Cross-fertilizing children's rights and the capability approach. The example of the right to be heard in organized leisure

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Chapter 7

Cross-fertilizing children’s rights and the capability approach.
The example of the right to be heard in organized leisure.

Daniel Stoecklin & Jean-Michel Bonvin

Abstract
The authors explore new ways of conceptualizing children’s citizenship and participation through the capabilities approach (Sen, 1999) applied to children (Biggeri et al., 2011). They highlight factors that must be considered when observing how formal entitlements, such as the rights of the child, can (or cannot) be transformed into real freedom to participate. Their study conducted in Switzerland and in France shows the conditions for the right to be heard (art. 12 UNCRC) to be converted into effective participation in organised leisure activities.

The authors identify four sets of factors (economical, political, organisational and personal) that convert or obstruct the child’s entitlement to participate in the definition of organized leisure activities. Two ideal types – bottom-up participation and top-down participation – are built along these lines. The research shows that child participation is mainly induced by professional adults working in youth associations and leisure centres while knowledge of “participation rights” is rather low. Respondents do very seldom use the narrative of “children’s rights” to reflect upon their praxis. This typical line of conduct, or “system of action”, indicates that social relations play a greater role than children’s rights in their subjective evaluation of participatory projects.

The study highlights child participation as a sequential process whereby the actor’s reflexivity plays an important role as a converting factor, and thus enriches the theoretical model used in the capabilities approach (Bonvin, 2008). The results have important implications for the paradigm of the social actor and contribute to the theory of child participation (Thomas, 2007). The paper underlines the instrumental dimension of participation rights as they become real through the exercise of participation itself. The paper allows for important theoretical and practical developments in the field of child participation.