Becoming Children. Well-being, Participation, Citizenship

Maria Carmen Belloni
Roberta Bosisio
Manuela Olagnero
(eds)

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**Acceptance, Acquiescence and Scepticism.
Adults' Views on Children's Participation in the Italian
Social Protection System**
Valerio Belotti

1. *Italian Children's Rights: Participation is Missing* **aA**
In Italy, discussion of children's participation seems to be a
kind of «odd man out». There is the feeling that something is
missing: official publications and recommendations from in-
ternational monitoring organisations emphasise the absence
of social and practical policies for children and young peo-
ple. Examples are the series of the stringent remarks made
in the biennial reports on the condition of children in Italy
(Osservatorio nazionale infanzia 2009: 3-30), the spe-
cific recommendations sent from the Un Committee on the
Rights of the Child to the Italian Government, and periodic
reports made by associations in the sector.[1]

In Italy, many people are convinced that *participation* is
not a word to be associated with children or young people,
particularly not by political institutions. Although occasions
on which their opinions are sought, mainly during judicial
hearings, are mentioned in more than one law, there is no
explicit reference to active, participatory involvement on the

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1. Recommendations for Italy from the Un Committee may be found at: www.ohchr.org.
Italian reports from associations are periodic and can be found at: www.gruppocrc.net
(August 2015).

part of children and young people, except in Law No. 285 of 1997. The importance of this one law in the construction of nation-wide and local welfare for children has gradually been weakened and almost demolished in the collective memory and daily practices of children's welfare. That law has also been interpreted and implemented in various ways on local scales, a fact reported as long ago as 2003 by Baraldi - Maggioni - Mittica (2003) in their extensive field research.

In several European countries and for some international institutions, children's rights to participation are of increasing concern, as shown by new norms, recommendations and guidelines. In some European countries, research shows that children are increasingly «participating» in decision-making processes which, for reasons of children's protection, involve them, including cases of suspension of individual and family rights. However, these situations sometimes give rise to problems, ambiguities and difficulties, as demonstrated by Pert-Diaz - Thomas (2017), among others, in the United Kingdom, Vis - Holtan - Thomas (2012) in Norway, and van Bijleveld - Dedding - Bunders-Aelen (2014) in the Netherlands.

Why is promoting Italian children's participation, on an ample scale and with institutional support, so fraught with problems? Why is it all made so difficult? James - James (2008), noting the great differences in adults' professional cultures concerning children in European countries, proposed the concept of the «cultural politics of childhood», which may be useful in interpreting the Italian situation. This concept aims at restoring connections - those interweavings which in all countries arise over time and become part of the ordinary, widespread social practices of organising everyday life and the politics of welfare. As laws come into force, adults' professional cultures tend to crystallise discourses and representations of children and young people. This «mix» can give rise to various kinds of profile. Some countries, with social organisations and welfare systems based on citizenship, differ from those with protective systems based on a conception of the family which is private and separate from public intervention, as in some Mediterranean countries (Naldini 2006; Esping - Andersen 2010).

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2. *What is involved?*

The experience and research of the last few years form part of this normative and cultural context. My colleagues and I have listened to children in alternative care, who are obliged to live for varying periods of time away from their parents, for their own protection. Thus, this chapter presents an analysis of data from a research programme carried out in north-east Italy to promote, implement and assess ways in which children's participation in decision-making could be developed within the Italian child protection system[2]. Our subjects were children and young people between 11 and 17 years old, in alternative care (foster care and residential care settings), and the managers and operators of both public and private social services of the local welfare system[3], as well as foster carers.

I concentrate exclusively here on the attitudes shown by adults to implementing participation monitored by research. I focus in particular on their prior experience, to highlight their ideas and convictions about these issues, their reactions to new proposals, and the kinds of difficulties which seem to be typical of situations in which children and young people are included in decision-making processes. My analysis examined the materials and data for several occasions during the research programme: 48 social operators and foster carers participated in eight focus groups; ethnographic observations were made at 53 meetings (including also seminars and conferences), to present and discuss the proposed initiatives, for a total of about 400 social operators, foster carers and parents. All these activities were recorded in diary form and 35 of the meetings were audio-recorded (12 were also video-recorded). Atlas.ti software was then used for textual analysis of all materials.

Analysing the perspective which social services operators and adults in general have on children's participation is very important in the particular state of vulnerability in which such young people find themselves in the child protection

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2. I refer here only to three projects carried out by the Veneto Region from 2009 to July 2015. Partial accounts appeared in previous works by Belotti (2012) and Belotti - Cerantola (2013).
3. I use the term «social operators» to refer to social workers, psychologists, neuropsychiatrists, etc., whether in management positions or otherwise.

system. This perspective obliges us to focus on the «space» for freedom and the powers which children have to distinguish and describe their level of involvement and participation and how their lifecourse is constructed. Their experience of participation presumes a situation of continual support and co-construction with adults of the «spaces» which, by definition, act within asymmetric power relations between generations (Lansdown 2010). Several studies have now shown to what extent children's participation is directly related to the commitment expressed by social operators, parents and volunteers involved in supporting it (Pert - Diaz - Thomas 2014). These studies show how participation initiatives play an important part in a number of aspects linked to the complexity of social work with children. The tensions that are thus set up pull in opposing directions: towards protecting children from situations that could harm them, and towards promoting their rights to participation; towards listening to what they have to say, but also to considering the viewpoints of all those concerned, parents in particular; towards prioritizing their immediate interests or towards taking a long-term perspective. In addition, participation initiatives involve the representations, images and, more generally, an idea of the professional culture which operators have of children as competent subjects and their well-being in their «best» interests (van Bijleveld - Dedding - Bunders-Aelen 2014, 2015; Pölkki *et al.* 2012; Vis - Holtan - Thomas 2012; Winter 2009; Shemmings 2000).

Other studies show that, although social operators recognise the importance of participation during protection processes, at the same time they show indecisiveness and reservations about how and when children and young people should participate in decision-making (Archard - Skivenes 2009). This is partly due to the accentuated polysemous character which the concept of children's participation acquires in these particular professional environments, and thus the lack of agreement on what should be understood by the concept and what practices can best represent it. Van Bijleveld - Dedding - Bunders-Aelen (2015) note that it is precisely this uncertainty which was one of the main findings of their review of research on the question.

3. *Emerging Attitudes*

Ethnographic observation and textual analysis of research results have shown various dimensions of meaning in operators' and adults' attitudes towards participation of children and young people. Here, I emphasise that these participation processes emerge in relation to two criteria. The first is recognition of the sound foundation, legitimacy and suitability of participation. I refer here to the extensive rhetoric of children's rights stemming from the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (Crc), but also to Italian Law 285/97, and the acknowledgement that children do have rights, independently of their degree of development and biological age. The second criterion is involvement, or being active in promoting participation, removing obstacles that stand in its way, studying it and working on ways and means of developing its potential and publishing results.

These two criteria are not necessarily alternative, inasmuch as their relationship contributes to reducing the complexity of empirical evidence. As the first criterion can be divided into two attitudes, viz., being open to participation practices or being opposed to them, and the second – involvement – can be either active or passive, there are four possible macro-groups of attitudes (Table 1).

Table 1. *Types of macro-attitudes of operators to topics regarding participation.*

Attitude / *Involvement*	Active	Passive
Openness	*Acceptance*	*Acquiescence*
Opposition	*(Hostility)*	*Scepticism*

By «acceptance» I mean a macro-attitude of clear-cut openness to participatory topics, either due to successful experiences in the past, or to an ideal and ideological tension regarding experience in other sectors, not necessarily professional. In these cases, subjects personally promote and construct conditions of feasibility, so that project experiences can start and, if successful, continue.

«Acquiescence» here means a macro-attitude which, although based on ideological openness towards participatory topics, is detached from them, with little emotional and cognitive acceptance. This attitude is often assumed in order to

fit in with the social reference group or what is considered to be the prevailing norm (respect for children's rights), rather than reflecting definite convictions about the suitability of involving children in care. This attitude becomes condescending if it expresses not only the need to be acknowledged in one's own group, but also if it is the result of the demand for acceptance advanced by the authorities from whom one depends, either directly (bureaucratically or administratively) or indirectly (for funding for particular projects, etc.). It is essentially constructed by means of a passive attitude, both in creating conditions for promoting the project and in those of obstructing it.

«Scepticism» here is the macro-attitude which does not consider that participation is possible, above all for children. This may be due to previous unsuccessful attempts. Sceptics do not take particular action against new experiences, but nor do they bother to remove obstacles, maintaining an attitude of passivity and little commitment to achieving positive results.

From the theoretical viewpoint, combining our two criteria and two attitudes also yields a fourth group which, however, did not emerge from the empirical field evidence analysed here. This macro-attitude, which could be called «hostile» or «contrary», is the converse of «acceptance», and is expressed by opposition to participation (IRES 1992).

There may be several reasons why this last group does not emerge, including the great predominance in children's welfare services of the culture and rhetoric of rights, which means that it is perhaps unlikely that these rights would not be acknowledged. Even if some operators do not approve of this rhetoric, it would hardly be opportune to express such an attitude publically, as this could cause them to be sidelined or damage their professional standing with their colleagues.

Much information on this point came from a social worker who took part in a focus group. After a meeting on participatory topics had lasted about two hours, she asked to speak, and revealed - unsurprisingly – that there can be quite a distance between the «stage» of the rhetoric of rights and the «backstage» of everyday practice.

> I'd like to say something about the link between social care and children's participation. On paper, OK, we all agree.

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But I think that, in fact, in the professional and everyday experience of us all, things are not always so easy. Institutional procedures and the constraints imposed on us don't always allow us to adopt a participatory method, and not everyone in our services wants to do so […]. We have colleagues who don't believe in participation, sometimes because of their personal culture […]. In our services, most of the attitudes are not participatory, they're hierarchical, just 'power games'. That's a long way from participation. (Gabriella[4], a public services operator, no. 42).

4. *Between Acceptance and Acquiescence*

At no time did the proposed participatory initiatives encounter formal obstacles from the institutions and social operators involved. They always recognised the legitimacy of proposals based on children's rights and the CRC of 1989, which also underlie the development of social services.

Discussions during the presentation of this research project thus first focused on the difficulties involved in organising it, as several services responsible for various structures were involved, with personnel taking on workloads already considered to be excessive. The hard work involved in social services, increasingly characterised by serious, complex situations and at the same time badly under-funded, sometimes gave rise to understandable mechanisms of defence and self-protection on the part of the operators who, however, never reached the point of expressing doubts about wanting proposals for innovation.

In one of the presentation meetings, emphasis on the lack of resources by one participant preceded a discussion on whether the proposed initiative was absolutely essential, at a time when funds for children's welfare were at an all-time low. Many emergency situations, due both to children's new social needs and down-sizing of services, were mentioned in questioning whether the new proposal could «stand on its own two feet», when situations believed to be more urgent could not find resources for their implementation.

I'd like to know why there is all this interest in children's participation. Here we have situations we can't handle, especially adolescents in psychiatric care. Just think! We of-

4. All names are, of course, fictitious.

ten have to hospitalise them in the adult psychiatric wards, and undergoing something like that is really the last thing a girl of 15 needs. […]. Now we have a few hospital beds for young neuropsychiatric patients, and we have to use outside facilities because of the numbers of patients. I hope the regional authorities can do something about all this, because it's a real emergency. (Maria, public health service operator, no. 17).

As well as these difficulties, mainly concerning the project's institutional and organisational framework, these meetings sometimes revealed further questions and misgivings, almost always expressed as questions and never in a such a way as to cast serious doubt on the proposal. But a certain (and expected) acquiescence did sometimes seem to prevail, rather than definite acceptance of the proposal.

In these cases, three problems were often encountered. The first directly concerned the ambivalence in which the social services were obliged to operate, their very *raison d'être*, i.e., promoting the participatory role of children (our project's focus), versus their responsibility for children's well-being. According to some social workers and psychologists in both public and private services, listening to children's perspectives collectively could give rise to embarrassing, painful situations, obliging children to go back to describing their own lives and generating states of individual anxiety and stress which a team of facilitators consisting almost entirely of professional educators would have difficulty in coping with. Thus, on one hand, there was worry about the emergence of particular situations of distress; on the other, doubts about whether the personnel facing such situations would have the necessary skills.

The second problem concerned the possible effects of making an open, collective comparison between the children and their operators, and to the resulting, albeit temporary, reduction of the reciprocal, daily positions of power between caregivers and those they care for. In these cases, the most frequently mentioned term was children's «omnipotence» and its possible emergence, once the child is no longer subject to the normal routines of clinical and therapeutic listening. In some cases, the particular workshop approach that was discussed at the meeting and eventually met with the participants' approval (discursive, rather than formal approval)

was viewed as liable to result in one-sided and barely credible accounts of life stories and experiences bearing little relation to the actual facts and thus misleading, whether consciously or otherwise.

> I don't know if this public approach to exchanges between young people and operators is useful in cases, say, when we have young people in psychotherapy. We know there's the risk of allowing them to take on an «attitude of omnipotence». But maybe it's not a good idea to let them criticise our work, our procedures. […]. We must be careful not to confuse these two planes of collective listening and participation, which belong to the sphere of prevention rather than therapy. (Maddalena, public health services operator, no. 21).

In this framework, one of the misgivings about the proposed initiative was due to the seriousness of the reasons why the children had been taken into care and, in particular, to cases of domestic violence or behavioural disorders. Expressing concerns similar to those noted by VIS - HOLTAN - THOMAS (2010) in Norway, operators were worried that the children might be distressed by having to think and talk about their traumatic experiences and that the situations might require a therapeutic rather than just dialogical approach.

> But if one of the kids breaks down, starts crying, has panic or anxiety attacks, what do we do? How can we intervene? Many of them have suffered trauma, they've been through terrible things, and the «listening space» you … we are thinking of giving them may be understood as an occasion to relive things they'd set aside long ago and which could give rise to more suffering. What can we do in these cases?. (Rita, community educator, no. 13).

A third point which surfaced in these discussions concerned the actual meaning of *participation*. Although the term «listening» was familiar to the operators from their own experience, some felt that participation was associated with aspects of decision-making - not so much the process that leads to making decisions, but the specific decision that must be made, and who makes it. The operators attending the preliminary meetings invariably revealed a certain reluctance to clarify the «scope» of this participation, its meaning, how it was to be implemented, and its practical consequences, as if it were

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not «politically correct» to publicly question children's right to participate.

When one member of the group asked for explanations, most of those present nodded their heads. The silence, accompanied by an evident momentary suspension of the dialogue, was palpable, and those who had the courage to «lift the veil», as it were, sat rigidly upright immediately after the question, in anticipation of an exchange of sharp remarks and further details from the project promoters.

> I haven't heard about such an innovative project since the years of [law] 285, in the sense that we've never done such a thing and I don't know any other places where they do. So I'm very curious to see what'll happen, what will come of it, because I think it's right we should think about how we do our work and what the children we care for think about it. They should be able to participate, that's true, but I'd like to say that doesn't mean they should decide their own courses by themselves, decide whether to make this or that choice. We are the ones, the people from the public services, who must choose. Yes, let's listen to them, yes, let's give them information, but I'd like to make it clear that we are the ones who have to decide what to do with them, with their parents, the other services, and so on. Otherwise, the roles will get mixed up. I don't think that's right, do you?. (Iside, public services manager, no. 17).

This opinion about participatory issues reflects a considerable amount of worry and highlights the ambivalence between the work of protection and that of promoting welfare services, already noted in other countries. It explains a difficulty which arises, not so much from prejudice towards these rights and processes, but from the novelty which their introduction generates in daily routines and practices consolidated over the years within the social services and social work with young people and their families.

5. *From Acquiescence to Scepticism*
Once the promotional stage had ended and regional funds had been exhausted, some local projects gradually petered out. Though there were various reasons for this, it was mostly because initial acquiescence gave way to scepticism, a change in attitude that was more common among managers than among rank and file social workers. Our findings do not in-

dicate to what extent this was due to the results, or to the way in which the project had been carried out. It may have been due to a preconceived attitude that the project did not succeed in overcoming, given that participation by the children progressed in ways and with results which were quite similar from place to place.

An interchange that took place during one of the final meetings is emblematic. One of the activities scheduled for this last meeting, open to the public and in particular to local operators, was a performance which three of the girls had decided to stage, to epitomise the various phases of their life in care: removal from their families, meetings with the social operators, their assignment to foster families, and their later move to residential care. The performance ended to applause, and the meeting continued with a question-and-answer session and an exchange of views and thoughts between the public and the girls and boys who had been involved in the action research project. One public services manager rose to speak not only about the project, but above all about this last performance by the three girls (transcription no. 32).

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[Public services manager] Everything you kids have told us, we've listened to, but not everything you told us is really useful, is it? There are some things which must definitely be listened to, gone into in depth, but here we certainly can't… I mean, we must be honest with you and say you've told us some interesting things, some more interesting than others, but we will remember the interesting ones! What else can I say? We always come back to the main theme, which is listening, listening to the things they say, trying to stay close to them and sometimes using them as were consultants, more on an everyday basis, I'd say, than in situations like this – they're nice situations, but they're a bit artificial, I mean, these young people must be listened to more in everyday life, in living with them and listening to what they have to say.

[…]

[Foster girl 1] Yeah, yeah … yes, you said there were useful things, but also other things that were not quite… what were you referring to?

[…]

[Services manager] No, [naming the girl], I didn't say there were useless things, but certain topics are so complex that … giving you the feeling that they've been understood

completely … you still have a long way to go to have a more complete and well developed understanding of them … know what I mean? […]. You see [naming the girl], let's give ourselves time to understand things in a way which is more complex, more in-depth. Yes, you have told us important things, but they should be gone into further, carefully, I mean … let experience give them even more depth! Now, don't get huffy with me.

[Foster girl 1] No, no, I'm not huffy.

Here, the manager's words clearly reflect the opposing tensions that have also been found in other studies of social work, as he is focused on what he believes to be the short- and long-term outcomes of care for the girls who had organised the performance on the one hand, and a certain concern regarding the public discussion of the care process on the other. But the exchange also reveals other elements – in particular, the stance taken by the adult, who represents himself as having a role of responsibility for the girls' care, with an understanding stemming from his specialized skills and experience – in brief, his deployment of a form of power. This had the effect of circumscribing and restricting the contextual space of the three girls' agency, but there was also the fact that her two companions looked on in silence.

I consider this stance to be one of scepticism rather than acquiescence, for two main reasons. First, it takes an "instrumental" view of listening, which it sees as serving the sole purpose of adult decision-making and thus reduces the practice to something that the operators do only to gain information. Second, it regards outside knowledge as being decisive in constructing the care relationship, and consequently assigns less weight in decision-making to the information that emerges and is constructed (in terms of the child's empowerment) from the exchange of views.

However, this stance cannot be regarded as one of hostility to participation practices, given its acknowledgement, albeit functional, that the listening relationship is essential.

Scepticism towards the viewpoint of young people and some forms of their empowerment was also shown on other occasions, particularly in operators' meetings with professional psychologists and psychiatrists. Though the evidence for this is limited and cannot be generalized, it could be hypothesized that the intensive use that these professionals

make of individual clinical therapy sessions tends to over-shadow the different ends and the different aims pursued by supporting participatory practices.

In this sense, some comments on exchanges between psychologists and psychiatrists and representatives of local and regional political institutions are interesting. In one case, the chief psychologist had always supported the project. Upon receiving a draft of the recommendations which the young people wanted to give the operators and services which she coordinated, however, she made a number of small redactions to the text, deleting sentences which she thought were most embarrassing for her organisation. This did not involve removing people's names and identifying information (which in any case were not permitted by the project's «code of conduct»), but general remarks regarding young people's advice to the social workers and psychologists. She also deleted some phrases - not disparaging, but which she thought showed little regard for the operators' professional standing. During the regional conference held at the end of the project, she admitted to this censorship in her speech. She volunteered this information somewhat ingratiatingly, seeking complicity and taking for granted that the adults in the audience to her would agree with her.

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In a subsequent speech, one regional councillor for social policy said he was amazed at what she had said she had done:

> I don't understand why you made these cuts, what need was there? We must listen to these young people and what they say without prejudice. We must start with them. Me, if I can, I always listen to them. They have a lot to tell us. Their ways must be respected. I wouldn't be scandalised by a few swear-words or criticisms. Sometimes it does us good to listen to young people saying them. (Regional councillor for social policy, no. 31).

But in this case too, there was another form of acquiescence: shortly before the young people began to speak, the regional councillor had left the room. This was despite the fact that he had assured the young people that he would attend, and the original timing of their meeting had been changed at his request to suit his political commitments for that day. In other words, he had not in fact been present to listen to anything the young people said.

6. *Problems Must be Taken Seriously*

This study shows that participation practices in the local children's protection and care systems we examined are still not widely adopted, unless, as the operators themselves suggested, they cannot be included among the factors that contribute to the quality of the care relationship. Seen in this light, participation thus seems to be limited to an intentional effort on the part of operators to collect information from the children in their care, in order to bring the children's difficulties into sharper focus – information in the broadest sense, about the children's abilities and intellectual skills, state of mind, wishes or convictions. Although these data are useful for social operators' decision-making, collecting them rarely involves a departure from the usual routine of meetings with social workers to monitor the individual child's progress, where the information flow is always only one-way: from the child to the social worker. Participation seems to be reduced simply to implementing an individual program which is adequate for that child's needs, but nothing more

This study was also able to confirm two other characteristic aspects. One was that young people are present and have «voice» only as part of the social worker/child dyad, and not in meetings of the professional teams or case reviews, where the child's care plan can be discussed and decided upon. The second aspect is that young people's participation is limited to the personal, rather than systemic, dimension. In other words, it does not extend to the formulation and modification of rules, routines, places and spaces, and, more in general, to the socio-environmental features of the child protection and care system

Starting from empirical evidence, operators' attitudes were divided into four large groups. Clearly, the probability of success or failure of promoting participatory events in welfare centres is also influenced by the capacity of the projects themselves to create conditions in which the macro-attitude of acceptance gains ground over the other components, mainly acquiescence. At the same time, efforts must be made to ensure that scepticism, rather than giving way to acceptance, does not degenerate into hostility, though the latter attitude did not surface explicitly in our study. Scepticism, unlike acquiescence, greatly restricts young people's chances of expressing their agency, although it does not ac-

tively hinder them, as hostility does. From this viewpoint, any action encouraging participation within welfare services must necessarily consider the operators' opinions, taking their representations, worries and uncertainties, as well as their insights and suggestions, into serious account.

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