

THE CHILDREN PARTICIPATION IN FOCUS: AN INTERVIEW WITH NATÁLIA FERNANDES¹

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Theories, researches and practices that have children as focus have presented significant changes as of the 1980s and 1990s with the emergence of new studies about childhood. Understanding children as active subjects, who construct and transform their contexts and society, these new studies resize the social roles of children and adults in researches and practices targeting children. They take children as those who know and inform best about their own lives, in a co-construction process between age partners (children, adults). A research topic that has played a key role in the construction of a field of knowledge and practices that effect this view of childhood and children is *child participation*. This theme has repercussions in the ways we understand children and childhood and dialogue with the knowledge that Psychology has built about this generational segment.

Concerning the construction of knowledge about child participation, professor Natália Fernandes has taken on a prominent role in the field of Sociology of Childhood, investigating the theme since her doctoral studies and making progress with new researches, advising on master's and PhD studies and developing practices in the Portuguese society.

Natália Fernandes is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Education of the University of Minho, in Braga, Portugal, and member of the Research Center for Child Studies at the same university. She advises on researches and interventions that have as theme the rights of children, new paradigms for research with children and ethical issues in research with children. Fernandes has developed partnerships and researches in international groups involved in the matter of children facing restrictions in their lives such as poverty, institutionalization, and neglect, among others. Among these groups, it is worth highlighting the European Network of Masters on Children's Rights, of which she is a founding member, and the Children's Rights Academic Network, CREAN. At national level, Fernandes performs and collaborates with local government projects in Braga, Portugal, with the aim of improving the conditions of children. Natália Fernandes is currently an important name when it comes to studies of Sociology of Childhood, with several publications, and has participated in conferences around the world, including in Brazil, with the theme of children's rights, especially regarding matters of child participation and the visibility of children as citizens.

The interview was conducted on March 28, 2013, in Fernandes' room at the University of Minho, in Braga, Portugal – as the first author was participating in a scientific meeting organized by the Institute of Education of the University of Minho –, edited by the authors and reviewed by Prof. Natália Fernandes in February and March 2015 for information update purposes. The interview has as its main axis the participation of children in the social world, and included a discussion on the roles of agents involved in

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this participation, possible places of its occurrence and aspects necessary for child participation to be effected. In addition, Natália assesses different actions and contexts, highlighting the school, the teacher's role and the need to train adults so that the participation of children actually happens.

When was the theme of child participation included in the academic and scientific agenda in Portugal and internationally?

When we speak of participation, there is an unquestionable formal moment which, in all texts we can consult, refers to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Without the existence of the Convention and without the existence of that set of articles, from 12 to 17, which formally legitimizes the child's image as a subject with rights of participation, it was difficult to support, in formal terms, this movement. The Convention on the Rights of the Child appears in 1989, and it is also around that time that the area from which I speak emerges, which is the Sociology of Childhood. The Sociology of Childhood arises in late mid-1980s and walks – not in parallel, because they touch, I think – with the Convention. When the Sociology of Childhood defends the child's image as a subject, a social actor, it is not defending more than what is safeguarded in the Convention when it says that children have the right to give their opinion, have the right to engage in matters that concern them. Therefore, there was an interesting synergy between the emergence of a scientific field that is exclusively focused on children and on the valuation of their social action and the emergence of the Convention which formally legitimizes the participation of children. Here are the factors that help sustain historically the concept of participation. There are contemporary authors in the Sociology of Childhood that have decisively contributed to supporting the idea that children are subjects with a valid social action and that we have to create spaces, times so that they can effectively exercise this social action of theirs meaningfully, namely Gerison Lansdown, Alan Prout, Michael Wyness, Nigel Thomas, Kay Tisdall, among others. The concept of participation that we defend in our group is something very simple but, at the same time, something very difficult to achieve. Classically, we tend to consider that children participate from the moment when, for example, in the classroom space, they are allowed to raise their fingers and say their opinion. This is good already; there was a time when we were not allowed to do even that. However, when teachers are faced with this practice, in the sense of deconstructing, going beyond that, most think that this is already enough. We firmly operate through the concept of a representative democracy. This is a stance which largely *donates* action, which has nothing to do with what we think participation should be. Participation should be an action endowed with meaning for the subject and has implications; implications in terms of social transformation. It does not need to change the world, neither the country or the neighborhood; changes in the subject himself, in his own group can be made, but this subject must feel that that intentional action that he triggers is received in a given collectivity and, after being received, has an impact or not. For example, we adults know that not all opinions we have about certain issues are opinions that will lead to a happy ending, the one we want. And we also know that our opinions clash with the opinions of others. And that is how we operate or should operate. And it is in these processes of confrontation and negotiation that we can build in the child this dimension of engaged subject or, as we prefer, in a broader way, citizen. We are only citizens if we can exercise our social action and feel that we have a space in the collectivity and that our action is also welcomed. It may not be that which will effectively command a certain dynamic, but one that was discussed, was considered and then placed in a set of wills which also contains the others will; and it is this confrontation that gives rise to a decision. When we feel that, a significant path has already been walked in the sense of us considering, "well, I have the right to express my opinion"; then Article 12 of the Convention safeguards already, "I have the right to express my opinion but, beyond that, my opinion is listened". Most of the time, that is what happens in the Portuguese school, for example. In classroom contexts the teacher says, "Well, here we have two cards, one red and one yellow. How many of you choose the red one?" And 9 out of 15 choose the red card. And the other 6 choose the yellow card. Because the teacher thought that the yellow card would bring more contributions for her to work on the content, she says, "Oh, alright, but today we will work with the yellow card, then we will have time to work with the red one". This is very common. However, that teacher felt extremely satisfied because

there she got some space for them to give their opinion. And if that is done repeatedly we are transmitting to children certain messages. What are we telling them? "Look, you can give your opinion, but in the end I am the one who decides". That completely destroys the meaning of the concept of participation and gives children the idea that what they say has no value. And they grow up with this mentality.

What are the roles of adults and children when it comes to child participation? Whose is the intentionality in this action: the adult's or the child's?

If the adults are not aware of and very well documented about what is or may be the concept of participation, it will be hard for it to happen. Children are and have become increasingly dependent; they have been living in an increasingly institutionalized interface and have become more and more dependent on the actions of the adult, who organizes everything; all stages of the lives of children are deeply shelved and manipulated by adults. If we do not invest in the training of the adults who work with children, in the sense of making them think, reflect on what it means to participate and on the kind of dynamics that should be accomplished it is difficult to promote the participation of children. We run the risk of believing that everything is participation, but it is not. There are spontaneous actions about which, at first, we can say, "He/she is participating". In fact, he/she may be engaged in a certain dynamics. But I think that we should give the concept of participation intentionality, consider that subjects should be aware of this intentionality too, because only then children, as they grow up, will attribute political meaning to their participation. If I am never confronted about whether something I do is considered participation, we may miss out on interesting and important experiences in which we become aware that this is a way for me to find myself and take a stand in society and take action. When we consider the concept of political participation, the individual dimension becomes much more diluted and the collective dimension is given more meaning. Regarding the concept of political participation and the possibility of understanding it from childhood, there are significant controversies arising from areas such as philosophy or law, where we continue to see the legitimization of childhood images in which children are mere objects of intervention, without considering them as legitimate active subjects of rights. Speaking of child citizenship in these contexts is talking nonsense, since it is conceived that the entitlement of citizen refers only to the old and moldy image of the last century, in which not even women had a place, only bourgeois men.

What is the role of children in political events?

I will give you an example about these collective movements of adults that illustrates that it is important to consider training processes about child participation so that participation effectively happens. A few years ago, in 2003 or 2004, there was in Portugal a case, which is still in trial, called *Casa Pia* (Pia House) – a case of sexual abuse of children in a shelter. It was a scandal, especially because the abusers were all public figures. So demonstrations of repudiation called *Marchas Brancas* (White Marches) were organized. The population was asked to dress in white, bring their children to march through the town. This was done in Braga. There were adults, children and, at the end of the demonstration, two children took the stage. I was glad because they were going to speak. When the children began, I found out that they were reading an adult's text. It was impossible that they had written a text of that nature. I believe that an important moment in terms of political participation was lost there, because if those children had taken the stage to present a manifesto derived from a work they had developed with other children, then that would have been political participation. The adults could have helped, but it would be good if that was the children's work. This is not participation, it is not political participation. It would have been, if indeed that was the result of a process of construction, of negotiation, of involvement of adults and, fundamentally, of children.

Would child participation lead to political participation?

Yes, provided that they can develop processes that indicate a social action with an intention, with an intention and with an impact, this is political participation.

What do you mean by intention and impact?

It should be something that goes beyond mere spontaneity; it is not a spontaneous action. It is an action endowed with a meaning, and it is an action that also has to have an effect in practice. Children must feel, at least, that they are taken into consideration, are targeted in a collectivity and are put at the service of a collectivity.

Does this intentionality belong to the adult or can it be the child's?

Children must appropriate the senses and modes of the action; otherwise, it is not participation.

Is the process started by the child or by the adult's proposition?

There is an author, Alejandro Cussianovich, a liberation theologian, who has many texts on child protagonism, and there is this phrase he says: "It is not because a certain process has been started by the adult that it ceases to be less participatory for the child". What matters is what will happen later, the way the adult will lead the process. In most cases, if the adult is not aware, participation not even starts. Therefore, it is imperative to invest in the training of adults who work with children in order to make them reflect and gather knowledge on what participation is and how it should happen so that, although sometimes they are the ones starting a certain participatory process, they can later develop dynamic activities with children so they appropriate and take on the protagonism in their own development.

And, for you, what characteristics should the adult have so as to promote participation?

In the sphere of initial training of teachers, within their training space, there should be moments when they stop and think about who this child subject is. If I defend a subject-child-citizen dimension, I have to stop and think about how this happens. If I defend a process of teaching and learning, of child involvement, I have to stop and think about how this happens. So, ideally, in a training process, in the curriculum, there should be moments when these aspiring teachers could reflect on who the child is, what participation is, what citizenship is, and how we can do this. There must be spaces in the training of people working with children for them to be more mindful and aware of what can and should be done. Otherwise, we will be educating them in the sense of conformity, with deeply hierarchical, vertical practices targeted towards the content and not competences for action.

How do we articulate child participation with the age of children? Is there any specific age when speaking of child participation?

Children have different competences. And the ways that children participate obviously differ from age to age too. Now, what is interesting is to look at the little ones, babies, for example, and see if they indeed participate too and the ways they participate, for example, in the classroom dynamics. Based on common sense, what people tend to consider is that the younger the child the less he/she participates and the less valid his/her participation is. It is that idea of infant. As children grow, they gain legitimacy to give opinions and participate. It is interesting to see that sometimes they open space for them to

participate, not because it is a planned, intentional act, but because indeed some children are extremely competent in the sense of taking a stand, defending their point of views and promoting change.

Does most of the knowledge in the area come from researches with older children?

Yes. I did it myself during my PhD studies; I worked with children aged between 8 and 12 years old. And most people prefer to work with older children, not with the little ones.

Besides the school, how do you see the participation of children in other social contexts?

In the context of protection, the concept of participation acquires a special importance. Participation has to be something which is at the service of subjects, which provides them tools, which allows them to build their identity as citizens, and which is useful. And with regard to, for example, protection, poverty and social exclusion, since the mid-1990s it is defended that the best weapon to fight against exclusion is to promote the participation of subjects. In the European Union, for example, programs to combat poverty focus on this participation and involvement of subjects. They came to the conclusion that organizing welfare political measures that do not involve the individual in the management of subsidizes, for example, has no effect. It does not empower the individual in the sense of making him look at his life and consider that it is his and that he has to do something for it. We have to be active and aware that we have to do something for our lives, we have to participate, it is a dimension of social policies, for example, aimed at combating poverty and exclusion. There is a very specific intervention line, which is the child poverty line. In these programs, it is argued, for example, the idea that the earlier we build with children contexts of participation for them to face their situations of deprivation, the more effective social policies to combat poverty in general will be; that is, the earlier individuals living in a situation of deprivation stand as subjects with action, whose voices are valid, whose actions have a meaning, the earlier they will stand as the protagonists of their own lives. And they will build the idea that is not based on the aid they receive from the State that their lives have to go on. But that they have a role to play. It is a very close relationship between protection and participation.

We have seen people taking the matters of protection and participation as opposites. What do you think about it?

This separation is artificial, based on the very concept of human rights. One of the principles of human rights is that rights are indivisible. They should be considered interdependently. It is completely wrong to defend a set of protection rights and a set of participation rights as isolated elements. They are accomplished only when considered interdependently.

And how do we do that, how do we articulate both?

There is this maxim, I think it is UNICEF's, I am not sure right now, which says, "the more participatory protection is, the more it will be achieved". The idea of participatory protection. Or protected participation.

Does that imply sparing children any kind of participation or context?

No, I think it is the opposite; it implies not pretending to children that there are no problems. Obviously, it is about not exposing them to unnecessary dangers, but building in them discerning eyes, eyes which are critical of the social reality. And that is how subjects will be able to protect themselves more. When I did my PhD field work, in the context of the Casa Pia, I worked with two groups: one that did not live in a shelter and another which lived in a shelter. In the conversations I had with the children who did not live in shelters, I did not even ask anything, the issue appeared spontaneously in our conversations. And, for example, all children with whom I spoke said they had already discussed that with their parents, that their parents had already given them certain instructions for them to protect

themselves. Therefore, that was a process – if we want to follow this line we are talking about – of participatory protection, that is, awareness of the problem is raised and protection strategies are developed. Protagonism is taken on there. What happened to the other group of children? This issue never emerged spontaneously in our conversations. And when I began to notice that it did not emerge in the conversations, I began to try to throw out some hints to see if they spontaneously spoke, but they did not. So I began to notice that there was there a strategy to silence a reality, not as a bad intention. The intention of the institution was to protect them, because the staff thought that, because they were living in a similar institution, they would feel threatened. Now my question is: are omission and silencing the best ways to protect ourselves? Of course not; we cannot build tools to face adversity. And there, an action that was legitimate, to some extent, to protect those kids was, at the same time, leaving them deeply unprotected. Because it did not allow them to discuss something that could happen inside the institution and have possibilities, mechanisms to protect themselves, in case that happened, showing that that was not a natural thing. There are problems which subjects can overcome if they gain awareness that that is a problem. And that they have the right to be protected and intervene to end the abuse process. So I think that the two dimensions can never be taken separately.

And how do you see the matter of participation, for example, in the family or in contexts that are, so to speak, more private?

I think that children, at least in the Portuguese context, have conquered some centrality in the way they see themselves as subjects participating in their families. By the way, when you talk to them, when it comes to this dimension of participation, it is in the family that they see greater opportunities for participation; because they choose their clothes, help choose the vacation destination, because of a whole range of decisions that are made within the family context, where they feel they have a space, that their opinion is considered in the family's decision making.

So it is in a more public context where child participation needs to be worked on.

Children themselves do not consider that it is important that they participate in public spaces. The fact that Portuguese children have more space in the family – nowadays the family is more democratic – is obviously great, no doubt, but it does not help them. Even the adults in the family also need to turn their eyes to the collective and society, break a little with the idea of individuality and consider that they live in a collectivity and that it is also in the collectivity that life, social life happens. So there is this very common idea, which is often brought in the discourses of children, that everything that happens out of the family space, out of the family arena, is the responsibility of those whom I elect to represent me. Therefore, I delegate.

Do you believe that school institutions in Portugal have been thinking more about child participation?

No, I do not.

But is there any experience, initiative?

Escola da Ponte. Unfortunately in Portugal I think that little or nothing happens with regard to considering that the participation of children is something fundamental that could be considered in the organization of the way education happens.

Whose is the responsibility? Is it the teacher's or the institution?

Some teachers have power. But I think that teachers get too comfortable with what is instituted. And indeed, in recent times, we have been required to show feasible results in terms of competences in those fundamental areas, which are taken as fundamental, which is Portuguese and Math. Then there

are rankings in Europe, and Portugal has always had low performance and now we have to do anything to rise. So what matters is to work on these areas. There are teachers who go by the book, so the classes are a torture, conditioning. Work, work, work. A big portion of teachers support themselves on this formal argument to legitimize the absence of participatory practices within the school. There are those who actually believe that there are other possibilities for education to happen and that Portuguese and Math can also be worked on in an environment where citizenship and the participation of children are promoted. They can do everything at once. As it is the case of *Escola da Ponte*, where they work on the contents but, at the same time, allow children to conquer fantastic political competences. But unfortunately Portugal is nearly a desert in terms of contexts which effectively enable child participation valued as something didactic, central, so that the education process can make sense, can happen.

And what would a school environment that fosters participation be?

I think that what happens in *Escola da Ponte* is the exact way the educational context should be organized so as to promote the participation of children. Even more, it is not about promoting; in *Escola da Ponte* the participation of children is central to sustain an educational process.

And the other elements walk together towards that.

Absolutely. The children are the ones involved in the management of times, of conflicts. It is obvious that teachers are there, and the children know they have to achieve some things in terms of content, at certain times. But the way this is negotiated, and the way the children themselves take responsibility to handle all the work, these achievements, is a process that is largely built with them, and that is the important thing.

How could teachers, managers and principals guide themselves in a school which seeks to consider participation?

I think that these people need to think very seriously and look with great respect at that child subject in the school. And this starts from looking at him/her not as a student but as a child or a young person; as someone who not only plays the role or wears the clothes of a student, because the biggest mistake we can make is this, it is to try to take subjects we have in the school as one big homogenous group. It is very easy to fall into the trap of homogenizing perspectives and practices. Understanding in a homogeneous way something that has not homogeneous at all can only have bad results in the end. The first thing they need to do is to challenge their own representation of who that subject right there is. And then, from the moment a more respectful look at this child who is in the school is built, they need to articulate all these dimensions of protection, of education, of participation, so that educational intervention can happen. It is in the mobilization of these dimensions and in their articulation that the practices developed by teachers should happen. But this will only happen if they receive training; without training, everything is very fragile.

Suggested texts

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