Research

Problematizing the concepts of ‘citizenship’ and ‘participation’ in early years discourses: are they so empowering?

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Abstract
The concepts of ‘citizenship’ and ‘participation’ are used increasingly in the early childhood field. Political rhetoric, policy frameworks, educational theory, pedagogy and practices all draw on these ideas in different ways. Professionals also use these concepts because of their democratic tone, with the best of intentions to create more inclusive, equitable and liberating relationships with children. However, ‘citizenship’ and ‘participation’ are rarely problematized in early years settings. This paper destabilizes these taken-for-granted notions. The author examines what the political notions of ‘citizenship’ and ‘participation’ entail; then uses the concept of governmentality to reconsider these discourses as technologies of government. The article poses some questions that might be asked before creating policies, and enacting pedagogies and practices in early years settings with and for children’s citizenship and participation.
Introduction

The concepts of children's 'citizenship' and 'participation' are enjoying something of a renaissance in public and political discourse (Kivisto & Faist, 2007; Scobey, 2001). They are also used increasingly in the field of education in general (Quaghebeur, 2007) and in early childhood education and policy in particular (ALP, 2007; Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett, & Farmer, 2008; Dei, 2008; Early Childhood Australia, 2006; Fleer et al., 2006; Lewis, 2003; MacNaughton, Hughes, & Smith, 2008; Millikan, 2001; Swiniarski, 2006; Woodrow & Press, 2007). Around the turn of the twentieth century, children appeared frequently as 'little citizens' in early years discourses and especially in the first kindergartens in Australia. Care and education that prepared children to be a part of the citizenry was seen as essential for nation building (Ailwood, 2002; Brennan, 1994; Hunter, 1994; Millei, 2007a). Recently, 'citizenship' has returned reinvigorated. On the one hand, governments invest in human capital to produce a highly skilled workforce that will maintain the nation's competitiveness among knowledge economies. On the other hand, it is also argued, particularly by Heckman (1999), that the same investment has the capacity to avoid future welfare spending that might arise due to unemployment or to health problems. In these discourses of investment, the term 'young citizens' positions children as responsible and willing partners and as autonomous and flexible life-long learners.

On the other hand, children are also being considered as citizens more frequently in the early years field in current pedagogical discourses, curriculum documents and practices and advocacy. Children are viewed as 'citizens with entitlements and rights' (ECA, 2006). These ideas originate in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989) (Convention) concerning rights to provision, protection and participation. Children First states that it is, 'the responsibilities of families, caregivers and governments to uphold these inherent rights' (p.2).

Children First adopts a children's rights-based discourse that reflects the intention of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989) (Convention) concerning rights to provision, protection and participation. Children First states that it is, 'the responsibilities of families, caregivers and governments to uphold these inherent rights' (p.2).
universal (Faulks, 2000) and, therefore, its application to children has the capacity to reinforce their rights, to emphasize their active agency and to position them in a more equal playing field with adults. It also lends a democratic tone to theories, documents and practices (Faulks, 2000).

This author maintains that the early years field has a strong desire for, and commitment to children’s empowerment and active participation. However, this does not guarantee that it will happen. The concepts of ‘participation’ and ‘citizenship’ have the potential to develop more equitable and inclusive practices, but only if they are grounded in an understanding of the politics and practice of ‘participation’ and ‘citizenship’. This article introduces some political ideas on ‘participation’ and ‘citizenship’ and then connects their use in the early years with the problematics of government (Foucault, 1994a; Rose, 1999).

Children’s emancipation originates in the feminist movement, due to the historical linkages between children and women (Roche, 1999). To empower children and to enable and facilitate their participation in matters concerning them are the objectives of a body of professionals working with children, using particular theories and practices of pedagogy and classroom discipline, such as participation and negotiation (Quaghebeur, 2007; Vanderbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). Among these theories and practices are interactive pedagogies (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Fendler, 2001) and guidance theories of discipline (Gartrell, 1998; Porter, 2003). Roche (1999) suggested that children’s participation and citizenship are two strategies to empower and emancipate children. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) have done similar work. They examined the practice of ‘participation’ and offered alternative practices to keep pedagogy and curriculum under negotiation continuously, thus enabling children to participate genuinely as equal members of learning communities. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) also argued that regarding empowerment as ‘giving power’ is problematic, as it implies that power is a commodity to be ‘passed on’ from one person to another.

This article furthers that argument by applying some political understandings of ‘citizenship’ to children’s empowerment. More particularly, it questions the idea that it is possible to create a more democratic and equitable environment for children by early years professionals or policy makers ‘passing on’ power to children. It uses the Foucault’s understanding of power and Rose’s understanding of governmentality (Rose, 1996, 1999) to question the extent to which these practices liberate children.

**Thinking politically about ‘citizenship’ and ‘participation’ in the early years**

The concept of ‘citizenship’ is complex and ‘essentially controversial’ (Vanderberg, 2000, p. 3); and a short review of the literature on citizenship showed its breadth (Kivisto and Faist (2007). Consequently, this article limits its focus to particular aspects of citizenship, highlighting the problematic nature of its use in early years discourses.

Citizenship is closely connected to rights, liberal history and nationalism. As Kivisto and Faist (2007: p. 1) argue, citizenship, ‘constitutes membership in a polity, and as such citizenship inevitably involves a dialectical process between inclusion and exclusion, between those deemed eligible
for citizenship and those who are denied the right to become members'. Membership of a polity brings with it rights, but also duties or responsibilities. Citizenship implies a rights-bearing political actor. Thus, citizenship entails active and ethical participation. In this way, citizenship is incompatible with domination and recognizes individuals as autonomous and self-governing (Faulks, 2000).

At another level, there is no definitive definition of 'citizenship' (Faulks, 2000; Kivisto & Faist, 2007; Vanderberg, 2000). Faulks (2000: p. 3) argues that modern citizenship is 'inherently egalitarian' as part of the liberal tradition, which is understood here as synonymous with modernity. This central characteristic enables minorities to argue against their unequal treatment and the infringements of their basic rights. However, the same inherent egalitarianism also promotes a view of citizens as equal individual, because it disregards their positions in society and it can disregard the power structures that can facilitate or constrain the practice of citizenship. Faulks (2000: p. 3) goes further and claims that citizenship, "contains an internal logic that demands that its benefits necessarily become ever more universal and egalitarian". This is also the view of Marshall (1963), who described how the meaning of citizenship has changed over time to grant different forms of rights to increasing proportions of society. In pre-industrial societies only a small elite had rights, but after the Industrial Revolution, different groups were granted civic and political rights. As the welfare state emerged, rights were extended to the majority of society. Marshall (1963) distinguished between civic, political and socio-economic rights. Civic rights include freedom of speech and equality before the law; political rights include the right to vote and to organise politically; and socio-economic rights include economic welfare and social security. Lister (1997) argues that social rights are crucial for those who are marginalised socially or economically (such as children - especially those in poverty) to enable them to claim their political and civic rights. Without social rights, children cannot be social agents, and therefore, cannot be citizens.

Children’s rights being enshrined in the UN Convention on the rights of the child, to which Australia is a signatory; and children are being involved increasingly in decisions affecting them. However, children are not equal to adults, because they depend on adults and because they lack civic, political and economic rights (Lansdown, 1994). Children are also excluded from arenas of political discourse and practice that form an important platform for participation and citizenship. Children are rarely involved in political processes, and consequently have minimal opportunities to express their opinions about institutions, policies and laws that affect them (Moss & Petrie, 2002).

Lister (1996; p. 171) suggest that political discourse occurs in two arenas, called 'strong publics' and 'weak publics', depending on whether they encompass decision-making as well as opinion-forming. Some community-based groups and Offices of Children in government are attempting to engage children in 'weak publics' whose opinions are heard and acted upon. For example, in discussions of family, school and health issues in Children First (Government of Western Australia, 2004), children appear as members of the community and are
invited to express their interests and aspirations. In this way, children are included in ‘weak publics’ but still lack any power in the ‘strong publics’ that take big decisions and do ‘real’ planning. In other words, children’s citizenship rights differ considerably from adults’. In these circumstances, does introducing citizenship into discourses of childhood benefit children?

According to Tushnet (1984; 1992), the definition of ‘citizenship’ rests on the abstract notions of rights. This means that rights are not ‘pernicious’ merely by virtue of being rights. Tushnet (1984; 1992) argues that by looking at rights in relation to law, rights are like a ‘smoke screen’. Although the law protects citizens’ rights, the extent to which an individual citizen can exercise those rights depends on their particular position in a society. Such a link between citizenship and abstract rights constitutes a ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980). Describing children as ‘young citizens’ implies that they possess certain rights already and can exercise them fully. This makes it difficult to raise questions about how far these rights are granted to children in practice or how these rights are safeguarded against greed or individual self-interests. Hunt (1990: p. 325) states that for rights to ‘have the capacity to be elements of emancipation … they [should] become part of an emergent "common sense"’ and be articulated with social practices. Thus, the use of ‘citizenship’ can empower children only if it forces individuals to enact children’s rights in practice. Otherwise, it merely hides the extent to which children’s rights are granted and preserved.

There have been several efforts to re-conceptualise ‘citizenship’ in political theory. For example, Harris (1987) argues that in spite of rights being associated legally with citizenship, rights have limited impact on citizenship; and so citizenship should be based instead on needs. (See Tushnet [1984, 1992] and Hunt [1990].) Harris (1987) suggests replacing ‘citizenship’ with ‘communitarianism’, in which rights flow from membership of a community that fulfils its members’ needs. This idea, he argues, might solve the problem when individuals are excluded from certain rights and therefore, citizenship. From this perspective, groups of young children would be seen as members of communities with children’s needs at the centre; and their membership would make them citizens. Fleer et al (2006) use a similar concept of ‘citizenship’, and recent policy frameworks of early years in Western Australia draw on these understandings as well as those previously mentioned. However, even in this case, different children’s different needs raise the question of whose needs are met and whose remain unmet?

Fleer et al (2006) argue that children are “citizens of learning communities” (p.25) whose needs concern their learning. Consequently, the only needs that such communities meet are linked to learning; and children are considered members of this group only if they are learning. This approach to children’s citizenship has the potential to produce ‘second-class’ citizens whose interests are other than those described in syllabuses and curriculum frameworks. These ‘second-class’ citizens risk being labelled as having ‘learning difficulties’ or ‘conduct disorders’ - labels that maintain their membership of a learning community while positioning them as inferior
members.

According to ‘postdevelopmentalist’ early years theory and practice (Cannella, 1998; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001; MacNaughton, 2005), a notion of citizenship based of needs is also connected to the idea and objective of participation because needs can only be defined through dialogue. For example, adherents to anti-bias, interactive or emergent curriculum or to multicultural discourses of early childhood education reject the idea that children have universal needs attached to particular stages of their universal development (Bredekamp, 1987). Instead, they believe that each child should articulate their needs, interests, skills and experiences for themselves in various ways, including dialogue. Consequently, defining children’s needs requires their participation.

Participation links citizenship with democracy in different ways, including representative democracy and participatory democracy. Participatory mechanisms are imbued with relations of power that marginalize and disadvantage certain groups, especially children. First, they disadvantage children due to their inexperience and lack of knowledge of negotiations. Consequently, several initiatives worldwide have sought to inform children about the process of negotiation, have explored their needs and have represented them through the standard processes of participatory or representative democracy. For example, Ombudsman for Children’s Offices around the world have designed a structure to facilitate children’s participation (Whyte, McAuley, Murphy, & Donovan, 2006). Participatory mechanisms also marginalize children differentially, because some cultures oppose or lack certain forms of participation and negotiation (Beck, 1997; Vanderbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). Thus, participation has the potential to empower some children but to disempower others.

Moreover, children’s participation is limited further by children’s protection. Children’s need for protection has been used to limit children’s participation in decisions about sensitive matters such as AIDS or death (Silin, 1995). Nonetheless, there have been attempts to provide children with necessary protection and at the same time to maintain their opportunities to participate. (See, for example, Christensen & James, 2000; Moss & Petrie, 2002.)

The next part of this article uses the idea of governmentality to re-conceptualise citizenship and participation and the liberation that is assumed to be associated with them. It will also examine the role of citizenship and participation in the problematics of government. This is not to question the value of children’s citizenship and participation. Rather, it is to question the theoretical and methodological functions that they fulfil in early years discourses that aim to create equity, inclusivity and freedom for children. The aim is to preserve what is valuable in citizenship and participation while highlighting the dangers of thinking that they can be taken-for-granted.

**Participation and citizenship as government**

‘Government’ refers to all endeavours that shape, direct or guide someone’s behaviour towards a specific end, ‘which is convenient for each of the things that
are to be governed' (Foucault, 1979a, p.13). In government, power consists of shifting relations that work through a triangle of 'sovereignty-discipline-government' (Foucault, 1979b: p. 19). The governed are controlled in a way that transforms sovereign forms of dominance (incapacitation) through the use of disciplines (such as early childhood education) into a form of self-government (capacitation) (Rose, 1999). Discourses and technologies of government constitute active subjects whose action can be regulated or self-regulated. Therefore, government embraces the control of someone’s behaviour, passion or instinct (Rose, 1999) and also delivers principles for the self-government and self-formation of its subjects according to certain available discourses.

Government uses certain knowledges about individuals in their government in the form of scientific disciplines or 'regimes of truth' (e.g. developmental or educational psychology). The human sciences deliver these knowledges as discourses; and within each discourse, individuals make sense of themselves by become subjects of that discourse and subject to it (Foucault, 1980). Thus, the governed are active. They govern and fashion themselves in particular ways according to particular principles in order to be who and what they desire to be within the limits of what is believed to be possible.

In this article, governmentality will refer to the power relations that regulate the population and individuals through a collection of rationalities and technologies that seek to promote a certain kind of self-government. Participation and citizenship are two such technologies of government. Sociocultural (Fleer, 2003) and Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) approaches to pedagogy and curriculum, and guidance approaches to classroom management (Gartrell, 1998; Porter, 2003), are examples of recent early childhood disciplinary knowledges that offer particular ideas and practices according to which teachers are able to understand children and develop practical approaches to support their learning and conduct. These knowledges and practices focus on children’s participation in co-constructing their knowledge or in decision-making regarding their lives and actions (Millei, 2007a). They constitute children as active, agentic, willing and capable participants who are full of potential. Constituting children in this way enables their government through their capacitation. These disciplinary knowledges and practices capacitate children to act in order for their action to be governable in directions assigned by the same discourses.

For example, children are constituted as active and willing participants in controlling their own behaviour by guidance approaches (Gartrell, 1998). Through their active participation, children can self-regulate their actions, freeing them from the teacher’s dominance. Consequently, children’s active participation in conflict resolution or negotiation is made governable. Children’s participation becomes a technology of government, yet appears to be a form of liberation (Millei, 2007b). As a result, order is maintained in the classroom not through the teacher’s dominance, but through the children’s willing participation. Those same disciplinary knowledges and practices also provide the principles through which children can think about themselves and
regulate their desires - for example, to be active participants in negotiating and self-regulating their conduct.

Liberalism has a special place in addressing the problematics of government or how to govern individuals (Rose & Miller, 1992). Liberalism is discussed in governmentality studies as a rational way of doing things and not as a theory or ideology of individual freedom (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Burchell, 1996; Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1994b; Rose, 1996, 1999, 2000). The particular rationality of the recently most prominent form of liberalism, 'advanced liberalism', answers particular problematics of the government of individuals related to their freedom (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1996, 1999). For example, it uses participation and citizenship to ensure children and teachers' greatest freedom to act, while at the same time, governing them to act in certain ways and to be certain types of subjects. The exploration of these technologies is the topic of the next section.

Liberating children through participation and citizenship

In 'advanced liberalism', the government of individuals is associated with a particular form of individual freedom that implies a kind of self-government. Thus, freedom itself became governmentalised (Rose, 1996, 1999). In 'advanced liberalism', individuals, 'seek to fulfil themselves [or rather choose to satisfy their assumed needs and desires] within a variety of micro-domains' (Rose, 1996: p. 57. Ooriginal emphasis), such as schools or communities. In other words, children seek to participate because the discourses of participation both capacitate and enable them to be active participants; but at the same time, those same discourses govern how children participate. Children desire freedom from domination, but freedom - as 'manufactured' by these discourses - is associated strongly with active participation. According to this logic, children's participation (a way of existence) and the formation of children's subjectivity (as participating individuals) are governed by discourses that are overwritten by an 'advanced liberal' rationality (Rose, 1999). Therefore, children's freedom is pre-fashioned and limited by the participatory discourses surrounding them.

The child subject of 'advanced liberalism' is an actively participating citizen, invested with a specific kind of freedom which subjects her/him to government. Therefore, the child's freedom is not a natural attribute but an effect of certain technologies aimed to create this freedom. These technologies shape the child as having the capacity to act freely they do so through developmental or pedagogical discourses that invent new capacities of the subject child that s/he did not possess before (Fendler, 2001). For example, in child development discourses the capacity to communicate and consequently to participate meaningfully appears increasingly earlier in a child's life. Through these newly invented capacities, 'the child' is fashioned as a subject of government with the capacity for freedom (Millei, 2007a). In these and the other discourses identified above, children appear as competent, active, independent, powerful, self-regulating and agentic and, moreover, as equal with adults. Hence their apparently liberatory character (Millei, 2007a).
For example, Kennedy’s and Surman’s (2005) discussion of the ‘pedagogy of relationships’ assumes a commitment to children’s participation from staff, parents and children in early childhood centres. This author supports relationships and participation in the early years and only uses this example to demonstrate that all discourses are ‘dangerous’. The ‘pedagogy of relationships’ presumes the inherent value of participation for children’s empowerment in their learning. Kennedy and Surman were influenced strongly by the work of Rogoff (1990), who defines development as, ‘a process of people’s changing participation in sociocultural activities of their communities’ (p. 62). Participation is almost reified as the rationality of development. Children, teachers and families are willing and eager participants, but their participation governs them, rather than liberating them.

‘Advanced liberal’ technologies and strategies of government link early childhood directly to macro-economic goals. An example of this is the recent push worldwide for increased investment in the early years to keep nations competitive in the international knowledge economy. At another level, these same technologies and strategies have produced dominant scientific discourses about ‘the child’ and his or her education that have homogenized and normalized practices such as Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), interactive pedagogy (Fendler, 2001; MacNaughton, 2003; Rogoff, 1990) and sociocultural approaches to teaching (Fleer et al., 2006; Rogoff, 1990, 2003). At the same time, the acceptance of plural existences has produced inclusive pedagogies and curriculum for the early years (Darder, 2002; Dau, 2001; Dermon-Sparks & Force, 1989).

In recent discourses of the early years, ‘the child’ is thought about as a citizen in the sense of being a member of a society. For example, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999: p. 50) argue that:

Last, but not least, the young child is understood and recognised as being a part of, member of, society. He or she exists not only in the family home, but also in the wider world outside. This means being a citizen, with citizen’s rights and, as he or she is capable of assuming them, citizen’s responsibilities It also means that the young child is not only included, but is in active relationships with that society and that world.

In these recent discourses, the young child has ‘active relationships’ with society and, thus, participates in it. Children are thought about increasingly as partners in research communities (Christensen & James, 2000) or as informants and partners in forming curriculum and pedagogy (Arthur et al., 2008; Stonehouse, 2001). In sum, ‘the child’ appears to be capable and willing to participate and to be a contributing member or citizen of society or a community.

In these discourses, children can gain or express their freedom through choosing to participate. In the end, children are regulated through their freedom. They are assigned to participate by the same discourses that aim to liberate their conduct from adult domination. If we understand citizenship and participation as technologies of government, then the power relations of these discourses
become visible. They promote children's freedom, but they also regulate children by limiting freedom. In other words, as technologies of government, citizenship and participation make domination obscure and distant.

As a technology of government, participation is the norm; and it fabricates a ‘free subject’ through domination, turning children into subjects of government (Dean, 1999). Participation, 'mobilises a particular type of individuality that is not "natural" … an individuality that implies a specific practice of freedom that needs to be "learned"' (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005: p.53). On the one hand, participation creates partnership between adults and children, empowers them and 'activate[s] forms of agency, liberty and the choices' for children (Dean, 1999: p. 165). On the other hand, children's participation is subject to norms to the extent that participation itself becomes a norm. Children are made participating 'free' subjects and their willingness to participate accordingly might be considered as 'learned'. Their active participation (freedom), in this way, is made subject to government (Quaghebeur, 2007; Rose, 1999). This idea leads to the idea of empowerment, in which both discourses of participation and citizenship intersect.

**The empowerment of children – is that liberating?**

Participation is promoted as an answer to particular problems in education at interconnected levels. Participation is an answer to exclusion because it can potentially create an inclusive learning environment (Quaghebeur, 2007). Participation can also solve problems with students’ motivation and make them responsible for their own learning and behaviour (Millei, 2007a). Moreover, participation can remove teachers' dominance and provide 'the child' with opportunities to practice his or her own freedom (Millei, 2007b).

In the early years field, it is often thought that participation and citizenship (i.e. membership of societies and/or communities) can enable children to become empowered and democratically self-governing; power, therefore, is not applied (Cruikshank, 1994). However, self-government is a particular form of government aimed at one's own conduct (Foucault, 1977); and empowerment that includes an aspect of self-government is imbued with power relations. Participation and citizenship are technologies of government that both alter and increase an individual's capacity to act (Cruikshank, 1994). Thus, children are capacitated to participate in order for them to become the subject of empowerment that involves self-government. According to this line of reasoning, participation does not only increase children's capacity to act, but also constitutes their subjectivity. Therefore, ‘the child’ is constituted in early childhood discourses where children think about themselves as having a potential and a will to participate. In this way, participation is instilled into ‘the child’ and participating becomes an expression and fulfilment of his or her desires and needs.

**Discussion**

Recent discussions in the early childhood field express a commitment to use participation and citizenship to emancipate, empower or liberate children. They draw children into partnerships with teachers, schools, families, researchers and governments. Thus, children are
obliged (or responsibilised) to participate, to exercise their freedom gained through participation (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005). These discourses constitute a desire and willingness to participate and a wish to be empowered. Therefore, this particular freedom is not the product, but rather the effect of their participation; and the desire to be free and to participate is a construction that is invented on children’s behalf. Through citizenship, participation and empowerment, children are governed in the ‘advanced liberal’ way (Rose, 1999).

Children’s participation and citizenship is seen as an emancipatory agenda for children. Therefore, it is easy to forget about the power relations built into them. If early childhood educators decide to implement this agenda, they have to recognise that it might merely transform adult-child power relations, instead of dissolving them. Calls for children to be considered citizens (members of societies and/or of communities) who should participate in decisions affecting their lives are problematic in three ways. First, they make participation normative and they take for granted children’s motivation and will to learn, to participate and to express their interests, strength and needs. Second, they govern children in spite of their intention to liberate them or to make them more equal. To borrow from Cruikshank (1994): how can an autonomous and participating ‘child’ be fabricated from a ‘child’ who is unwilling to participate without making him or her want to do so?

Consequently, for participation and citizenship to attain the intended ‘liberation’ each needs to be theorized far better. We need an open-ended dialogue between teachers, parents and children in which to continuously rethink participation and citizenship and how they are put into practice in the early years field. This dialogue can be informed by questions, such as:

- How are participation and citizenship understood in the field of early childhood generally and in specific settings and contexts?
- Does the use of participation and citizenship encourage children’s authentic involvement in practice?
- How do participation and citizenship facilitate or limit children’s membership? Do participation and citizenship create ‘equal playing fields’ for all children?
- Can we consider non-participation as dissent (i.e. a particular form of participation) and, if so, do we welcome it as such in practice (Delpit, 1988)?
- Is participation always in children’s interests?
- In a community in which children are considered as citizen-members, for what (and whose) purpose is citizenship defined? And does this purpose exclude some children from being citizens?
- Who defines the needs that are associated with membership in a community and on what basis?

If participation and citizenship are promoted in the context of such a continuing dialogue, then these technologies of government have less chance to govern children’s and teachers’ actions. For example, Campbell (in MacNaughton, Hughes & Smith, 2008) discusses the case of a disabled girl in her classroom who used gendered discourses and practices in order to gain entry into a group of children’s play. In spite of the disempowering effect...
gendered discourses might have on girls, being ‘super girly’ empowered this girl who was usually excluded from play because of her disability. Thus, power shifted in unexpected ways that enabled this girl to play with others. The belief that participation and citizenship always empower children disregards the shifting nature of power that empowers and at the same time disempowers certain children. For example, making a child participate in spite of his/her unwillingness, or asking a child to participate in a decision regarding a matter to which s/he is opposed might disempower that child.

If citizenship is granted only to children who are active and willing participants in a society or a community that has a specific purpose, then certain children may be considered as ‘second-class’ citizens. As an earlier example demonstrates, if learning or willing engagement in learning activities is the basis on which citizenship is granted in a learning community, then those children who have difficulty with learning or are unwilling to learn might be shut out from the chance to be considered as citizens. Therefore, children’s participation and citizenship should be considered as open for contestation and debates according to particular events and shifting power relations in order to maintain their empowering potential.

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