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Beyond the familiar challenges for children and young people's participation rights

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Beyond the familiar challenges for children and young people's participation rights: the potential of activism

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Over the last 30 years, remarkable efforts have been made to understand, support, and protect children and young people's participation rights as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Despite these efforts, challenges remain consistently the same, such as tokenism, lack of sustainability, and accountability. This article reviews the progress and challenges for children and young people's participation over the past 30 years. It then considers the potential of activism as a relatively novel concept for the children's rights field. Drawing on activism literature more generally, and considering particular examples of child activism, the article explores the potential of identity politics and social movements to challenge adult power, growing on-line activism and the tension between best interests, protection and participation. The article concludes that activism recognises children as political actors and problem solvers. The article develops the idea of an 'ecology of participation', which values respectful intergenerational relationships that develop 'critical social capital' for child activism and multiple participation forms – ranging from the more conventional, to protest, to transformation – using a number of modes, such as the internet and social media. This more extended conceptualisation of children and young people's participation

builds on all the participation rights within the UNCRC, recognising them as minimum standards rather than final destinations, to create more expansive understandings and practices.

Keywords: activism; activists; children; young people; participation; rights

Introduction

Since the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted by the UN Assembly in 1989, it has been the cornerstone for children's human rights globally.[1] The UNCRC's articulation of children's human rights has global traction and challenges us all to respect, fulfil and promote children's rights.

The UNCRC has been described as radical and innovative[2] in recognising children's rights to participate, supporting and being supported by understandings of children as social actors within their families, communities and society at large.[3] The participation rights of the UNCRC have inspired a host of legislative and policy changes, programmes and initiatives, and research and publications. These range from changes in constitutions and domestic laws, to global networks of young people advocating for change, to local projects to develop skateboard parks, to an ever-increasing range of academic and other literature.[4] As these changes and initiatives have proliferated, so has a familiar narrative as articulated by McMellon and Tisdall[5]: while the UNCRC has provided an immense impetus to recognising children and young people's participation, and questioned 'traditional' constructions of childhood, participation rights continue to be particularly challenging to adults, systems and decision-making, and these challenges remain stubbornly similar over time and contexts. The challenges include children and young people's participation being tokenistic, having little impact on decision-making, involving only some children and young people and excluding others, and too often lacking sustainability and continuity. Yet, there are examples where children and young people's participation have overcome some or all of these challenges, often because they have set up new relationships

between children, young people and adults that respect the knowledge, expertise and skills that children and young people bring to decision-making.[6]

Other examples have been potentially even more challenging to the status quo of adult decision-making: activism by children. Malala Yousafzai's advocacy for girls' education from her early teens onwards gained international attention, resulting in her Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. The world has been gripped by Greta Thunberg and the climate protests inspired by her, which led to children and young people holding demonstrations across the globe in 2019 and 2020. Jaclyn Corin and other children and young people came together across the USA, to argue for greater gun control.[7] In 2018, thousands of schoolchildren took to the streets of Dhaka in Bangladesh and built a protest movement to demand government response to the death of two students who we run over by a bus.[8] In the USA, the Black Lives Matter movement was galvanised by young people who mobilise their peers, ranging from social media activism to street protests, to denounce systemic racism and inequality against African American people, and demand the end of state-sanctioned violence.[9] Other examples of child activism have been documented, from children and young people's collective actions to stop child marriages[10] to improving education in South Africa.[11] These examples suggest a more 'active' role for children and young people than is often found in participation more generally.

This article wishes to take the challenge and opportunity of 'child activism' further, to explore its potential to address the thirty year narrative of the UNCRC and potentially to move forward children and young people's rights to participation. The article looks to the broader literature on activism, where it has become a popular term across fields such youth studies, identity politics and social movements.[12] Frequently, such literature refers to the spectacles of activism – protests, marches, demonstrations, public petitions – but arguments have been made that it can range from radical revolutionary action to community work to everyday actions.[13] Martin provides a direct definition of activism: 'Activism is action on the behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine'.[14] This definition captures key components of interest to this article and frequently found in the literature: the emphasis on action; the association of activism with a cause, a social goal, often fuelled by passion, commitment and energy; and

activism challenging social norms and decision-making's status quo.[15] As McMellon and Tisdall write, 'Activists *start* conversations rather than relying upon adults to invite them in to existing ones; activists take up and take over spaces rather than waiting to be given them. Child activism, then, could provide a useful challenge and opportunity for the participation field.'[16]

Below, the article locates the reader in the UNCRC and related understandings of participation. The article then uses resources from the broader literature on activism, to discuss activism's potential conceptually and practically for children and young people's participation. The broader literature on activism illuminates three very current issues: (a) lessons from identity politics and social movements, for child activism to challenge adult power; (b) the affordances, modes and challenges of on-line activism as a form on participation, which has only increased in response to COVID-19; and (c) growing adult concerns about protecting children and young people and the ensuing tensions with children and young people's participation rights. The article then concludes, drawing out the lessons from considering the 'ecology of participation' for the children and young people's participation field.

What is children's participation? Starting from the UNCRC

Participation has become the word used in the children's rights field, to encapsulate the requirements of Article 12 of the UNCRC and associated rights. Article 12 is one of the General Principles of the UNCRC[17] and the precise wording of Article 12(1) is:

> 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.

Other rights within the UNCRC are typically categorised, alongside Article 12, as participation rights. These include Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article 15 (freedom of association and peaceful assembly) and Article

17 (access to information).

Article 12 outlines the right to participation but does not itself use this term; hence, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment on Article 12 provides a definition of participation:

> This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. [18]

This definition stresses the need for constructive exchange between children and adults, with both 'information-sharing and dialogue', in a context of 'mutual respect'. The importance of feedback is underlined, with children needing to learn how their views and those of others are taken into account. There is the implication, subsequently emphasised in the General Comment,[19] that children's views should have influence on decision-making: children's views should be given 'due weight' in decisions. Article 12 covers both decisions made about an individual child and 'collective' decisions, where groups of children come together. This article addresses the latter.

Despite it being described as radical and innovative, Article 12 is in fact a modest right to participation. A child's views are not necessarily determinative of the decision; decision-makers (typically adults) do the weighing and it will be adults who judge the implications of a child's age and maturity.[20] Concerns about a child's best interests, another General Principle that is articulated in Article 3 of the UNCRC,[21] can diminish children's rights to participate and the influence of their views on decisions.[22] Thus, Article 12 may be a popularised right in policy and practice, at least amongst children's human rights advocates, but it is far from offering autonomy and self-determination.[23]

Even if Article 12 is a modest right to participate, its implementation has still faced problems in practice. Limiting factors can be found across institutional, social, political, cultural, and economic contexts, including tokenism, exclusion, inequality, power imbalances between

adults and children and young people and amongst children and young people themselves, lack of sustainability, and weak accountability.[24]

Hart, for example, identifies tokenism as the 'experiences of children whose views have been sought by adults but not taken seriously',[25] as a non-form of participation.[26] Similarly, Tisdall argues that a process is tokenistic when 'children and young people may be consulted but their views have no discernible impact on decisions'.[27] The risk of tokenism can deter adults from seeking to involve children and young people. Lundy, however, refutes such a position and points out that tokenism 'is not in itself a legitimate excuse for inaction'.[28] That said, tokenism must be addressed in order to ensure participation is rights-based.

Another consistent challenge is excluding certain groups of children and young people in favour of others, which can be a breach of the UNCRC's principle of non-discrimination (Article 2). Inequalities may be exacerbated unless intersectional identities are recognised, mitigated, and addressed.[29] For instance, children and young people themselves can maintain power differentials in their peer relationships based on learnt stereotypes (e.g. about gender, ethnicity, or other identities that generate discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes).[30] The layers and complexities of social identities and structures can privilege one group over another.[31]

Power imbalances go further: adult systems, adult decision-makers and adult attitudes continue to set the terms for most decision-making, which can preclude children and young people's views having an influence on decisions that affect them. Evidence is now widespread that children and young people are well able to develop and put forward their views, and practitioners have become increasingly skilled in supporting children and young people to do so;[32] the issue is not whether children and young people are capable of participating, but whether adults and adult systems are capable of listening and giving due weight to children and young people's views. All too often, children and young people's views do not have an impact on decisions that affect them.[33]

Lack of sustainability can undermine children and young people's participation rights.[34] Sustainability typically requires two components: long-term funding and community ownership.

Children and young people's participation activities are frequently subject to short-term funding so, when that funding ends, children and young people are left without alternatives to engage in ongoing projects.[35] This issue can be addressed by strengthening the second component, which has been identified by international development agencies as community ownership.[36] A project is more likely to be sustainable in the longer term if is understood, owned, managed, and maintained by a group in the community or a local organisation.[37]

Lastly, children and young people's meaningful participation is often undermined by weak accountability. This refers to the institutional communication processes between children, young people and adults that allow transparency between parties and provides information on how decisions will be made -- and the possibilities of complaint and redress. The lack of accountability is an ongoing criticism of participation projects, with children and young people not provided with relevant information, given minimal feedback on their contributions, and not informed how their views have influenced decision-making.[38]

The potential of child activism

When children and young people decide to invest their time and energy in collective participation activities, they usually do so because they want to make a change. They report wanting to do so within their own communities and lives, and to make a wider difference into the future.[39] Child activism seeks to do this directly, potentially moving beyond the familiar challenges of children and young people's participation, to inspire and create change that may challenge the adult mediation and control inherent in Article 12 itself.

The potential of child activism in practice and conceptually are explored further below, under three themes. First, we explore how child activism can build on identity politics and social movements, to transcend the hegemony of adult power structures to inspire change. Groups and networks of child and youth activists have done this very powerfully by harnessing the potential of social media and the internet, which is explored under the second theme. But this expansion into on-line activism has exacerbated adults' concerns and fears that children and young people's

participation will be against their best interests, with risks to their safety and wellbeing in the short and longer term. This tension between best interests and participation is explored under the third theme.

Challenging power, oppression and inequalities

Activism, Martin recognises, is 'typically undertaken by those with less power' – as more powerful people can achieve their aims through conventional means.[40] Within youth studies literature, youth activism is presented as a way for youth to be active politically. This literature is replete with discussions about how youth are not necessarily disengaged from politics and their societies but often disengaged from conventional political structures.[41] Rather than becoming invested in political parties and elections, youth may orient themselves around 'cause-oriented repertoires' that focus on specific issues and policy concerns.[42] There is a morality to activism, as expressed by Heywood, 'between what is and what ought to be',[43] with the identification and desire for something wrong or something lacking to be changed.[44] Activism then is a resource for those with less power, to agitate for political and social change, on issues of importance to the activists. It is an alternative to conventional politics, particularly when activists feel or are unable to influence them.

Activism is often rooted in the desire to defy dominant traditional, political, and social structures that exclude marginalised groups, such as women, people of colour, LBGTQI+, and disadvantaged people.[45] Activism has thus demonstrated its potential to address marginalisation, to call out oppression, and support minorities and under-represented groups to claim their spaces, to contest or reject dominant views and offer more inclusive perspectives.[46] Children and young people, as a marginalised group under the control of adults, have few options to engage in traditional forms of public debate and this is intensified by inequalities based on age, race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status. Activism can provide ways children and young people to express their ideas, to contest and to transform.

For example, a research project conducted in Bangladesh learnt how children and young people worked collectively to challenge social norms of child marriage.[47] The children and young

people drew on their collective resources to create spaces to express their opinions about child marriage. Further, they took very direct action, travelling and networking in order to stop child marriages within their communities, with considerable success. Such social actions would normally be banned for children and young people in their communities and families. But they were able to create the opportunities and growing support for their activism.[48] Similarly, child climate change activists have emerged as a new wave of social actors that want to express their views and take actions to defy economic growth, contamination, and environmental justice.[49] Through their recent widespread dissent and disruption, children and young people's climate protests have obtained global attention and shaped the global debate. In another field, child activist Cheryl Perera founded a child-led organisation – OneChild – in 2005 to raise awareness of child exploitation in the sexual tourism industry. She began her mission using her ethnicity as a cover to engage directly with paedophiles and trafficking rings to rescue exploited girls from her parents' home country of Sri Lanka. She and her team of young people, between the ages of 13 and 18, then campaigned to raise the issue's visibility in her home country of Canada.[50] These examples show how child activism was fuelled by individual and collective resistance to injustice and oppression, and wanting to change practices and attitudes, just as other activists have done on such issues as feminism, LGBTQI+ rights, and against racism.

These examples suggest that child activism may address certain challenges for children's participation, as activists do not need to be part of a specific constituency.[51] Children and young people's very activity, their willingness to innovate, network and act, can challenge the conventions within their families, communities and politics, redistributing power over decision-making otherwise held onto by adults. Activism is not without risks – children and young people in Bangladesh spoke of feeling threatened by certain community members and the potential child brides' male relatives when the child activists instituted direct action, while some school systems threated truancy procedures for children who marched in climate protests rather than attend school.[52] But through overcoming these risks there is evidence of transformative change in attitudes towards children and young people, as well as the issues they sought to address.[53]

While activism itself may seek to address marginalisation, stigmatisation and exclusion, activist groups themselves have been critiqued for their own exclusions of certain identities and perpetuating certain inequalities. The concept of intersectionality itself arose from critiques of feminism, for failing to recognise the oppression of intersecting identities of black women.[54] Child activism is not exempt from the continued need to consider and challenge who is included or excluded, but it has proved a mechanism to challenge exclusion and oppression. Child activism provides an alternative to frequent critiques of 'traditional' structures of children and young people's participation – such as school councils, child forums or youth parliaments – which risk being composed of already advantaged and articulate children and young people.[55] Israel and colleagues' social survey data across European countries find that social exclusion is not always a barrier to activism – but can be its trigger.[56] When personal efficacy was increased by education, social trust and local connections, young people at risk of social exclusion were more likely to participate. Activism's initiation from local connections and communities is longstanding, building from the local to the global, from the personal to the public.[57] While activism is not solely collective, it is often collective, with the group providing mutual support, mentoring and leadership growth, and exchange of information. Activism and activists are known for their 'public' face, their direct or front line action, but Martin writes of the benefits of thinking about the 'ecology of activism', which requires a range of support and nutrients and frequently considerable facilitation behind the scenes.[58] Thus activism frequently arises from a lack of power, which gains power in collectively and collective actions, and can build from the local to the global.

Digital access and technologies

Children and young people's engagement with social media and the internet more generally has provided effective avenues for their activism. Global social media platforms provide opportunities for individuals and groups to demand, advocate, and enact the changes they consider relevant, which is not always possible through traditional media.[59] As a result, social media has been positioned as a platform for 'obtaining protest-related information, forming insurgent

informal networks, and mobilising individual participation'.[60] One example is the 'Twitter revolution' that occurred in 2011, where young people used their social media as a means to express their dissenting views and mobilise their peers against the Egyptian government and President Mubarak.[61] Social media is changing the way activists communicate their messages and amplify their outreach, with children and young people increasingly taking advantage of this.

This potential is only more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a research project conducted across 13 countries, children and young people highlighted the value of social media as a powerful tool for engaging with others, acquiring information, and disseminating their ideas and messages to the public, especially in times of restrictions or their own vulnerabilities.[62] Furthermore, the children and young people recognised that their knowledge of the online world could be used to share their views more widely. Social media provides a space for children and young people to raise their opinions on a range of social justice issues and acts as a tool to connect them with others and influence change.[63] However, technologies and internet accessibility are limited and do not reach everyone globally: 41% of the world's population lack internet access, exacerbating existing inequalities amongst children and young people.[64] This situation was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where millions of students in lockdown were unable to attend distance learning classes online due to a lack of technology and/or internet access.[65] Additionally, online communications may aggravate current disparities between social groups as internet access is only the first obstacle: accessibility may also be undermined by a lack of technological knowledge, illiteracy, cultural heritage, or disability.[66] Thus, social media and the internet more generally can engage a wide range of children and young people, to great effect, but digital activism risks exacerbating digital exclusion, which is itself unequally distributed.

Social media has garnered much attention as providing 'new and exciting means of being political'[67] for young people, with numerous examples highlighted such as feminist bloggers[68], protests fuelled through Facebook posts[69] and TikTok users' disruption of a President Trump rally[70]. The affordances of social media not only provide new vehicles for youth activism, but they also themselves create new forms of citizenship (e.g. 'networked young citizens'[71]) and new

types of action (e.g. 'connective action' in contrast to collective action, where personalised ideas, images and plans are shared on social networks[72]). For instance, the use of hashtags is one way to engage in collective actions. Hashtags connect individuals' messages with other posts and transform a discrete expression into a collective social presence. By engaging with others on social media, children and young people often transition from an individual, private sphere to a collective, public one to challenge unfair situations and place themselves into the public debate to pressure people in positions of power and influence decision-making.[73] This type of digital activism is a new way for children and young people to pursue social justice, carving out room in public spaces that they would be typically excluded from. One example is the 'school strike for climate', generally referred to as the 'Fridays for Future' movement, that has spread across countries and continents, enabling children and young people to assemble through social media with peers globally towards accomplishing a shared goal.[74] Children and young people are out of school and in public spaces of communities, and have marched to political institutions to express their views. Children and young people are thus out of the 'traditional' institutions of schools and households, into the public spaces of civil society and political protest.

Yet the euphoria surrounding digital activism is now tempered by caveats. A range of youth studies' literature criticises participation on social media, which is more about the individual and less about collective positive action (with terms like 'clickism' and 'slacktivism' indicating little commitment or engagement[75]). Social media may increase certain inequalities. For example, social media may increase the engagement of those young people who are already interested and engaged but they are not re-engaging young people who have lost interest in politics. 'Bubbles' can be created, where 'fake news' and filtering mean that groups only hear each other and the same information, untroubled by counter viewpoints. Digital platforms are an open territory for everyone to engage, in both positive and/or negative dialogues, which intersect with issues such as free speech, censorship, and ethical considerations. Social media and the internet more generally, therefore, support many possibilities for digital activism but create and exacerbate certain risks.

Protection and participation

Adult concerns for children and young people's safety, vulnerability and wellbeing have long been critiqued for trumping children and young people's participation rights.[76] Children and young people's engagement with social media and the internet, often in advance of most adults' own knowledge and skills, has only directed and amplified adults' concerns for children and young people's protection. If concerns about best interests generally can be barriers to participation, then the perceived risks for children on the internet only strengthen such barriers for children and young people's digital activism.

An overriding response to such risks has been to exert greater adult control and restrictions. This includes seeking to limit children under the age of 13 from accessing social media apps, to warnings to parents to patrol their children's access to and use of digital devices, and parental surveillance and blocks to be placed on such devices.[77] These are familiar responses, where adults seek to protect children and young people by keeping them in the 'bubbles' of their families or, at most, schools, rather than recognising them as social actors in their communities. Such controls are not fully successful, as children under the age of 13 still frequently access social media apps and children and young people may circumvent parental controls through a variety of means (such as finding new apps, using apps that allow communication but are not overtly social media, or evading controls). Seeking to protect children and young people by limiting their participation does not necessarily protect them individually nor collectively. Children and young people can be put at more risk by adults' attempts to protect them and can be safer if they are supported or able to participate. An example in Keller's work on feminist blogging, where young women who might well face danger if they explored feminist ideas in their community contexts but report being able to do so with anonymity and freedom through social media.[78] The opportunities for children and young people to access information, to share views and to organise for collective action, can protect their rights generally and their protection rights in particular.[79]

Another risk of digital activism lies with internet affordances: that postings can quickly be disseminated, go 'viral' and create a digital legacy that can be difficult to remove completely.

There is increasing concern about the commodification of internet users' data or its use for political manipulation.[80] By participating in the public arenas of the internet, children and young people's participation can face these short and long term risks. Yet there is strength in collective and widespread activism in the short term (e.g. see examples above, in terms of activism to stop child marriage) and the longer term for collective protection such as raising issues around climate change, gun control or quality education described above. While children and young people's activism can be suppressed to a certain extent by adults' attempts to control and protect, children and young people's activism in their families and communities will still take place[81] but risks being undervalued and underrecognised.[82] Seeking to stop children and young people's activism often does not do so and loses its potential to protect in the longer term.

If children and young people cannot be fully protected by preventing their activism, what is the solution? Literature on youth activism provides some possibilities. Rather than preventing young people from accessing information, the emphasis is on providing information and particularly how to encourage critical thinking.[83] Ginwright writes persuasively about the support of Black youth in the USA by community organisations.[84] His research develops the idea of 'critical social capital', focusing on the collective dimensions of community change. This activism is intergenerational, with community organisations providing resources for youth, leading to young people being seen as civic problem solvers, seeing themselves as connected across communities, and recognising that their personal problems can be policy issues. With some similarities, the communities of feminist blogging depicted by Keller[85] and Harris and colleagues[86] facilitate young women to develop their 'public self', developing ideas about feminism and their priorities for feminist activism, thus also developing critical thinking, recognising the personal is political, and changing discourses. Critical thinking and critical social capital prove both protective and emancipatory in these examples.

At its most positive, activism and activists can thus be transformational, changing how problems are perceived and thus their potential solutions, challenging and replacing social norms. But such dissent can also be viewed by those with political power as polarising and antagonising, something to supress or co-opt, rather than to instigate change.[87] Far more research attention has

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been dedicated in activism research to exploring 'positive' activism, with a certain normative approval of its aims, while other activities by the Far Right or terrorist advocates are not included and bracketed off into other research domains.[88] This leaves under-explored and articulated children and young people's activism that may be considered unacceptable to human rights' values or may be manipulated by conventional or unconventional political forces.

Children and young people's activism is challenging to adults' concerns about protecting children, with adults potentially fearful of children and young people being put at more risk by their participation, of children and young people being exploited or manipulated. The opportunities of critical social capital and critical thinking provide ways forward, as through dissent, debate and discussion, ideas can be tested and reformed.

Conclusion

In what ways can the concept and practices of activism help move on children and young people's participation rights? The very familiar narrative of children and young people's participation since the UNCRC was ratified in 1989 describes the radical and innovative potential of Article 12, but all too frequently its failure to be respected in practice. This article suggests that activism illuminates certain lacunae, challenges some fundamental assumptions, and provides possibilities for ways forward.

Recognising child activism involves perceiving children and young people as political actors. Such recognition is immensely challenging to traditional ideas of childhood and intergenerational power relations, with a fundamental critique of ageism and age discrimination.[89] By labelling certain participation activities by children and young people as activism, it aligns these activities with other activists – such as human rights defenders – and challenges power relations, with children and young people's defining characteristics not being their age, their vulnerability, their dependence but rather their moral cause, their activity, and their commitment. The youth literature perceives such activism as overwhelmingly positive because it demonstrates that many youth are engaged with politics and society, just not conventional politics. The youth

literature is not concerned with young people being too political – the concern is that young people are not being political enough.

Considering child activism highlights how restricted Article 12 is, within the UNCRC, where participation is limited to children's views being weighed in decision-making, that presumes that adults will invariably be involved and most likely the ones judging children's capacity and maturity and making the ultimate decision in the child's best interests. Notably amongst other international human rights treaties in relation to civic and political rights, within the UNCRC children have no rights recognised in terms of self-determination, no rights to vote, and no rights to stand for government elections. Children's rights to participate can be seen therefore, as a panacea for their exclusion from the adult political system that retains the power to make political decisions. Children's participation is important, to be supported by a raft of additional policies, programmes and politics, *because* they are excluded from democratic participation in conventional politics.[90] Child activism thus very fundamentally fits within Martin's definition of activism, as outwith the conventional and the routine of politics and challenging social norms. Child activism addresses the challenge of tokenism, so commonly found in children and young people's participation, because child activism is not reliant on adults: child activists take the space and demand the attention, rather than relying on adults to do so.

Being a part of an activist movement can foster a sense of inclusion and belonging to a community of peers that think alike, have similar aims, and share a feeling of being left out of mainstream structures.[91] This is connected to the well-documented motivations of children and young people to engage in participatory initiatives to make a change, even when in restricting environments. Children and young people's participation structures (such as child parliaments, councils, and clubs) can be limiting and excluding for many, as these can be complex and bureaucratic; activism is likely to be less constraining as it can operate outside of traditional participation spaces. Children and young people's activism can be collective without the need to be a member of a group; it can be an individual action that supports a collective movement, which gives children and young people the sense of recognition, belonging, and self-efficacy.[92] This can address issues of lack of sustainability and long-term planning, which have plagued children and

young people's participation, because activities have relied so heavily on adult organisations. Individual or collective activism will exist as long as the activists are committed to their cause and continue to act.

Activism is not without its risks. It can provide a means to challenge discrimination but it can also exclude. As discussed above, activism has provided a vehicle for identity politics, to challenge oppression, but activism has also at times failed to recognise its own exclusion of certain identities or not ensured all interested people can access. The potential of social media and the internet to facilitate children and young people's activism, particularly in the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic, is increasingly recognised, but so has the evidence that a significant proportion of children and young people experience digital exclusion. Activism can be a way to challenge social norms, to disrupt and dissent. But its celebration for transformative change can leave unchallenged the normative assumptions, that participation and activism is a 'good thing' and leave under-examined forms that are counter to human rights and its values. Activism can recognise children and young people as political actors but it can also result in political manipulation or co-option. The affordances of digital activism raise issues around exploitation, publicity and fake news, which increase concerns about protecting and safeguarding activists in the short and longer term.

Children and young people's activism is challenging to adult concerns about protecting children, with adults potentially fearful of children and young people being put at more risk by their participation, of them being exploited or manipulated. But rather than framing children and young people's protection in *tension* with their participation, or the need to *balance* participation and protection (the familiar phrases in the children's rights literature), there are opportunities to consider how protection and participation rights do and need to work together. The literatures on activism show the power and protective natures of collective action, critical social thinking, intergenerational and cross-peer support, and learning and critical social capital.

While activists and activism are often known for their 'public' face, their direct or front line action, Martin writes about the benefits of thinking about the 'ecology of activism', recognising that activism requires a range of support and facilitation. While activism need not be

solely collective, it is often so, with the group providing mutual support, mentoring, leadership growth, and exchange of information. Thus the critical social capital described by Ginswright, and evident in the child activists' success in Bangladesh,[93] suggests the potential of respectful intergenerational sharing of resources, expertise and knowledge. O'Brien and colleagues extensive consideration of youth activism results in a three-fold typology: dutiful dissent, that 'works within existing systems and power structures to offer policy change'; disruptive dissent, which is oppositional and contests social norms and policy practices; and dangerous dissent, which creates new and alternative systems, mobilising citizens around new norms and values.[94] Their findings and resulting argument are provocative in suggesting that all three types may be needed, in order to create transformative change, because of the respective strengths and risks of each type. So despite the celebration of child activism, for example, arising in the public imagination and participation literature, there is also merit in meaningful and effective participation within the existing political structures, that can create the environments for disruptive dissent to be heard or dangerous dissent to transform norms. For children's human rights, thinking of an 'ecology of participation' just as Martin suggests an 'ecology of activism' can provide constructive routes for intergenerational relations and to consider strategically the intersections, impacts and sustainability of participation.

The concept and practices of activism highlight particular things, of use to the children and young people's participation field. Child activism has the potential to expand the modest right to participate outlined in the UNCRC's Article 12, remembering that the UNCRC itself sets minimum standards: we can go beyond them. Combining Article 12 more deeply with other participation rights – like freedom of association and peaceful assembly, and the right to give and access information – already creates a more expansive consideration, that supports a broader range of participation modes that can include and support child activism. Activism illuminates the political exclusion of children and childhood and certain advantages of recognising their activism as political. It can respect and support the willingness of a host of children and young people to be active, to take action, to innovate, contribute and make changes individually, in their

communities and globally. It can move from perceptions of children and young people as being the 'problem', and even beyond respecting that children and young people may have important views to consider in (adult) decision making, to recognising children and young people as potential problem solvers.[95] Activism can challenge ageism and the marginalisation of children and young people generally, and particular groups of children and young people, from decision-making and influence. Considering activism can also recognise the challenges of participation that are 'dangerous' and transforming ideas and norms, that are outwith the conventional status quo, and that are passionate and innovative, emotional and disruptive. Thinking about the ecology of participation suggests that multiple forms of participation may well be needed to create change and we need to use the skills of critical social thinking to discuss and debate what is challenging, risky and disruptive, bringing together all of human rights, from protection to participation.

[1] Broadly, this article relates to people under the age of 18, following Article 1 of the UNCRC ("For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier"). The phrase 'children and young people' is generally used in this article to refer to people under the age of 18 because, in the contexts that the authors work in, older children often prefer to be referred to young people. The UNCRC does not use the term young people, so when discussing the UNCRC directly variations on children are used in this article. The term 'youth' is used to reflect the youth studies' literature, which generally is used for an older age group (approximately age 15 to 24, see https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/youth-0/index.html#:~:text=There%20is%20no%20universally%20agreed,of%2015%20and%2024%20years (accessed September 25, 2020).

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