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Conceptualising children and young people's participation: examining vulnerability, social accountability and co-production

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Abstract

Children and young people's participation in collective decision-making has become a popular policy and practice concern. Yet challenges persist, such as tokenism, limited impact and unsustainability. This article examines ways to address these challenges and realise children and young people's participation, particularly in child protection contexts. Conceptually, the article investigates three popular ideas – vulnerability, social accountability and co-production. Each idea potentially suggests revised and more emancipatory relationships between the State and service users. Practically, the article matches these ideas to examples of children and young people's participation. The article concludes that claims to vulnerability's universality are persuasive; however, conceptualisations fail to address adult power. Social accountability addresses power, but insufficiently addresses the current challenges of participation. Co-production has the most potential, with participation examples that have been meaningful, effective and sustainable.

Keywords: children; participation; rights; child protection; social accountability; vulnerability; coproduction

Introduction

Children and young people's participation has become an ever-more popular policy demand and practices have multiplied. This growth has been catalysed by the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its enhanced recognition of children's rights to participate. A host of activities seek to involve children and young people at local, national and international levels, from children's clubs in Nepal[ii] to delegations to the United Nations.[iii] Yet challenges remain stubbornly persistent, such as tokenism, limited impact on decision-making and lack of sustainability.[iv]

If such challenges are faced by children and young people's participation generally, they can be even more acute in child protection. Child protection responses are frequently in contexts of crisis, where concerns about children and young people's vulnerability dominate.[v] This leads to adults closing off opportunities for children and young people to participate. There is no consensus on child protection's definition. Child protection can be more narrowly defined, focusing on state intervention in families' lives due to professionals' concerns for the children and young people.[vi] Child protection can be more widely defined, such as UNICEF's reference to 'preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children - including commercial sexual exploitation, trafficking, child labour and harmful traditional practices, such as female genital mutilation/cutting and child marriage'.[vii] Whether narrow or wider, such definitions are united by at least two aspects. First, definitions frequently do not address structural contexts that harm children and young people – such as enhancing community resilience to natural disasters – but focus on improving or changing interpersonal relationships – whether within the family or with other exploitative adults. Second, professionals tend to determine whether there is a child protection concern, rather than children and young people. Thus the focus moves to *adult* definitions and *adult* actions, prevention and protection, rather than children and young people's participation in identifying their own concerns and solutions.

This article explores ways to realise children and young people's participation in collective-decision making, within child protection. With the challenges for children and young people's participation remarkably consistent across cultures and places, and particularly acute when adults are concerned about child protection, this article seeks new ways of understanding children and young people's participation and thus, potentially, of practice. Conceptually, the article examines three popular ideas – vulnerability, social accountability and co-production – which claim to be emancipatory in their own respective literatures. All seek to transform relationships between the State, services and 'service users', with positive results. Practically, the article illustrates the conceptual discussion with examples of children and young people's participation in child protection contexts and particularly ones that seek to influence national decision-making. Examples are used from Majority and Minority World[viii] contexts, following the advantages of learning across contexts globally.[ix] The article begins by previewing the concept and practices of children and young people's participation, then considering each idea's potential in turn, followed by a discussion and conclusion comparing the advantages of the three ideas conceptually and practically.

Children and young people's participation

The CRC supported a renewed interest globally in children and young people's participation in matters that affect them. A range of CRC articles can be grouped together as 'participation' rights, including Article 12 (a child's views being given due weight in matters affecting the child), Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article 15 (freedom of association and peaceful assembly) and Article 17 (access to information). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises Article 12 as a general principle applying to all measures

adopted by States Parties to implement the CRC.[x] While the word 'participation' is not itself mentioned in the CRC, the Committee refers to participation directly in its 2009 General Comment on Article 12:

> This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.[xi]

The definition emphasises relationships and respect, with reciprocal information-sharing and dialogue. Children and young people should receive feedback, to learn how their views have been considered, and the definition presumes that children and young people's views should be taken into account and shape outcomes.

Such elements address many of the criticisms of participation 'in practice'. While engaging methods have proliferated, when involving children and young people, children and young people's views all too often fail to have a discernible impact on decision-making. Children and young people can be consulted far too late within a process of policy review or creation, so that they have limited influence on agendas and too little time to respond. Even if they do contribute their views, feedback is missing: they do not know if their views have influenced decision making and the rationale thereof. Some children and young people are overwhelmed with consultation requests, while others are never asked. Participation activities are frequently dismissed as not being representative of children and young people, whether in a democratic sense (can this young person legitimately represent other children and young people?) or a statistical one (can these young people's views be generalised to the broader population of children and young people?). Adult structures for decision-making frequently exclude children and young people; adult decision-makers often extract information from children and young people rather than engage them in dialogue. Even examples of

participation activities that do address such criticisms struggle for sustainability, as frequently participation work is reliant on short-term funding, with changing demands and expectations. These criticisms remain remarkably consistent, across the literature and contexts.[xii]

These criticisms are particularly salient for child protection. Some children and young people risk being 'over-consulted' because of their visibility – e.g. children and young people looked after by the State, in the UK – while others risk not being involved at all because they are considered too vulnerable – e.g. young children in conflict situations.[xiii] International child protection initiatives are often highly reliant on grant funding from national governments or philanthropic organisations, which have their own changing agendas and accountability requirements. Adult structures may resist 'hearing' certain groups of children and young people, who are perceived as threatening to public order (such as 'street children') or to traditional conceptions of childhood (e.g. 'child soldiers'[xiv] or children involved in sex work[xv]). Children and young people's views on what they need or is needed may differ from adults'; this can be challenging for adults, when they perceive such views as too risky or dangerous. Thus, child protection policy, systems and practices can find it especially difficult to accept children and young people's participation, let alone ensure such participation is meaningful, effective and sustainable.

Addressing challenges to children and young people's participation with three concepts

How can these challenges be met and new avenues identified? This article looks to three concepts that have been popularised in different academic areas and policy work, which claim to provide fresh perspectives. First, the article will consider the surge in

philosophical and legal interest in 'vulnerability', as a universal concept that provides new perspectives on the State's role and human rights. Reclaiming this concept could provide greater space for children and young people's participation. Second, on the more practical policy side, international development discourses increasingly refer to 'social accountability', to address inequity and ensure change. Third, co-production has become popular in policy and research literatures. Originally coined to describe and promote services users' involvement in their own service delivery, it has been picked up in additional ways to encourage greater collaboration in knowledge production. None of the three concepts are particular to children but have been generated more generally. They each address power – as held by services, decision-makers and professionals. They each claim to be emancipatory, giving greater recognition to service users and 'lay people' in their relationships with service providers, political decision-makers and experts. Below, each concept is discussed in turn, along with its potential – or not – to address the challenges of children and young people's participation in child protection contexts.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability has become a popular philosophical concept, particularly in discussions of social justice. A leading proponent is Fineman.[xvi] Vulnerability, she asserts, is a universal and inevitable condition of being human because we are embodied. This contrasts with the subject of liberal theory, which incorrectly conceives of citizens as autonomous, self-sufficient and independent and leads to a State that normally does not intervene nor regulate. When we recognise vulnerability, and the potential for dependency, the State's role is reconceived as having positive obligations, to ensure protection as needed, to provide resources to promote resilience. Questions are raised about why some people have so many more resources than others.

At first look, reclaiming vulnerability as a universal condition is attractive. In much of liberal theory on rights, children are either absent from the theorisations or set up as the counter-example:

> … the individual child is largely a tool to illuminate the nature of the autonomous adult citizen by providing the perfect mirror within which to reflect the negative image of the positive adult form.[xvii]

Not so vulnerability theorisations, as children exemplify the intergenerational and temporal claims for vulnerability and addressing dependency.[xviii] Vulnerability theorisations start from embodied vulnerability, perceiving autonomy as relational rather than individualised, and advocate for a responsive State.[xix] Children and young people's perceived vulnerability, in child protection, is thus not an exceptional but a central concern.

An ongoing critique of Fineman's work has been her unduly benign consideration of this revised 'responsive State'. Mackenzie and colleagues recognise that vulnerability can 'engender a troubling sense of powerlessness, loss of control or loss of agency'.[xx] In response, they argue that interventions must aim 'to enable or restore, wherever possible and to the greatest extent possible, the autonomy of the affected persons or groups'.[xxi] Mackenzie then seeks to reclaim autonomy conceptually.[xxii] Autonomy is inherently social, requiring relationships to acquire skills and capacity, and to achieve recognition. The links between self-determination, autonomy and State obligations are summarised in these words:

> … because self-determination is crucial for a flourishing life, social conditions that thwart the development or exercise of autonomy competence, that hinder genuine equality of access to a range of significant options, or that sanction social relations of misrecognition are unjust. A socially just state therefore has an obligation to develop social, political and legal institutions that foster citizen autonomy.[xxiii]

Such theorisations can then reconceptualise the 'vulnerable' child in child protection, to allow for possibilities of participation as well as protection, recognising the importance of relationships and the State's support. Children and young people should be supported in developing their autonomy, recognising that this is done through relationships and capacity-building.

The literature on children and young people's participation abounds with examples of such capacity building. For example, a children's radio project ran over several years, in a remote rural district in South Africa severely affected by HIV and AIDS.[xxiv] The project enabled children to tell their own narratives, through radio journalism, as a juxtaposition to the victimhood of international and national discourses. The project's evaluations showed personal and local community transformations, as children welcomed developing technical and transferrable skills and intergenerational dialogue was facilitated. Yet the project was unable to break through to national influence through mainstream radio broadcasting nor ensure policy impact: for example, opportunities for national coverage were disappointing, as the children's journalism was only played on children's radio or edited to concentrate on children's vulnerabilities. Other research[xxv] similarly replicates children and young people's appreciation of their developing personal skills, their future aspirations and their growth in confidence and self-esteem. Far less often does this research find that the children and young people's collective participation has influenced decision-making and even less on decision making at national levels.

Once again, children and young people's participation activities can become therapeutic or educational opportunities for them to *learn* how to participate rather than to have influence currently. Such activities threaten to fall into the familiar childhood studies' criticism, that children are perceived as solely 'human becomings' rather than

'human beings'.[xxvi] Mackenzie and colleagues' work on vulnerability and autonomy seems to do so too. Self-determination is withheld from children while they are children, because they need to gain the skills and experiences to achieve specific functionings.[xxvii]

Vulnerability theorisation fails in at least three other ways to help improve children and young people's participation, particularly in relation to child protection. First, key theoretical developments are situated in liberal democracies, which have developed and functioning States, with articles referring to 'citizens' and 'agency'. These elements are not questioned for their normative values, their conceptual content nor their realisation in practice.[xxviii] This raises questions of how well these vulnerability theorisations will work in situations that are not liberal democracies, where people are excluded from citizenship and/or where individual agency is not valued.[xxix] Such are the contexts for many international child protection activities.

Second, power (and particularly adult power) is inadequately addressed. This is demonstrated by Sherwood-Johnson's analysis of Scottish policies for those considered 'vulnerable' or 'at risk'.[xxx] She argues that child protection policies do not challenge power relationships. Children are seen as inherently susceptible to harm, dependent on others and more prone to risk. Thus parental control of children is usually accepted unless there is perceived parental failure and the State is the 'benign intervenor'. Adult power in itself is not a problem. In contrast, domestic abuse policy is not based on women's vulnerability. Women are not conceptualised as inherently susceptible to harm nor as unusually putting themselves at risk. The problem lies with male partners as perpetrators, within a context of problematic gender inequalities. The State can be part of this broader context and, as such, is not necessarily benign. Her comparison begs the question of what a child protection policy would look like that did not concentrate on

children being vulnerable or at risk and instead saw the problem lying with adult abusers and structural inequalities. Such a policy would provide far more possibilities for children and young people's participation than one based around vulnerability.

Third, vulnerability may encourage philanthropic and governmental sympathy[xxxi] but it is not a position of strength for those labelled as vulnerable. Brown summarises social science critiques into three types: vulnerability is paternalistic and oppressive; it can be used to widen control over certain people; it can exclude and stigmatise.[xxxii] Fawcett's review[xxxiii] notes how vulnerability can be used to constrain people's rights to make decisions, separating them out from their social networks which in turn makes them more 'vulnerable'. Vulnerability, then, can be a very controlling and stigmatising label rather than an emancipatory one.

Such problems can be traced through participation activities for children and young people, which concentrate on their vulnerable position and do not address power. Project-funding has been successfully obtained across the UK, for example, to support disabled children and young people's participation[xxxiv] in influencing disability policies and services. But the children and young people themselves assert that they are too often only asked about disability-related issues and too seldom asked about the broader range of issues that affect them. When children and young people's views appeared to conflict with their parents, in Scottish policy-making, the children and young people's views were relegated to guidance while the government sought to appease certain parents' groups.[xxxv] The legacy continues, with renewed attempts to recognise disabled children's capacity to enforce their own rights halted by adults' views about their best interests and vulnerability.[xxxvi] Children and young people's human rights to participate can be blocked by ascriptions of vulnerability to them.

There is easy slippage from recognising vulnerability as universal to perceiving it as naturalised, something that is inevitable and unstoppable. Too little attention is given to the contextual and structural causes and too much attention to individuals who are vulnerable and/or dependant.[xxxvii] As Edstrom argues, the analysis goes back to individuals and their bodies, 'at the expense of [analysis] of power relations, accountability, structures and dynamics'.[xxxviii] This seems an inherent risk of vulnerability theorisations and one particularly salient for 'vulnerable' children and young people in child protection, which so easily limits their rights to participate on matters that affect them.

Social accountability

Accountability has become a key concept in international development. As the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) loomed, the *lack* of accountability – of States to their citizens, of global institutions to States, of richer to poorer countries, of the private sector, and between generations – was identified as a core reason for so many MDGs being missed.[xxxix] Thus, improving accountability for MDGs' successor, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is considered essential.[xl] A connected concern is about inequity: by focusing on headline outcomes, as the MDGs largely did, averages were privileged over attention to the most vulnerable and marginalised people, whose outcomes may be much poorer. A human rights approach is thus advocated, to recognise the importance of processes as well as outcomes, and the need to disaggregate data to ensure all people's rights are addressed, including and especially those who are most vulnerable and marginalised. Accountability, then, becomes a key link between human rights and governance, seeking to address inequity.[xli]

Accountability 'can be defined as the obligation of power-holders to account for or take responsibility for their actions'.[xlii] The literature identifies several forms of formal accountability: i.e., quasi-judicial accountability at the international and national levels (such as UN Committees and ombudspeople); legal and judicial accountability; political accountability; and administrative accountability. Social accountability is an informal form of accountability:

> Social accountability can be defined as an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability.[xliii]

Other concepts, such as a 'voice', 'civic engagement' and 'participation' can be components of social accountability: what distinguishes social accountability is that power-holders must be accountable and they must be responsive.[xliv] Social accountability emphasises the need for standards, monitoring (involving information gathering and judgements) and sanctions on power-holders. Social accountability, then, seeks to create a robust system to address power.[xlv]

Social accountability could provide a powerful framework for children and young people's participation. In development work, social accountability has been used to recognise that not all 'voices' are included within civic society and that particular attention and support needs to be given for those 'voices' who risk exclusion. Children, in many societies, risk such exclusion because of generational hierarchies and some children are at even greater risk because they are part of marginalised groups. Social accountability recognises the need for capacity-building, assisting people such as children to have the skills to engage. Information is particularly emphasised, where transparency is demanded from the State and information can be analysed and then publicly used to hold decision-makers to account.

This literature, arising from the development context, explicitly recognises social accountability's affinity with democracy and how this can work where there are weak States (e.g. in conflict-areas) and/or different governance paradigms.[xlvi] For the former, the literature suggests that peace-building benefits from including social accountability, so as to strengthen the State ultimately to be responsive and accountable. For the latter, the recommendation is to proceed carefully but purposefully, as social accountability addresses marginality and inequity.[xlvii]

Children are one of the groups mentioned in the social accountability literature as requiring a particular emphasis or approach. In publications seeking to apply social accountability for children, children are presented as particularly vulnerable.[xlviii] They face unequal power relationships between the State and society, as well as unequal power relationships between children and adults. Children have the dual challenges of being non-voters and treated as passive recipients of public services. They are thus excluded from direct participation in many public processes of accountability. As a result, both Nyugen and Gibbons conclude that children need to have intermediaries. These intermediaries will consult with children, as a 'proxy for their direct involvement'.[xlix] This is required both to respect parents' roles (who have rights to claim on their children's behalf) and to protect children, to ensure that their 'voice' does not lead to negative repercussions. Children must be consulted, as rights-holders, but the goal is accountability *for* children's rights and not accountability *to* children. Gibbons summarises the role of the adult intermediary:

> It [social accountability] generally requires adults as intermediaries to build and facilitate children's capacity to seek, analyse and use information on the performance of the duty bearer they want to monitor, and to interface with the adult world when presenting their findings and asking for and obtaining accountability.[l]

While adults may expect social accountability to improve services, address corruption or build good governance, the 'empowering exercise of their civil rights' can be considered an outcome in itself for children 'valuable whether or not they obtain redress in rights-fulfilling services'.[li]

The protective role of the adult intermediary can be seen across many participation activities with children and young people. Considerable expertise and experience has been accumulated about how to engage with children and young people, so that participation activities are inclusive, fun and ethical.[lii] While it can be enabling for children and young people to have their own spaces to grow in skills and confidence, very frequently they do not participate in other spaces, with others in civic society or indeed directly with those in power.[liii] So children and young people are consulted from marginalised communities for recent children's legislation in Scotland and the results are summarised in a report. The report is referred to within parliamentary debates but not to influence the legislation's content; is it only referred to as having fulfilled the requirement to consult with children and young people.[liv] More positive examples can be found of such consultation activities influencing services and policy, but they miss the transformative potential from directly engaging with power-holders.[lv]

Child-responsive accountability risks returning to the very familiar challenges of children and young people's participation described above. The concept of social accountability may challenges power between civic society and decision-makers within the State, but leading publications on child-responsive accountability have an insufficient critique of adult power within participation activities. But this is not inherent to the concept of social accountability, and children and young people's participation could take on the benefits of social accountability in emphasising standards, monitoring, information and sanctions. Such benefits could provide new and

stronger routes for children and young people to impact on collective decision-making, as part of civil society and human rights accountability.

Co-production

Like social accountability, co-production has a history in seeking to improve services for those who use them. Public administration coined the term over fifty years ago, to describe potential relationships between service providers and clients.[lvi] Services may only be deliverable through the client's contribution, such as an out-patient taking her prescribed drugs from the doctor. Co-production gained renewed policy interest more recently, as an answer to austerity measures in the UK and elsewhere. Here, the emphasis is on changing relationships between the State and citizens: public services should be co-produced by service users and communities. Boyle and Harris argue for co-production:

> Co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using their services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become more effective agents of change.[lvii]

New relationships can thus be formed between staff and those using services. Service users' expertise and assets are recognised, facilitating durable peer support and incorporating 'a whole life focus'.[lviii] Co-production has also been picked up to describe particular 'participative' activities and methodologies. For example, the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council advocates co-production in research: aiming to 'put the principles of empowerment into practice, working 'with communities' and offering communities greater control over the research process and providing opportunities to learn and reflect from their experience'.[lix] Thus, all three literatures recognise and

discuss questions of power and control, professional expertise, and what constitutes knowledge.

Co-production has been applied to participation activities with children and young people. Williams[lx] argues that co-production goes beyond the collaborative work of youth participation as it requires deeper engagement and is thus more challenging for services. Similarly, Stephens and colleagues write:

> The point is not to consult more, or involve people more in decisions; it is to encourage them to use the human skills and experience they have to help deliver public or voluntary services.[lxi]

In Scotland, for example, the term has been used to describe an intensive way of involving children and young people, to influence policy. All three leading examples address examples of children and young people's protection and safety: the Youth Commission on Alcohol, funded by the Scottish Government and supported by Young Scot, a non-governmental organisation;[lxii] Scottish Borders Council (a local government within Scotland) set up its own Youth Commission on Bullying;[lxiii] and Voice against Violence, a group of eight young experts supported by the Scottish Government to influence the National Domestic Abuse Delivery Plan for Children and Young People.[lxiv] All three examples recruited a limited number of young people, to explore an identified policy area. All examples involved extended research with other children and young people, to address the need to be 'representative'. All examples had notable and dramatic policy successes.[lxv] Young people in each of these three projects point to respectful engagement of adult advisers and direct engagement with decision-makers (and notably the politicians, rather than intermediaries or civil servants), as leading to their project's success.[lxvi] The three examples were a form of peer research, where young people were identified as or became the 'experts', supported by adult facilitators,

and with direct links to political decision-makers. Similar examples can be found in the Majority World, such as research undertaken by children and young people about adult alcohol use in Keradi India[lxvii] and by children and young people on their experiences as refugees due to the Syrian conflict, now living in Lebanon and Jordan.[lxviii]

Both conceptually and in practice, co-production addresses several of the challenges of children and young people's participation. By perceiving participants as potential experts and creators of knowledge, co-production can provide children and young people a place in decision-making. The examples all created spaces in which children and young people developed skills and gained information. But then children and young people were typically facilitated to meet directly with political decision-makers, rather than relying on intermediaries to communicate their views. Through an open recruitment process and an extended research agenda, each example sought to ensure an aspect of statistical representativeness and avoid claims of democratic representativeness. Thus they sought to legitimate their claims to knowledge and expertise.

Most examples, like the Youth Commission on Alcohol and the research undertaken Lebanon/ Jordan, were established for a set time. Thus, while constraints of time were an issue, their sustainability was only required for those months. Voice against Violence, in contrast, had set project funding that finished and then struggled to find renewed funding to continue. Despite its recognised policy successes, it lacked a sustainable basis to continue without substantial funding, and this was frustrating to the young experts who had committed so much time to Voice against Violence and wished to mentor their (younger) successors to continue their work. Sustainability therefore remains a problem for many co-production activities that have no set timeframe.

Co-production is not without its potential criticisms. It can be used to control participation, to make service users complicit in experts' agendas.[lxix] The emphasis can be on making existing services or policies better, functioning more smoothly, rather than more conflictual and radical forms of citizenship participation such as student sit-ins or social media campaigns.[lxx] Yet the examples here show co-production's potential, with the children and young people recognised as experts, their knowledge legitimated particularly by the additional research undertaken, and often resulting in changes for policies and services nationally.

Discussion and conclusion

What do the three ideas offer, conceptually and practically? They offer fresh viewpoints on three issues: the role of the State and public services; children and young people's representativeness; and data use and knowledge creation. All three provide certain new ways to conceptualise children and young people's participation and thus practice.

First, all three concepts pay attention to the role of the State, and particularly relationships between public services and those who use them. In Fineman's vulnerability writings, the State must be responsive: it must set up the conditions to encourage resilience and pay attention to equitable resource distribution. Social accountability also wants a responsive State and a strong, functioning one. But the relationship is more confrontational, with the State asked to supply information, to be transparent, and the State held to account by civic engagement.

Both vulnerability and social accountability writings recognise the need to support the State, which is not invulnerable. This is productive for children and young people's participation. As practices for engaging children and young people have developed and improved over recent years, the literature increasingly realises that decision-making processes and structures need to change, and adult decision-makers

supported, to create spaces and opportunities for children and young people's participation. This requires support *for* as well as *by* the State. Any existing good practice can be vulnerable – as was experienced by Voice against Violence in its attempts to renew funding.

The emphasis remains, in both the vulnerability and social accountability literatures covered here, on vertical relationships between the state and citizens/ civic society. In comparison to vulnerability and social accountability, co-production more directly addresses horizontal relationships.[lxxi] The three examples discussed here are illuminating, in seeking to insert children and young people into accountability structures, ensuring people have a 'place at the decision-making table' and decision-makers are accountable.

Second, representativeness remains an ongoing problem for both co-production and social accountability. The examples of co-production discussed here placed great efforts on a justifiable recruitment method, which sought diversity in membership, and then broader research with children and young people to justify knowledge created.[lxxii] For child-responsive accountability, it is accepted that children will be excluded from political accountability and thus cannot be represented nor representative politically. Following on from this, adult intermediaries must consult with children and young people and include their views when advocating for children's rights – and this creates a problem of statistical representativeness. The concern becomes that only some children and young people's 'voices' are included and not others. Special efforts must be made to ensure the 'most vulnerable' are reached or more and more children and young people involved. This creates sustainability issues. Children and young people may be involved in a project, become mobilised and empowered, but the adult intermediary can stop supporting them: the adult must move onto the next children and young people's

group, as to avoid being ‘captured’ by the now professionalised children and young people who are no longer ‘authentic’ in expressing a child or young person’s perspective. Both social accountability and co-production still need to defend themselves against criticisms that children and young people are unrepresentative.

Third, both social accountability and co-production address data. Social accountability pays particular attention to collecting, analysing and using information. Data are used to judge whether standards have been met and, if not, for power-holders to be held accountable. Social accountability explicitly recognises that citizens do not always start with the capacity to gain or understand such information; this capacity is something to be developed and encouraged. With capacity developed and skills learned, data are then used to advocate for change. Co-production too recognises the value of building capacity in information-seeking and information-analysis. Co-production, though, more explicitly addresses hierarchies of knowledge. Children and young people are recognised as having skills and expertise, as being creators of knowledge, alongside professionals and other adults.

It is co-production’s (re)claiming of children and young people’s expertise and knowledge that distinguishes itself from vulnerability and social accountability. Co-production seeks to move to horizontal accountability and, even more, co-creation of solutions as well as critique. In doing so, it addresses some of the oft-cited challenges of children and young people’s participation, such as having an impact on decision-making, helping to set the agenda and – at least in regards to carrying out its own research activities – having time allocated to develop findings. Co-production, however, needs to guard against its enlistment merely to support the status quo. Its theoretical history shows how children and young people’s participation could be used to make them complicit and more compliant with professionals’ agendas. Co-production, as a

concept and a practice, needs to hold onto its potential for more transformative change, which lie with its creation or improvement of participation spaces with children, young people and (adult) decision-makers.

In summary, vulnerability theorisations show promise, in recognising vulnerability as universal rather than exceptional, and thus offering to re-frame human rights. Vulnerability theorisations are helpful in recognising that even a responsive State can be vulnerable and require support. However, such theorisations provide limited conceptual spaces for participation and particularly for children and young people's participation. The literature reviewed here fails to consider sufficiently assumptions of liberal democracy, agency and citizenship, which are inaccessible or contested for children and young people and particularly in child protection contexts across the world. In contrast, social accountability has been developed cross-nationally and cross-culturally with child protection concerns in mind, which heightens its applicability. It adds to the participation literature, in requiring power-holders' accountability through transparency, monitoring, analysing data, and sanctions. It has the *potential* to include children and young people alongside others in civic engagement and ultimately social accountability. But it can slide into the familiar criticism of participation activities when they perceive children as vulnerable and requiring adult intermediaries to protect them. Co-production conceptually and practically can take on the benefits of vulnerability and social accountability. It can address vulnerability: co-production can allow for certain support and resources to be enlisted, to ensure inclusion. Co-production goes beyond vulnerability, though, in *recognising* children and young people's expertise, assets and skills rather than perceiving them as *developing* towards autonomy. Co-production can recognise information's enabling power and ensure institutions and mechanisms are created and/or maintained to hold decision-makers to account. Co-production must

guard against being overly controlled by adult structures and agendas but examples do show how it can facilitate children and young people's impact on national decision-making.

All three ideas address power – as held by services, decision-makers and professionals – and claim to be emancipatory in giving greater recognition to service users, civil society and 'lay people' in their relationships with the State and services. They can provide substance to children and young people's human rights to participate, as outlined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2009, with implications for practice. They can be useful particularly in contexts of international child protection, in respecting children and young people's human rights to protection and provision as well as participation. But all three concepts, and their ensuing practices, need to question whether they sufficiently address power and meet their emancipatory claims. When applied to children, they can repeat forms of adult control, with too much attention to developing children and too little attention to demonstrable influence on decision-making. They can reify the position of adult intermediaries rather than perceive children as human rights holders and thus worthy of recognition of their own direct involvement. Such perceptions do not negate capacity building, including developing skills and ideas: after all, access to information (Article 17) and evolving capacities (Article 5) are both detailed in the CRC. Co-production examples show that children and young people can be directly involved in collective decision-making in child protection contexts, with supportive State and service structures, and have lasting influence.

[i] The phrase 'children and young people' is generally used in this article, following young people's typical preference to be referred to as the latter. Broadly, 'children and young people' refers to children up to the age of 18, following the definition within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
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[iii] J. Ennew and Y. Hastadewi, *Seen and Heard: Participation of children and young people in Southeast, East Asia and Pacific in events and forums leading to and following up on the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on Children* (Bangkok: Save the Children Bangkok, 2004).
[iv] E.K.M. Tisdall, 'Children and Young People's Participation: A critical consideration of Article 12', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Children's Rights Studies*, ed. W. Vandenhole, E. Desmet, D. Reynaert, and D. Lembrechts (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).
[v] B. Daniel, 'Concepts of Adversity, Risk, Vulnerability and resilience: A discussion in the context of the 'child protection system', *Social Policy and Society* 9, no. 2 (2010): 231-241.
[vi] L. Waterhouse and J. McGhee, 'Introduction' in *Challenging Child Protection*, ed. L. Waterhouse and J. McGhee (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2015).
[vii] UNICEF, *What is Child Protection*, (2006) http://www.unicef.org/protection/files/What_is_Child_Protection.pdf
[viii] The terms 'majority world' and 'minority world' refer to what has traditionally been known as 'the third world' and 'the first world' or more recently as 'the Global South' and 'the Global North'. This acknowledges that the 'majority' of population, poverty, land mass and lifestyles is located in the former, in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and thus seeks to shift the balance of our world views that frequently privilege 'western' and 'northern' populations and issues. S. Punch, 'Childhoods in the majority world: miniature adults or tribal children?', Sociology 37 no.2 (2003): 277-295.
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[xi] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment No. 12 The Right of the Child to be Heard*, (2009) http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.doc, 3.
[xii] B. Percy-Smith and N. Thomas, ed., *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from theory and practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010); G. Lansdown, *Monitoring and evaluating children's participation*, (2011) http://www.crin.org/resources/infoDetail.asp?ID=25809&flag=report; E.K.M. Tisdall, R. Hinton, A. Gadda, and U.M. Butler, 'Introduction' in *Children and Young People's Participation and Its Transformative Potential: Learning from across countries*, ed. E.K.M. Tisdall, A.M. Gadda, and U.M. Butler (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
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[xv] H. Montgomery, 'Defining child trafficking & child prostitution: the case of Thailand', *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 9, no. 2 (2011): 775–811.
[xvi] M.A. Fineman, 'The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring equality in the human condition', *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20, no. 1 (2008): 1-18; M.A. Fineman, 'The Vulnerable Subject and the Responsive State', *Emory Law Journal* 60 (2010/11): 251-275; M.A. Fineman, 'Equality, autonomy and the vulnerable subject in law and politics', in *Vulnerability:*

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[xix] See M.A. Fineman, 'Equality, autonomy and the vulnerable subject in law and politics', in *Vulnerability: Reflections on a new ethical foundation for law and politics*, ed. M.A. Fineman and A. Grear (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); R. Hewer, 'Book Review Vulnerability: Reflections on a new ethical foundation for law and politics', *Social & Legal Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 465-469.

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[xxi] ibid 9

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[xxiii] C. Mackenzie, 'The importance of relational autonomy and capabilities for an ethics of vulnerability', in *Vulnerability: New Essays in ethics and feminist philosophy*, ed. C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers and S. Dodds (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45.

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[xxxvii] B. Daniel, 'Concepts of Adversity, Risk, Vulnerability and resilience; A discussion in the context of the 'child protection system', *Social Policy and Society* 9, no. 2 (2010): 231-241; V.E. Munro and J. Scoular, 'Abusing Vulnerability? Contemporary law and policy responses to sex work in the UK', *Feminist Legal Studies* 20, no. 3 (2012): 189-206; C. Philo, 'The Geographies that wound', *Population, Place and Space* 11 (2005): 441-454.
[xxxviii] Edstrom, 'Time to call the bluff', *Development* 53, no. 2 (2013): 215-221, 217.
[xxxix] E. D. Gibbons, *Accountability for Children's Rights*, (2015) http://www.unicef.org/policyanalysis/rights/files/Accountability-for-Childrens-Rights-UNICEF.pdf, 4.
[xl] UNDP, *Reflections on Social Accountability*, (2013) http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/documents/partners/civil_society/publications/2013_UNDP_Reflections-on-Social-Accountability_EN.pdf.
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[xlviii] L.T. P. Nguyen, *Child-responsive accountability*, (2013) http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/iwp_2013_16.pdf. She describes the following in detail, which is picked up and accepted by Gibbons 2015.
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[li] ibid 12
[lii] E.g. G. Lansdown and C. O'Kane, *A Toolkit for Monitoring and Evaluating Children's Participation*, (2014) file:///C:/Users/kay/Downloads/22-me-toolkit-booklet-4.pdf (2014).
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[lxii]Young Scot, *Building the Boat: young people as co-producers of policy*, (no date), http://www.youngscot.net/what-we-do/key-documents/building-the-boat.aspx Young Scot are repeating this process in 2016, with a Youth Commission on iRights [children and young people's digital rights] https://rewards.youngscot.org/activities/1425-apply-youth-commission-for-irights
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[lxvii] Keradi Alcohol Story. Directed by Makkala Toofan https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B3MAx-b6BpynVG51b1FqdVg0cFU/edit, 2015
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[lxxi] Literature on the wider concept of accountability considers horizontal relationships extensively (e.g. internal mechanisms of accountability within the State).
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