

# **Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Child and Youth Participation in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa<sup>1</sup>**

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Issues of child and youth participation in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa have distinctive local features; at the same time, they share many qualities with those in other Western countries. In this introduction, I provide some regional context for the participation debate by discussing the demographic, socioeconomic and political environment for children and young people in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa. I identify a tension between social changes that have ushered in an agenda of child and youth participatory rights and the economic and political forces that have made meaningful participation for a diverse range of youth difficult to achieve. The collection of articles for this special focus region highlights in various ways how this tension has become the key challenge for participatory programs, research and policy in the region. Throughout the introduction, I refer exclusively to the work of authors from Australia and New Zealand to provide readers with an overview of local work on this topic.

A demographic snapshot of children and youth in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa helps to situate debates about participation in the region. Children and young people constitute just over 27 percent of the populations in both Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001; Statistics New Zealand 2001). Unlike in many other Western nations, the geographical makeup of these countries is such that youth often live in rural and regional areas that are isolated from major urban centers and cities. There is also significant ethnic, cultural and religious diversity amongst children and youth in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa, as both countries are home to Indigenous populations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia and Maori in

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<sup>1</sup> Aotearoa is the Maori (Indigenous) name for New Zealand.

New Zealand/Aotearoa); both were colonized by Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; and both countries have received migrants and refugees from the Asia-Pacific region, Europe and, more recently, Africa. Further, while the overall standard of living in these countries is high, the economic and social well-being of children and youth is mediated by class, culture and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, ability and location. The interdisciplinary nature of child and youth participation studies in the region is shaped by these demographic features of children and youth, and also reflects and responds to changing socioeconomic trends that have an impact on young people in the region.

As Johanna Wyn and I (2005, 272) have written elsewhere,

Australia is a large, sparsely populated continent and a population of approximately 19 million people, who live in cities and regional towns, largely concentrated on the coastal fringe. New Zealand consists of two main islands, and has a relatively small population of approximately 4 million people. While they are both migrant societies that have Indigenous populations, the different historical origins and subsequent social and economic development between the two countries means that today there are both historic and contemporary differences that impact on young people's lives. Yet young people in Australia and New Zealand do share some common circumstances. They have grown up in English-speaking countries in the Pacific that were colonised during the 1800s. Young people born in the early 1970s in Australia and New Zealand are shaping their lives in the context of significant changes to many aspects of life that the preceding generation took for granted.

These significant changes have been both positive and negative. Some historical and legal circumstances brought about by social changes of the 1960s and 1970s have greatly improved the status and position of children and young people in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa and have enhanced their participatory capabilities. For example, the current generation of young Australians is the first to have grown up under a constitution that recognizes Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders. Many young Australians and New Zealanders constitute a first, second or third generation of migrants or refugees – from Southeast Asia, the Pacific, Europe and Africa – and live in an environment wherein multicultural policy has been institutionalized, for the most part accepted, and often celebrated. The legacy of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s is also an important factor in understanding the opportunities for participation afforded to the current generation. The achievements of rights-based movements have meant that children and young people today are growing up with anti-discrimination legislation and equal opportunity policy and a language of participation that was previously unknown. Many of them have freedoms, rights and opportunities the previous generation did not enjoy.

However, in acknowledging the strong social foundation for child and youth participation, it is also important to understand the contradictions and complexities in the lives of the current generation of young people in the region. The

achievement of full citizenship in both Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa has become a more problematic experience, with traditional pathways to adult status and rights disrupted by deindustrialization, a restructured economy and labor market, and the retreat of the welfare state. Compared with earlier generations, for example, young people today stay in education longer, reside in the family home for extended periods and move in and out of the job market rather than find a job for life (see Wyn and Dwyer 1999; White and Wyn 2004). The absence of experiences that have traditionally indicated adult status, and, in turn, citizenship, has had an impact on opportunities for effective participation. As a result of extended transitions to what is conventionally perceived as adulthood, children and young people are more visible as “youth,” and there is considerable public anxiety about their capacity to follow the appropriate trajectory to responsible adult citizenship. Consequently, a debate has emerged about the demonstration of responsibilities before the granting of rights. As I will discuss more fully later, children and youth have been traditionally perceived as “apprentice citizens,” rather than entitled rights-holders, but this perception has had a greater opportunity to take hold in a time when adult status is hard to achieve. It can also be difficult to enact participatory rights when other aspects of citizenship, such as the social rights that underpin economic security, prove elusive. The current environment vis-à-vis participatory rights for children and young people in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa is therefore complex: they are growing up in a time of more education, but fewer jobs; more choices, but less security; greater recognition of their participatory rights, but more complicated requirements of mutual obligation and demonstration of responsibility.

Contemporary debates about child and youth participation in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa tend to commence with acknowledgement that the need for and value of participation is increasingly recognized by decision-making bodies as well as the everyday institutions of children’s and young people’s lives. Policies, programs and research regarding participation have been fundamentally shaped by a rights-based discourse as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), to which both countries are signatories. The CRC is a 1989 UN document that outlines the rights to which children and young people are entitled, and articulates these broadly in terms of protection, provision and participation. It is the focus on the participatory rights of children and young people and their entitlement to exercise these rights in the everyday business of their communities that has been perhaps the most radical and complex aspect of the CRC agenda. This is because children and young people are positioned not simply as passive dependents who must be provided for and protected, but are framed as active citizens.

Many local researchers and practitioners have been instrumental in establishing and furthering the worldwide participation rights movement for children and young people, based on this shift in perspective. The entitlement of children and young people to participatory rights is now increasingly recognized, albeit unevenly, at many levels of society, including government, schools and local community. There now exist many more opportunities for youth to be involved in decision-making processes through bodies such as student councils, youth reference groups for

government and community-based advisory groups and programs. Frameworks for participatory research involving children and youth have also been reshaped with a rights agenda in mind. For example, government and university ethics committees, which control the obligations of researchers to participants below the age of consent, are increasingly making a shift from protection to empowerment. In other words, children and young people are not simply perceived as vulnerable individuals who must be looked after by the institutions responsible for safeguarding their well-being, but as rights-holding citizens who are entitled to an active role in creating and consulting on research programs that affect them.

However, the meaning and implementation of these rights vary enormously, as noted by several of the authors of articles in this regional focus section. One of the key issues for the region, therefore, is not so much how to increase opportunities for participation, but how to make participation a meaningful practice for diverse groups of children and young people. This is particularly significant in light of the changing socioeconomic landscape affecting the young generation that makes traditional markers of citizenship more difficult to achieve while simultaneously requiring children and young people to be increasingly responsible and engaged in civic life regardless of their position in society. There is concern that the discourse of participation, on its own, serves only to further “responsibilize” children and youth, and ultimately blame them for their failure to engage. As I have written elsewhere (Harris 2004, 139), “this renewed interest in youth participation has brought about prescriptions for being a properly engaged, good youth citizen, along with an increased regulation of young people’s lives.” For example, Thomson and Holdsworth (2002) have demonstrated how participatory programs in some Australian schools are designed to teach students how to become self-managing subjects. They suggest that such programs encourage children and youth to identify social issues, such as health or law and order, take responsibility for these problems and then “fix” them. This is consistent with a broader neo-liberal agenda of the responsibilization and individualization of youth, as Kelly (2001) has argued. Attention to the socioeconomic conditions for meaningful participation and the ideological framing of children and youth as self-making citizens has been an important focus of recent critical work in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa.

The new construction of children and youth as self-managing civic agents sits alongside a longer-standing representation of children and young people as inappropriately disengaged from their political and civic worlds. In both the international and local literature, an urgent need has been identified for improved strategies for participation, partly owing to a perception that children and young people are disengaged, inactive in the political realm, and lacking civic knowledge (see Mellor, Kennedy and Greenwood 2001). Some research that propagates this image is concerned with children and young people’s lack of interest in formal politics, and some with their apparent lack of engagement with their local communities, social justice agendas or social movements. One approach to these problems is to focus on the failings of children and young people themselves to enact their participatory rights. However, an important alternative in local research has been to document the conditions behind opportunities for child and youth

participation, as well as the deeper meanings that lie beneath so-called apathy or cynicism about political and civic matters.

For example, a longstanding argument by many researchers in this region holds that when calls for participation, civic connection and increased civic knowledge are driven from the top down, the citizenship education programs that inevitably eventuate do not tend to engage young people. Ten years ago, Owen (1996, 20) observed that "what we are witnessing in Australia at present is a policy-led resurgence of interest in civics and citizenship. That is, the Commonwealth government has identified a 'problem' ... and has set in train a range of solutions." This trend has continued throughout the past decade in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa. However, children and young people have not traditionally been consulted about programs that work for them, and have tended to be treated as what Owen calls "apprentice-citizens" rather than responsible, rights-holding individuals who are entitled to an active and critical role in their society (see also Wyn 1995). Consequently, many researchers have argued that it is no wonder that children and young people tend to seem disengaged from civic life and knowledge and cynical about politics. As Lean (1996, 55) has documented in her research, "one of the greatest problems according to youth is the assumption by political leaders that they know what is best for young people." She also notes that what appears to be apathy may in fact be a rational response to the new economic conditions faced by young people, such that getting a job was more important to the cohort she surveyed than obtaining the vote (1996). The civics and participation focus in policy has not connected with the real issues in young people's lives, such as high unemployment, that confront them in times of social change. As Bessant (2004, 397) writes, "the failure to recognize the very noticeable and real obstacles that most young people face in their bid to engage in democratic practices raises questions about the efficacy of the official youth participation agenda."

Further, local researchers have suggested that a distinction ought be made between children and young people's interest in the more alienating and abstract institutions of the political system and "society," and their interest in specific political and social issues (Beresford and Phillips 1997). Although conventional measures of citizenship continue to show that youth may not be interested in participating in formal politics or civic programs, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that they are passionately engaged in political and social issues. These include the environment, equality and human rights, race relations and cultural diversity, and employment and education (see Beresford and Phillips 1997; Cope and Kalantzis 1998; Aveling 2001; Vromen 2003; Bulbeck 2004). This suggests that children and young people are active participants in their social worlds, and hold important views and engage in important practices on political matters. However, their strategies for participation may be more diffuse and less formal than those of previous generations.

In recognition of both the obstacles children and young people face and their alternative ways of expressing political and social engagement, child and youth researchers in this region have suggested that models of participation need to be substantially rethought in order to be meaningful for children and young people

today (see for example Jamison and Gilbert 2000; Moore 2000; Holdsworth 2001). In particular, children and young people should not simply be passive recipients of civic education. Some argue that their own concerns and rights ought be the starting point for improving participation (Doesburg 2000; Taylor and Smith 2000; Aveling 2001; Bessant 2004). Others are cautious of a rights-based approach on the grounds that it favors traditional models of participation and reduces accountability, arguing instead for improving the relevance of the voting system and increasing children and young people's involvement in good governance (Burfoot 2003). Either way, there is a new focus on meanings of participation for a new generation of youth grappling with forces of economic restructuring and individualization. And importantly, there is a new emphasis on a critical examination of the effectiveness of participation strategies rather than an assumption that the existence of formal initiatives is sufficient (see Freeman, Nairn and Sligo 2003).

Similarly, participatory research involving children and young people has moved beyond the basic recognition that they need to be consulted about research that affects them. As discussed by Tupuola in this issue, young people's lack of engagement with research may be a political choice based on a stance against colonial or other disciplining methodologies. Ormond (2001) notes that reluctance to participate must be interpreted carefully, as it might signal strategies for retention of power and knowledge within youth cultures and communities. Methodologically, this has meant that spaces for hearing youth voice have become more complex, contested and expanded. Research methods must be flexible and respectful, but approaches vary. In some cases, child and youth participation is seen to be best achieved when the research space is formal and has considerable gravitas attached; for example, Smith et al. (2001) make a case for the forum of the public testimonial or tribunal. In other circumstances, the need for confidentiality and intimacy may preclude public methods, or stipulate that the forum be modified, for, as they note, there is a real problem that "youth voice-when it is expressed in society- is often regarded as publicly available, open to ongoing censorship and correction" (Smith et al. 2001, 178). Ormond further argues that even when youth voice is heard with compassion rather than censure, an emotional response can prevent important socioeconomic and cultural analyses from taking place, and therefore modes of listening must become part of a critical perspective on participatory research (see Ormond 2004). Significantly, Tupuola's work in this issue suggests that when new participatory methods for research are followed, these may in turn reveal new modes of civic participation, as young people can engage with one another as participants in both research and community and identity building.

I have suggested here that while children and young people's participatory rights are increasingly recognized in policy, programs, research and practice in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa, an emergent issue is how to make participation meaningful for a diverse range of youth. This concern is reflected in the collection of articles for this regional focus section. All of the papers and field reports acknowledge that a rights agenda has taken hold, but each raises important questions about how the agenda is being implemented on the ground. Some of the

papers highlight the ways in which certain groups of children and young people are constructed as preferred and non-preferred participants. For example, Nairn, Sligo and Freeman argue that young people tend to be constructed dichotomously as either “achievers” or “troublemakers,” and that participatory initiatives targeted at these groups represent young people in limited ways and inevitably exclude the less noticeable population of “ordinary” children and youth. Couch and Francis also analyze the exclusionary practices that occur in current participatory strategies by discussing the marginalization of refugee young people. They point out that consultative processes designed to engage refugee communities tend to focus on adult representatives. To remedy this, they argue against an abstract “having a voice” approach, and suggest that refugee youth face particular challenges that necessitate specialized strategies for inclusion, but that they also bring enormous resources of resilience and initiative. Tupuola looks at the question of successful participatory research for minority youth, whom she argues have often been misrepresented in research, perceived as research objects or included in only a tokenistic manner, and rarely engaged as the agents of research. She argues for the utilization of Indigenous, cross-cultural and trans-national methods that can create a critical dialogue between researcher and participant as well as across participant groups – a point that she notes is increasingly important as young people construct global cultural and political identities.

Other authors in this focus section focus on the particular participatory initiatives that have emerged in response to some of the specific criticisms identified both in this introduction and in many of the articles themselves; in particular, that participation is often promoted without meaningful processes or evaluative measures in place, and that children and young people are constructed as particular kinds of participants and included or excluded accordingly. In his field report, Bo’sher discusses the Australian federal government’s National Youth Roundtable, which is the national body that brings together a selected group of youth to network and receive advice in order to return to their local communities to develop projects. He brings to bear his many years of experience as a youth participant in several programs and advisory bodies to raise questions about how effective or meaningful engagement in the Roundtable might be, and about its representative capacity. Three other articles discuss non-governmental initiatives designed to enhance the participation of children and young people in urban, regional and remote communities respectively.

In her field report, Douglas discusses a city-based project entitled *BlastOff*. She makes a case for a differentiation between participatory initiatives that are adult-managed and those in which children and young people devise and lead projects but have access to adult advocates who can assist with legal and bureaucratic matters. Graham, Whelan and Fitzgerald review a regional program entitled *Young People Big Voice* and argue for a reflexive approach to participation: one that involves youth themselves in ongoing evaluation in order to be effective. Palmer, in collaboration with Watson, Watson, Ljubic, Wallace-Smith and Johnson, discusses the *Yiriman Project*, an intergenerational program that involves senior members of a regional Australian Indigenous community organizing trips “back to country” for groups of young Indigenous people. He argues that these trips, which involve

knowledge sharing, community building and land care, enable young people to participate in an anti-colonial movement and to engage in traditional cultural practices about decision-making and leadership that offer alternatives to the limitations of Western liberal notions of individual rights.

The articles in this special issue highlight the diversity of experiences and circumstances of children and young people in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa. They demonstrate that the recognition of participation rights is only the beginning in terms of meaningful engagement and agenda-setting by children and young people in the decision-making and community-building processes that affect their lives. Recent socioeconomic and political changes have created new challenges for the effective implementation of participatory rights for youth in this region. These papers offer some provocative, original and exciting ways to think through these challenges in terms of policy, practice and research. While they refer directly to the Australian and New Zealand/Aotearoa scene, they also speak to issues of participation for children and youth in many other places.

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