the views of children need to be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity (Article 12). But the age at which children are believed to be ready to make serious decisions that affect them and their education is open to interpretation, and these beliefs changes over time and across contexts. We would argue that it is important to go beyond token decision-making at an early stage, to give children a true sense of agency in their own lives, and not only to rehearse for adulthood. Several of the contributors to this book draw on Hart's (1992) 'ladder of participation' to analyse the purpose and ways in which children participate in decision-making. The ladder helps to distinguish different levels of children's input, ranging from the minimal end of manipulation and tokenism, through children being consulted while adults take the initiative, to the highest level of youth initiatives in which they decide how far to include adults. As many of the case studies in this book will show, it is usually adults who decide whether children can make decisions, and which children qualify.

As the agenda approaches the level of policy, in particular, adults are increasingly likely to be in control. Yet, as illustrated in this book, the benefits of children's decision-making to themselves and to schools and other organizations are multiple.

Schools have the potential to be sites of power for children, but they can also be, and often are, sites of repression. Many educators do not feel comfortable with allowing children's decisions in areas where power relations might shift as a result. Equally, the virtually universal standards agenda, with its focus on the 'basics' of literacy and numeracy, may not help to encourage the development of the less obviously scholastic skills of self-confidence and critical questioning that need to be fostered if children's involvement in decision-making is to grow.

It is interesting that while most of the UK-based chapters in this book refer to schools, many of the contributions from developing countries refer to NGO actions and other non-formal sites of education. This raises questions about whether it is best to work from within or outside the formal school system, and from within a set of cultural norms, or from a more cosmopolitan perspective. When considering the possibilities and limits of children's decision-making powers in different contexts, should local cultures and practices set the agenda, or are we working toward a shared set of goals bounded by a global moral framework? If the latter, how should this framework be negotiated, and is it realistic to apply it to institutions so different from each other?

The book is based on an Economic and Social Research Council-funded seminar series held at the Universities of East Anglia, Birmingham and Leeds during 2006–7. The seminars broke new ground in bringing together educators, researchers and activists working in a range of countries to present papers, discuss practice, and form collaborations. The chapters are based on papers presented, and the book seeks to develop the themes explored in the seminars and to present case studies of children involved in decision-making internationally. It does not do so uncritically, and the barriers to their participation are also explored.

The book is divided into four parts. The chapters in Part 1 ask, in various ways, whether we can make space for children's decision-making. They focus on the macro level of policy and how this is a starting point for practice. Policy includes that of national government, but also regional bodies and the work of international NGOs. Case studies include England, Brazil and the Philippines. From policy we move to practice: the chapters in Part 2 explore how children's decision-making affects practice in schools, communities and beyond, and the authors offer insights from Nepal, Zambia, Peru, India, Moldova, and the UK In Part 3, we consider the social and political dimensions of children as decision makers, asking what we are trying to achieve in terms of political agendas and social integration, equity, and citizenship. Along with further chapters from UK contexts, there are papers

exploring these issues in Mexico and India. Finally, Part 4 asks how we facilitate children's participation. It draws mainly on experiences of children as researchers, as well as other forms of decision-making, providing perspectives from India and the UK on the question.

In the closing chapter of the book, as editors we adopt a comparative perspective to investigate what these cases from different national and cultural contexts tell us about children as decision makers, and what some of the facilitators and barriers are to fuller and more meaningful participation. We hope that this cross-cultural view will help to inform debate internationally – and that children will be included in the debate.

Notes

[1] We have chosen to use these terms rather than North/South or First/Third World, reflecting the preference of most of our contributing authors.

References

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Part 1

Can we make space for children's decision-making? Perspectives on educational policy

Globally, attitudes to children have changed over time, towards acknowledging the importance of their decision-making. This is reflected, for example, in the almost universal ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Among the decision-making rights upheld by the Convention are children's right to stay with their parents if they choose (Article 9.1); to express their views freely (Article 13.1); and to assemble peacefully (Article 15.1). We would hope to see such shifts in attitude, and such international agreements, reflected in national policy and, in turn, in how these policies are enacted in schools, classrooms and other educational sites. The chapters in this part of the book explore how far, in different contexts, these aspirations are manifested; they also introduce concepts which facilitate analysis of children's involvement at different levels. Among the themes are the extent to which policy rhetoric is matched by reality, and the roles of organizations such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in bridging gaps and supporting children and adults in making children's decisions heard and realized. Policy can be an enabler, but it certainly does not guarantee that children are empowered, and, as some of these chapters point out, evidence of resistance can be found at many levels.

An historical overview of the situation in the England since 1965 provides an interesting case study of some of these themes. The intersection of politics and education creates a fluctuating trajectory. Rather than being taken seriously, Colin Richards argues that children's decision-making is restricted by such factors as high-stakes examinations and school league tables, driven by a performativity agenda. Increasingly, there are moves to include children's perspectives, for example in how their views of their schools and teachers are now part of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)

process of inspection, but 'myths' live on. Along with 'myths', Richards uses 'ages' and 'autonomy' as organizing ideas in his analysis, which is based on many years of experience with Ofsted and as an academic educationist observing policy and practice in England. We invite readers to compare his observations with the situation in other contexts.

Given the limitations of policy, organizations promoting children's right to decide have used interventionist tactics to facilitate the prerequisite skills, structures and attitudes. The following two chapters document case studies of such strategies, in different national contexts. In Chapter 2, Tristan McCowan considers the 'prefigurative' potential of schools in the Brazilian context, in relation to pupil participation in schools and ultimately in society. In particular, he analyses a municipal government's 'Plural School' initiative, based on the principle of inclusion through democratization. Once again, we find the challenges of facilitating the participation of all children, of democratizing the relationships between teachers and pupils, and of taking young people's decision-making powers beyond the more trivial elements of uniforms and food. However, there is evidence that the prefigurative strategies employed can lead to wider exercising of the right to participate.

The work of the international NGO Oxfam in conflict zones is the basis for the next chapter. Drawing on experience from conflict zones internationally, the region of Central Mindanao in the Philippines becomes the focus of an exploration of how conflict and poverty affect schooling and create particular conditions for the participation of children. Sheila Aikman considers how school as a place and as a social space can create opportunities, and how the dynamics of power affect processes. Among the achievements of the programme in Mindanao are higher levels of attendance, interest and participation from children, and fewer interruptions to schooling as a result of the conflict.

Finally, Clive Harber draws on evidence from a wide range of contexts to argue that, on the whole, school children are not decision makers, and that policy and teacher education are parts of the problem. He brings together studies of pupils' views of schooling to illustrate the 'unfreedoms' inherent in the purposes and structures of schooling. Crucially, the chapter also synthesizes evidence of how very important listening to pupils and giving them power and responsibility are. We might expect this in terms of developing the capacity for democratic citizenship, but it proves to be excellent practice even using more conventional indicators of effectiveness such as examination outcomes and pupil discipline.

Chapter 1

The changing context of decision-making in English primary education: ages, myths and autonomy

Colin Richards

Introduction

This chapter discusses children as decision makers in the context of developments in English primary education. It cannot do justice to developments elsewhere, whether in other parts of the United Kingdom or overseas. It uses three organizing ideas – 'ages', 'myths' and 'autonomy' – as a way of outlining the changing context in which English primary schools have operated, primary teachers have taught and primary pupils have experienced their schooling over the forty years since the publication of the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education 1967). Very largely the story is one of adult decision-making, albeit in a changing context, with different sets of adults making different kinds of decisions at different times. It is a story in which children's perspectives are not so much consciously ignored as not really considered – either in policy, research or school decision-making. There are some signs that at long last those perspectives are being seen as important – at least at the level of rhetoric but only very patchily as yet at the level of practice. The lessons of English history (if it has lessons) are not all that hopeful. There is a need now to make that rhetoric a reality – forty years after the Plowden Report was published with the title *Children and* Their *Primary Schools*, with its assertion that 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child', with its slogan 'The child as agent of his own learning', but with its 500-page report providing no evidence that children had ever been consulted in its deliberations!