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# Radical democratic citizenship at the edge of life: young children, cafés and intergenerational and intersectional activism

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## ABSTRACT

Current approaches to radical democratic citizenship seek to open up new spaces for political action and politicise ordinariness. However, a question remains as to the extent to which current radical approaches to citizenship include one of the most overlooked groups: very young children. This article focuses on radical democratic citizenship and early childhood (0 to 8 years old), where rights are often violated and activism is not always recognised, particularly in everyday public spaces. Drawing on critical reflections from recent research projects focusing on young children's rights in everyday public spaces, I argue that radical democratic citizenship in early childhood can be conceptualised through intergenerational and intersectional activism and through an analysis of children's ordinary political acts which render visible processes of radical change.

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**KEYWORDS** Young children; activism; intersectional; intergenerational; cafés; public spaces

## Introduction

Current approaches to radical democratic citizenship seek to open up new spaces for political action and politicise ordinariness making visible those 'daily' sometimes 'hardly visible resistances' (Neveu 2015, 150). However, a question remains as to the extent to which current radical approaches to citizenship include one of the most overlooked groups: very young children. This article focuses on radical democratic citizenship and early childhood (0 to 8 years old), where rights are often violated and activism is not always recognised, particularly in everyday public spaces. Drawing on critical reflections from recent research projects focusing on young children's rights in everyday public spaces, I argue that radical democratic citizenship in early

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childhood can be conceptualised through intergenerational and intersectional activism and through an analysis of children's ordinary political acts which render visible processes of radical change.

### **Radical democratic citizenship and intergenerational and intersectional activism in childhood**

Recent moves beyond reductionist conceptualisations of citizenship have opened up new possibilities for making visible political sites, scales and acts across time, place and space and new understandings of how the latter 'produce new actors who enact political subjectivities and transform themselves and others into citizens by articulating ever-changing and expanding rights' (Isin 2009, 368; Mustafa 2016). Citizenship has thus been defined as an 'open set of elements' which emerge in different contexts (Gordon and Stack 2007, 122) and is linked to rights and entitlements (e.g. human, civil, political, social) (Isin 2009). Turner (2016, 143–147) adds that the political is 'more than a claim to rights' and suggests that 'right claims can be read as interruptions of the social order'. Citizenship is thus conceptualised through acts and claims to justice which 'break habitus' disrupting 'already defined orders, practices and statuses' (Isin 2009, 384). Radical democratic conceptualisations of citizenship include 'working through the ordinary' (Neveu 2015, 148) thus making 'visible processes ... rendered invisible in mainstream political discourse and research' and opening 'up the analysis to sites, moments and practices usually considered as "non-political"' (Neveu 2015, 148).

Childhood and youth studies in particular have refocused citizenship studies in different ways (Fyfe 2009; Nolas 2015; Tisdall and Cuevas-Parra 2020), from less institutionalised and more flexible forms of youth participation such as friendship circles (Fyfe 2009, 41) to radical new concepts such as childhood publics, which 're-connect' children's participation 'with social movements and social change' (Nolas 2015, 157).

Processes of social change, social movements and campaigns are usually linked mainly to older young people; young children are often seen as innocent and apolitical. However, although the term childhood activism might not always be used, notions of children as active citizens involved in processes of social change have been recognised and analysed (see Derman-Sparks 1989; Mac Naughton, Hughes, and Smith 2008). More direct links to children's activism in early childhood are rather limited (a few examples include Rosen 2017; Walker, Myers-Bowman, and Myers-Walls (2008)). There are issues to consider when looking at young children as activists; for example, young children cannot demonstrate and lobby on their own and rely on adults to access spaces and to be taken seriously. In this sense, it is useful to consider the solidarity work embedded in intergenerational activism and how adults and children build intergenerational alliances to address children's

interests and experiences. Rosen (2017) highlights intergenerational activism as an important part of political solidarities, which expands notions of political subjectivities and political work for social justice.

All of the above are mainly adult ideas about how processes of social change work and what activism means; more work is thus needed to understand what young children themselves think about different processes of change. Research needs to highlight the everyday political acts of young children towards social justice and change and to politicise these ordinary spaces as sites of radical democratic citizenship.

As children are not a unified, homogeneous group, it is important for any political project to take intersectional activism into consideration. Adopting intersectionality as praxis (Konstantoni and Emejulu 2017) within childhood research and practice commits various actors to work towards an emancipatory and activist agenda, with the ultimate goal of challenging intersectional discrimination and promoting social justice. It is important that any activist and participatory process which involves young children questions which young children participate in these campaigns, which are excluded, what the power struggles are within the group and how these struggles for power might be resolved. I will now turn to critical reflections from my recent research projects linked to young children's rights in everyday public spaces to provide examples of radical democratic citizenship in early childhood through a conceptualisation of intergenerational and intersectional activism.

### **Critical reflections from the field: cafés as a political nexus for intergenerational and intersectional activism**

My recent work has examined young children's rights in everyday public spaces with a focus on cafés as a political field, and includes two related empirical projects, which I draw on for this article:

- (a) a research project in Greece focused on young children's rights (titled *Young Children's Rights in Humanitarian Crises*), which employed an ethnographic and participatory approach (e.g. participant observation, informal conversations, interviews, participatory methodologies etc.). In total, I worked with 7 families with young children (0–5) from diverse backgrounds (white majority Greeks and visible/ non visible minorities) in community and home environments, being part of their everyday life for three months.
- (b) A pop-up play café<sup>1</sup> community event, part of the Fire Starter Festival,<sup>2</sup> which was attended by 70 families of diverse backgrounds. Research methods included informal conversations, participatory activities, interviews and participant observations.

Both projects received approval from the Moray House School of Education and Sports Ethics committee.

Two critical points emerged from both projects. The first was that if children do not like specific adult-designed 'child-spaces' they will resist, either by themselves or by forming alliances with other children or adults to re-claim such spaces. The success of their resistance depends on the negotiations they conduct, and factors such as the strength of their adult alliances and their intersectional positionings. My data highlighted that children faced many inequalities whilst trying to access public life and spaces; whenever children resisted being in areas specifically designated for them, they would face pushback and judgment from other adults. Such pushback and judgment were often racialised, gendered and classed.

One of the children in the study, Stefanos<sup>3</sup> (White Greek Other, 1.5 years old) would often get both positive looks of approval and judgemental frowns as he was exploring his surroundings at an outside, municipality-run café space in a coastal town in Greece, connecting landscapes of sea and forest. In one incident, a woman stared at Stefanos and then at his mother many times as to question his use of such public areas, mumbling to her husband 'How can this be right what she is letting him to do'. Her partner was more considerate; 'But where can he play?' he asked. 'There, that is where he should play, that is the space for children' she answered (pointing to the designated children's area), making sure Stefanos' mother noticed her annoyance. Interestingly, she was not annoyed with adults walking up and down in the same fashion. This was a common theme about the public spaces children could occupy, signifying control over their bodies and restrictions on how they can engage in public life. The fieldwork also demonstrated the political resistance from children and their parent allies trying to reclaim public spaces. Despite uncomfortable bystander reactions, Stefanos' mother did not force him into the aforementioned designated area, and continued supporting Stefano's exploration of the public space.

The above kinds of judgemental attitudes which were encountered in the project led directly to follow-up projects on the politics of café spaces. A pop-up play café initiative was organised in a Scottish neighbourhood facing disproportionately high unemployment and drug/alcohol abuse. The aim of the pop-up play café was to engage with families to understand their experiences of current provision and access to public spaces like cafés, to provide an alternative space for them based on pedagogical child-centred and children's rights approaches and to co-design a future ideal social and play space. In particular, the design of the space was based on a specific child-centred approach linked to Froebelian philosophy,<sup>4</sup> which has received great importance particularly in the Scottish context for its 'principled approach', with children's rights and child-centredness being at the heart of its philosophy and practice.<sup>5</sup> The Froebelian approach to space design was linked to

creating a calming ‘home-like’ environment, providing open-ended and natural materials. The aim was to create a space offering opportunity for rich sensory experience, engaging the children’s imagination, curiosity and creativity (Tovey 2019). Children moved freely, engaging with resources that interested them. During the event and the research, parents and children spoke about the lack or poor quality of current play areas that neither encourage high quality learning and education (Tovey 2019) nor meet their needs. ‘There is nowhere for us to go, and the options we have like the play-park I mean is that what we deserve?’ (Sofia White Migrant Mother of 5-year-old Mary). Parents also spoke about the importance of having places where children are not considered ‘add ons’, who are only allowed to occupy a corner or a little space. Parents/carers and children commented positively on the resources and the welcoming and warm environment of the play café, where children were free to explore and be autonomous with supportive adults nearby (Bruce 2012, 22). Parents’ and children’s views of their ideal social and play space were mostly articulated by parents, as many of the children were non-verbal. This highlights the importance of intergenerational activism and effective representation of children’s views and the need for more participatory observation-based research into young children’s views and experiences.

The second critical point that emerged from the field was that young children’s activism is evident by the fact that parents/carers seek public spaces that cater to their needs and are welcoming and inclusive.

I only go out where Tom will be happy and safe, he chooses where we go really, but the options we have as a family are very limited ... you don’t get many places that allow children to play or places where you don’t get the looks because you are with a child ... the options we have are not nice but we go wherever Tom can play and I can also relax a bit, have some coffee and get time to chat with other mums. (Tamsin, White Scottish, Mother of 3-year-old Tom).

The above, a key theme that emerged from various parents/carers in the research, highlighted children’s active role in deciding family access to public life. Children’s activism and parents’ solidarity through these intergenerational alliances and subsequent choices on where to be with their children have had direct impact on driving and forcing the market and community spaces to begin to offer alternatives in order to cater to children and family needs. This is reflected in the emergence of a wider initiative called the kindercafe/playcafé movement (Johnson Reed 2021), led often by dissatisfied mothers, which can be seen as a political reaction to discrimination, isolation and dissatisfaction that mothers experienced with their young children when accessing public areas. The project further highlighted that such options are even more limited for children and families from racial, ethnic, refugee or socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who did not access public

spaces due to fear of racism, violence and discrimination. For example, the families living in refugee camps in Greece that took part in the research stated that they had never visited a café space in the country and avoided public spaces out of fear (with the exception of things like quick visits to shops), living their life mainly within the confines of the camp ('it is very hard here', 'If you have noticed I don't let them [children] go out, even though they want to go out' [Mohammad, Afghan, living in a refugee camp in Greece, Father of 5 daughters, 12 year old Aisha, 9 year old Farah, 6 year old Mariam, 4 year old Mina and 2 month baby girl Nazia]).

The above projects are examples of intergenerational and intersectional activism. The projects were born out of personal lived experiences of injustice my child and I faced in everyday public spaces. Over the years, we have been prevented from accessing cafes because of using a pram, we have been made to sit in segregated areas just for families, and we have been reprimanded for being too noisy and roaming too freely. At the same time, I have been all too aware of my own positioning as a middle-class White Greek Briton, a status which conferred certain privileges whilst negotiating, resisting and reclaiming public spaces on my child's behalf. This led to follow up research projects and community engagement events to learn from a range of families of various socio-economic and marginalised backgrounds and to centre their views and experiences. The wider aim of the play-café project is to examine the politics of these spaces and the alternatives for children and families from aforementioned communities. The forthcoming We Play Festival<sup>6</sup> project will bring together numerous stakeholders, from elected government members, civil servants, academics and researchers to café business owners, practitioners, children and families and community activists to share research findings, to prototype radical new public spaces which promotes children's rights and to co-produce a reflexive resource which could be used for (re) designing such spaces. The above processes of solidarity are embedded in intergenerational and intersectional activism and adult-children alliances that address children's interests and experiences.

The conceptualisation of radical democratic citizenship in early childhood through intergenerational and intersectional activism offers new opportunities to render visible the political activism of young children in ordinary spaces, spaces that move beyond early childhood institutions to include more public spaces expanding in this way our understandings of the political (Turner 2016).

## Notes

1. Play cafés are defined here as social and play spaces for children and families.
2. For more information, see <https://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/our-research/children-young-people/early-years-research/research>



3. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
4. For more information, see <https://www.froebel.org.uk>
5. For example, see Education Scotland 2020.
6. For more information, see <https://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/our-research/children-young-people/early-years-research/research>

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