RiDE: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 2015
Vol. 20, No. 1, 24–38, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2014.953470

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Seen and not heard: participation as tyranny in Theatre for Early Years

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This paper uses the frame of participation as tyranny to trouble the concept of 'participating freely in cultural life and the arts' within Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially as it relates to the youngest children: when children's experiences are curated and determined by adults, participation may resemble manipulation rather than control. Heavily influenced by Article 31, contemporary Theatre for Early Years relies on audience participation and often takes the form of a wholly participatory experience. For many audience members, these moments can be liberating, but others may feel unsettled by a tokenistic experience which appears to legitimise the artist's hegemonic status. Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation provides a provocative typology of participatory practices, which this paper reformulates in relation to the very young. As a route away from the often unconscious tyrannies which may accompany adult-led arts projects, it is proposed that participatory power structures can be created which grant agency to child audiences to engage on their own terms. This includes the ability to take control of the theatrical event, to withdraw from participation and to have children's innate imaginative capabilities recognised as comparable to those of adults.

Introduction

The term 'participatory' is nebulously applied to a range of practices within children's theatre, from tiny moments of one-to-one interaction between performer and spectator to full-scale theatre environments where children can influence dramatic outcomes. Contemporary Theatre for Early Years (TEY) tends to rely on audience participation even more than theatre for older children, with common examples being eye contact which negates the 'fourth wall' and the ritualised exchange of gifts, and may take the form of a wholly participatory experience (Fletcher-Watson 2013). For many audience members, these moments can be exciting or liberating, but others, including parents, may feel unsettled by a seemingly tokenistic experience which simply legitimises the artist's hegemonic status as part of an adult elite.

TEY is heavily influenced by Article 31 of the United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states firstly that signatory states shall 'recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and arts', and secondly that states shall 'respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of

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appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity'.

This paper therefore uses the frame of participation as tyranny (Cooke and Kothari 2001) to trouble the concept of 'participating freely' as used in Article 31, especially as it relates to the youngest children. When children's experiences are curated and determined by adults, participation may resemble manipulation rather than control. Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969) spans precisely this spectrum, providing a typology of practices relating to civic participation. This paper proposes a new Ladder of Participation relating to TEY, demonstrating the breadth of contemporary theatrical practice with specific examples of each stage. It is proposed that, as future citizens, children may be received into power structures via the medium of culture as a means to fulfil the aims of Article 31.

Power relations in TEY

Theatre for Early Years (also known as Theatre for the Very Young or TVY), which means theatrical events explicitly designed for audiences under 5-years old and their caregivers, has grown enormously in popularity since it emerged in the late 1970s (van de Water 2012; Fletcher-Watson et al., forthcoming). From installations to immersive theatre, from opera to ballet, professional performing arts for the youngest audiences now appear at venues around the world.

It can be argued that no single document has had a greater impact on the development of this new genre of performance than the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 31, addressing children's rights to art, leisure and culture. Artists and producers cite the Convention as a foundation to their practice (see e.g. Schneider 2009), with 'free' and 'full' participation often emerging as key aims for new work. This has led to the creation of performances which lack scripts, narratives and even actors, privileging free agency over traditional notions of drama (Fletcher-Watson 2013). A spectrum of TEY performance thus becomes apparent, moving from play-centred environments to productions which ration agency or guide their participants' actions through interactivity, and extending further to more conventional modes of theatrical presentation, where some participatory exploration of the set may occur after a performance. In all cases, participation serves several purposes: aiding children's comprehension of perceived action (by combining active physical or kinaesthetic discovery with more typical, passive forms of visual, verbal and aural presentation); empowering young spectators (by allowing them to take a degree of control over the performance or space); responding to children's natural urge to join in with play scenarios.

However, it must also be recognised that access to participation is determined not by children, but by adults. Parents or caregivers select performances, purchase tickets, transport children to the theatre, select seats and chaperone participants throughout the experience (van de Water 2012). Jonathan Levy has noted provocatively that 'children in the theatre are a captive audience … they do not choose to come. They are brought' (1990, 10–11), while Matthew Reason calls them 'a benevolently coerced audience … taken to the theatre perhaps in the same way that children are sent to school or taken to the dentist – because it is good for them' (2010, 17). Jeanne Klein goes further, claiming that audiences visiting from school or nursery have been 'kidnapped' (2005, 44). This is comprehensible as an inevitable

effect of babies' lack of communication skills – a newborn obviously cannot select a production from a brochure, for example. Nonetheless, a fundamental imbalance in power relations is inherent within the theatrical event before the child enters the venue.

In the late twentieth century, critics tended to claim that the central purpose of theatre for younger children was theatre literacy – the practice of training audiences to comprehend theatrical tropes (see e.g. Bolton 1999; Schonmann 2002; van de Water 2004). Some have stated baldly that 'viewing a play is different from the act of playing' (Schonmann 2002, 144), and therefore children were to be instructed in modes of behaviour such as sitting still and quietly in order to decipher the semiotics of theatre (Fletcher-Watson 2013). Once within the theatre, the child was expected to adhere to normative adult conduct, rather than being accommodated on equal terms. Adult fears about children's disruptive or even destructive capacity fulfilled clichés of the Dionysian, dangerous, uncontrollable, tasteless, selfish child in need of education and correction: 'the child is Dionysian in as much as it loves pleasure, it celebrates self-gratification, and it is wholly demanding in relation to any object, or indeed subject, that prevents its satiation' (Jenks 1996, 182).

Thus, the baby spectator has been further disempowered, this time by cultural gatekeepers. It should be noted that the last decade has seen significant acknowledgement of the needs of previously overlooked audiences, including babies. The movement towards inclusive access, combined with more nuanced artistic practices, has led to the creation of what might be termed *non-judgemental performances*, such as autism-friendly or relaxed performances, mother-and-baby matinees for adult theatre (such as Soho Theatre's *Soho Screamers* season in 2013–2014) and an increase in TEY productions around the world. Scholars no longer focus on theatre literacy to the same extent – indeed, by repositioning theatre literacy as 'art form knowledge', some commentators have designated it essential for 'the empowerment of young audiences' (Reason 2010, 172) – yet culturally this adult-derived restraint remains potent. For example, chaperones often perceive that their children are expected to be still and silent, and enforce 'appropriate' behaviour rigorously, even when boisterous interaction is welcomed.

The final stage of disenfranchisement occurs when the performance begins. A typical TEY production may involve items being passed into the auditorium for inspection, or participatory moments where audience members can enter the playing area. These interactions appear liberating, fulfilling all three aims of participation as described above, but the experience grants little or no creative autonomy to the participant. Instead, the artist has curated a series of seemingly participatory acts which can be tokenistic. The status of the artist remains unchanged throughout – they are powerful, elevated above their audience simply by their embodied adultness. Being bigger, more skilled and more respected, they cannot help but impose an unconscious hierarchy within the theatre.

Stephen Kline has explored these power relations in theatre for young audiences, noting that 'children's culture has always been primarily a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children' (1993, 44). In TEY as in theatre for older children, 'powerlessness is manifested in the preposition for. For children, but by the adult author, artist, director, actor' (Reason 2010, 169). The child becomes what Jacqueline Rose has called 'an outsider to its own process' (1993, 2), denied the possibility of creative autonomy. Indeed, when art represents an adult's re-construction of infancy,

rather than allowing a child to represent a construction of their own on-going reality, it cannot be an equal encounter. As Manfred Pfister vigorously argues, 'this can never, even potentially, become a symmetrical two-way exchange with reversible sender-receiver relationships, such as in ideal cases of *face-to-face communication* [original italics]; because here, an institutionalised asymmetry is present' (quoted and translated in Wartemann 2009, 50).

Participation as tyranny

Tyranny can be defined as the illegitimate or unjust exercise of dominance; the members of society most vulnerable to tyranny must then be those least able to exert power themselves against institutionalised hierarchies: the elderly, ill and very young. Of these, the least powerful are babies, lacking all autonomy – as discussed earlier, their lives and experiences are routinely determined by others. Defending the use of the term 'tyranny' in their influential discussion of international development practices against accusations of being inflammatory or hyperbolic, Cooke and Kothari claim that 'tyranny is both a real and a potential consequence of participatory development, counter-intuitive and contrary to its rhetoric of empowerment though this may be' (2001, 3). Tokenistic and manipulative participatory practices serve only to legitimise decisions already made, offering no enfranchisement or agency to those taking part.

Agency can be posited as the counterpoint to tyranny (Hickey and Mohan 2004), being a democratic transfer of power to the individual, even in time-limited scenarios such as theatre productions. Agency permits the participant to take control of a situation or a space by becoming involved in delicate negotiations with others in their community. The complexity of children's free play, with its ever-shifting hierarchies and alliances, provides a clear example of agency, to be contrasted with the powerlessness inherent in traditional educational models, where participation is limited to tightly circumscribed tasks.

Gaynor, responding to Cooke and Kothari, outlines three possible aims of participatory practices: legitimising a pre-existing condition or decision; exploiting a community's own resources in order to reduce costs; and empowering a community to 'ultimately control their own destinies' (2013, n.p.). As noted above, poor participatory design or deliberate manipulation of a community cannot ensure true agency. Exploitative participation (where the project overseer seeks to minimise costs by using the community to effect a change imposed from outside) perhaps mirrors those arts outreach projects where a topic or theme has been imposed by an external body – the state or a sponsor – leading to an unengaging attempt at community-building through culture. As Rustom Bharucha has noted, these productions 'can be patronising and infantilising. [They] can be self-righteous, driven by the notions of intentionality, form and aesthetics' (quoted in Knight 2011, 11).

However, even Gaynor's third aim – empowerment – can result in the perception of tyranny for participants, especially the very young. Lack of adequate preparation can lead to fear about becoming involved in an activity, from not understanding rules of engagement to simply wishing not to participate. For example, an audience unprepared for participatory theatre may feel that professional performers are best-placed to carry out the aesthetic actions required to create drama. Paradoxically, these spectators feel empowered by their choice not to participate.

For young children, fear of participation is further complicated by their fragile grasp of fantasy. Gaston Bachelard claims that children's fears can inhibit curiosity, especially in unreal scenarios such as theatre, where authenticity becomes slippery (cited in de Faria and Richter 2009, 38). The same is true of adults. Discussing his own early participatory experiments, Jerzy Grotowski ruefully reflected that 'we were putting the people who came to us in a false position, it was disloyal of us: we were prepared for this sort of encounter, while they were not' (Grotowski and Taborski 1973, 129).

Thus, tyranny may be perceived by audiences even when an imbalance of power is explicitly rejected by theatre-makers. In any participatory production, from the smallest moment of interaction to the most free agency possible, there will be an audience member who does not wish to join in, and this must be carefully negotiated by caregiver and artist alike. Arguably, the absence from Article 31 of the right *not* to participate in culture may trouble the entire document.

The next section will explore the spectrum of TEY practices as a hierarchy granting ever-greater agency, in a bid to outline a possible route away from tyranny for the very youngest spectators.

A new '**ladder of citizen participation**'

Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein 1969) provides a useful structure for considering the varying forms of participatory art for babies and toddlers. This typology moves from manipulation and therapy as contrived forms of 'non-participation' towards citizen control, where the bulk of decision-making is transferred to the previously powerless. Briefly, citizens may be presented with eight rungs of engagement (although Arnstein notes [1969, 218] that there may be many more rungs): *manipulation*, where their presence legitimises pre-existing decisions; *therapy*, where a pretence of participation disguises the power structure; *informing*, where rights may be described to citizens but no means of enacting them are offered; *consultation*, where participation is cursory and tokenistic; *placation*, where hand-picked representatives stand in for the community; *partnership*, where power is shared jointly; *delegated power*, where citizens have a dominant role in decision-making and *citizen control*, where participation equates to full agency.

Arnstein's description of the aim of the least-participatory rungs being 'to enable powerholders to "educate" or "cure" the participants' (1969, 218) has echoes of the discourse still prevalent in TEY about the need to educate children in theatre literacy before they can be allowed access to truly dramatic experiences. By contrast, notions of partnership, delegated power and citizen control are reflected in certain productions which grant increasing degrees of autonomy to their audiences.

This paper seeks to create a comparable Ladder of Arts Participation by exploring concepts of autonomy, agency and tyranny in TEY productions centring on participation. It is worth noting at this point the objections raised by critics such as Claire Bishop to the application of Arnstein's Ladder to the arts. In particular, Bishop points out that it 'falls short of corresponding to the complexity of artistic gestures' (2012, 279), declaring that models of democracy inherently differ in society and in culture. She highlights the complex interplay between 'freedom and structure, control and agency' (2012, 267) in situations where artists curate audience experiences. When working with the youngest children, these tensions (freedom/

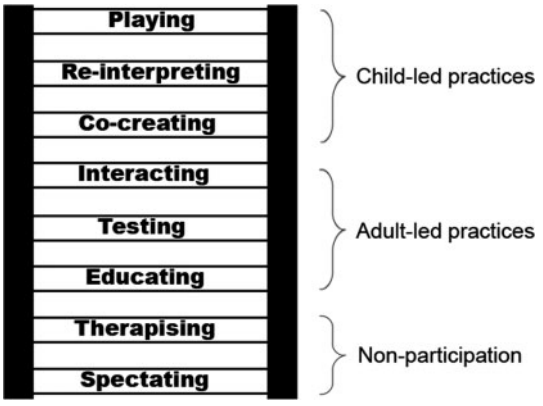

Figure 1. A ladder of arts participation for the very young.

restraint, influence/agency; being seen/being heard) are more explicit. Babies' and toddlers' tendencies towards physical interaction mean that objects will be sucked, grabbed, pulled and even torn apart, for example, whether desired by the artist or not. This may also be one reason for the absence of pre-schoolers from Roger Hart's development of Arnstein's ladder to examine children's participation, despite his claim that 'even in infancy, children discover the extent to which their own voices influence the course of events in their lives' (1992, 4).

Nonetheless, it may be possible to reformulate the participatory ladder if the primacy of the artist *as an adult* is challenged. 'Free' participation as outlined in Article 31 is perhaps only achievable if children are recognised as artists in their own right, capable of creating art and curating culture on their terms. This may mean challenging not only the hegemonic status of the theatre-maker as an elite possessor of skill but also the traditional mode of narrative drama as the supremely valid aesthetic. If it can be argued that children's play, unmediated by adults, can exhibit dramaturgical and theatrical legitimacy as coherently as professional theatre (see Guss 2012; Fletcher-Watson 2013), then a new hierarchy of participatory practice can be posited (Figure 1).

Manipulation ⇒ spectating

Spectatorship is inherently participatory, in the sense of being a social act carried out between at least two people. Without either one, the event could not occur. However, for audiences who do not yet understand the semiotics of theatre – sitting in seats, facing in one direction, watching other people and not joining in, staying quiet, suspending disbelief – traditional modes of performance may seem alienating. Without the acceptance of participatory impulses such as eye contact or verbal response, theatre can be unengaging for the very young.

It must be remembered that child-curated culture (meaning those activities selected by children, such as painting, choosing a story to be read or watching television) relies on a fluctuating tension between engagement and disengagement, determined by the child. Spaces and activities which do not permit self-directed engagement, such as a theatre auditorium where spectators may not come and go as they please, manipulate their audiences into adhering to adult norms of behaviour.

By contrast, a TEY production such as *Babydrama* (2006) does not explicitly allow physical participation in the action, but the babies attending (aged between 6 and 12 months) are free to move around the space, ignoring the performance if they wish (Fletcher-Watson et al., forthcoming). In addition, productions which encourage exploratory play on and around the stage after the performance, as is common in TEY, may be contributing to children's comprehension of the observed action, as they investigate the means by which drama is made. Thus, the shift might begin to be made from classroom-based theatre literacy to embodied art form knowledge.

Therapy ⇒ therapising

Play therapy has become increasingly popular in recent years, with a focus on attachment in early infancy (see e.g. Jennings 2010). Its corollary, drama therapy, tends to involve teenage participants or school-aged children, as verbal communication is a pre-requisite.

Forms of therapy for the very young always involve the presence of a caregiver, from pregnant mothers to adoptive parents. Therapeutic practices are therefore framed as the facilitation of adult participation in joint play, rather than unmediated play between children. The caregiver is almost always the primary participant, such as in Blooming Voices (Sellers 2013) where expectant mothers create lullabies for their children, or Conducted Improvisation with Musical Instruments (Gabriel 2011) where pregnant musicians improvise together as a bonding and confidence-boosting exercise. The aesthetic outcome, sung or instrumental, is designed to appeal to the foetus or newborn, but the therapeutic purpose is to support the adult. Therapy for babies and toddlers, who can now become physically involved, also tends to remain focused on adult participation, acknowledging the vital role played by a primary caregiver.

This is by no means an objection to arts therapy for early years: there is a strong case to be made for arts experiences aimed at expectant parents. The benefits to mental health and well-being of a calm, pleasant but stimulating environment, not to mention the social possibilities offered by sharing in an event with other future parents, should not be underestimated (Demecs, Fenwick, and Gamble 2011; Carolan et al. 2011). However, it must be recognised that participation by the child is not the aim.

Informing ⇒ educating

In Arnstein's original formulation, informing citizens of their rights or developments which may affect them is considered the first (lowest) form of true participation in democracy. It is symbolic of inclusion within social hierarchies, but is unlikely to affect the overall power structure. This is perhaps comparable to those productions which follow a traditional spectatorial model, but then provide information packs for teachers and parents to continue the performance experience outside the theatre. These packs can include games, suggestions for visual art activities, a plot synopsis, production images and soundtracks. A recent development is the creation of theatre-inspired digital apps, such as *White The App*, adapted from the TEY production *White* (2010). These products allow children to explore the world of the performance in a replayable dramaturgy, where scenes can be extended, re-ordered or skipped entirely (Fletcher-Watson 2014).

Children are thus encouraged to participate in cultural activities inspired by or derived from the original production, but their post-participation cannot affect the performance. Indeed, the theatre-maker may never know whether any child has continued to investigate the drama. Participation is severed from performance, to be configured in a discrete, often education-focused mode. The child's contribution is generally not considered to be theatrical, reinforcing their subordinate status.

Consultation ⇒ testing

Consulting citizens may not be a democratic act, but instead an incompetent attempt to transfer decision-making to the people (Lauwaert 2009, 121), for example by staging a referendum to avoid the perception of state imposition of a decision. However, consultation can have a positive impact on theatrical productions as part of a development process, as Hart has described in children's television: 'The project is designed and run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously' (1992, 12). TEY productions routinely use test audiences to assess the efficacy of routines or scenes, as in *Glouglou* (2003), where children and teachers contributed comments throughout rehearsals (Fletcher-Watson et al., forthcoming). Testing may therefore be an example of participation prior to performance. The responses of invited audiences guide and shape the end product, even if those audiences do not attend a fully realised performance. Nonetheless, it is obvious that participants cannot influence the production as it is unfolding in live performance, and thus participation remains incomplete.

Placation ⇒ interacting

TEY productions frequently contain interactive sequences as children are invited onstage to participate in a physical activity. This interactivity is generally restricted to the fulfilling of set tasks, with no wider agency to alter the terms of engagement, such as the gathering of fallen leaves in *Egg & Spoon* (2003). In addition, interactive moments may not permit all audience members to become involved, due to issues of space or availability of props. Instead, only a select few are welcomed onto the stage, privileging bolder children or those with assertive chaperones, as is commonly seen in commercial pantomimes and magic shows. This arguably mirrors the use of hand-picked representatives in civic development processes, whose presence is taken to characterise the entire community. Those who do take part appear to be fully participating (if not freely, as noted above), but for the remaining spectators, interactivity is a weaker form of involvement.

Partnership ⇒ co-creating

It is still rare for very young children to be invited to create a performance in partnership with adults. One example, *Princess and Ginger* (2007), was developed in a child-led process by 2- to 4-year olds, creating and editing possible plots, then role-playing the characters. Project leader Peter Wynne-Wilson describes the outcome: 'the groups … created a single story from which I created a draft script; my brief being to stay as faithful as possible to the desires and ideas of the young playmakers, in putting their story on stage' (Ball et al. 2007, 8). However, the final performance was fully scripted, not participatory. Co-creation is thus a more participatory negotiation than simple testing, as original ideas are generated and advanced by

young children, but the content of the performance cannot be altered in the moment. This is also distinct from adult-led models which may appear similar, such as *Monkey Bars* (2012), which restages children's verbatim dialogue to create an ironic commentary on adult mores – a businessman in a suit and tie singing about jelly, for example.

By contrast, in *Claytime* (2007) two performers improvise stories drawn from children's suggestions, moulding characters and landscapes before the audience's eyes from a large mound of clay. After the performance, the audience, aged 3 years and over, are invited to come forward and model their own objects and people, and the assembled 'cast' are commemorated in a photograph. The boldest (or oldest) child may well provide the first suggestion, but a clamour of voices soon fills in every detail: the protagonist's name, history and motivation are agreed in a verbal tussle where a performer often acts as referee as much as storyteller. The challenges of co-creating performances with very young children should not be underestimated, but control may be imposed by careful planning in advance and on-going negotiation: 'the artist relies upon the participants' creative exploitation of the situation that he/she offers – just as participants require the artist's cue and direction' (Bishop 2012, 279). This planning will ensure for these vulnerable audiences that 'such a formative experience does not become "another act of betrayal"' (Knight 2011, 58).

Delegated power ⇒ re-interpreting

Co-created productions tend to fulfil critical expectations of theatre, containing narrative arcs, characters and dialogue. More complex and controversial are those productions which allow greater agency to their participants, and which may do without these tenets of traditional drama. Some TEY productions present a 'dramaturgy … composed of a series of short actions or happenings' (Reiniger 2011, 2), which has been defined as post-dramatic (Fletcher-Watson 2013). Here, children are free to act within controlled limits of object, zone and time. In *Le jardin du possible* (2002), toddlers enter a space to discover spot-lit piles of natural materials – leaves, stones, sand and sticks. They are encouraged by a single performer to create and destroy new shapes in an autonomous, spontaneous interplay. Drama's conventional sensory hierarchy, where sound and sight take precedence over touch and smell, is reversed (Pinkert 2009, 65), just as the actions of the child participant are elevated above those of the adult performer (Figure 2).

As Liam Gillick has said of his relational art, 'Without people, it's not art – it's something else – stuff in a room' (quoted in Bishop 2012, 61) and the same applies to *Le jardin du possible*. Without participation, the artwork cannot exist. *Oogly Boogly* (2003) goes further, dispensing with 'stuff' entirely: babies aged 12- to 18-months old lead an entirely self-directed form of proto-dance within an inflatable tent, their every move mirrored by adult performers. Here, caregivers may not participate, ceding the stage to their children, while adult artists may only copy the flexions and expressions of the babies. The performance is thus an unpredictable 'byproduct of participation' (Brown, Novak-Leonard, and Gilbride 2011, 15). Agency is ostensibly free in this delegated power structure, although rationed by time constraints and fixed in place – if a child leaves the tent, the performance will not continue outside (Figure 3).

LicketyLeap (2008) provides an innovative model of participation perhaps more closely related to conventional children's theatre. This immersive production is

Figure 2. *Le jardin du possible* (2002). Performer Benoît Sicat. Image by Nicolas Camus.

staged not only in traditional spaces but also within nurseries in areas of multiple deprivation, as an early intervention programme. As part of the intervention, the actor-pedagogues return a week later to invite the children to discuss the story and expand their ownership of the narrative through a child-led recreation of the production, reflective art activities, observing a recording of themselves taking part and presenting their parents with a description of the performance to encourage further play at home. This process combines elements spanning the Ladder, including spectating (watching themselves on video), therapising (as parents are encouraged to join in, by watching the recording or assisting with further play), educating (via the

Figure 3. *Oogly Boogly* (2003). Performer Eeva Maria. Image by Benedict Johnson.

Figure 4. *LicketyLeap* (2008). © Licketyspit Theatre Company – children participating in Licketyspit's immersive theatre project, *LicketyLeap*, together with actor pedagogue Hannah Donaldson. Image by Borja Prada Garcia.

provision of activities to be continued at nursery or at home), interacting (in the original performance) and co-creating (as the children negotiate a recreation of the performance from memory). However, the combination of these elements is intended to create equality between participants and artists (Radcliffe 2013), not to place children above artists in the creative hierarchy (Figure 4).

Citizen control ⇒ playing

As noted above, the fullest participation promised in Article 31 is perhaps only achievable when children's inherent artistic and imaginative abilities are recognised publicly. Instead of participating in adult-designed performance, the child may create autonomous dramatically satisfying performances, for themselves and others to enjoy. Faith Gabrielle Guss has filmed and analysed children's play sessions 'as if they were theatre productions' (2012, 179). She observed a child exploring the drama of the Big Bad Wolf, entirely self-directed and unsupervised, encouraging others to

participate in her creation: what if the Big Bad Wolf from *Little Red Riding Hood* and *The Three Little Pigs* was the same creature, could not be killed, and kept coming back in new stories? How would you defeat him?

Three-year-old Tessa's solution is for all the fairytale protagonists to band together – pigs, goats, little girls and all – producing 'a non-linear narrative … in which the wolf is captured, punished and slain in many variations' (182). Traditional molecular story forms are destroyed and rebuilt constantly, and the piece has no neat, tasteful resolution, as an adult might choose – she 'repeatedly leaves her episodes at the climax, with no future harmony established' (186). For Tessa and her fellow participants, the experience is engaging, satisfying and a source of pride.

The claim that free play can be considered theatre is obviously contentious, but it remains the closest comparator to Arnstein's category of citizen control, where the participant becomes the power-holder, subordinate to no one. As scholars have noted, 'TEY privileges the neophyte' (Fletcher-Watson 2013, 18) because it rejects the need for knowledge of theatrical semiotics to gain access, focusing instead on accommodating the needs and abilities of young children. Free play or productions such as *Multicoloured Blocks from Space* (2012), which create environments without plot or actors for children to explore and play in as they wish, may appear to exist beyond accepted theatrical boundaries – 'theatre-but-not-theatre', as Roger Bedard (2003, 98) has described the entire genre of children's theatre – but they can also be said to be the most truly participatory experiences.

Play is children's culture. It is how they understand and interrogate the adult world. 'Playing at theatre' might then be termed 'playing as theatre'. Reason argues that 'theatre for children is never allowed to be simply for the sake of being. Instead, it is always invested with various other qualities, purposes and utilitarian functions whereby the experiencing of theatre will somehow do good to the children concerned' (2010, 18) and it may be fruitful for scholars to consider free play in the same terms.

Conclusions

Article 31 seeks to empower children of all ages, but participation in culture is problematised when power rests with adults, be they artist, critic or parent. Free and full participation may be compromised by perceptions of tyranny or inferiority, even in situations where artists seek to promote a child-led approach. The conventional view of the child as not yet worthy of adult rights ('seen and not heard'), or as the necessary recipient of instrumentalist policies designed to develop them into an adult, disenfranchises the very young. For children as citizens, the right to participate 'freely' and 'fully' in the arts can be instead seen as an end in itself.

As a route away from tyranny, it is proposed that theatrical power structures can be created which grant agency to their participants to engage on their own terms. This includes the ability to withdraw from participation at will, to take control of the theatrical event if desired, and to have the child's innate imaginative capability formally recognised as comparable to that of an adult. Creating such structures therefore requires a bold step: 'an explicit commitment on the part of adults to share their power; that is, to give some of it away' (Shier 2001, 115).

This paper does not aim to create a hierarchy of virtue – artists are driven by aesthetics as much as utility, and cannot be expected to compromise their practice in

an effort to emancipate child spectators. However, the Ladder of Arts Participation for the Very Young offered above may provide a new means for scholarly engagement with the diversity and ingenuity of contemporary TEY.

Funding

This research is supported by the ESRC Capacity Building Cluster, 'Capitalising on Creativity', [grant number #RES 187-24-0014].

Keywords: Theatre for Early Years; TEY; participation; article 31

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