Chapter 10

Exploring constructions of children's identity and childhood in the global South from a policy perspective

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This chapter presents a critical discussion of constructions of childhood and children's identity in the global South from a policy perspective. In recent years, care and education of young children from birth to primary schooling have become central in the field of policy and politics. Drawing on findings from a systematic review of early childhood and peacebuilding policies and literature in the East Asia and Asia Pacific region, the discussion examines the notion of 'childhood' as a social and cultural construct informing our understanding of children and their identity. The research showed placing children at the centre of policy revealed opportunities for transformative change in the promotion of social cohesion and equality. The chapter argues for the centrality of recognising the important role and agency of children in constructing and shaping their own identities in the society in which they live.

Introduction: Constructions of childhood and children's identity from a policy perspective

The construction of childhood and children's identity is a timely and poignant area of focus. There is established scholarship which theorises children's identity formation in various contexts relating to gender, class, ethnicity, community affiliation and other formative categories (Erikson, 1968; Helms, 1990; Corsaro, 2005; Rogoff, 2003). There is also research which shows the extent to which children's roles and identity in society are mediated through wider social, cultural and policy discourses (St John, 2014; Dale, O'Brien, & St John 2011;

Kelley, 2006; Ang & Oliver, 2016). Additionally, there is increasing public policy attention on children and early childhood in the global context. In the seminal anthology Early Childhood Policy (Dalli, Miller, Cameron, & Barbour, 2017), scholars have highlighted the substantive focus on early childhood care and education both in the global South as well as North[1], and the stepped advocacy driven by supranational organisations in influencing development of macro-policies and global discourses promoting the prioritisation of young children.

It is important that discussions around children and children's identity are informed by existing conceptualisation of how children are constructed and positioned in diverse discourses in political and policy domains. Researchers have argued that children and the concept of childhood are fundamentally implicated in the daily practices and policy frameworks of society which in turn gives rise to the myriad ways in which notions of "the child" are constructed (James & James, 2004; Woodrow & Press, 2007). This entails critically analysing the power discourses informing our understanding of how children are positioned from a policy perspective. Kelly (2006) for instance, highlights the role of children as key stakeholders in policy development and the responsibility of governments in implementing 'policies which are child-specific or have particular impacts on children.' (p.37) Emphasising the central role of children, St John (2014) contends that "[e]very policy would be subject to scrutiny as to whether it infringes these precious rights of childhood." (p.1014). It is therefore important that pertinent questions are raised as to how children are positioned in discourse, for instance whether they are represented as passive and vulnerable subjects whose rights and voices are expressed primarily through adults, or as active social actors with rights to their own agency to

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[1] The North–South divide is commonly used to differentiate between the two global regions broadly considered as a socio-economic and political regional divide. The North is generally defined as the richer, more developed regions in the West (including the United States and Europe) and the South encompassing the less rich, less developed regions such as Africa and other developing countries such as (perhaps include the countries referred to in this chapter? I felt like some kind of defining region would have been helpful to set up for the rest of the chapter).

participate in society. The central argument here is that it is only through the interrogation of prevailing global rhetoric and policy discourses that the development of programs and services that support children's care and education can be formulated as if children mattered (St John, 2014).

From a policy perspective, examining children's role and identity is all the more pertinent in the rapidly evolving social and political contexts of the global South where national policy frameworks, or the lack of, can profoundly affect the accessibility and availability of services that are essential for children not just to survive, but thrive. Reports from supranational organisations indicate many countries in the global South have begun to develop key social sector policies pertaining to the promotion of health, education, social protection and welfare (OECD, 2012; 2013; UNESCO, 2015). What is unknown, however, is the degree to which these policies address the importance of early childhood or young children at all. This dynamic policy landscape therefore offers compelling rationale to build an evidence-base to better understand how children's roles and identity are constructed in the wider policy and global discourse.

Prioritising early childhood in the global South

The social and economic case for prioritising young children and 'early childhood development' (ECD), as the term is commonly used in the global discourse, is well-evidenced. The term ECD used in this chapter is in keeping with the preferred terminology employed by the United Nations and other supranational organisations to denote the stage of human development from prenatal to 8 years of age. The terminology also incorporates interrelated domains of young children's ecological environment, including the most proximal contexts such as the home and family, to the more distal contexts such as the community and policy

milieu (UNICEF, 2014). The emphasis on development makes reference to a holistic "whole child" approach in supporting children's basic needs in health, nutrition, education, social protection and cognitive development.

A series of studies published in The Lancet shows investments in ECD yield substantially more returns when compared to equivalent investments made at later stages in life (Grantham-McGregor et.al., 2007; Engle, Fernald, Alderman, Behrman, O'Gara, Yousafzai, Cabral de Mello, Hidrobo, Ulkuer, Ertem, Iltus, & Global Child Development Steering Group, 2011). 2011). It is estimated up to 50% increase in preschool enrolment for instance, in every low-income and middle-income country, can potentially generate benefits of around USD $33·7 billion (Engle et. al., 2011). Additionally, scientific advances in neuroscience in the last decade have led to considerable knowledge gains. Research indicates it is during these earliest years in the early childhood phase that the foundations are laid for increased early learning and later educational achievement (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Thomas & Johnson, 2008). The evidence shows integrated interventions that target the "whole child" rather than just one area of development (Engle et al, 2011; Chan, 2013), and underpinned by coherent policies (The World Bank, 2011; Ang & Oliver, 2015) in countries with an established tradition of community-led ECD initiatives (Tanner, Candland & Odden, 2015) revealed benefits in improving children's developmental outcomes. It is therefore important that effective ECD policies encompass the multidimensional factors influencing young children's lives - including early care and education, as well as child and maternal health, and nutrition interventions, which are designed to promote development.

The evidence-base is therefore unequivocal that the prioritisation of young children has important economic and social implications. The importance of ECD is also widely

acknowledged by the international community as a transformative social agenda. For the first time in the history of the United Nations' sustainable development goals, ECD is included as a key global target (Goal 4.2) (United Nations, 2015). Central to the global discourse on early childhood, therefore, is the importance of placing children at the centre-stage of policy and the development of coherent policies in driving effective care and education for the benefit of all young children. This chapter outlines the case for prioritising children from a policy perspective, as exemplified through the findings of a funded international study of ECD and peacebuilding in the East Asia and Asia Pacific region.

The study: A brief overview

Informed by the context discussed above, it is apparent the role of young children is centrally positioned in the global discourse. The study aimed to critically examine the multi-dimensions of children's role as represented in the global advocacy and policy discourses, through a systematic review of existing policy and research literature derived from targeted secondary databases. It examined the notion of 'childhood' as a social and cultural construct, and children's roles and identities within these multiple discourses. The methods entailed systematic searching and screening of published literature, underpinned by rigorous data analysis and consultations with key stakeholders in international non-government organisations (INGO). The study was supported by a specialist review software, the (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information) EPPI-Reviewer 4 tool, an online research application used specifically for systematic reviews. The review entailed several steps in searching and identifying relevant literature for review: a database search, data extraction, research analysis and synthesis of findings. A systematic search of online databases was conducted using a standard protocol to capture literature from a range of databases - the British Education Index

(BEI), ERIC (Education and Resources in Education Index) and the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS).

A combination of search terms or descriptors was used to capture literature that addresses the key concepts of 'childhood', 'children' and 'East Asia'. The results uncovered a body of scholarship and policy documents which were subsequently collated in the EPPI-Reviewer tool. A total of 1,126 items were retrieved from the search, out of which 152 items were identified as duplicates where they were marked with a score of 1 and considered an 'exact match 100%'. After removing duplicate items, a final list of 974 items were screened and coded, from which 196 items were eventually included based on their title and abstracts. A standardised coding tool was applied in the EPPI- Reviewer 4 to screen and code the data. An in-depth analysis of the final items retrieved formed the basis of the primary data, which in turn contributed to the findings and an emerging conceptual framework of how children are positioned in discourse in the East Asia and Asian region.

Problematising children's identity: Traversing conceptual boundaries in the global discourse of early childhood

Findings highlighted the centrality of children's role and identity as active agents not only in the promotion of children's rights but in the advocacy of a wider social justice agenda. The study showed multiple interpretations of how children and childhood are conceptualised in existing research and policy discourses. It encapsulated multi-disciplinary perspectives around children and childhoods, drawn from literature across a range of disciplines in anthropology, sociology, developmental psychology, and philosophy, as well as country-level policy documents and reports from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). The

review revealed not only the sociocultural, policy and conceptual constructs of "childhood", but simultaneously dissonance in the way children and childhood are portrayed and positioned.

Findings revealed a variety of markers or descriptors used to frame different analyses of childhood as employed by stakeholder groups - governments, policymakers, practitioners, researchers, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), each with a vested interest in children and families, and where the terms 'children' and 'childhood' are often evoked as a powerful force of advocacy (OECD, 2012; UNESCO, 2013). Supra-international organisations such as The World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF and the United Nations are widely known to have driven a consistent campaign of early childhood advocacy globally. The descriptors 'children' and 'childhoods' are used prevalently in the rhetoric of global advocacy, although at times with vague consensus as to the precise nature of the concepts and differentiations in their usage. For instance, a variety of terminology is used to encapsulate the importance of children's care and education. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006; 2012) uses the term early childhood education and care (ECEC) to encompass all services including health, education and general well-being for children from birth to compulsory schooling age. The World Bank (2011) tends to use ECD to describe the multidimensional, interrelated domains of children's development including the physical, cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional aspects, while the United Nations and its related agencies often use the term ECD and early childhood care and education (ECCE) interchangeably to refer to the overall environment related to children's lives and education including maternal health, child health and protection (UN 2003; UNICEF 2009). A similar concept of early childhood is supported by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2007) which suggests that the notion of childhood, at its core, encompasses the wellbeing and holistic welfare of children including a full range of

provisions such as the 'services and programmes that support children's survival, growth, development and learning – encompassing health, nutrition and hygiene, and the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development – from birth to entry into primary school' (UNESCO, 2013: 404).

It could be argued that the notion of childhood and with it, children's identity, therefore becomes a transdisciplinary and travelling concept among supra-national organisations and advocacy groups. Bal (2002) encapsulates the idea of travelling concepts as not fixed but shifting as they traverse time and place:

> Concepts are the tools of intersubjectivity: They facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language. But concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach and operational value differ. (13)

Such a conceptual understanding offers a useful framework of constructing a model for understanding concepts of children's identity as not static, but produced and reproduced through a process of social and historical evolution. For example, terms such as 'early childhood care and education' (ECCE), 'early childhood care and development' (ECCD), and ECDthat are used prolifically by supranational organisations, stem from differing ideological, cultural and historical factors which in turn, influence the way we construct our ideas about children and childhood. The prevalent use of these terminologies in influencing advocacy debates around children's care and education has been pivotal in championing the profile of children and families as a key national and international agenda. Despite the prolific rhetoric,

however, it could also be argued that the positioning of children and 'childhood' is less clear-cut than it seems, and is, at times, arbitrary.

In material terms, the phrase 'childhood' as a distinct phase of human development varies considerably across countries. For instance, the UNESCO Education for All Global Report 2013-14 (UNESCO, 2013) provides a reference map of age group indicators which denote 'early childhood care and education (ECCE)' globally; a selection of which is presented here:

Country or territory	Age Group 2011	Country or territory	Age Group 2011	Country or territory	Age Group 2011
Portugal	3-5	Papua New Guinea	6-6	**Arab States**	
San Marino[2,3]	3-5	Philippines	5-5	Algeria	5-5
Spain	3-5	Republic of Korea	3-5	Bahrain[1]	3-5
Sweden	3-6	Samoa	3-4	Djibouti	4-5
Switzerland	5-6	Singapore	3-5	Egypt	4-5
United Kingdom	3-4	Solomon Islands	3-5	Iraq	4-5
United States	3-5	Thailand	3-5	Jordan	4-5
South and West Asia		Timor-Leste	4-5	Kuwait[1]	4-5
Afghanistan	3-6	Tokelau[2]	3-4	Lebanon	3-5
Bangladesh[7]	3-5	Tonga	3-4	Libya	4-5
Bhutan	4-5	Tuvalu[2]	3-5	Mauritania	3-5
		Vanuatu	3-5	Morocco	4-5

TABLE 1: Focus age groups

(Source: UNESCO 2013, Table 3B Early Childhood Care and Education: Education pp332-336)

A cursory glance at the table shows what is defined as 'early childhood' may constitute a longer phase in some countries compared to others, and the differences in age range vary from three to five years, three to six, and five to six years. The considerable inconsistencies of representing 'childhood' as a specific age group differs from one country to the next, creates social boundaries that have a powerful effect on children's daily lives and the way they are perceived in reality as well as in discourse. As James and Prout (2015) contend, time and temporality are significant in shaping the concept of 'childhood' as a particular periodization of the human life-

course; this differs across communities and societies. The table shows across countries and regions, there is no 'global norm' or universally-defined measurement of childhood. These variations in categorisations compel us to challenge and re-examine our own often taken-for granted definitions and conceptual boundaries of how the term is constituted, and how this might impact on identity.

At a more abstract level, a prevalent discourse of 'early childhood' as exemplified through the study, is embodied in the way the term is evoked through various representations of children in the rhetoric of global advocacy. The positioning of children is often presented as visionary and exemplified by 'the ideal childhood envisioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.' (UNICEF, 2006: 41). Within this discourse, the status of childhood is encapsulated in a globalised vision of 'a world of peace, equity, tolerance, security, freedom, respect for the environment and shared responsibility' (UNICEF, 2006: 85) where 'no child is excluded or invisible.' (85). The visionary rhetoric is also often couched within a rights-based discourse driven ostensibly by the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989). It is underpinned by optimism for the future that 'one day all children will enjoy a childhood with full respect for their rights, their basic needs provided for, protected from violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and discrimination, and empowered to participate meaningfully in all decisions that affect their lives' (UNICEF, 2006: 3). While arguably, this visionary discourse offers much needed leverage in elevating the importance of children onto the international political stage, especially for those living in conflict or adverse conditions, it positions children essentially as vulnerable beings, needing protection, and, in some contexts, with limited agency. Invariably, such a discourse also brings into question the incongruence of framing children as 'rights-bearing individuals' on the one hand, and subjects of vulnerability needing care and protection on the other. It raises debates about how childhood is defined, what

is meant by 'children's rights', how this is construed in society and what this means in practice, particularly in communities where a collective approach to rights through social and kinship ties might be prioritised over individual rights (Franklin 2002). There is a danger, then, that the identity of children as a homogenous group of individuals of national and global concern presents a rather simplistic representation of childhood. This representation may mask the everyday realities of children in the majority world in the global South who live in very diverse social, economic and cultural contexts; often in stark contrast to the minority industrialised countries in the global North.

Paradoxically, the concept of early childhood is also often invoked as an instrumental means for the wider benefit of society. The UNESCO Global Monitoring report asserts, 'The foundations set in the first thousand days of a child's life, from conception to the second birthday, are critical for future well-being' (UNESCO, 2013: 1). The OECD states that:

> early childhood education and care (ECEC) brings a wide range of benefits- better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; and better social and economic development for society at large (OECD 2012, p.9).

The notion of 'childhood' in this discourse, takes on an instrumental purpose in the drive towards consolidating political will and strategically aligning 'early childhood' as a priority area for government investment. It contributes to the idea that social transformation is best addressed by improving children's educational outcomes and well-being. It could be argued that this utilitarian model of 'childhood' is preoccupied with the outputs of care and education

in a 'technological' discourse, as children and their relationship with society are constructed in particular instrumental ways.

As such, the construction of children's identity remains problematic, as the term is embroiled in relations of power and knowledge in the way children and childhood are conceptualised by wider society. Its usage in dominant discourses can often serve to conceal the hegemonic relations inscribed in its very conceptualisation. Reflecting critically on the global status of early childhood also highlights tensions in our own adult constructions of children's place in the world, between our social concern for the development of society at large, and for children's own interests and how their future capacities as citizens and individuals can be best served. The study showed there is broad but nonetheless difficult consensus to the question of how 'early childhood' is defined. Acknowledging these limitations is important, as it evokes debate and breaks new ground by bringing into sharper focus different 'lenses' of viewing children's lives and experiences and represents a significant step towards a multi-dimensional conceptualisation of 'childhood'.

Policy constructions of children and childhood

Importantly, the study raised pertinent reflections on how our understanding of children and childhood needs to take into account children in their wider sociocultural and macropolicy environment. The review of policy literature showed the concept of childhood functions differently in geographically-dispersed communities and temporalities and is imbued with different traditions and social mores. Children's identity, and what constitutes childhood, are very much dependent on social, political and historical contexts that vary from one population to another. In the East Asia country of Myanmar, for instance, children's role and identity are closely associated with the country's cultural, historical and political legacy as a society that

has only in the last decade emerged from a period of militant rule to a new democratic parliamentary-based government. The national-level policy on Early Childhood Care and Development (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014) strongly emphasises the importance of 'culturally and linguistically appropriate preschool education' (5). 'Childhood' in the Myanmar context is perceived as a crucial stage in (re)building the foundations for future society, in the fostering of social cohesion among minority ethnic groups through the use of the local languages in early childhood and primary schooling. The policy states:

> Transition activities, kindergarten and early primary grade instruction will be provided in the mother tongue of the children as soon as it is possible to do so. Many more persons from minority ethnic groups need to be trained as teachers, and learning materials must be prepared in local languages. Mother tongue usage will help to ensure children will understand what they are learning, will perform better in school, and will not drop out of school or repeat grades. (Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2014, p.116)

In Sri Lanka, 'childhood' refers to children from birth to five years, where the period of 'ECCD' is categorised into two distinct phases: 0 to 3 years as the stage of infancy, and 4 to 5 years as the stage of preschool education. As a country with a history of conflict, the nation has emerged over the years as an independent state in a transition towards independence with its own distinct culture and identity. This is reflected in its national policy for children where notably, there is strong emphasis on building a national identity; the overall goal of education is to contribute to 'nation building and the establishment of a Sri Lankan identity through the promotion of national cohesion, national integrity, national unity, …' (Ministry of Education 2013: 19). The notion of 'childhood' in this context is constructed in a specific sociohistorical context and at a policy level, as a medium for building a cohesive society and national identity

in a post-conflict state. The documents reviewed shows that 'childhood' is contextualised in a particular temporality which shapes children's role and identity as citizens first and foremost, then individuals in society.

In Bangladesh, the notion of childhood or ECD is a fairly recent phenomenon, precipitated in-part through the interventions of non-government organisations (NGOs) and development partners from the global North working in the country in international development. As the country's National Plan of Action for Children (2004) endorsed by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs states, 'ECD is a new concept' that has emerged as a result of 'initiatives taken by the Government, NGOs and development partners.' (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2004: 28). In this discourse, children are positioned first and foremost as a vital resource for the wider benefit of society, and their role is to contribute to building 'social capital' for the family and community. This is particularly the case as traditionally, in Bangladesh, the extended family and their community are the 'main providers of early childhood' (27). The policy states, 'Children are the greatest asset of our country. We should provide them proper environment for blossoming to their full potentials.' (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2004: v). In this discourse, 'early childhood' is perceived not only as a means of improving children's lives, but as a way of creating and strengthening the support for families and the community. Contrary to the construct commonly depicted in dominant 'Western' discourses of the child as an individual and the emphasis on preparing children to develop as individuals (Cannella and Viruru 2004), the role of 'childhood' in the context of Bangladesh is on the child as an integral part of the family, and the importance of providing 'on-going support to the reintegrated child and family' (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2004: 82). How children are

constructed in national policy has a direct impact on their roles in the family, community and society, thus rendering the conceptualisation of 'childhood' a potentially political undertaking. The juxtaposition of children as primary contributors to the family on one hand and vulnerable beings needing protection on the other, as set out in some of the international literature, suggests there is potential for national policy discourses to place competing demands upon children in terms of their roles and positioning in society.

The wide range of global and policy discourses emerging from the review strongly challenge normalising or universalising ideas of childhood. An important implication from the research is that there is no universal conceptualisation of "the child" and that the concept of 'childhood' must be defined in its specific context. (Prout and James 1997; James and James 2008). Indeed, the idea of childhood itself has become a topic of scrutiny as researchers explore how children and their identity are constructed in discourses and lived experiences. Research by anthropologists such as the work of Corsaro (2005), Hedges, Cullen & Jordan (2011) for instance, shows that children's development and identity are mediated through 'funds of knowledge' from the distinct formal and informal experiences that shape children's everyday lives, and that the concept of 'early childhood' is marked by sociocultural difference and diversity. Similarly, established scholarship by researchers such as Carsaro (2005), Rogoff (2003), Prout and James (1997), González et. al (2005), Moll et al (1992), LeVine and New (2008) have collectively explored the complex interplay of the macro social and cultural influences which shape our understanding of children and childhoods. Montgomery (2009) argues that the array of sociological and ethnographic evidence has exemplified 'quite how diverse and elastic a concept childhood can be' (3). Comparative research regarding children across cultures indicates that the concept of early childhood needs to be contextualised and reformulated from one society to another.

Scholars engaged in research around children and childhoods have also positioned their work within a sociologically oriented, inter-disciplinary theoretical grounding that is concerned first and foremost with how children are situated in existing social and cultural structures. Tobin (2011) argues that all societies have specific cultural knowledge, beliefs and practices about children, their learning and their development, which are endangered, and in danger of being under-valued in the intense climate of globalisation of childhood practices. Katz's (2004) longitudinal study of the lives of Sudanese children in rural Sudan and the juxtaposition with children growing up in New York City exposes the vastly different and complex "topographies" (xiii) of childhood experiences. Katz's book Growing Up Global (2004) highlights how cultural forms and practices such as schooling, learning, children's roles and responsibilities "travel" across localities and each society presents a dimension of childhood that is divergent from any other but remains attuned to the local community. LeVine & New's (2008) study of anthropology and child development provides a helpful cross-cultural framework that is ethnographically informed to demonstrate the different ways childhood is conceived in diverse societies of the world. Broadening our understanding of children, their identity and how they are positioned in the world, can remind us that amidst the strong rhetoric of universal global advocacy, there is a need to reclaim and locate a notion of childhood informed by children's immediate everyday surroundings, in their local contexts and shaped by their active participation within the family, community and society. Engaging with the concept of children and childhood therefore problematises the globalisation of 'childhood' as a universal, Western construct, and offers a particular way of knowing about children, sometimes at the expense of more local and indigenous understandings of childhoods. It reminds us of the importance of valuing childhood as a "culture of nested identities" (Bronfenbrenner 1995) that is influenced by cultural-specific norms and practices, and which

actively engages the complex interplay of identities and cultures that shape children's experiences.

The study showed the importance of assuming a "child-centric lens" through raising the visibility of children and positioning them as policy actors rather than passive subjects in policy discourse. As Dahlberg states, critical analysis of policies is important to challenge 'the dominant, discursive regimes' (Dahlberg, 2000. p.14). The implications for policy development is therefore the importance of raising pertinent questions as to how children, their roles and identity are constructed in policy, and whether there are fundamental injustices in our policies for children that we have come to accept as status quo with little question or resistance. Are we guilty of normalising a policy direction that has been to the detriment of the most disadvantaged children?

Conclusion

The discussion here is informed by a subset of a larger funded study on a systematic review of early childhood policies and literature in the global South. The study showed that attempts to construct a universal definition of children's identity and childhood remains elusive. Rather, the notion of 'childhood' and 'the child' is multi-dimensional and at times paradoxical. The task ahead then, is to extend our interrogation of policy and global discourses of childhood, and to expand the evidence base of the different ways children and their identity are constructed. In doing so, there remains key questions for us all to consider - how are children featured in our policies, if at all? and if we truly believe that children are competent, active citizens of society, what opportunities are there to have their voices heard?

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