



On your Marx, Escobar, Bourdieu: Theorising children's public decision-making and aiming for change

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Abstract

This article develops theoretical understanding of children's participation in national-level public decision-making, strengthening insight into how to pursue influence. Using aspects of the work of Bourdieu, Marxist theories and Escobar's writing on Epistemologies of the South, we analyse examples of participatory processes in four European countries, developed from interviews with young people and adults. Bourdieu focuses attention on the power to mobilise knowledge and the constraining role of doxa. Marxist collective action theories highlight learning through struggle, collective action, and social movements from above. Escobar reveals the power of *sentirpensar*-feelingthinking, localised autonomy and meshworks, to enact change in the now.

Keywords

children's participation, child activism, public decision-making, voice and influence, Bourdieu, Escobar, Marxist collective action

Introduction

This article develops theoretical tools for understanding impactful children's participation in public decision-making, because theory-informed analysis is needed (Taft and O'Kane 2024; Thomas 2007). Being heard and considered in public decision-making is a

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matter of social and environmental justice - if collectively we are to resolve some of the greatest challenges facing the Earth in a more equitable way, we certainly need the insights of all generations. In the face of democratic institutions' failure to deliver on their promise of social justice (Offe 2017), there is increasing support for deliberative democracy, through which, alongside elections, citizens influence political decision-making through advancing arguments and dialogue. For children, this deliberative turn is important, as they are largely excluded from even the notional democracy of voting. We focus on Europe. Where evidence of children's participation impacting public decision-making at national levels has been limited (Janta et al., 2021).

This article explores the benefits of different theories through dialogue with national-level empirical examples of children's participation that have been considered impactful, using theoretical concepts to unpick the journeys from voice, through action, towards influence. We argue that theorizing children's participation in public decision-making, using the work of Bourdieu, Marxist collective action theories and Epistemologies of the South (Escobar 2016, 2021) provides insights that have international significance.

Current understanding of children's collective participation

The UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (the Convention) and *General Comment* (UNComRC 2009) provide important grounding for children's collective participation, noting that environments, mechanisms and on-going processes should be established that enable children's views to be expressed and taken into account in matters that concern them, including in "*decision-making, policymaking and preparation of laws and/or measures*" (UNComRC 2009, Sec III, Para 12). This is public decision-making in the sense of the often iterative and incremental processes of agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, evaluation and revision (Howlett and Giest 2012). Over decades, children's rights to collective inclusion in public decision-making have been increasingly enshrined in European policies and national laws (Crowley et al. 2021). This rights-based approach has created valuable expectations in Europe that children should be not only heard, but also influence policy-making (Janta et al., 2021). Whereas in Latin America there has been a greater focus on participation as collective action (Collins et al. 2021).

There are concerns about the adequacy of some aspects of children's participation rights. These include that the Convention differentiates children from adults' citizen rights (Warming 2019), fails to provide voting rights (Wall 2019) and there is a false separation between participation and protection rights (Collins et al. 2021). Children are depicted, on the one hand, as competent with valuable perspectives whilst, on the other, as superficial and unprepared to influence adult politics (Lorgen and Ursin 2021). So, the Convention may reaffirm existing social positions (Beier 2025). The functioning of some invited participation structures and processes offered to children (for example parliaments, councils, boards, consultations) is also a matter of concern for some, as these may act as an oppressive form of governance (Holzscheiter et al., 2019; Raby 2014), encouraging children to accept and adopt dominant forms of political practice and hegemonic notions of common sense (Boldt 2024; Luhtakallio and Eranti 2024; Raby 2014). Participation in policymaking may be tokenistic, condescending, derisory or

manipulative (Perry-Hazan and Bauml 2023). Invited participation processes are often exclusionary (Cuevas-Parra 2023). Nonetheless, through participation in public decision-making processes, children can gain knowledge and skills that can strengthen their pursuit of social justice (Collins et al. 2021; Lundy 2018; Moran-Ellis and Sünker 2018).

Children's political engagement extends beyond formal invited participation (Collins et al. 2021; Taft & O'Kane, 2024; Trott, 2021). Children's political action happens in daily life, in which they disrupt norms and expose inequities (Lanas et al., 2023). Children have long-standing involvement in social movements and creation of transformative spaces outside formal structures (Collins et al. 2021; Imoh, 2023). Historically, children have participated in socio-political struggles, from the American Revolution to the Arab Spring, often as active contributors (Rodgers 2020). But focusing on progressive politics alone produces a partial view, as young people are also involved in conservative or right-wing activism (Hartung, 2023).

Development of a decolonial framework is vital (Collins et al. 2021). Significant recent scholarship (Collins et al. 2021; Taft 2023) has reinforced the relevance of the notion of *protagonismo* for understanding children's collective action with adults. This notion reframes participation by linking structural analyses of power with activist strategies for social change, challenging assumptions that voice alone influences policy. Rather than relying on procedural inclusion or governmental benevolence, it foregrounds collective action, organizing, and pressure from below as the basis of influence. This perspective demands attention to internal differences among children (including race, class, nation, sexuality) that shape opportunities and constraints, while avoiding romanticized notions of resistance or "pure" perspectives (Taft 2024). Challenging individualist notions of agency is also crucial, as children's control over resources and activism is deeply entangled in complex intergenerational relationships (Collins et al. 2021; Hunter and Cassidy, 2025; Larkins 2019). Children's participation studies could also benefit from further engagement with theories of activism and social movements (Taft & O'Kane, 2024).

Whilst recognizing the importance of children's everyday politics and activism, this article focuses on theorizing participation in which children engage with invited spaces (rather than the many spaces which Imoh (2023) notes that they create or claim). We have this focus in order to explore whether and how these too might offer opportunities for transformation (in the sense of rethinking problems from below and redressing systemic injustice (Escobar 2021)). Research (Kiili and Larkins 2018; Larkins et al., 2014; Cuevas-Parra 2023; Tisdall 2021) has established that children's invited participation can be impactful where there are: resources (such as funding, time and space); opportunities for face-to-face inter- and intragenerational dialogue; adult's (politicians) greater understanding of how to be allies; critical reflection by adult facilitators; cultures that respect children, their knowledge and rights; strong connections to policy objectives; strategic approaches to influence; and opportunities for children to set agendas. But how can this become transformational impact?

Methodology

To develop theoretical understanding of potential journeys to influence through children's invited participation in public decision-making we used a dialogical theory building approach (Rule and John 2015). This involved reflecting on our subjectivity and relationship to the subject; exploring and experimenting with emerging theoretical understandings and surrounding literature; and testing their explanatory power using examples of four national-level participatory processes. A dialogical approach – moving back and forth between theories and examples – helped encourage “new collisions, possibilities, and insights” (Rule and John 2015: 7). We developed an initial analytical framework by reviewing existing childhood literature (e.g. Abebe et al. 2022; Kiili and Larkins 2018; Moran-Ellis and Sünker 2018; O'Toole and Gale 2013; Raby 2014; Thomas 2007; Wall 2019) and theorists they suggested as potentially enabling deeper understanding of children's participation (Ricoeur, Foucault, Appanduri, Bourdieu, De Certeau and Escobar). Rather than repeat engagement with *protagonism*, we drew on Taft and O'Kane's (2024) advice to engage more with social movement theory, reading the authors gathered in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*.

To generate criteria for selecting diverse participatory processes to bring into dialogue with these theories, we drew on recent reviews of children's participation mechanisms in Europe (Crowley and Moxon 2017; Janta et al., 2021; Larkins 2018). We sought processes in which we had no personal involvement, at various points along four axes of diversity: (1) Short- versus long-term; (2) primarily on-versus off-line; (3) state-down versus group-up; and (4) with mainstream versus marginalised populations. Our aim was to achieve sufficient diversity to enable development of provisional theoretical tools, rather than to be fully representative.

After securing ethical endorsement from our institutions (University of Lancashire and University of Jyväskylä), we asked adults in European children's participation networks to propose potential examples of impactful national-level processes. From the twelve example processes suggested we approached six to match our criteria. In these processes, information about the study was given first to young people (who had been children at the time of their first involvement). Where young people agreed to take part, we sought participation from adults too. All participants (and if aged under 16, their parents), gave written consent. Participants chose how to be interviewed. In one country, young participants chose to be interviewed off-line and together, in three countries all interviews were online. This article draws on four processes from which 11 young people (aged 15–22) and 9 adults were interviewed. Eight young people had lived experience of marginalisation related to race, ethnicity, refugee status, developmental disability or care experience. Interviews lasted 40–120 min. They were transcribed and anonymised.

The four participation processes took place in mid-size countries in Europe in the 2020s (and one dates back to the previous decade). Austerity economics and post-Covid-19 responses were dominant in public policy. Transition from social welfare towards more neoliberal economic models was well established. Over the preceding century, children's rights had moved from being a demand of a social movement from below towards becoming formally sanctioned (nationally and internationally). Civil Society

Organisations (CSOs) and governmental institutions were organising and collaborating around notions of children's rights and participation. But right-wing resistance to human rights was also on the rise. The examples were diverse in terms of duration (2 weeks to many years); digitality (digital, hybrid and primarily in-person); from above or below (one was entirely consultative from above, one entirely from below, others contained elements of both); marginalisation (three were primarily with children experiencing marginalisation). The process were (a) a short-term mainstream online forum expressing views on predetermined themes, (b) medium-term CSO-led activity seeking to influence government policy through diverse on- and off-line activities, (c) longer-term repeated engagements, off-line, to provide mutual support and influence local and national services; and (d) sustained campaigning, dialogue and collaboration to influence public attitudes, practice and policy.

We discussed the affordances, overlaps and limitations of each theoretical lens by exploring their relevance to extracts of the data. There was resonance between the data and many theorists. However, through abductive puzzling (Van Hulst and Visser 2025), we found a stronger connection between our data and Bourdieu (particularly capital, doxa and social positions) and Marxist conceptions (of collective action that progresses towards social movements and the state). During this analysis, we also turned to Escobar, as his ideas (pluriverse, sentirpensar-feelingthinking, and enacting autonomy) addressed emotional engagement and enacting change in the present through mutuality. Below we demonstrate what each of these frameworks revealed, outlining first the aspects of theory we used, giving examples of the resonance with the data. We then discuss how these theorists may be brought together to help understand the potential for transformative invited children's participation.

Analysis

Thinking with Bourdieu

We found relevance in Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit, perhaps unsurprisingly as we and others have used it to explore children's participation previously (Kiili and Larkins 2018; Kiili et al. 2023). But in this study, three concepts – doxa, capitals and social positions – resonated again (see Figure 1). Doxa can be understood as naturalized knowledge (Eagleton and Bourdieu, 1992), it the dominant logic of a social space that has the power to make things visible and seemingly inevitable or natural. This has been important in exploration of political legitimacy and notions of common sense within adult deliberative processes (Hayward 2004). Doxa also shapes dominant narratives of children's participation, which tend to emphasize the instrumental value of children's knowledge for decision-makers (Kiili et al., 2023).

In children's invited participation certain resources are significant, these are cultural (age and civic competence), social (networks and relationships), economic (market logics and budgeting) and symbolic (legitimacy and political positions) (Kiili and Larkins, 2018). Bourdieu notes that such resources, when used within a particular social space (field), express power and should be termed capitals (Bourdieu 1986). Different forms of capital are always connected, and in a capitalist society, economic capital constitutes the

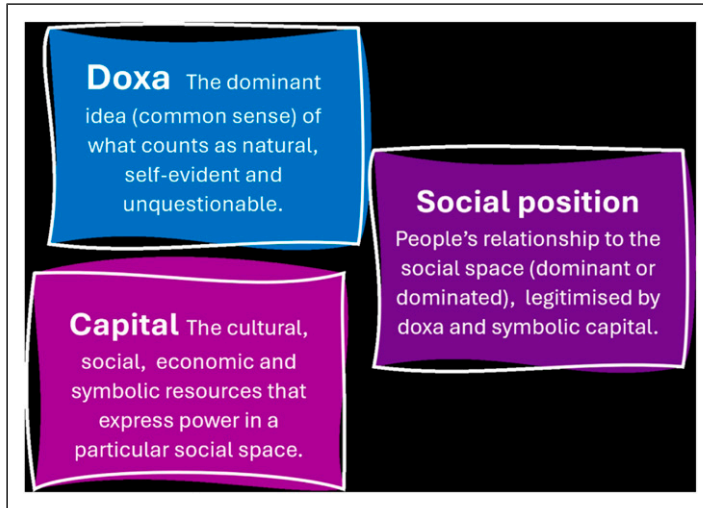


Figure 1. Elements of Bourdieu's conceptual toolkit.

most basic form of social stratification (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is a crucial and often overlooked feature in children's participation, particularly as the lack of economic capital is often given as a reason for not responding to children's call for social change (Kiili and Larkins 2018; Luhtakallio and Eranti 2024). The struggle for transformation within a social space can therefore be seen as a struggle of people in different social positions, those who are dominant because they can mobilise capitals and those whose are dominated as they cannot mobilise the relevant capital. This struggle for transformation is difficult because doxa works alongside symbolic capital to reinforce the naturalness and legitimacy of domination.

In the examples we explored, the relationship to different resources, and their power as capitals, varied. In the short-term online activity, written proficiency in native languages was important whereas the medium- and longer-term activities demanded considerable time from children, young people and adults. In all examples, resources invested in participation processes (including CSO and government staff time and connections into policymaking) were important. Some young people described personally gaining resources through the process of participation, including social connections and knowledge about political processes. For example, anonymous online discussions offered opportunities to accumulate personal cultural resources, including knowledge of the subjects being discussed and confidence. Participants reported learning from others and one young person noted that positive feedback: *"It feels really good when others say nice things about my ideas and cheer me on"*. These young people also valued the freedom offered by this anonymous space, describing the online forum as a *"steppingstone"* to engagement in other non-anonymous participatory processes.

Children's lived knowledge (a valued cultural and social resource) was mobilized by children and by adults in their struggles for transformation. For example, one young person used knowledge gained in one participatory process in other participatory

processes. In the medium-term, long-term, and sustained examples (which involved public campaigns, petitions, investigations, consultations, recommendations, and monitoring), children's lived knowledge was mobilized by children and adults using their time and personal, governmental, charitable social and economic resources. For example, young people used evidence and campaign materials they had created to put pressure on politicians. But, at certain times in all of the processes, young interviewees were unclear about how the knowledge resources they cocreated were used by decision-makers. They were critical of the lack of information about impact, as this young person notes:

We should have some feedback of what has happened or changed. We can comment ... but we've got no idea what happens to them after.

Two young participants were also critical of how the themes on which they offered their views were determined by others - they could suggest a theme, but the decision on whether it was explored did not lie with them.

Young people interviewed about the online activity had differing expectations around how the knowledge they created should be used, and this seemed to reflect the doxa. Some young people were comfortable with creating knowledge resources to be used by adults, and did not want to do any more than have their say. In earlier versions of the online platform, policymakers had been asked to join the discussions, but they '*usually forgot to come*' as one of the facilitators explained, so the expectation of dialogue with policymakers was removed, to protect young people from disappointment. Young people also accepted that "*Adults need to supervise discussions to keep them safe for everyone*". In this one example, then, the doxa centred on producing lived knowledge through "safe voice" connected to autonomy and anonymity with a request, but no expectation, for feedback on how knowledge resources were used. Anonymity was seen as the unquestionable benefit of online activities, valued by adults and young people.

The doxa in long-term, and sustained participation processes, was different. There were moments of strong consensus around the commonsense importance of children's voice and influence and an adult noted times when the state acted as if: "*Of course this was going to be co-created!*" In these processes, we found struggles over how resources were used in the process of seeking transformation. Use of the lived knowledge that children and young people offered was partially controlled by state actors who made decisions about what to respond to. Doxa led to moments of children and young people being invited into adult-centric spaces, where participation required conforming to existing rules. Some young and adult interviewees described instances where young people (through their symbolic presence) supported politicians in communication efforts, appearing in photographs and videos that showcased political endorsement of their work. But public exposure also granted some young people recognition as voices in campaigns, which two young people suggested may aid the struggle against domination.

So, children of diverse ages and genders were able to mobilise accumulated cultural, social, and symbolic resources in three distinct ways. First, some secured leading roles in intergenerational committees in which they did contribute to decision making about how young people's knowledge and other resources were used. Second, young people described using social and cultural resources (invited processes, introductions made by

CSOs, their own connections, and knowledge of parliamentary spaces) to directly challenge politicians. Third, young people were invited to join an intergenerational monitoring group, funded by the government, which enabled them to demand accountability from public services regarding the allocation of economic, social, and cultural resources.

Thinking with Marxist collective action theories

In the *Wiley and Blackwell Handbook* Barker's (2023) account of Marxism and social movements offered an explicit focus on contexts of struggle, the state and the distribution of economic resources which were recurrent themes in our national-focused examples. Whilst research on children's participation has repeatedly turned to Bourdieu, little attention has been given to Marxism. So, we drew on Marxist understandings of collective action, power and the state (Barker (2007, 2023), Barker et al. (2013), Nilsen and Cox (2013), and Jessop (2014, 2016) and their interpretation of Marx, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Williams, Harvey and others). Marxist accounts of power relate to class and social relations of production, control of the state and of people's hearts and minds (Jessop 2014). Marx predicted that transformation would arise in particular conjunctures of economic circumstances when, through leadership and class consciousness, individuals come to understand their shared experiences and engage in a practical mass movement to challenge the class that controls the material, economic and mental means of production and the state. Later Marxists point out that leadership may not be by a unified party and that there is value in contention; other struggles for emancipation are linked to class struggle; and that the state is comprised of diverse social relations (Jessop 2014).

Nilsen and Cox's (2013) overview of four forms of collective action (drawing on Gramsci, Williams and Harvey) was particularly resonant (see Figure 2). As struggles emerge from concrete lived experience of oppression, a first form of collective action is local rationality (thinking and doing things to try to oppose everyday routines and received wisdoms, to protect already secured achievements, or to carve out new social gains). Second is militant particularism (spoken or enacted public action confronting the action of dominant group in response to a lived experience in a particular place and time). Third is campaigns (coordination of words and actions around a generalised challenge to step towards understanding commonalities across multiple life-world situations or locations and understanding of underlying causes of oppression). Fourth are social movement projects (action to transform the social world as a whole, challenging the hegemony of neoliberal capitalist relations of production and control of the state and ideology). Through collective action (Barker (2007, 2023), Barker et al. (2013)) groups come together around a shared aim and develop understanding of the effectiveness of different political actions and of the terrain of their struggles. Consciousness of the social positions they share with others (related to class, gender, race for example) and links between economic and political questions may, or may not, be made. Internal and external struggles and emerging hierarchies are likely to emerge.

Elements of collective action were present in all four example processes we explored. Even in the short-term online example, when young person noted "*I do sometimes use the*

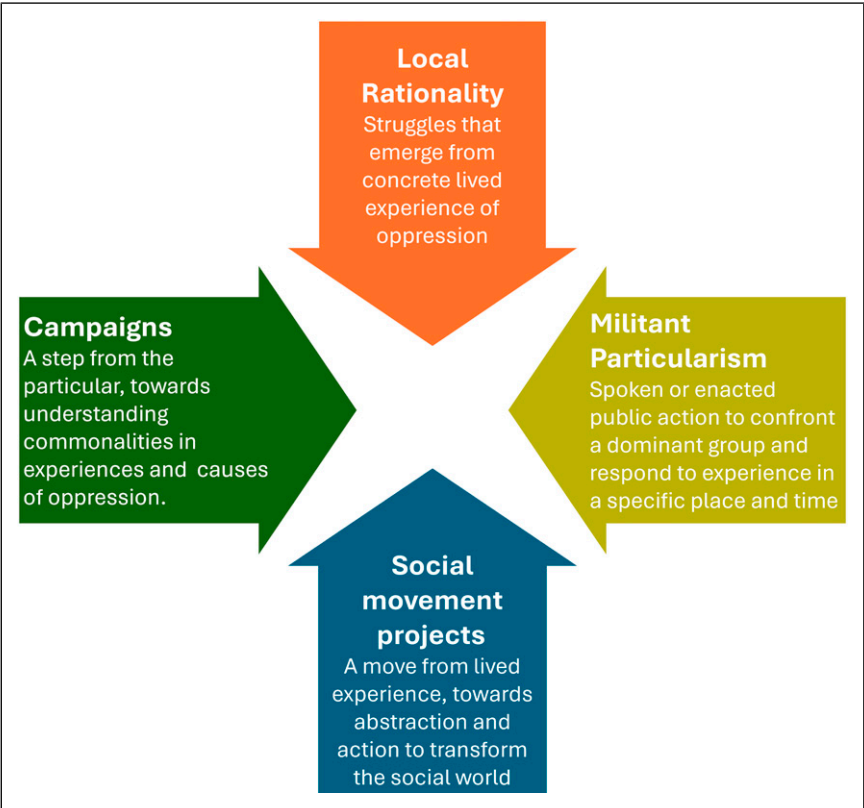


Figure 2. Four Marxist forms of collective action.

summaries when we discuss similar issues in our youth council” this may be interpreted as a step towards activism on local rationalities in other collective spaces of dialogue. The medium-term example could be seen as militant particularism as it involved collective action articulating demands related to a particular lived experience. This was through invited meetings with politicians and through videos, presentations and a petition.

The long-term and sustained examples involved repeated collective action, through strong organizational structures involving children, young people, adults and many allied CSOs (led by adults who may or may not have related lived experience). For example, young people joined groups with young people experiencing similar forms of discrimination and received practical and emotional support, then, through what one adult described as *“a fairly organic progress”*, started to exercise their voices to try to influence the actions of schools and municipalities locally, stepping into invited meeting with politicians, calling for an end to bullying in schools and for *‘teachers to change their attitudes’*. Some young people joined national organised activities, and their understanding of common experiences across different parts of the country grew. Young people

described how these conversations helped them realise that *'this education is not good for us'* and *'our community is victimised'*, one young person also described learning about *'rights and political tactics'*. Through this growing consciousness, and with youth and adult leadership, they decided to start demanding national change in policy on this issue and started speaking with politicians. So, over years, relatively stable groups of people engaged progressively in what can be termed local rationalities and militant particularism.

In the longer examples, the collective action also included national campaigns, calling for changes in the whole social system to redress discrimination. These emerged at a time, as one adult described, when the national CSO leadership was *'getting strategic'* and related campaigns were spreading across Europe. The multi-pronged campaigns involved *'training'* or *'awareness raising'* with politicians and civil servants and pressure from a whole movement of CSOs and individuals. In one example, a government funded consultation process was launched and young people from the campaigning groups engaged in ongoing dialogue with government representatives to develop recommendations. All interviewees in these two examples noted feeling confident in the recommendations made and that some gains to redress systemic marginalisation were secured, including, as an adult put it, *'changes in attitudes, laws and practice'*. Some young people described how they saw *'the change happening'* in their lives, but others remained *'deeply disappointed'* by the slowness of change. Young people and adults described this as being due to *'lack of clear lines of responsibility'*, *'lack of resources'*, and workforce pressures.

Our empirical examples fell short of being social movements, as the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism was not questioned, however, all showed elements of developing consciousness and understanding through struggle. Where collective action was based on common lived experiences, young interviewees started to understand *'what was the same and what was different'* in their lived experiences. Where this was absent, one young person expressed frustration and wanted to reflect more with peers and receive advice: *'Maybe someone should have ... like told me or helped me with like maybe I should look at this from a smaller scale...'*. In the medium-, long-term and sustained example, young people came to understand how economic priorities dominated, and the legitimacy of this was questioned. For example, one young person described how they cross-questioned a politician:

We asked: "Is it a money thing? Do we need to do crowdfunding? ..."

And the politician said: "No, no, the government's got more than enough money."

And so, I said: "So you just don't want to then?"

Adult interviewees also became aware of *'all of the complex multi-system stuff that that's needed'* and the challenges of achieving change. One young person who described connections between economic contexts and intersecting struggles also talked of the current moment of *'economic crisis'* and *'transitions within communities experiencing deepening poverty'* presenting political possibility. Some young and adult interviewees moved on to organised collective action that may be social movements, around issues of

poverty and racism, where connections between lived experience and the economic superstructures were made.

In all examples, adults described how participatory processes were supported by laws and policies, and sometimes financial contributions from the state. They welcomed state commitments to children's rights and participation, and recruitment of children's rights movement activists into positions within the state, as this built easier routes into dialogue. Young and adult interviewees stressed that even where there were close links between the state and a CSO, their collective demands were not changed. As a young person described, in the face of competing priorities and timings '*we were all trying to do what is best for children*' and children's rights. But inequalities in funding for CSOs caused tensions, and occasionally adults who were brought into closer relationships with the state felt that they '*had to be careful*' or '*not express overt challenges*'. Here, the notion of social movements from above (Barker 2007; Nilsen and Cox 2013) and the state as a place of struggle comprised of multiple social relations (Jessop 2016) may be useful. Tactics from above may be economic (maintaining or expanding certain forms of production and accumulation), political (limiting access to representation and state power), or everyday (framing what is taken for granted as common sense). These theoretical insights call for attention to how progressive demands may be accommodated but diffused, and how divide and conquer tactics may hamper fundamental change. In our examples, in the face of pressure from children and CSOs, some parts of the state offered gains, whilst other parts of the state resisted.

Thinking with Escobar

Abebe et al. (2022) have suggested that Escobar's (2016, 13) notion of Epistemologies of the South (ES) and *sentirpensar-feelingthinking* are relevant for childhood studies. They provide a way of understanding the connection between heart and mind, body, reason and emotion which contrasts with European dualism. Dialogue with our data revealed the importance of this element, and what Escobar describes as movement away from mono-ontological theories of Western origins and towards the multiple relational ontologies to understand the practices and strategies of the subaltern actors.

Rather than the notion that there is one correct perspective on reality (the One World World - OWW), ES propose the notion 'pluriverse' acknowledging the deeply relational lived understandings of the world that offer counter narratives to dominant and monolithic world views (Escobar 2016,22). These relational understandings emphasise connections between human, non-human and place, interdependence and mutuality.

Embracing the ontology of pluriverse creates the conditions for imagining and designing new ways of being and doing, interdependence, care, and repair (Escobar 2021,14). Meshworks (networks of networks) struggling for radical alternatives are central, they enable transformational movement from the dominance of the OWW towards ecological, non-capitalist, nonpatriarchal, nonracist, and pluriversal societies. Escobar's (2021,10) also emphasises local diverse actions of mutuality, the doing – 'active verb-strategies to eat, to learn, to heal, to dwell, to build', achieved through local autonomy. This is direct democracy and enacting politics through design and inter-existence with humans and the Earth, rather than relying on institutions and experts. Local

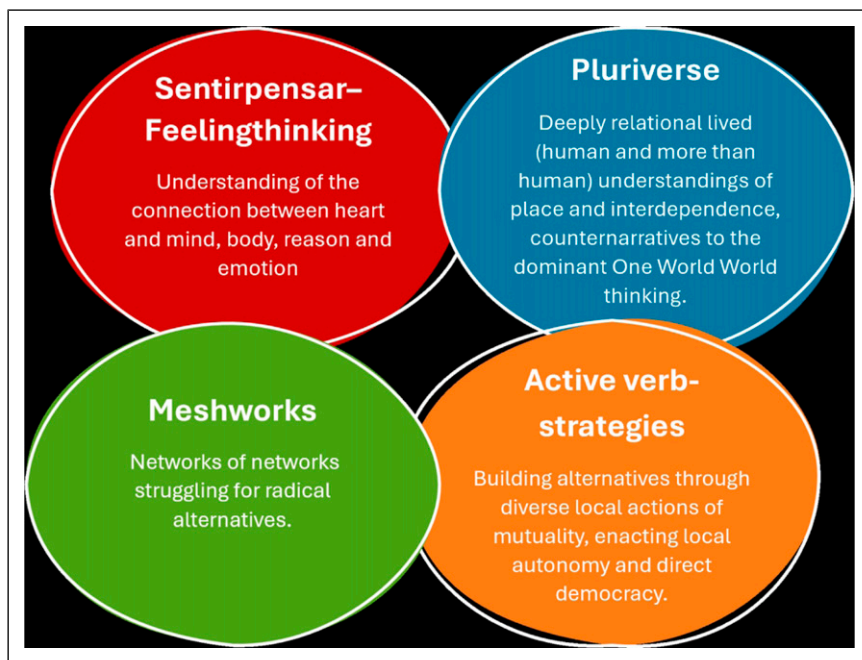


Figure 3. Concepts drawn from Escobar and Epistemologies of the South.

autonomy reconfigures power relations and the economy in less hierarchical and more reciprocal ways (see Figure 3).

Exploring our data with Escobar helped us understand the role of emotions and of articulating alternative versions of the world. In our example processes, children and young people were being asked to engage with reason and emotion, to *sentirpensar-feelingthink*, to reflect on their lives and put lived experiences and aspirations into emotionally engaging words. Creating a collective space of reflection was important, as one young participant in the online activity said: *“It really matters to me to write with people who care about making a difference”*. *Sentirpensar-feelingthinking* with policymakers was also a recurrent theme. One young person described how engaging with her own emotions about her lived experience helped her feel brave enough to name the issues she really cared about when meeting a senior politician, it meant *‘I was able to say things I’d not said before’*. Adults described the emotional impacts on policymakers, how one policymaker reported back that young people’s testimony *“hit my heart”* and how another politician put her hand on her heart as she listened. But, adults noted the *‘safeguarding issues’* of such emotionally charged engagements between children and policymakers, when participatory processes are *‘built on storytelling and children sharing of their own experience’* and politicians use *‘the language of emotional commitments to children’* which they cannot actually deliver. Where these interactions were supported by meshworks (networks of networks) pushing similar messages, verbal and written commitments to action followed, including policy commitments. In one process,

emotional connections with political leaders and young people's storytelling of their experiences were seen as key to material gains.

Notions of One World World (OWW) and pluriverse were evident where children and adults tried to challenge dominant accounts of the world. Adults described how '*care, passion and expertise*' and '*the desire from children and young people ... to tell their story*' meant that in some processes, young people were naming their realities and daring to ask for things that adults had not thought to question. But, as this adult described, at times this collective articulation of the pluriverse was denied by professionals who clung to dominant OWW views:

Young people spoke to the group of professionals, and described what they are living through.

And one professional just said: "No, no, that doesn't happen anymore".

So the young people asked: "Why do you think that?"

And the professional replied "That happened in the 50's, this isn't happening now."

Struggling against the dominance of the OWW was not easy, for example one young person described how racism is '*just a big problem that nobody really sees*' but challenging it at a societal level can feel like '*too big a dream*'.

Thinking with Escobar also helped us understand variations between participation processes related to direct democracy. Some examples did not seek to transform democracy. They were, as one young person notes:

forums for young people to have a say ... they feel so light, too light. They don't really give us a platform where we're taken seriously or where we can make a difference.

However, some processes tried to reconfigure power in less hierarchical ways, through intergenerational committees with decision-making powers jointly chaired by professionals and young people, or accessing a little known open space in a national parliament where it is possible to, as one young person described, "*just wait for them [politicians] and then ask the hard questions*". Repeat interactions with politicians, including in parliamentary spaces, helped enact accountability, and a more direct democratic relationships, even though, as this young person noted, this human inter-existence was not always comfortable for the politician.

Escobar's notion of local autonomous action and mutual reciprocity, enacted through active-verb-strategies, were evident in some processes. For example, in longer term activities focused on mutual aid alongside demands for state implemented national changes. These processes provided a space in which young people were supported (and supported each other) with practical and emotional issues alongside learning about and engaging in change. One young person emphasized why this was important:

To show young people that they're not alone. And then there is help out there and not it's not just them go through these ...thing on their own ...it makes a big difference

Our examples, though limited in number, suggest that local enactment of change in the moment is more likely where groups of young people have sufficient shared lived experience that enabled them to feel understood. Where this was absent, as one young person noted, *“I don’t usually speak up... because it’s also like most people who are doing child participation activities don’t share my experience”*.

Discussion

In this article we sought to develop theoretical tools for understanding how children’s invited participation in public decision-making might contribute to transformation. Rather than focusing on children’s engagement in through social movements (Leibel 2024; Rodgers 2020; Taft 2019, 2023), our focus was on invited participation because these processes receive considerable support (Taft and O’Kane 2024) and may offer a bridge into engagement with the state. Our use of Bourdieu and Marxism reflects in part our personal relationships with these theorists, but they also chimed with our empirical examples. Escobar offered an important new lens. Our aim was not ‘theoretical reconciliation’ but ‘inspiration and critique’ (Streckeisen 2022, 195). Harvey and Williams’s (1995, 95) analysis of militant particularism, reminds us that ‘reduction of relations between people into relations between concepts’ is risky but it can provide understanding of how transformation may be achieved or impeded by ‘focusing attention on the processes’. In our empirical examples, we found some children are content with just being heard, and from Hartung (2023) we know that some children and young people are interested in maintaining inequalities. But we found that, like children engaged in social movements (Taft and O’Kane 2024) many young people we interviewed did develop a sense that systemic change is needed. Dialogue with these theories helped us understand how three of the example processes were not simply invited participation in formal state-led initiatives, but complex compositions of mutual support alongside engagement with invited opportunities. The dialogue between these processes and theories provides insight on how transformation can be pursued.

Transformation through invited participation requires reflection on the OWW, doxa and hegemonic framing. The notion of pluriverse can help. We found OWW framings in some professionals’ denial of young people’s lived realities. We found doxa and hegemonic framing of common sense were expressed when ‘safety’ was used to justify lack of transparency about impact and lived realities were denied. These reflexes may be understandable reactions by adults seeking to protect themselves from questioning the legitimacy of the structures and processes in which they live; the OWW, doxa and hegemonic framing are relatively enduring and hard to challenge and we too (Cath and Johanna) sometimes fail to challenge these framings. But, inspiration may be drawn from anti-capitalist social movements, which show that challenging doxa becomes more possible at times of crisis (Ibrahim 2015). And, in contrast to Moran-Ellis and Sünker (2018, 288) who noted that including children in public decision-making is not (yet) common sense, we found in longer processes, perhaps reflecting the impact of the children’s rights movement, there was an emerging consensus that ‘of course’ a policy about children must be coproduced. In these favourable contexts, there was struggle for transformation through complex interactions with resources. So, echoing Jessop (2016),

there are changing relational dynamics in state responses to different interests. This suggests challenge to the OWW doxa may become more achievable for adults and children in specific conjunctures. Children's participation might then be strengthened by ensuring that pluriversal, lived accounts of reality can be consistently named and valued, and by struggling for a doxa of cocreation.

Transformation can be pursued by making the dynamics of ownership and control of resources visible, using notions of resources and capitals, OWW, and class interests. Bourdieu's notion of resources and capitals helped reveal the relevant cultural and social resources that were generated and mobilized by people in different social positions. Our research confirms the assertion (Lundy 2018; Moran-Ellis and Sünker 2018) that non-transformative participatory processes help children and young people gain valuable skills and resources, including knowledge and connections. But there were also extractive processes; children creating knowledge that did not become capital they controlled. Learning from Escobar and Bourdieu raises the importance of questioning whether resources are held by dominant adults or used to pursue or transform the dominant doxa and the OWW. Some young people and adults in some examples were doing this; articulating the need for redistribution of economic or cultural resources towards social justice, sometimes spurred by understanding that the social provision they requested was not happening due to active choices by the state, rather than being something that was natural or inevitable.

Thinking with Bourdieu, Marxist collective action theory and Escobar helped us identify allies, meshworks, sentirpensar-feelingthinking and enactments of support through which invited participation processes sometimes questioned the legitimacy of OWW, doxa and distributions of resources. Though not yet a mass movement, we found examples of what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) describe as networks and allies helping turn social resources into valued capitals, and what Escobar (2021) describes as meshworks that enable greater change. For example, collective action by multiple organisations and allies, sometimes offered children and young people greater control of resources they had created and moments when they could challenge dominant framings. Where collective action challenged dominant world views and existing distributions of resources shifted, we also found sentirpensar-feelingthinking as emotional testimony sometimes influenced policy discourse, though not always with material outcomes. Locally grounded strategies to foster mutual aid, and the support on everyday issues offered by CSOs, made young people feel more able to deal with practical challenges, the emotional exposure and the disappointments in the struggles for systemic change.

We found in this a link between Marxist accounts of collective action focused on local rationalities and Escobar's notion of local autonomous active-verb-strategies to enact reciprocity and mutuality. Young interviewees facing marginalisation, highlighted the need for support. They valued collective action which tried to transform local conditions before or at the same time as national action, and some felt concerned when this was lacking. Invited participatory processes usually require that children learn to act within frameworks primarily designed for and by adults (Boldt 2024; Luhtakallio and Eranti 2024), but we found adults were also learning how to act. Pursuing change was sometimes difficult and some felt unable to challenge powerful actors. In some moments, some parts of the state used divide and conquer tactics or defused struggles by accommodating

demands in words without redistributing economic resources in support of these. Building the genuine deliberative democracy that Escobar envisages, therefore requires consideration of how empowering and safe challenge can be built into children's invited participation processes and how to fairly redistribute economic resources to sustainably support local autonomous mutuality alongside engagement in the spaces of invited participation.

We found that cocreating processes of consciousness raising and organized collective action are key, echoing work on *Protagonismo*. A Marxist collective action typology (Nilsen and Cox 2013) helped us to trace progression in sustained participatory processes, which included struggles for local rationalities, militant particularism and campaigns. This range of collective action enabled connections to be made between children and young people's concerns, shared experiences of marginalization and enduring inequalities. Through sustained collective action, gains were won (although these were patchy in how they were experienced) at local and national levels. Sustained action was possible where there was secure funding for CSOs (as well as commitment) and where processes involved intergenerational groups (adults and children) with shared lived experiences, enabling young people to continue to be involved once they turned 18. Where children's engagement in invited participation processes runs alongside sustained collective action, potential for transformational change appears to be strengthened.

Conclusion

Bourdieu's concepts of doxa and capitals, Marxist theories of collective action and the state and Escobar's insights on OWW, pluriverse, sentipensar-feelingthinking, mesh-works and active-verb strategies revealed the crossing of lines between invited participation and collective transformative action. Even in summary form, these theories revealed aspects of the processes (the doing, being-together, and background forces) that enabled and limited transformation in our selected examples. In moments of impact in these European examples, the Latin American focus on children's participation as collective action was seen. This is significant because calls for transformation are often toned down by fears of asking for too much, adults are constrained by the assumption that children's participation is primarily grounded in voice rather than action, and tangible influence or structural change are difficult to demonstrate or require extended periods of time (e.g. Liebel and Meade 2023; Lorgen and Ursin 2021). We do not suggest that these are the only relevant theorists and further work to develop decolonial frameworks for analysing children's participation remains needed (Collins et al. 2021). But, dialectical deliberation with Escobar, Marxist theories of the state and collective action, and some of Bourdieu's concepts, reveals understanding of potential journeys towards transformation. Reflection with these theorists can help us:

1. Identify and challenge dominant views on the world, value lived accounts of the pluriverse
2. Question the legitimacy of how resources are owned and shared, connect with allies to normalize cocreation and seek redistribution

3. Focus on both local action and broader campaigns, by thinking-feeling and action-verbing mutual support.
4. Raise critical consciousness through struggle, and reinforce organisations and meshworks that sustain collective action and care

Intergenerational collective action, and processes where children's participation crosses between collective action and moments of invited participation, remain vital tools in the movement towards transformation.

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Ethical considerations

This study received ethical endorsement from the University of Jyväskylä and was then approved by the University of Central Lancashire Research Ethics Committee (approval no. BAHSS2 01195) on July 11th 2024. After receiving written and verbal information about the study, adult and young participants gave written and verbal consent.

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Data Availability Statement

To protect anonymity, no data set is publicly available.

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