

# EDU

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# THEMATIC SECTION

Children's rights at 21: policy, theory, practice

# Childhood, complexity orientation, and children's rights: Enlarging the space of the possible?

Dr John I'Anson\*

## Abstract

This paper begins by considering some of the performative dilemmas associated with the enactment of children's rights by adults. In particular, it is argued that the mobilisation of children's rights often tends to involve multiple forms of *complexity reduction* (Osberg and Biesta, 2010), the net effect of which is to limit children's expressive powers and attenuate rights-based approaches.

A focus of this paper is the specific understanding of *childhood* that necessarily accompanies any appeal to rights as specifically an appeal to *children's* rights, as distinct from, for example, adults' rights, or rights as such. In other words, some image of childhood will necessarily and variously haunt, and inform, mobilisations of children's rights discourse by adults.

Three scenarios, drawn from a recently completed research project, *Moving Image Literacies*, are used to think through some of the material, relational and spatial effects of different mobilisations of childhood. The paper argues that it is necessary to attend to both the orientation to complexity that informs a given approach, together with the characterisation of childhood that is mobilised, if spaces are to be created that enlarge the space of the possible.

**Key words:** childhood, children's rights, complexity, digital technologies

## Introduction

The point of departure for this paper is some of the performative dilemmas associated with the enactment of children's rights by adults. In particular, it is argued that the mobilisation of children's rights often tends to involve multiple forms of *complexity reduction* (Osberg and Biesta, 2010), the net effect of which is to limit children's expressive powers and attenuate rights-based approaches. Complexity reduction is a concept developed by Osberg and Biesta (2010) to describe ways in which multiplicity, variety and recursivity is restricted, often for a variety of pragmatic reasons. Clearly some form of closure (Lawson, 2001) is necessary if one is to make sense at all. However, it is desirable that the specific forms of complexity reduction that are mobilised are subject to critical scrutiny, since they potentially have far-reaching political and educational effects.

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## Children's Rights and Complexity Reduction

Multiple forms of complexity reduction are practiced in relation to children's rights. Lundy (2007) considered some of the reductions effected through limited summaries of legal definition of rights where, for example, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) is often reduced to "the voice of the child", "pupil voice" or "the right to be heard/consulted/participate". As Lundy (2007: 930) comments:

While these provide a convenient shorthand which helps to avoid the use of Article 12's long-winded and somewhat awkward construction, each has the potential to diminish its impact as they convey an imperfect summary of what it requires.

Beyond such legal simplifications there are other forms of complexity reduction that further limit the scope of a rights-based approach. Lee (1999), for example, argued that complexity in relation to rights issues is often overcome through indefinite deferral to some future occasion. Then there are approaches that limit complexity by restricting both the domains and the issues over which a rights-based account might have influence. Some of the criticisms levied against pupil councils, for example, are illustrative of the ways in which much of children's experience is excluded from view (such as criticism of lessons, for example), whilst the issues that do get a hearing tend to be relatively less controversial and of arguably less political and educational significance (Cf. I'Anson and Allan, 2006, Allan et al., 2005).

Then there are the limitations that accrue from what might be termed the "linearization of rights" (Derrida, 1998). Whilst the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2008) clearly states that "all rights are interconnected and of equal importance", the Articles that together constitute the UNCRC are usually presented in a linear and chronological manner and one of the consequences of this can be that one particular right is focussed upon to the exclusion of other rights that might also have a bearing upon a particular context. So, for example, the children's right to protection might be cited as justification for an adult's particular response to a situation rather than this being set within a more complex and dynamic understanding of the mutual imbrication of the different Articles (cf. Scenario 1, below). These might be seen as illustrations of some of the multiple ways in which forms of complexity reduction come into play. Failure to adequately resist these pressures towards complexity reduction in the case of rights can lead to that "peculiar combination of bold intent and potential toothlessness" (Lee, 1999:457) which might otherwise characterise a rights-based agenda.

A focus of this paper is the specific understanding of *childhood* that necessarily accompanies any appeal to rights as specifically an appeal to *children's* rights, as distinct from, for example, adults' rights, or rights as such. In other words, some image of childhood will necessarily and variously haunt, and inform, mobilisations of children's rights discourse by adults. This is the case even if the full legal definition

of each article is attended to; thus, for example, the understanding of childhood will influence the extent to which an adult judges that “the child... is *capable* of forming his or her own views” and the “*due weight*” to be given “in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (Article 12, UNCRC, emphases added). In short, the implicit understanding of childhood may impact the orientation to the complexity of decisions taken in sites where children’s rights might be mobilised.

Three scenarios are explored in which different conceptions of childhood are in play, which have a material impact on the opportunities that children have for expression. These are taken from a recently research completed project, *Moving Image Literacies*,<sup>1</sup> and concern three different spaces. The first is within a school but outside a classroom; the second, is focused upon out-of-school spaces, while the third is concerned with children within a classroom. Scenarios enable this discussion to “touch down” in relation to a series of specific events that afford an exploration of the ways in which “childhood” is variously diffracted, via networks of people, objects and spaces. More specifically, the scenarios make it possible to draw out some of the material, relational and spatial consequences of enacting different childhoods and how these impact upon children’s opportunities for agency and expression.

### **Scenario 1**

The first illustration is from an interview with a secondary school teacher about their perception of children’s use of new technologies. The teacher recounted an incident that involved a girl walking into a corridor where, prior to this, other pupils had placed something on the floor, over which she tripped:

This was recorded on mobile phone and uploaded to You-tube... which everyone in the school had watched... you know, so this poor girl, you know....ehm, somethin’ was done about it... the Headteacher heard about it... eh, but you know it’s so easy...it’s so quick... you know, it’s an afternoon and it’s on You-tube and then before you know it the whole school of 700 pupils has seen this one clip...

Here is an instance that appears to underscore the risks associated with new technologies, and the need for protection in the light of this (James and James, 2008). Whilst such technologies afford new opportunities for expression, when put in the hands of children there are dangers to be expected. This might be seen as an instance of what James and James (2008) describe as a paradoxical situation where acknowledgement of increased agency – usually regarded as a positive indicator of empowerment – becomes the occasion for increased punishment and control over young people. With increased agency goes responsibility for the actual choices made. The associated discourses of protection and risk, that have become characteristic of recent policy initiatives in relation to children, mean that it is difficult to argue against measures taken to protect the victim from such actions in ways that seek to minimise the possibility of such an occurrence happening again.

On the face of it, an example of public humiliation such as this appears to present a clear example of children's *lack* of responsibility: given access to new technologies children will act in ways that potentially do harm – both to each other and to the wider reputation of the school. The image of childhood being mobilised here is clearly a deficit one. Young people lack the capacity to act reliably and in ways that are responsible and mature such that it is incumbent upon adults to act in ways that protect children from themselves, each other, and the wider risks that attend such a state. Such a framing instantiates what Lee (n.d.) has identified as a dominant conception of childhood at the present time: the child as pupil. This is linked to a strong temporal framing in which certain things are deemed to happen “at the right time”. Of course, this is also linked to the state's concern with seeing young people as a future economic resource and potential. Within such a conception children need to be provided with “safe spaces” (Boostrom, 1998) and their behaviour carefully monitored by adults (Fotel & Thomsen, 2004). There are a number of parallels here with the fixed conception of childhood that Allan Prout (2005: 35-6) identifies as one of the legacies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

By the end of the nineteenth century conceptions of children as innocent, ignorant, dependent, vulnerable, generally incompetent and in need of protection and discipline were widespread. In general terms by the start of the twentieth these ideas had been diffused through most of the different social classes and groupings within modern society.

These developments in turn supported the idea that bounded spaces of the school and home were the “proper place” for children, rather than employment (Prout, 2005: 36).

In producing a particular characterisation of childhood, this framing also brings in its train a particular understanding of risk, and adult responsibilities in relation to this. Risk, rather like appeals to security, tends to bring with it a demand for immediate action in the light of which wider considerations might appear secondary, or indeed “merely academic”, given the pressing need for decisive action. Presenting things in such a way short circuits the need for wider deliberation and the possibility of conceiving matters otherwise (James et al., 1998).

So this would suggest that the framing of events in scenario one is part of a broader economy of sense-making that mobilises far-reaching, and normative assumptions about childhood that appear to settle what is proper – and improper – *apropos* agency, power and place. In regard to children's rights, such an economy of sense-making would naturally appear to gravitate towards Article 3 of the UNCRC, where it is the duty of an adult to protect young people's “best interests”. How these best interests are conceived is directly linked to the conception of childhood that is in circulation. This, in turn, is inextricably associated with a particular understanding of adulthood and the kinds of actions that are to be expected as a consequence of this (Mannion & I'Anson, 2004). Children's rights when mobilised – by adults – within such an

economy will thus tend to stress the right of protection and the risks associated with this would seem to ensure that this takes precedence over other claims.

## **Scenario 2**

Researchers in the *Moving Image Literacies* project were also interested in finding out the extent to which young people used digital technologies outside of school, in an effort to investigate how childhood was potentially reconfigured through new performative assemblages. For this purpose, pupils were asked to complete a simple 24 hour clock that recorded their use of digital technologies throughout the course of a particular day. The young people were then interviewed about their activities as they had been recorded on their clock.

One such pupil, Jane, was a 10-year-old girl in a year six class of a primary school located in a city area surrounded by local authority flats in a relatively poor socio-economic catchment area. Jane explained how she had made a film the previous Sunday which she had been planning and organising for some time. She recounted how she had been sitting on her bed, feeling bored, and so had thought up the following plot for a film:

Two men are in love with the same woman. One of the men is her partner, the other, a lover. So the woman is having an affair, which her partner in due course finds out about. The two men subsequently have a fight, after which the "step boyfriend" (her term) decides to try and bribe the other man to leave the country by offering him money. The man agrees to this arrangement and collects a package of money from a car at a prearranged address. He then leaves the country and all would appear to be better. However, the woman then feels sad as she misses her lover, even though she too had been party to the plan of bribing him to leave. Feeling miserable, she sets off in search of him and the two are happily reunited. Her original partner, however, is distraught at this outcome and is left crying at home. Eventually he "pulls himself together" and starts going out again until he finds someone new with whom he can once again be happy.

Having written this narrative, Jane then organised it into various scenes, before gathering together the various props she would need to make a film. This involved a series of complex negotiations in order to secure access to appropriate clothes, a package that looked like it was stuffed with money, her aunt's car, and her neighbour's house. Jane even managed to persuade her father to take on various different roles, and in one scene this involved him dressing up as a woman, which she achieved by bribing him with chocolate. Her mother insisted upon doing the filming as she was worried about what might become of the family's new digital camera. Jane stated that while she liked watching television, she preferred making her own films to watch even though the whole enterprise was somewhat exhausting.

At the time there were problems with the family computer, and so Jane edited the films on her mobile phone before then uploading them onto her own laptop. Jane's mobile phone, in addition to being enacted as an editing instrument, was also used as



a portable movie screen. Jane taught herself to do this through experimentation; the choice of topic and the choice of audience for the films were her own. This particular project reflected the type of narrative she found interesting, which she identified as having commonalities with the soap opera genres she enjoyed watching on television, fused with her own experience of family relationships and dramas.

In this project, digital technologies were assembled together with various objects and practices that became the means to new possibilities of expression, which in turn ushered in new ways of learning. Digital technologies were used to create a surface upon which Jane could explore issues of relationality and express matters of concern. In this work she explored the possibilities of relationships and enacting her own extended family and community relations differently. In contrast to epistemologies that privilege a detached knowing over which the self exercises reflective analysis and judgment, here Jane created novel material assemblages that enabled her to refigure worlds and entertain alternative becomings (Henare et al., 2007). Such practices of world-making required acts of invention in and through material performance as a condition of their possibility.

The second scenario would therefore appear to instantiate a very different account of childhood from that implied in the first scenario. In place of childhood conceived as a fixed state – of lack – here, childhood was performed as a complex orientation to a future in which agency is co-produced in and through the affordances of a particular network of people and things. As such, childhood is concerned with the unprecedented, and with the intensification of what was already “there”, to hand (Osberg, 2010). Here the risks involved were of a different order. These included the willingness of adults to take up roles assigned to them, to give or withhold permission to make use of certain objects, the successful entrainment of technologies, and the concomitant risk that this posed to Jane’s acts of invention and expression. The juxtaposition of scenarios one and two was made for heuristic purposes in order that different conceptions of childhood, as refracted through material events, might be contrasted. Both these scenarios took place outside of formal classroom spaces. What, then, might be the effects of different characterisations of childhood in relation to pedagogies, as instituted within schools? We turn to a consideration of this in the third scenario, which is described in two parts.

### **Scenario 3**

The focus of this scenario was a lesson that took place in a Primary year 7 class as part of a project on World War II. The lesson began with the teacher standing at the front, waiting for quiet whilst scanning the class in a purposeful manner. The children quickly stopped talking and paid attention to their teacher, who then took the register.

#### ***Part 1***

There were 25 children sitting in twos at desks which were arranged at regular intervals, all facing the front area of the classroom. The children had in front of them a history text book called *The Home Front*, which they shared in pairs. The teacher asked

one of the children which page they were on previously before asking for volunteers to read; some of the children put their hands up. The teacher chose one child who began to read. From time to time the teacher would interrupt the process in order to ask a comprehension question, such as: "what are the armed forces?", or to summarise the key points of the paragraph that had just been read. The pupil needed a fair amount of prompting to form the ideas into one sentence. Again, the pupils put their hands up volunteering to read the next section. Shortly after another child had begun to read, the teacher interrupted so as to remind him about punctuation, and again to use some expression in his voice.

## **Part 2**

The teacher then signalled that pupils should take their exercise books from their bags. This was a cue the children instantly appeared to recognise as marking a transition into another phase of the lesson. The atmosphere in the class changed dramatically as the children began to move into groups of their own accord. From out of his bag one boy extracted some braces, while a girl brought out some scarves which were then waved about, adding to the general air of excitement that was erupting throughout the class. The tone had now completely changed: the pupils' faces registered excitement and there were sounds of laughter as if they might actually be enjoying themselves. While some groups of pupils gathered around computers, two pupils entered the large cupboard behind the whiteboard and emerged with a camera and tripod before heading off in the direction of the classroom door. Here they joined up with their colleagues who were also in the bomb shelter project, and it became clear that arrangements had been made to do some filming – on location – in the garden at one of their houses. On leaving the classroom, the children decided the best route amongst themselves, and during the walk to Alan's house there was animated conversation about arrangements.

Alan's house was in many ways indistinguishable from the many other rows of local authority housing that comprised the neighbourhood. But there was one significant difference, which had become the source of new status, pride – and even envy: Allan's house still had an original corrugated iron Anderson air-raid shelter in its garden. Once cleared of various paint pots and accumulated debris, it had become transformed into the site of a film set, to re-enact an air-raid warning and its effects upon a particular family. The children quickly assumed their roles as a grandfather, two children, grandmother and mother. The grandfather had a walking stick, the boy child dressed in shorts and braces, the grandmother with a headscarf and the mother with an apron. Meanwhile, two other pupils took up their roles as camera person and director, after a discussion as to the best position to capture the action.

The director counted with his fingers: three, two, one, action! The mother picked up one of the jackets the children had brought with them and used it as a prop to hang on the washing line. The children took up their positions on the see-saw, while the

grandmother sat on the bench, watching the children at play. The grandfather was also intent upon watching the children playing, until he heard the sound of a plane overhead. The grandfather looked up at the sky in the general direction of the plane before waving his stick in the air. The mother immediately dropped the washing and ordered the children and grandparents to move into the shelter as quickly as possible. All acted out the feeling of fear and panic as they moved towards the shelter, maintaining their roles as members of this family...

The first part of the lesson is a classic instance of a traditional lesson that might be characterised in terms of one (teacher) to many (pupils), mediated by a specific text (Sørensen, 2009). The teacher directs the pupils who all read from the same material resource, in this case, a text book about World War Two. Other things are enacted too, which enable this particular organisation to hold together; there is, for example, a clear separation between different areas of the classroom. Pupils are seated at their desks in the main body of the classroom while the teacher tends to occupy the front space – particularly around his desk, which is much larger than the pupils' desks and near the whiteboard that, on other occasions, is another powerful focus of attention. The teacher can walk freely around the spaces that the pupils occupy – but they have to wait to be given permission to enter the front space. Indeed, in this part of the lesson, there was little opportunity for expressiveness beyond what had already been decided in the lesson plan. Here, the young people's experience was choreographed via "a logic of predetermination" (Osberg and Biesta, 2007: 48) in which the complexity of potential interactions is quite radically reduced in order to conflate childhood with pupilhood (Lee, n.d.). Indeed, such is the limitation in scope for individual expressiveness that it may be more appropriate here to refer to a single body: the text as embodied, with each individual element merely serving to produce a collective body of enunciation. In terms of power, it is a leader-subject relationship that is privileged, which Spinoza characterised in terms of power as *potestas*, a form of centralised top-down power that serves to produce a single body (Spinoza, 2004; Schostak and Schostak, 2008).

In the second part of the lesson a very different arrangement is woven that connects children, adults, objects and technologies in ways that permit new movements, intensities and forms of presence (Sørensen, 2007). There is scope for negotiation and new distributions of status beyond that wielded by the teacher. If the first part of the lesson suggested hierarchical power (*potestas*) with little scope for individual acts of freedom, the second part of the lesson appears to inaugurate a different kind of power in so far as spaces are opened for new outcomes that exceed what could have been anticipated in advance. This kind of power parallels Spinoza's concept of power as *potentia* – as a local organisation that permits a multitude (Spinoza, 2004; Schostak and Schostak, 2008). And this, in turn, permits the mobilisation of childhood as a radically open figuration for becoming (Castañeda, 2002). To this extent, childhood is enacted as a capacity to become, and this has significance for the kinds of world-making that are actualised.

This has implications for the *kind of ontology* that each of these characterisations of childhood mobilises. For if, in scenarios one and three, part one (1, 3.1), the limits and possibilities of childhood are pre-determined, in scenarios two and three, part two (2, 3.2), that which might emerge has yet to be determined. Ontologically, the former scenarios (1, 3.1) equate the real with the actual; what can come to pass is limited by what is already present. As Deleuze (1988:98) put it:

...we give ourselves a real that is ready-made, preformed, pre-existent to itself, and that will pass into existence according to an order of successive limitations. Everything is already *completely given*... (italics in the original)

With such an account, for example, evolution is regarded as consisting simply in the unfolding of what is already given, and this involves a progression towards some pre-established end. Nothing new enters the scene: the limits of the possible are given in advance. It was precisely against the inherent dangers of such ways of thinking and practising, that assume the idea of necessities in human existence, that were a particular focus of Deleuze's critique (May, 2005).

In direct contrast, the latter scenarios (2, 3.2) install no such *a priori* limitation, and remain open to the virtual. For Deleuze (1988), drawing upon themes in both Bergson's – and Leibniz's – philosophies, the virtual is to be distinguished from mere possibility, which is less than real. As Colebrook (2002: 97) observed, "...possibility is a pale and imagined version of the actual world, [whereas] virtual difference and becoming is the very power of the world". Virtual potentiality can be regarded as a field from which any given actual becomes realised. As such, the (actual) real can be regarded as a limitation of the virtual. In so far as *this* ontological orientation is mobilised, therefore, children's becomings remain undecidable: it is not known in advance what will come to pass. There is, in principle, an open field of becoming.

A contrast can be drawn, therefore, between conceptions of childhood that are informed by a rhetorics of certainty – where the real is known and approached via a logic of pre-determination, and characterisations of childhood that can acknowledge what might be termed a logic of complexity. The latter conception gestures towards an *ecology of rights* that can acknowledge the mutual claim of different rights over the more limited linearisation of rights where rights are selectively, and separately appealed to. According to Brown (2008: 200), an ecology is:

basically an open, complex, adaptive system comprising elements that are dynamic and interdependent.

To the extent that such an ecology is open, and not restricted to some pre-given ordering, the outcomes are undecidable (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984) and potentially "enlarge the space of the possible". Of course, the undecidability that is an effect of moving beyond more limited mobilisations of rights, and developmental characteri-

sations of childhood, brings in its train a series of *aporias* where the way forward cannot simply be assumed or predicted. The literal meaning of *aporia* is “without path” and, as Papastephanou (2009: 466) commented:

Real life and everydayness present us with impasses, *aporias* in the double sense of dead end and wonder, that can move us to thought and action.

The way through this involves inventing the new rather than through appeal to a pre-given blueprint. An ecology of rights is one that, in acknowledging *aporias* between, for example, protection and expression, risk and possibility, creates a space for the in-coming of the new. Likewise, the figuration of childhood as becoming, calls into question characterisations that might otherwise limit and restrict what childhood might become within a specific context.

## Conclusion

In this paper “thinking through things” has enabled a contrast between different conceptions of childhood as these are materially enacted in a series of three different locations. The *Moving Image Literacies* project has been drawn upon so as to “ground” thinking in specific situations where some of the performative dilemmas in enacting childhood in relation to children’s rights discourse might be encountered in practice. Here, it has been argued, the particular conception of childhood that is mobilised is likely to have far-reaching consequences not only as to which rights are appealed to, but also as to the extent to which there is room for undecidability and for enlarging the space of the possible. More specifically, when childhood is figured as becoming, its orientation to complexity marks a shift towards an ecological understanding of rights that can acknowledge the multiple claims of different rights in any situation. Such an ecology potentially opens up spaces for the unprecedented, and for the in-coming of the new.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The *Moving Image Literacies* project was a partnership between the University of Stirling, *Creative Scotland*, a public body charged with promoting the arts in Scotland which provided financial support, a local authority in which the three schools were situated, and the macrobert, an innovative arts centre based at the University of Stirling. The author was Principal Investigator, and is grateful to the project's Researcher, Dr Kate Miller, for the use of data from field notes that inform the three scenarios considered here.



