



The framed right to participate in municipal youth councils and its educational impact



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ABSTRACT

This study describes the phenomenon of *framed participation*, which constrains children's participation frameworks within a confined area of decision-making. It draws on interviews and focus groups with 32 children who participated in eight Israeli municipal youth councils, ranging in age from 13 to 18. In addition, five interviews were conducted with adult leaders of youth councils. The study showed that council activities remained confined to the particular municipal department responsible for them and comprised mostly the organization of leisure activities, such as parties, performances, and group trips for youth. Yet, almost all the children participating in the study perceived the organization of leisure activities as “meaningful” participation, which “succeeds”, “empowers”, and “leads”. The adult leaders acknowledged the *framed participation* and, while critical of it, preferred to remain within the comfort zone of their professional responsibility. We argue that when *framed participation* entails the organization of popular activities, in which the municipality invests considerable resources, the ensuing positive experiences may frame the children's rights consciousness and critical thinking. We also discuss the institutional conditions that may shape *framed participation*, and the role of human rights education in building children's capacity to mobilize their participation rights.

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1. Introduction

There were activities that were a little bigger than “me and my friends”... but it had a glass ceiling... They did not raise issues that conflicted with the municipality's agenda... They are not kids who wanted to break anything.

This statement of an adult leader criticizing the participation consciousness of the children who took part in the municipal youth council that he directed exemplifies the phenomenon that this study explores: *framed participation* in youth councils and its educational impact. *Framed participation* grants children decision-making power, but constrains this power to within confined boundaries. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with children and adult leaders participating in Israeli municipal youth councils, this study portrays the ramifications of the councils' constrained involvement. It shows that when participation is limited to organizing popular leisure activities in which the municipality is heavily invested, the ensuing positive experiences may frame the children's rights consciousness and critical thinking. We also discuss the institutional conditions that may shape *framed participation*, relating

to the ties between the youth councils and the municipality, and the role of human rights education in building children's capacity to mobilize their participation rights.

The study may be of interest to scholars exploring children's participation in student and youth councils, or in voluntary associations. It broadens the scholarly discourse regarding the barriers impeding children's right to participate in municipal youth councils, focusing on institutional barriers that have been examined in few studies (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Faulkner, 2009). Additionally, the study may interest scholars exploring wider areas of children's participation, as it uses theoretical models of participation rights to explore the *framed participation* (Gal, 2015; Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2001; Lundy, 2007; Shier, 2001). Hopefully, the study will also assist practitioners who mobilize participation rights to shape effective practices that fulfill the goals of these rights.

2. Models of children's participation

Article 12(1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), hereinafter: CRC) obligates states to assure “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”, and give the views of the child due weight in accordance with his or her age and maturity. This provision represents the core of the CRC's innovative perceptions of children's rights, which supplemented the long-established rights to protection

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and provision with a new set of rights that views children as agents who share the power to shape their own lives (Lansdown, 2001).

Lundy's (2007) influential model conceptualized Article 12(1) as comprised of four elements: *Space*: children must be given the opportunity to express a view; *Voice*: children must be facilitated to express their views; *Audience*: the view must be listened to; and *Influence*: the view must be acted upon, as appropriate. Thomas (2012) augmented Lundy's structural analysis by linking participation not only with rights but also with love and solidarity. This model is grounded on the premise that children's participation requires respect for children as rights-holders, as well as providing a sense of warmth and a shared purpose.

Several other models sought to characterize different levels of children's participation, based on different power relations with adults. Hart's (1992) eight-stage "ladder of participation" classified practices aiming to fulfill children's participation. Three stages allude to non-participatory practices: manipulation, decoration, and tokenism. The remaining five stages describe various participatory practices: children are assigned, but informed; consulted and informed; adult-initiated practices that share decisions with children; child-initiated and directed practices; and child-initiated practices that share decisions with adults.

Another significant model was offered by Lansdown (2001), distinguishing between consultative processes, in which adults obtain information from children, participative initiatives, which involve children in the development of services and policies, and self-advocacy practices, which empower children to identify and obtain their own goals.

Shier (2001) categorized five levels of participation: children are listened to, children are supported in expressing their views, children's views are taken into account, children are involved in decision-making processes, and children share power and responsibility for decision-making. Shier's model also specified three degrees of adult commitment to the participation process at each level: *opening*, which occurs when there is a personal commitment or a statement of intent; *opportunity*, which occurs when there are adequate resources, training, and other conditions enabling the participation; and *obligation*, which is established when policies are adopted, enabling a specific level of participation to become built-in to the system.

Shier's model stresses that the classifications of participatory practices are fluid. As Tisdall (2015) noted, a project could be located on a certain rung on the ladder at a particular time, possibly progressing subsequently to a higher rung. Moreover, not all participatory practices should necessarily aspire to the highest levels (Hart, 1992). In this regard, Gal's ecological model of participation (2015) indicates that the form, level, and effectiveness of children's participation are affected by multiple factors, such as issues relating to the individual child and his or her family, organizational training, state structures, cultural values, and global human rights norms. Her model, incorporating contextual influences, is congruent with studies emphasizing the importance of studying children's participation in different cultures (e.g., Bessell, 2009; Faedi Duramy, 2015; Mason and Bolzan, 2010; Raby, 2012; Rampal, 2008; Wood, 2014).

3. Participation in student and youth councils

One of the prominent structured mechanisms that enable children to participate in public decision-making is student and youth councils. These councils may operate within schools (see Cross, Hulme, and McKinney, 2014; Wyness, 2009), under the auspices of municipalities (see Collins, Augsberger, and Gecker, 2016; Matthews and Limb, 2003), or at the national level (see Shephard and Patrikios, 2013; Perry-Hazan, 2016). Student and youth councils are generally distinguished from other forms of youth participation by their structured connections to the formal institutions they are intended to influence (see Collins et al., 2016) and by their objective of representing the interests of other children (Wyness, 2009). Such council formats have been adopted worldwide as a means for the manifestation of the CRC's right

to participation (Alderson, 2000; Cross et al., 2014; Matthews and Limb, 2003; Wyness, 2009). Student and youth councils are also prevalent in the United States, though the United States has yet to ratify the CRC (Checkoway, Allison, and Montoya, 2005; Collins et al., 2016; Mitra, 2008; Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009).

However, the right to participate in student and youth councils is often hindered by the low worth that adults tend to ascribe to children's positions (see Cockburn, 2005; Collins et al., 2016; Freeman, Nairn, and Sligo, 2003; Matthews and Limb, 2003). Scholars have termed these perceptions as "adultism" (e.g., Checkoway, 2011; Conner, 2016; Gordon and Taft, 2011; Shier, Méndez, Centeno, Arróliga, and González, 2012). Another barrier hindering participation rights in student and youth councils relates to their participation being shaped and managed by adults, and typically mimic familiar political institutions. Such top-down mechanisms may be subject to tokenism or manipulation (Freeman et al., 2003; Matthews, 2001; Matthews and Limb, 2003). In addition, certain groups of children tend to be excluded from participation in student and youth councils. These include children coming from disempowered families (Collins et al., 2016; Matthews, 2001; Wyness, 2006, 2009), those tending to be critical of adults (Pavlovic, 2001), or those who are less academically and socially successful (Collins et al., 2016).

The cited barriers may generate negative images of the councils among children. Scholars have indicated that, in many cases, children do not believe that student and youth councils offer them the opportunity to participate in decision-making of any substance (Alderson, 2000; Matthews and Limb, 2003; McCluskey et al., 2013; Stafford, Laybourn, Hill, and Walker, 2003; Taft and Gordon, 2013). Studies have also shown that children perceive student councils as unrepresentative institutions (Morrow, 2001; Stafford et al., 2003).

4. Barriers to participation in municipal youth councils

Several studies have focused on the context of children's participation in municipal youth councils in the United States (Checkoway et al., 2005; Collins et al., 2016; Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009; Taft and Gordon, 2013), in the UK (Faulkner, 2009; Matthews, 2001; Matthews and Limb, 2003; Wyness, 2006, 2009), in New Zealand (Freeman et al., 2003; Nairn, Sligo, and Freeman, 2006), and in Latin America (Taft and Gordon, 2013). Municipal youth councils' models of operation vary, as they depend on regulatory frameworks, on institutional and organizational structures, and on demography, politics, and local traditions (see Collins et al., 2016). However, most of the cited studies have shown that participation in municipal youth councils is impeded by barriers similar to those characterizing school-based student councils: perceptions of adultism, top-down structures, exclusion of certain groups of children, and a resultant negative image among children. Other studies have shown how certain municipal youth councils have been designed to overcome these barriers (Checkoway et al., 2005; Matthews and Limb, 2003; Richards-Schuster and Checkoway, 2009).

Some of the studies exploring participation in municipal youth councils have considered the special barriers impeding the right to participation in the municipal context. These barriers include the difficulty sustaining membership over time, as youth forums characteristically demand a long-term commitment (Matthews, 2001) and youth are "overscheduled" (Collins et al., 2016, p. 145); the gap between the single year that children typically devote to their participation in youth councils and the planning cycles of actual events and activities, which frequently demand longer time spans (Matthews and Limb, 2003); and the lack of exchange between youth councils and other youth groups (Matthews and Limb, 2003).

Only two studies focused on the institutional ties between youth councils and the political entities they sought to influence (Adu-Gyamfi, 2013; Faulkner, 2009). Faulkner (2009) explored the involvement of an advisory group (AG) of young people in public

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