



# The 'good-enough society', the 'good-enough citizen' and 'the good-enough student': Where is children's participation agenda moving to in Brazil?

Childhood

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## Abstract

This article discusses how the new paradigm of children's participation rights and competence has maintained unchallenged the subjectivity considered apt to be included as an opinion giver in the polity. 'Developmentalism' continues to feed as a theoretical input and a practical regulation of adult–children relationships. The article, based on an empirical investigation with Brazilian children, discusses how participation views of students and school staff, premised on the 'good-enough student', commit participation to an unchallenged school hierarchy and non-reciprocal adult–child relationships – a single standpoint from where to envisage the educational process and a de-politicization of school life. Consequently, the effective inclusion of children in society, constituting an important political challenge of our time, must be faced so that children's participation can become more real and less rhetorical.

## Keywords

Brazilian schools, developmentalism, participation, politics of adult–child relationships, subjectivity

Since modernity children have been isolated in a cloak of invisibility while having become the object of the dutiful attention of adults. Capturing with refined irony this significant aspect of generational relationships at the turn of the 20th century, Freud observed that the newborn – in his words, 'her majesty, the baby' – reigned supreme embodying an intangible control over parents' behaviours (Freud, 1996 [1914]). A new era of children's and adults' relationships was making its way by announcing the importance of children as receivers of parents' due care, while designing for them a place of protected silence.

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Notwithstanding the paramount importance of children's protection as a regulative moral horizon modulating children's and adults' relationships through the course of the 20th century, new discourses and practices have recently problematized established conceptions of children as helpless recipients of adults' endeavours and the latter's zealous competences as protectors of children's best interests. The prevalent framework of expectations that children should be protected has encountered increased suspicion for its failure to live up to its promises (King, 1997). Furthermore, the once taken-for-granted attribution of vulnerability to children was questioned on the grounds of its lack of contextual clarification leading to an essentialized notion of children as incompetent, fragile and innocent (Christensen, 2000). Thus, the questioning of children's silenced and, to this effect, invisible social position was cast in new moral discourses which aimed at recovering children's agency and their sociopolitical contribution to society. Participation has been the overall catchword (Hart, 1997; Johnson et al., 1998) that has named the multifarious endeavours to envisage children in a different manner deregulating the normative framework which positioned them as sheer objects of adults' actions.

Participation rights have been established by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12) under 'the right to freely express one's opinion', on the condition that the child is capable of it, and in matters that affect her or him. The Article also runs that children's opinions should be given due weight depending on their age and maturity.<sup>1</sup>

However, the notion of children's participation still meets with significant difficulties to evince clear-cut plausibility. In the first place, the timid and half-hearted acknowledgement of children's participation in the Convention is couched in conditional terms, that is, only if the child is able to demonstrate it and in matters that directly affect her or him. In practical terms, this means that children's participation (= the expression of their opinions) becomes admissible, and legitimate, when it is already factual, that is, when children are already practising it (the evidence of being capable of it is shown by their action itself). Therefore, the legalized notion of participation has become a dead letter in terms of opening up novel ways to include children's voices, bowing to the conventional wisdom that participation *depends on* 'maturity', and not the other way round, that 'maturity' is acted out through and by participation (de Castro, 2004; Freire, 1985).

Second, children's participation rights, as a special instance of making rights positive through laws, have not been the result of children's own mobilization and dispute over their social condition of subordination and oppression, and consequently, were not sustained by ongoing changes of children's subjective and collective experience about themselves *qua* children. Granted by their representatives, who could speak in their 'best interests', children's participation rights did not enhance a clearer understanding, from the point of view of children themselves, about the directions in which relationships of subordination and oppression that involved them should be changed.

This article aims at contributing to the ongoing discussion about children's participation, problematizing whether it has favoured changes in the ways that children are regarded. Although the notion of participation has been accredited as a 'right' or a 'competence', its embeddedness in developmental discourses has maintained unchallenged the basic underpinnings of an age-related competence model and its theoretical assumptions about how human subjectivity is constituted as a linear and cumulative trajectory

whereby specific cognitive and emotional aspects should ‘flourish’ under adequate social intervention. Empirical data on children’s views about participation in Brazilian schools are presented, and it is discussed how children’s participation, and ultimately, the acknowledgement of their demands and interests as a new social actor may entail a process of problematizing school goals as established by an adult-centred society. This may eventually lead to redesigning public spheres to include new topics of public discussion and the politicization of adult–child relationships, as antagonisms engendered by the differential standpoints from where to view the educational process seem likely to emerge.

### **From the invisibility of protection to the affirmation of participatory rights: What is ‘new’ about children’s participation today?**

Children’s participation rights as disposed in international laws have been subsumed under the prevailing notion of citizenship based on a model of subjectivity geared to act rationally, to express oneself through dialogic and decentred communication, to act with emotional independence, self-control and subjective autonomy. In order to participate and be considered a legitimate ‘opinion-giver’, children would have to conform to such established conventions of public debate which, *de facto*, even for most adults, pose enormous difficulties as such codes of behaviour have to be learnt as situations demand. Children’s participation has become dependent on their possibility of showing the very same capacities which adults are supposed to show, in conformity to the requirements of a ‘good-enough’ adult citizenship (James, 1992). On this point Wyness et al. (2004) have noted that adults’ inclusion in the polity is not based on competence, but on status.

The notion of development has been the explaining tenet of the process of subjectivization whereby human subjects, born in a supposed condition of incompleteness, gradually became ‘complete’. Under ‘developmentalism’ subjectivization was construed as a sequenced and cumulative process of *individual preparation* towards adulthood whereby one’s species potentials would flourish under the stimulation of legitimate ‘universal’ social and educational intervention.<sup>2</sup> The ordeal of children’s preparation put them in a world aside under the guise of protecting them from the ‘hardships’ of the ‘real’ world, thus producing an irrevocable disjunction between participation and protection.

In this sense, children’s significant contribution to family and school life has long remained understated, and understood in a very restricted way, as an ability to receive and incorporate learning goals in accordance with the overall agenda of individual formation. Thus, though in a very weak sense, children’s participation was indeed acknowledged, as the adequate taken-for-granted responses to societal demands *qua* learners dutifully awaiting maturity and getting ready for their full role in society. From this point of view, children’s participation does not stand as a novelty, as it has been obliquely admitted alongside the repertoire of foreseeable interpretations of the son’s, daughter’s and pupil’s roles.

The recent participation agenda has enhanced a recasting of children’s presence in the private worlds of family and school, making a case for children’s relevant differential contribution to family and school matters. However, there is an issue as to what extent

their ‘participation’, though now explicitly acknowledged and recommended, should consist of something other than the learner’s role. A lot of discussion on children’s participation is still couched in terms of their developmental capacities. Shier, in his *new* theoretical model of children’s participation, concludes that ‘children should not be pressed to take responsibility they do not want, or that is inappropriate *for their level of development and understanding*. However, in practice adults are more likely to deny children *developmentally appropriate* degrees of responsibility’ (Shier, 2001: 115; my emphasis). Drakeford et al. (2009: 262) concluded their research affirming that Welsh children’s political knowledge and discourse depended on the discursive repertoires available to them, but also on their *cognitive development*. Powell and Smith (2009) placed the ‘developmental’ perspective on childhood in straight opposition to the social constructionist one, inadvertent of the fact that the notion of development was itself socially constructed and served modernity purposes of defining an abstract individual child, much in accordance with the demands of western sciences to produce universals (Jullien, 2008). Thus, even for the critics of ‘developmentalism’, it is hard to give up completely the notion of development, or its correlates, such as vulnerability, incompleteness and immaturity. The idea of ‘immaturity’, criticized and ‘repressed’, returns here and there, pointing to a difficulty as to how to theorize children’s differences in terms of *décalages* of experience, knowledge, responsibility and bodily-ness in relation to adults.<sup>3</sup> More balanced views have been proposed (Uprichard, 2008) which attempt at redressing different ‘timescapes’ simultaneously – present and future – which embed children’s lives and actions. Thus, children can be seen as ‘beings and becomings’ not to the detriment of recognizing their capacity as agents.

Contradictory theoretical standpoints on the nature of children’s difference point to the need of conceptualizing notions of change along subjectivization processes other than from a developmental perspective which defines a ready-made teleology for children’s lives. Current literature on children’s participation has insightfully noted that participation can often stand in a relationship of tension and opposition as far as protection is concerned. Sinclair (2004: 107) points out that ‘taking responsibility *for* someone resulted in taking responsibility *away* from them’. She questions whether the participation agenda will effectively promote the restructuring of institutional cultures and adults’ expectations so that children’s participation becomes, not an add-on, but *an integral part of how adults relate to children*.

Our standard model of subjectivity has been cast in an adult-centric point of view. What we understand as knowledge, responsibility and autonomy, for instance, has been construed and legitimated as projections of an idealized *adult* performance in response to the demands of modern, rationalized, liberal societies (Nandy, 2007). The effective inclusion of children in ampler social processes entails a radical questioning of very cherished ideas about rationality, autonomy and responsibility that have been the basis of modern institutions. Cockburn (1998) addresses such issues when he problematizes models of citizenship based on the autonomy of the individualized subject which underplays the inexorable interconnectedness of subjective constitution.

## **Participation practices in school: Is the ‘new’ participation agenda moving forward?**

Children’s position in schools – their subordinate role as learners and recipients of adults’ endeavours – gradually imbricate with novel perspectives on children as ‘subjects of

rights' and agents which introduce tension in such clear-cut roles. Thus, schools can provide a relevant context to investigate how relationships between children and adults – students and teachers – are changing in face of a renewed participation agenda.

Recent educational bills in Brazil, both federal and municipal, have announced a 'democratic management of schools', as a main ethico-political orientation of educational ideals. The National Bill on Education (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional, Law 9.394/December 1996) established specific guidelines for a democratic management of public education: school councils should be constituted by heads, teachers and school staff, parents, *student representatives* (my emphasis) and community representatives. Councils are supposed to exert surveillance on school financial resources and discuss the school pedagogical project. At the municipal level, legislation on school councils, named School–Community Councils, recommended that the community of parents should be organized and take part in school affairs and student leaderships stimulated through the establishment of student councils. Children, from 9 years of age, are allowed to elect their candidates. The right to organize free and autonomous student councils is guaranteed by two laws, one federal (Law 7398/November 1985) and one state (Law 1949/January 1992). These laws provide that in all schools, private and public, students have the right to organize themselves in autonomous entities representative of students' interests. Interestingly enough, legal dispositions guarantee the existence of student councils, though do not secure their obligation. They come to exist only if students are mobilized enough to make them happen.

In what follows we present the results and discussion of part of a larger research project on children's and youth's social and political participation in schools in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.<sup>4</sup> As the initial stage of a wider project, the interviews explored the meanings that the term 'participation' evoked for students and heads, what sort of actions were most associated with it, how they viewed the presence and the activities of student councils in schools and what sorts of problems student representatives faced.

### *The empirical study*

Open interviews were conducted with 140 students, aged between 11 and 21, and with 68 heads (or other school staff holding an administrative position) of private and public (state and municipal<sup>5</sup>) schools in the city of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>6</sup> The final sample included 35 municipal, 19 state and 18 private schools, totalling 72 different schools, the larger number of municipal schools representing their proportion in the population as a whole.

Private schools in Brazil generally recruit children from middle and upper social classes, whereas public schools – especially municipal ones – stand as an option for those who cannot afford the costs of private educational services. Thus, a clear social class bias is present in public schools which recruit mainly from lower social classes with a significantly greater number of black and coloured students in comparison with private schools. In the state of Rio de Janeiro, municipal schools offer basic compulsory education for children between 6 and 15 years of age, and state schools offer the second level of basic education for youth between 16 and 18 years of age.

The schools were located in three different educational districts of the southern, northern and western sides of the city, so that not only could a wider range of educational contexts be included, but also a more representative student composition in terms of

families' socioeconomic level, parents' educational background and cultural opportunities available for children depending on the area where the school is located.

In each selected school we aimed at three interviews: one with the headteacher or any other member of school staff holding an administrative position at the time, and two with students, one student that had, or had had, any involvement with the school or the student council, and another student that had not.

Students were contacted via school staff. All students that were contacted, but one, agreed to participate. In general, once the sequence of authorization procedures has been followed, which can take from 4 to 6 months, heads of public schools are in the position to judge ethical issues and decide themselves, without parents' consent, about the feasibility of the research in their schools. In private schools, the situation varies, with parents sometimes being asked to consent. In our case, in all schools, private and public, it was the heads who gave their approval for the interviews. Interviews were conducted by graduate and undergraduate students who were part of the research team, and acted as a *different type of adult* (Christensen, 2004) who were interested in children. Notwithstanding the many ethical implications of research with children, we were especially concerned with making accessible to them the results of the research. A very first opportunity to do so took place in an event in 2008 organized by the educational authorities when student representatives of student councils were receiving their certificate. Discussion of the results with school staff took place in 2009.

Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Two methods of data analysis were followed for the student interviews. The first method encompassed an 'immersion' (Gill, 1998) in the interview data by multiple readings which were accompanied by intensive group discussion among the research team. Group discussions provided the opportunity of discussing possible interpretations of the data inspired by the theoretical guidelines of the project. Coding the data followed, aiming at producing analytical categories. A second method of interview analysis was carried out using the software ALCESTE (Analyse Lexicale par Contexte d'un Ensemble de Segment de Texte, version: 49 Image), which allows coding the interview data in lexical classes which group together words as they significantly appear in proximity in the text. By using a second method of analysis comparisons could be made between the two groups of categories yielded by each method. Interviews with headteachers were analysed by the first method.

Roughly, the two methods used to analyse the student interviews indicated three main categories of students' participation: (1) 'conservative participation', (2) 'fearful participation' and (3) 'precarious resistances'; and these are the focus of the discussion that follows. Headteachers' views are brought in and discussed within the scope of these categories.

### *Conservative participation*

A prevalent meaning of students' participation is understood as an individual endeavour to act out the student's role adequately: to attend classes, to be attentive during classes, to study and do the homework. By and large, this seems the most straightforward meaning of student participation irrespective of age and type of school. Many students refer to this kind of participation as the 'normal' one, meaning, like 'everybody else', or, like 'it should be'.

To participate is to be attentive, to obey the head, not to mess around. (Boy, age 14, municipal sch.)

The school doesn't offer much. I go to classes, I do the homework. My participation is more attending classes, really. I don't think that participating in students' councils changes much in school decisions. (Girl, age 17, private sch.)

A constellation of meanings is attached to acting out 'normally' at school. To carry out one's duties as a student also involves a commitment to the role of learner which implies following the rules and displaying attitudes of 'good behaviour', showing that one is 'civilized' and 'respectful' of teachers. 'Normal' participation, besides the individualized investment in the attainment of educational demands alludes to the recognition of staff as hierarchically superior, as 'authorities'.

I help a lot. I consider respect very important, to recognize the authority of heads and teachers. I don't participate in school decisions. I could but I find this boring. (Girl, age 13, municipal sch.)

Thus, this way to view participation leans towards a conservative acting out the student's role constrained by expectations which should not be surpassed. For instance, if a more prominent or active behaviour is eventually demanded, as when teachers ask students' opinions about one or another school issue, one should be willing to do so, but only as far as authorized:

I think that I have a good participation because I do all the homework, I participate in the classes, I give my opinion about the students' life in school when I am asked. (Boy, age 13, municipal sch.)

'Conservative participation' thus refers then to a cluster of attitudes and behaviours, such as involvement in school work, commitment to school rules, voicing one's opinion when asked for it and attendance to school events and activities which in different degrees help to maintain existing hierarchical positions leaving to the staff a clear role of command and control of school affairs and student behaviour. This should not be understood as a smooth accomplishment on both sides. In public schools (state and municipal) students felt it hard to live up to school expectations, especially when the daily life of schools presented them with so many frustrations, disappointments and hardships. Therefore, whenever they were sure about being deprived of a right, as when a teacher was systematically absent, they also felt authorized to complain and show their dissatisfaction. Even so, students' reactions were measured against possible retaliations from the staff, avoiding actions that could be considered too independent and daring. In private schools, such aberrant situations did not occur, and students' dissatisfactions voiced more disperse interests, like the demand for classes on extra-curricular topics and cultural events.

In the opinion of headteachers, students' participation and the activities of student councils should be closely supervised. A prevalent understanding was that students were immature and needed guidance, otherwise they would not know how to act properly if left on their own. By and large, heads affirmed that student participation could be positive when students' representatives acted as a *good link* between the student body and the staff.



Participation was frequently associated with *help* in schools. This was especially noted in municipal schools, where students were younger, and the word was often employed by student representatives to convey how they should act. Students, elected to student councils, or holding a position of representation in school councils, felt that their most important commitment was to help school staff. Staff also confirmed such a view. This included a range of activities, such as running errands, helping to organize school events, reporting to staff fights, graffiti and other deviant behaviour among peers, surveillance of peers when teachers were absent, counselling of peers to improve their behaviour, reporting to staff students' needs and opinions and 'doing anything that the head asked to improve school life':

I participate in different ways here at school. Dona Vania [name of the head] asks me to help, I go along and participate, calmly, I don't complain. Dona Vania asks me to make a student's noticeboard, I do it, I help people to carry things. Whenever there is something, I help, calmly, I don't complain. I'm an excellent student. I don't mess about. When there is something 'strange', I go and tell her. (Boy, age 16, municipal sch.)

For staff, especially at the municipal schools, help from the student representatives could be vital as a way to maintain control over the student body:

She [the president of the student council] is always near me, she knows the school, its difficulties, talks with the peers, informs me which ones don't come with uniforms, she is like a spy. (Head, age 45)

The fact that students, representatives or not, often associated participation with helping the staff, especially in the municipal schools, highlights specific aspects of the Brazilian educational context. Accounting for the greatest demand of compulsory education in the city of Rio de Janeiro, municipal schools face enormous problems concerning the maintenance of infrastructure, teacher commitment and a clear support from higher educational authorities. A straightforward disinvestment of students and staff was often perceived to be the *modus operandi* in such schools, running under a very centralized and bureaucratized control of teachers' activities. Frequent changes in educational policies, dependent on the whims of party politics, and societal pressures for the improvement of educational standards in public schools have deteriorated the already frail conditions of municipal schools over the last few decades. Students, thus, clearly expressed their concern about this situation as a 'duty' to *do whatever was possible to improve school life*, in face of very adverse, sometimes chaotic, conditions.

To help the staff consisted of a form of acting out different responsibilities as a student, and for the students, but *from the staff's point of view*. This means that though students were elected by their peers to act on their behalf they were caught in an impasse because they were expected not to disagree or counter staff's dispositions. Student elections were generally controlled by school staff and only those considered 'apt' by staff could run for them. Student representatives, especially younger ones, seemed more likely to envisage their roles as an appendage of staff's initiatives. Being in a more privileged position with regard to proximity to staff, compliance with them enhanced personal



approval and minor gains, such as, for example, the choice of which peers would form party committees and so on.

In private schools, *help* was mostly associated with the performance of one's responsibilities as a student, *doing one's part*, so that the school became a good place to be at. *Help* became important to *improve school life, organize parties, engender conscientiousness among students* and, sometimes, to develop social projects in the community.

Many heads noted, however, that children were not motivated to participate and seemed very apathetic. In private schools staff were concerned that student councils should conform to the 'politics of the school'. As they had a paying clientele, usually from a better off population, students' activities should be controlled so as not to let down academic achievements. Therefore, concerns about *student activism* related to the potential damage to students' intellectual preparation and lack of competitiveness in public exams.

### *Fearful participation*

In some of the interviews with students participation evoked a clear dissatisfaction with the status quo, as if the constraints and difficulties of school life could stir dissonant voices and different attitudes other than those prescribed by the learner's role. A questioning of the status quo and of the students' subordinate role, ever positioned as rule-followers, was timidly put forward. This category was represented mostly by students coming from municipal schools and by more girls than boys. In the interviews a recurrent feeling of fear was reported concerning students' actions. These were couched less in the positive sense of *help*, as in the aforementioned category, but rather as attempts to dare to act differently. However, acting differently was usually limited to complaining to the 'authorities' about what was wrong, or sometimes transgressive behaviour, such as messing about in the refectory or in class.

Everybody is afraid to speak out . . . it'd be better if the students' council could do it. I could speak to her [the head], but then it doesn't seem necessary anymore. (Girl, age 16, municipal sch.)

Although a distancing from the staff's point of view could be noted as students talked about participation, leading to situations of tension and conflict, they did not position themselves as a collectivity expressing a *students' point of view*. In this sense these were disperse and timid actions to deconstruct the sole way to *be seen and to act at school*, even though such expressions did not lead to the emergence of a collective subject with interests, opinions and desires different from the staff's.

### *Precarious resistances*

This category stands for a much less frequent meaning of student participation related to a distancing of the staff's perspectives – expressed as a deliberate resistance to the overall institutional (adult-centred) point of view. It represents an attempt to speak from the students' standpoint, which encompasses students' specific interests which, from school to school, showed an immense variation. Nevertheless, an important aspect was the fact

that students could talk from a distinct, more collective point of view showing concerns other than those of the individualized 'good-enough student' and more likely to stand out from the authorized limits of demands and complaints:

I think that we have participated more, for example, we have gone out in the streets for the student's free transport pass. I think that we are struggling a little for our rights. The school council doesn't help much; if I did not belong to it, I would be very frustrated, because it does not do anything. We invited our peers for the debates to get prepared for the students' elections, but nobody turned up. (Girl, age 17, state sch.)

My participation is very minimal because we don't have access to the school staff. The fact that the school council is back this year has been a students' achievement, because the staff are against it. (Girl, age 18, state sch.)

In both these excerpts the girls mentioned the difficulties inherent to students' participation in school. Mobilizing peers for a school council, running it against all odds were common complaints: peers weren't aware of its importance, staff didn't help, there was no petty cash to buy paper or pens to make posters. Despite the problems, students talked of fighting for rights, as above, or *striving for more union among students themselves rather than uniting with the staff*. Many students said that they had been discharged of their responsibilities as student representatives on account of being regarded by staff as unreliable, irresponsible and having shown bad academic performance or behaviour.

Staff's concerns about students' participation, especially older students, were related to possible divergences from school norms and ideals. Two kinds of complaints emerged: first, parties could become more important than students' academic endeavours; second, student representation could be overtaken by political partisanship. Headteachers' fears that students' representation could be assumed by irresponsible students also appeared:

From last year we have cancelled the student council's activities. Student leadership here is negative because of the elected students. The council is used to cause confusion. We are making students aware that they have to consider what they want to do. There is no sense to have a student council just for the sake of it. We had serious problems with it last year. When we went to clean up their room there was alcoholic drink hidden there. (Assistant head, age 54)

The fact that student councils existed in about half of all schools cannot be taken as a straightforward mechanism to improve students' participation, *as they think it*, or as a sign of the 'democratic management of school life'. Nevertheless, in schools where student councils were non-existent, there seemed to be less need to envisage participation other than the conservative form. Thus, mobilizing peers for elections, discussing projects, dealing with adversities, facing opposition or persuasion by staff and so forth, made students aware that an *other* position in school could be constructed, even though very disparate conceptions of students' representation could be found. In fact, student councils, though hardly meeting students' expectations, seemed to bring about some tension and divergence of opinions between staff and students, and among students themselves, in their attempts to grope towards participating in a different way from the conservative understanding.

Some heads showed a positive outlook on students' participation and student councils, stressing their importance as a means to develop citizenship values and a critical political mentality. No significant relationship was observed between such views on the part of headteachers and the type of school where they worked:

I find the students councils' activities very beneficial because they are the very first beginning of a political experience in a social institution that they know, with norms, rights and responsibilities. It is on account of the council that the student will learn to live politically, will learn how to act in society. (Assistant head, age 51)

Students' interests, as the abiding force, continuously creating novelties and disturbances of school routines, were not uniform, varying according to type of school. For some, it was most important to organize parties, extra-curricular activities and trips, all felt to be lacking especially in public schools, but considered necessary to students' life. Others were concerned with creating a liaison among students by informing them of important decisions of the school staff and/or educational authorities, and by collecting students' opinions to forward to the staff.

The importance of the students' voice, as a unique expression of a distinct point of view, not univocally assimilated to the pupil's role, seemed to represent a precarious resistance to the powerful control over students' behaviours by staff. Students' actions seemed directed towards making their school experience more meaningful, contributing somehow to make it more theirs. Often, however, this entailed being regarded and positioned as an oppositional force inside the school. The organization of school events, for instance, as the result of ongoing discussions in peer groups, very often countered staff's opinions, who employed different manoeuvres to impose their views such as making promises, tactical indifference and sanctions.

It was in public state schools with older children that many students indicated the importance of a students' movement and the need for a 'political student culture':

I think that it is not easy to build up a student council: schools don't have a political culture, students are not mobilized enough, peers haven't got such a culture. Student councils are important on this account, to engross students' participation in schools. (Girl, age 17, state sch.)

In the state public schools, where the students are older, a more organized 'students' voice' was noted especially. Maybe the fact that public schools confronted students with recurrent problems, from teacher absenteeism to dirty bathrooms, plus headteachers' impotence or apathy, led to intense dissatisfaction and protest on the students' part. In the private schools students, coming from a better-off sector of the population, did not face such contingencies, and were more concerned to succeed in exams, having internalized the more individualistic and competitive ethos consonant with prevailing educational ideals.

### *Discussing the results*

By and large, for children and adults alike, students' participation should be accommodated within the spectral domain of good academic behaviour and loyalty to staff's points of view (see also Alderson, 1999), conforming to what heads and teachers are able to

offer. Hesitation, caution and indeed fear about not meeting such expectations disempowered students from daring to challenge the edifice of school hierarchy – if it is at all possible for a school hierarchy to become more democratized, a point already made by McCowan (2010).

However, eventually, students' participation can also manage to distance itself from the authorized perspectives of headteachers and staff, although a compromise between distancing and conformity was observed, as outright opposition seemed unrealistic. Often non-conformity was expressed in a 'covert way' (see also Devine, 2002; Thornberg, 2008). The episode that was reported by one head that the student council had become a place where alcoholic drink was consumed can be understood as an instance to rebel against school rules in secret.

At the epicentre of headteachers' surveillance of students' participatory activities lay the fear of disorder, disruption of normality and loss of control of students' behaviour. Also the multiple adversities that public schools face in the Brazilian context make teachers themselves cling desperately to routines deterring them from any attempt to experiment and learn as new situations come up. The view of children as in need of strict guidance addresses a long-standing intergenerational grammar which confers immanent qualities of immaturity and irresponsibility to children, on the one side, and of rationality to adults. Such asymmetries lead to a non-reciprocal relationship between teachers and students – the premises of what Dubet (1999) calls non-reciprocity – where students have obligations and teachers don't, when students have to follow the rules, and teachers may not. What results then is not an environment where trust and solidarity are fostered but one where constant suspicion towards children's actions awaits to condemn them. Furthermore, though serving to reinforce teachers' omnipotence, it also disengages students to act on their own behalf and learn responsibility in practice – assuming that one's actions have inexorably some effect on the world around.

A *developmental* perspective whereby children's subordinate position is based on their incapacity legitimated staff's control of whatever students' behaviours did not conform to expectations. The developmental perspective feeds the existing social order inside schools where adults are supposed to enact the cultural transmission from the point of view of the older generation, that is, from the standpoint of a single social actor who is in command of the whole process. The existence of student councils did provide an institutional resource to back up students' mobilization, though they did not guarantee that a students' point of view – a construction of school experience from the students' perspective – could be enhanced. Students themselves strongly felt the lack of collective support for their own endeavours, complaining how difficult it was to mobilize their peers in favour of what *they* wanted or needed. On this point Houssaye (2005) has argued that students themselves resist being put in a situation where they may decide. Anxieties in the face of the absence of (the teacher's) power makes students reaffirm demands for protection and orientation, rather than prefer emancipation.

Albeit very seldom, some heads did admit that the children inspired them to *see their practices in a different way*, or make them change. Amid the enormous adversities faced by public schools in Brazil, it was possible for some heads to be enthused by the children's voices. However, these fragile positions met with colleagues' general lack of motivation to act differently, hostility towards parents and conformism that

have become the pervading attitudes of the teaching body in Brazil today (Krawczyk, 2003; Vieira, 2002).

The emergence of students' points of view, seen as possibly different from, and conflicting with, those of headteachers and staff, were likely to push children into dissidence making public what schools would prefer to keep private: conflicts, disturbances and disagreements. Students' activism in schools was discursively constructed as a 'political school culture'. This seems interesting as it indicates that these youth allude to the notion of 'politics' to disentangle themselves from the adults' perspective and as a backdrop for an identity other than that of the subordinate learner. Students' allusion to a 'political culture' in schools seems to name, then, the difficult process of conjoining forces and articulating idioms in the struggle to construct their own experience of school life and resist the views of others about what they want and who they are. This may possibly indicate that privatized adult-child relationships in schools, in the sense of disregarding the public agency of children, will have to eventually face the antagonisms resulting from the expression of different perspectives of construing one's collective experience.

So far it seems that this process has met with strong difficulties to bring about changes towards more effective children's participation, more teachers' involvement and more pleasure to be in school, on both sides. In this respect, Cockburn (2007) has advocated the transformation of public spheres so that they can accommodate children's experience and interests. This would lead to shifting forms of governance in schools, from hierarchical top-down strategies to those which call for the participation of all partners involved.

## Concluding remarks

The notion of participation that has lately been introduced as a new paradigm in the regulation of children and adults' relationships has not radically changed the normative conception of children's subjectivity which establishes: (1) a straightforward trajectory of attainments, abilities and performances whose endpoints are defined by the conventional wisdom of what it is to be an adult – a rational, socialized human being; (2) the positioning of the child at the initial point of such a trajectory attributing to him/her the restricted participatory role of adhering to such demands of socialization; (3) the granting of 'participatory competence' as the child assumes a more adult-like subjectivity. Such a model has moulded school practices based on the idea of (children's) individual social and cognitive preparation.

Recent Brazilian educational legislation animated by the principle of 'democratic management', where children appear with 'adult-bestowed rights' (Alderson, 2010), does not seem to have had much of an impact on school practices. Students' participation seems still ingrained in the conventional wisdom that reiterates the subaltern role for children regarded as participants subject to adults' authorization, which ultimately denies the differential and possibly conflict-ridden impact of children's contribution in school.

An important issue concerns how to theorize childhood taking into account biological, psychological and cultural dimensions conjointly (Thorne, 2004) in an effort to cross-fertilize disciplinary boundaries so as to envisage a different theoretical framework for subjectivization processes. If children can be seen as speaking subjects, and not merely as 'minors', 'learners' or 'pupils', their contribution and construction of a 'common world' (Arendt, 1986; Tassin, 2003) can be recognized and valued not only in the

privatized arenas of family and school, but in all matters that affect them. This means that even if children are structurally positioned as recipients of the cultural heritage, they are active constructors and permanent interpreters of such a legacy, consistently initiating novel understandings about what world this is, and what it should be. As agents, children *alter* expected outcomes of social interaction, a process that propitiates off-script roles and questions the legitimated grammar of intergenerational transmission opening it up to more contingent outcomes.

If children can be regarded as apt to participate, not to the detriment of their care,<sup>7</sup> this entails reconsidering the statute of their action, so that in the present, and in whatever social interactions, they are reckoned as agents who permanently re-establish *other* points from where the world can be constructed and interpreted (see Alanen, 2001). This presupposes that a speaking capacity can be attributed to children who can be recognized as 'speaking subjects'. We learn with Rancière (1995, 1998, 2000) that such a process of *subjectivization* is, above all, a political one, as it involves struggles involving those who do not yet participate, or are not yet visible, or still, are not yet considered proper speakers. For Rancière, it is not absolutely straightforward and simple the act of recognition of those who can speak, and thus are *subjects*, from those who can just make noises with their mouths, thus, not standing as subjects with full prerogatives of subjecthood. Such a process of recognition involves 'a subversion of the normal ordering of things', as it is the constitution of the world itself – in terms of who *is* there, who is *apt*, who *can speak* and what stands as *legitimate discourse* – that is in dispute.

The inspiring ideas of Rancière make us argue that our present regimes of what counts as 'real', 'true' or 'valid' will not remain the same as children become included in matters affecting them. Adult-child relationships are bound to be politicized in the sense of releasing new issues to be worked out, discussed and negotiated, redesigning public spheres to accommodate other topics of public discussion. These changes are likely to accompany children's endeavours towards assuming their own advocacy, as Tisdall and Davis (2004) have remarked.

This entails a necessary openness to problematize current truths of our modern institutions: democracy, citizenship, the school system and so forth, looking at these institutions also from the point of view of children. This does not seem a simple or unproblematic task. First, because to include children's perspectives will demand a reframing of institutional goals, formats and procedures so as to accommodate the interests of these newly engaged social actors; furthermore, this will probably expand present private arenas into arenas of public concern 'politicizing' adult-child relationships and making explicit latent conflicts and antagonisms. For those who prefer to maintain the image of our 'good-enough society' with 'good-enough institutions', the effective inclusion of children's perspectives can be seen as a haunting image of disaster.

Participation demands inclusion of different partners in the process of establishing goals and values of conviviality. School goals – in an adult-centred society – have been established so as to prepare children for adult roles. Such unequivocal goals need to be problematized if children are to be included in the construction of school life. Alderson (2000: 132) has put it cogently: 'Schools cannot simply ignore democracy; they can either promote democratic practices or actively contravene them, there is no neutral middle ground.' Maybe deep anxieties about what future awaits schools – and what unknown challenges are to be faced – are constraining the advances of our participation momentum.



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## Notes

1. Article 12: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.'
2. The argument cannot be fully presented here. Psychological development was theorized as a 'naturalistic process' (McCall, 1977), comprehending patterns of individual change genetically determined which could be predicted (Clarke, 1978). However, species-universal givens ('nature') would only evolve towards full-fledged 'universal' expression – rationality – under the correct intervention procedures ('culture') targeting at the supposed 'universal' logical structures to be cultivated. As Buck-Morss (1987) has argued, formal, abstract, logical structures mirror the dominant 'universal' economic structures of modern capitalism, produced to permit abstract value exchanges unqualified by specificities of content and context.
3. I am not essentializing children's difference here, in the sense of affirming an inherent difference of children vis-a-vis adults, but arguing for differences that are the outcome of relational positions in discourse and in material conditions of living.
4. Research project titled Children's and Youth's Political Subjectivation and Institutional Contexts: Democracy in Schools, supported by the Carlos Chagas Research State Foundation (FAPERJ) and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPQ) in Brazil.
5. By public schools I mean state-funded institutions.
6. The empirical part of the research was carried out from 2006 to 2009 and involved, apart from the interviews, which constituted the very first moment of the fieldwork, the following procedures: (1) the application of a questionnaire (with two versions, one for younger children, another for the older ones) to a sample of 1980 children and youth; (2) conducting 35 focal groups with children and youth on specific topics from the questionnaires, comprising approx. 12 participants each; and (3) attendance at school events organized by the educational authorities to 'instruct' recently elected student representatives on their roles.
7. Protection, or rather care, should not be in opposition to participation. As some researchers have shown (Thomas and O' Kane, 1998) taking children's point of view into consideration and allowing them to decide imply the construction of relationships of trust, as well as the assumption that children and adults have their own stakes of risk and responsibility in matters that involve them.

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