Approaches to promoting ideas about children’s rights and participation: Can the education of undergraduate students contribute to raising the visibility of the child in relation to child participation in Canada?

Sam Frankel, Sally McNamee and Alan Pomfret
King’s University College at Western University

Abstract
This paper compares children’s participation rights in England and in Canada. It argues that the increasing participation of children in English policy and legislation is linked to research and publishing from those working in the new paradigm of the social study of childhood. We consider that one effect of the relatively low take up from Canadian academics in this sub-discipline may be one reason as to why child participation has somewhere to go in Canada. We describe an undergraduate program that has recently added a Child Advocacy Certificate or Diploma, and contend that undergraduate education grounded in the new paradigm can positively impact advocacy and participation, as well as feeding into wider societal understandings of childhood.

Keywords: childhood studies, education, advocacy, participation, rights

Address correspondence to:
sfranke6@uwo.ca smcnamee@uwo.ca apomfret@uwo.ca
King’s University College at Western University
266 Epworth Avenue  London, Ontario N6A 2M3  tel: 519 433 3491
Introduction

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)—which has, since January 2015, been ratified by every country in the world except the United States—is couched within three broad areas: provision, protection, and participation. While the first two are relatively easy for states parties to engage with, the participation principle of the Convention often proves more difficult to deal with. This paper describes the advances made in the UK in relation to child participation since the development of what has been called the “new” paradigm of childhood studies. The paper contrasts these advances with attempts to encourage child participation in Canada, and argues that one of the components missing is an engagement on the part of academia with the new paradigm. The paper describes a program at one Canadian University which has, over the last 10 years, educated students in this academic approach to childhood and which is more recently training students in reflexive thinking about children’s voices, rights, participation, and child advocacy. This program is distinctly focused on childhoods rather than children’s rights. For as will be argued throughout this paper, it is a conception of the theories that underpin childhood, with reference to the “new paradigm,” that offers a means for a more child-centred engagement with a defined rights agenda. We argue that a commitment to childhood and to the participation of children at all societal levels can begin from undergraduate education in childhood studies, and that the potential contribution that graduates of such a program can make to raising the politics of childhood in Canada could—at societal and at policy levels—enable Canada’s approach to the child participation articles of the UNCRC to meet the expectations of the Convention.

The structure of this paper allows us to set the state of childhood in Canada, particularly in relation to children’s participation, alongside the ongoing work that has been taking place in the UK. What this allows is an opportunity to situate the progress of thinking in Canada as part of a wider discourse that reflects the journey of children’s rights and more widely childhood studies. As such it offers a context into which we explore the role and purpose of academic programs, and their potential to challenge the dominant discourses that continue to pervade thinking in this area. We begin, therefore, by contextualizing issues around children’s rights
more generally before moving on to delineate the tenants of the new social study of childhood. This provides a basis on which to then consider the way in which this agenda has impacted the development of children’s rights in England and Canada. Before we consider applying the new social study of childhood to promoting champions to advocate for a shift in attitudes, we will argue that it has the potential to transform approaches to children's participation and engagement.

Children’s Rights –A Context

It is important that this paper starts by offering a context within which the discussion on children’s rights—and particularly the theme of participation—can be considered. Acknowledging the history of children’s rights is necessary if we are to make sense of the way in which the rights agenda has come to be applied. For example a brief review of the story of children’s rights will show how, many years before the UN Convention, others were seeking to find a way to establish a marker through defining key societal attributes for engaging with children. This can be seen in the efforts of campaigners like Save the Children’s founder Eglantyne Jebb, who after the First World War looked for ways to formalize the recognition of children’s rights, but perhaps more significantly, the responsibilities which adults hold to the child. As such, the 1924 UN Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child considered certain needs that adults should address. These certain needs demanded that adults take seriously children’s development through acknowledging both their material and spiritual well-being; that all children are worthy of attention (and transformation); that children should be the focus in times of distress or relief; and that to be given a chance, they should be kept safe from all exploitation. The final of five points, that “the child must be brought up in the consciousness that its talents must be devoted to the service of fellow men” (UN), suggests that as a result of adults first providing those needs and the protection above and, second, by offering an appropriate socialization process, the child may then be able to take on a useful role in society. In short, it offered a blueprint for a model of protection and provision and, indeed, participation that was going to continue throughout the 20th century. The model of the child that sits within this charter is one that must be seen in the context of the time. It is thus framed by representations of childhood, in which children were a universal group and perhaps more importantly were seen merely as objects, as products of the society they found themselves in. These themes of passivity
reflect wider themes of the time, which, for example from a sociological point of view, saw the structure of society being the causal factor in shaping the actions and behaviours of the individuals within it. This unidirectional force that was society meant that the individual was a mere pawn, pushed and pulled by the whim of these greater powers.

Within this context the writings of influential theorists such as Jean Piaget who, despite his progressive approaches of actually engaging children in research, still saw children limited by their competence and therefore restricted in their capacity to engage. Although these structure-dominated approaches were challenged by shifts in social theory in the 1970s, offering a revolution in thinking that raised the individual to an agent (an active player in social interaction) even in relation to children (Hardman, 1973; Corsaro, 1979; Bluebond-Langer, 1978), the dominant themes of protection and provision remained. It is hard to say to what extent shifts in social theory provoked the more defined focus on participation in the 1989 Convention, but it is a clear add-on to a rights-based model for children that has always had at its heart a focus on protection and provision that draws on particular representations of the child as incompetent, a developing becoming and thus in need of protection.

As such, the rights to participation enshrined in the UNCRC grew out of a Westernized, paternalistic view of childhood informed by a romantic, developmental perspective. This can be clearly seen in the preamble to the Convention that describes children as immature and as a “special” and vulnerable category of person in need of protection: “Bearing in mind that, as indicated in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth.” Such a view of childhood is further entrenched in Article 3, which makes very clear that the best interests of the child (as defined by adults) override all other rights of the child.

Article 12 is one of the articles of the Convention that should hold most promise for children’s participation rights. However, there are three distinct conditions that govern when a child can and cannot exercise that right: the child has to be seen as competent to think by the adults who are considering giving the right to a view to the child; considered old enough or mature enough to have a view; and, if the adult judges these first two conditions met, only then is the child’s view acknowledged. It should be noted that nowhere does the Article state that
children have the right to make decisions, they only have the right to a view. The onus is thus on adults to decide whether a child’s view will count. However, even if the child is deemed mature enough to have formed and expressed a view, if that view is not in the child’s best interest according to the adult, then under Article 3, the child’s view need not be taken into account. The right of the child to participation, then, is qualified by developmental notions of age and competence as determined by adults. Thus, the constructions of childhood employed in the Convention and the clear boundaries between childhood and adulthood that it establishes have a direct bearing on how children’s rights are implemented (Aitken, 2001).

Recent writing by academics such as Cockburn (2013) has invited us to rethink what participation actually means. As argued above, the notion of participation that sits in the convention offers a view that is driven by ongoing assumptions about the child and although, as will be argued later, the new social studies of childhood is having an impact, it must be seen within the wider context of a pervasive set of dominant discourses. As such, this definition of participation reflects those dominant discourses and adds to an institutionalization of childhood (James & James, 2004), which is characterized by themes in which children are seen to lack competence. This can be seen in reflections on a recent flagship policy in the UK: the “National Citizen Service,” which was set up to further the current coalition government’s attempts to achieve a Big Society. In short, their solution for children (and one of the only visible policies of this movement to remain) was a citizenship program aimed at 16-year-olds, who on reaching this moment in their lives (just prior to becoming adults and engaging with the work place) were considered to be “ready” to undertake a program of change where they would, through experiences, develop the appropriate skills and attitudes to take on the mantle of an acknowledged citizen. Although presenting a participation model, it is one that must be seen as still emerging from those dominant understandings that surround our thinking of children in this area. In an analysis of the initial material supporting this program, Bacon, Frankel, and Faulks (2013a) showed the extent to which themes of “lack” continued to pervade the way in which children came to be represented. It raised questions that in acknowledging the opportunity for participation that this program gave 16-year-olds, it raised many more about the extent to which participation was framed, as being required training for adulthood.
An implication of the institutionalization of childhood, therefore, can be seen in the extent to which the notion of participation has taken on an elitist air, as the right to participate is linked to civic and political notions of citizenship (see Bacon & Frankel, 2013b). A consequence has been that participation has become dependent on certain criteria being met and, in most cases, children are seen as falling short. It is the need to respond to these assumed understandings that Cockburn’s (2013) work, referred to above, emphasizes the centrality of the new paradigm in allowing us to reapply the notion of participation and to re-present how it is viewed by adults. However, if the work of Cockburn and others is to be accepted, it points to the fact that children’s inability to participate is not a matter of competence but rather one of opportunity. Through a re-engagement with how we come to think about civic society and citizenship education he points to the opportunity to establish a firmer basis that allows for children’s participation, recognizing and drawing off the growing examples of the effectiveness of children as active and engaged partners in society.

The “New” Social Study Of Childhood: A Foundation For Advancing Children’s Participation?

It is into this context that the recent theorizing of childhood, which is based in the new paradigm, must be placed, and consideration given to the implications that this had for the way in which we not only think about protection and provision but also about the meaning of participation. Both developmental psychology and traditional socialization theory, what Wyness (2006) calls the “dominant framework” in contemporary understandings of childhood, position childhood as different from adulthood and children as lesser than adults. On the one hand, childhood is an age-linked progression to adulthood through a set of developmental stages. On the other hand, childhood is nothing more than a period of time in which children learn the appropriate norms of and roles in their society in preparation for future adulthood. The “new” paradigm of the social study of childhood was developed in the Nordic countries and in the UK from the 1980s. In a rejection of the previous academic theorizing of childhood described above, and also influenced by feminist and social constructionist analyses within the discipline of sociology, the so-called paradigm shift in the study of childhood recognizes childhood as a social
and historical construction and, drawing on the work of James and Prout ([1990] 1997). Its key principles are as follows:

- rejects a view of children as passive incompetent becomings;
- highlights the socially constructed nature of childhood;
- moves away from a conception of childhood as an age-bound developmental process;
- moves away from a view of children as passive recipients of socialization;
- moves towards seeing childhood as a time of competence and agency.

The new social study of childhood, then, conceptualizes children as competent social actors. Since its introduction, there have been more than two decades of work generating examples of children acting as social agents in various contexts—home, school, work, the environment, and so on. Examples of children’s voices and competence are many (Punch 2000; Kellet, 2005; Klocker, 2007).

This approach is important, then, in (1) highlighting the historical construction of childhood, noting that what childhood is or is taken to be changes over time; (2) focusing on children’s present rather than children’s future roles as adults (that is, children as beings rather than becomings; and (3) documenting the cultural, social, and historical construction of childhood. The new paradigm provides a critical alternative, allowing us to rethink what we “know” about childhood. It allows us to see that there are multiple constructions and representations of childhood that vary between, but also within, cultures. Representations of the child as in the process of becoming have been highlighted by particular moments in history, however it is important that they are not seen as chronologically fixed. Rather as reflecting themes that can be seen throughout history, as notions of innocence and evil, fear and threat, need and lack, recur albeit with different emphasis at different times, but with the same power to affect and direct our thinking towards children (Frankel, 2012). Significantly, these views, as seen earlier in relation to the discussion of particular theories from psychology, and indeed sociology, place children firmly in need of both protection and provision.

We therefore should talk about childhoods as well as childhood. Childhood can be seen as a social construction (which varies over time and across cultures) but also as a universal characteristic (e.g., as a period of life) (Wells, 2009). It is about seeing childhood as both a
social phenomenon and as it is experienced by children (James & James, 2004, p. 213).
Increasingly, academics working in the interdisciplinary field that makes up the “new” paradigm have paid attention to issues of rights and participation (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010), frequently highlighting the contradictions and ambiguities around rights versus best interest and demonstrating some of the difficulties inherent in promoting children’s rights in a cultural context where children are seen to be unable to bear those rights due to dominant discourses of the child as not-yet competent.

Children’s Rights in the English Context

In a paper presented to conferences in Denmark and England almost 10 years ago, one of the authors of the present article noted that in many areas of interest to children, while there was ostensibly a commitment to child participation, children’s voices were filtered out, or deliberately not included—even though under Article 12 of the UNCRC and under the UK 1989 Children Act there was a requirement that children participate. Drawing from research findings on several projects over a six-year period, the paper argued that in order for children’s meaningful participation, two conditions were required: that children’s voices were heard and that it was necessary for children to be visible. Models of child participation (e.g., Hart’s ladder of participation) posit that, in order for meaningful child participation, adults should share decision-making with children regarding child-initiated concerns. The question is, which children are able to reach the top of the ladder? When carrying out research with groups of practitioners in different arenas (for example, in family courts and children’s charities; see, for example, McNamee, James, & James, 2005; Craig et al., 2005) where the onus was on the practitioner under UK legislation and the Convention to represent children’s voices, it was found that there were several barriers to child participation. Some of these stem from an unwillingness on the part of adults to alter their working practices to include children’s voices as West (2007) has pointed out. A pertinent example is that of a committee which reviewed and approved small grants to children’s groups under a government-funding scheme, which was aimed at alleviating child poverty.

Committees were charged by the conditions of the scheme with ensuring that each committee had child representation. It was found that, nationally, this was not happening. On speaking to one of the children who should have been on a committee, she revealed that she was
unable to participate as meetings were always arranged by the adult committee members and held on Wednesday afternoons during a time when she was at school. She had also, on the one occasion that she had attended a meeting, felt sidelined by the adults on the committee (from field notes, July 2003). A reliance on the dominant discourse of childhood in the developed world (romanticized, developmental) means that adults often do not recognize children as able to participate until they are deemed “mature” enough. This example demonstrates a clear example of the rhetoric of child participation, without meaningful engagement. Without adult facilitation, children’s voices remain unheard. However, as a cautionary aside, the practice of forming youth parliaments or well-trained youth consultation groups may mean that only some voices become heard and some children are empowered through participation, thus not representing the concerns of all children but rather those of a visible group of children.

However, following the appointment of the first Commissioner for Children in England in 2005, an appointment made under the 2004 Children Act, that office has shown increasing commitment to the participation rights of children. While there can be no definitive direct proof that the uptake of the New Paradigm in the UK directly led to the appointment of the Commissioner for Children, it is undoubtable that the work of that office follows very closely some of the themes highlighted as a consequence of 20 years of research and theory. A build-up of literature during the 1970s from a range of disciplines, linked in with the International Year of the Child and later the agreement of a United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (James, 2013, p. 37) contributed to a general zeitgeist that was marked by a shift in thinking that meant that previously unconsidered perspectives on the child as an active participant in the social world was to change. In addition, the UK 1989 Children Act, which asserted that the child has a view in all matters concerning the child (following Article 12 of the UNCRC), ensured that practitioners working with children were bound by the requirement to explore the wishes and feelings of the child and to report these (for example, to the courts who may have been considering making an order in respect of the child).

A major five-year program of research funded by the main research funder for British Universities (The Economic and Social Research Council - ESRC) entitled “The Children 5-16 Program” was arguably the main contributor of research and theory in the field of children as social actors. Twenty-two projects explored different aspects of children’s lives, experiences, and perspectives. One of the objectives of the program was to feed the findings of the projects
into policy and practice. As Alan Prout (the director of the ESRC program) stated: “The relationship between research and policy is [...] only rarely immediate and direct. In general social research is more likely to contribute to policy development by being part of an ongoing arena of debate in which many voices participate. The Programme’s innovative view of children as social actors lends it more to this longer-term role” (2002, p. 74). As we argue below, what is missing in the Canadian context is the linkage between theory, policy, and practice that has been evident in the UK.

The possibilities for children’s participation in matters concerning them has shifted from employing merely the rhetoric of child participation to a more meaningful engagement of children at many levels, right up to children addressing Parliament in relation to their views. This was highlighted by a recent invitation to one of the authors of this article to attend the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children to share an education-based project, accompanied by some of the 9- and 10-year-old children it had impacted (Frankel, 2015). Indeed, just a few hours later, further up the same corridor, a 9-year-old became the youngest person ever to address a Select Committee (Guardian, 2015). Opportunities are an important theme of participation, and although the cynic might have little hope that the children’s message will be fully received and acted on, the chance to voice their opinions has to offer a starting place.

This association between the ethos of the new paradigm continues to be seen in high-profile policy-oriented areas, for example, in the influential body of work reflected as “The Report: A Good Childhood” (Layard & Dunn. 2009), drawing the first independent national inquiry into childhood, which has over the last nine years heard from over 20,000 children. Despite much of this work drawing from a psychological perspective, it does draw on the fundamentally shared stance that children are active players in society and therefore their place as “participants” is to be encouraged as part of improving outcomes.

**Children’s Rights in the Canadian Context**

In the Canadian context, despite the best efforts of the Committee on the Rights of the Child to encourage it, there has been no appointment of a Federal Child Ombudsman or Children’s commissioner. Rather, a provincial approach is taken with child advocate offices in 10 Canadian provinces. While the advocates share a common mandate to support the rights of children and to promote youth voice, each office works independently (Canadian Council of
Child and Youth Advocates, http://www.cccya.ca/content/Index.asp?langid=1). While we would not want to dismiss the hard work that the Child Advocates engage in, we feel that there is some way to go. Echoing the reports by the Committee on the CRC, we would argue that the appointment of a Federal Advocate or Ombudsman for children would not only help to develop strategies for action but also would send a clear message from Parliament that children’s rights are being taken seriously (see also Howe, 2009). In 2007, Howe and Covell argued that Canada holds at best a wavering commitment to children’s rights. Eight years since that text, there is still no systematic program of education for children in relation to children’s rights—for example, in every introductory class on the Convention, we ask students (who have in the main just graduated high school), “Who among you has heard of the UNCRC or been educated at school as to the rights that children hold?” Only one student (who had previously worked in ECE and had received the information through holding that post) had responded that she had. Of the other almost 1,000 students over the last eight years, none of them responded affirmatively to this question. And yet, there is an obligation of States Parties to educate children as to the rights that they hold under the Convention. One of the measures the government has taken has been to print and distribute copies of the convention to people who request it. While the majority of the Canadian public remains largely unaware of the UNCRC, there is thus a lack of knowledge about children’s rights which might encourage the public to request copies of the convention, and perhaps a corresponding lack of pressure on the government to meaningfully engage with children’s rights at a federal level.

Most significantly for a clear children’s rights perspective is the lack of a coherent well-funded research program in Canada that takes children’s experiences, voices, and perspectives as central, as happened in the UK with the “Children 5-16 Program” described above. The Canadian National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY) (http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p2SV.pl?Function=getSurvey&SDDS=4450&lang=en&db=indmdb&adm=8&dis=2) is one which might have had great potential for studying childhood from a “new paradigm” perspective—or at least adding in that aspect to the study. The NLSCY began in 1994, and has followed the development of children into adulthood (www23.statcan.gc.ca). Drawing on a sample of 35,795 children in 10 provinces, this study is definitely based in what Wyness (2006) has called the “dominant paradigm” of the study of children—that is to say, a scientific, developmental approach. Rather than including the child as a major respondent,
instead the respondent is the “person most knowledgeable” about the child—a parent, guardian, or teacher. Thus, what feeds into policy and practice in the Canadian context is a set of data that fails to consider children’s voices, experiences, and ways of being in the world (see also Caputo & Kelly, 1998).

The academic context in Canada similarly is currently failing to represent the theoretical approaches of the new paradigm. Most university courses in Canada are ECE, education, or psychology based. The situation is improving with new programs taking a broadly new paradigm approach at some universities (notably at Carleton, Queen’s, and Brock). Centres for children’s literature and histories of childhood are also growth areas in some universities. There is also the well-regarded Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood that has developed the “Shaking the Movers Initiative,” offering workshops for children and young people to prepare them for engaging with government and society more widely in relation to the UNCRC (www.landonpearson.ca), and the Young Lives Research Lab at the University of Prince Edward Island. There is, then, an increasing academic focus on childhood, but we argue that without a grounding in the new social study of childhood, the “spreading out” of academic theory and findings of research on childhood from this perspective into policy and practice remains handicapped. However, this too shows signs of improvement. Many of our students report finding the perspective we offer on childhood useful in their later careers—in education, social work, health, and law and policy. For example, in a recent survey of our graduates the following comments were typical of those received:

“I feel very strongly that the program […] has influenced my teaching philosophy. I conceptualize my students using the ‘CSI lens’ and encourage them to become active participants and facilitators of their learning.” (Student who graduated in 2012, communicated in 2014)

A graduate who later took an MA and is now working as a behavioural consultant with children with autism said:

“The program gave me an outlook towards children … the way I look at every client and patient I serve is through a lens of advocacy and respect. I assume capacity and the highest of ability from every person I support … I view them as an equal, and that is
largely because [the program] allowed me to understand the limits we put on others because of their social position.” (Student who graduated in 2013, communicated in 2014)

Many of our students are, therefore, taking the concepts of rights, participation, and respect for children into their working lives.

**In Practice – Applying the New Social Study of Childhood to Rights-based Discussions of Childhood**

We argue that there is a relationship between the low visibility of the child in terms of rights to participation in Canada and the slow uptake of the new paradigm of the social study of childhood among the academic community in Canada. As discussed above, some universities are beginning to include undergraduate courses and programs on childhood studies, but many tend to provide students with a mix of theories drawn from education, psychology, traditional sociology, and newer perspectives on the child. In our institution, a three- or four-year program on childhood studies was introduced in 1998. Framed within the “new” social studies of childhood approach, the program focuses on child voice, children’s competence, and children’s rights. We offer courses on childhood and history, discourses of childhood, and several courses that are based on exploring the experiences of children in various social institutions (for example, in the family, in law, etc.).

These courses seek to interpret participation as a response to the growing amount of literature that is emerging from within the discipline (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010; Tisdall, Gadda, & Butler, 2014). The underlying feature of this work is the extent to which children’s agency is recognized as a contributing factor for how we come to view participation. As a result, it promotes an atmosphere for discourse in which the child’s voice in not merely something to be entertained and documented as a demonstration of good intention, but rather engaging with the child’s voice s only the start of recognizing the extent to which children can contribute to transforming the structures within which they practise their everyday lives (see also Hart, 1992). This body of research is demonstrating the link between a more active view of participation, in line with the new paradigm and its impact on the settings within which children operate (Tisdall
et al., 2014). It is through this lens that the course seeks to encourage students to take a more active view of the social world, recognizing that the link between children’s participation and how this impacts their opportunities for action also changes outcomes.

In order to engage with the potential for children’s participation, this program starts, as one might anticipate from the commentary above, by looking to raise awareness of the cultural barriers that restrict how we come to think about children, barriers which have been historically and socially constructed. The idea of childhood as a social construction brings with it certain very real implications for how such constructs impact on the way children come to experience their everyday lives and the assumed ways of thinking that we carry with us as adults. Through lifting a lens to society, students start to reconceptualize their thinking as they consider the multitude of examples that show how society comes to manipulate and engineer policies and practices for children. Within these, representations or images of the child based on adult assumptions about knowledge emerge, providing support to arguments that reinforce the adult-centric grasp that social institutions have in framing childhood.

Encouraging students to look beyond their assumptions and constructed understandings has to be the starting place. For it is these assumed understandings about children and childhood that see many students begin their journey firmly in the protection and provision camp, as they reflect back those adult-centric views that stress a lack of competence or capability heightening children’s need. It is therefore, important that theories of social construction and cultural and historical difference are given effective application as they are used as a basis for analyzing the current social context that children find themselves in. From this, students begin to analyze what they see around them, not as accepted understandings but as understandings that require interpretation. Interpreting these views demands the ability to highlight and define the dominant and pervasive discourses that narrow and limit the way we come to see children. It is an approach that sees students reassess the world around them, where instead of black and white they start to see the shades of grey that make up the complexity of children’s worlds. It is a way of thinking that needs to have applications far beyond the classrooms of a university.

Having established with students a language for recognizing and placing assumed understandings of the child, they are then encouraged to find a basis on which those constructed understandings can be challenged and as a result reconsidered. Essentially this means moving
students away from theories that are comfortable with children’s passivity to one in which students understand the ways in which children are active in the construction of meaning as they respond to social interaction. Much has been written about the definition of agency, and this has been dealt with elsewhere, but in very practical terms, students are engaging with what Lee (1999) calls the “ambiguity of childhood.” This is marked by the separation between “knowledge of childhood” and its desire to draw on those assumed understandings applied universally to “knowledge of a particular child” and a commitment to understandings that stem from a desire to engage with children first in the context of their individual lives and second as competent and capable actors in the communities within which they live. This sea change in understanding and positioning of the child should not be underestimated. It is a transition in thinking that is not easy as it demands, following from the ideas above, a reconceptualization of the child that stands in opposition to the dominant framework of contemporary culture in North America and the West more generally.

An acceptance of children as social agents immediately moves them away from simply being seen in the context of protection and provision. For it acknowledges that the individual becomes the central point of meaning-making, rather than adults or society more widely. That does not mean that adults are not important in providing children with safety and supporting their needs, but it does greatly challenge the emphasis of the role that adults take on. Rather than adults, or indeed society, being the force for children’s journey to a perceived moment of competence, children become the key ingredient in understanding what those notions of protection and provision really mean.

For students, and we would argue for society more widely, a realization of this offers a real moment of enlightenment. It places children in a very different type of relationship with society, one in which protection and provision can be seen as a question rather than simply an answer. For if this notion of agency in children is accepted, it requires that society takes an interest in the processes that see children drawing off the adult-centric context within which they live their lives and how this comes to take on meaning as it becomes filtered through that individual child’s sense of identity or personhood (James, 2013). It is such questions that James notes in her reapplication of the notions of socialization (see James, 2013), with implications for more effective understandings of children but which, notably, are framed by the need to allow children’s “participation.” The need to shift society from a model that regards participation as a
possible add-on to one in which participation becomes the foundation for effective protection and provision is a challenge. A desire to address this in our program can be seen in the recent introduction of a Diploma or Certificate in Child Advocacy that builds on students increasing awareness of the forces that have come to shape society’s thinking towards the child and seeks to give practical application to their critique by inviting students to look at how they might challenge this.

An emerging theme from this paper has been the need for us to question and challenge the way in which we come to think about the notion of participation and the way this comes to be applied to children. It is this need to call to account, and to give students this alternative perspective, that sits behind the development of an advocacy certificate. The status quo, through its focus on protection and provision, creates a climate in which it is easy to assume that adults are doing the “right thing.” Our advocacy courses, however, seek to shake students out of a cozy acceptance of the dominant framework, where the version of advocacy that exists simply seeks the adult interpretation of the best interests of the child. Rather, our courses demand that students move beyond an acceptance of participation as a goodwill gesture and see it as a topic in need of enquiry. For example, in one course, students are asked to consider the work of the Provincial Advocate Offices in Canada. Although this review was limited to an investigation of Advocate offices through the way they presented themselves on their websites, it offered a framework for analysis that was significant. This framework encouraged the students to look beyond the positive mission statements and to examine more fully the image of the child that was advanced by that organization. This required examining constructed notions of childhood and the extent to which these come to be presented through particular images of the child. The second aspect of the framework was the importance of looking at the relationship between protection, provision, and participation.

By asking the question and examining this relationship, it recognizes the different agendas that are brought into working with children. As, commented on above, it is not that certain agendas are misguided but that the “agenda” itself is acknowledged and identified. For the approach that draws from a desire to protect and provide is, as we have argued, going to carry with it a particular understanding of the child, one in which adults will continue to both know the questions and have the answers. The result is more protection and more provision. It is not that we are suggesting to students that this is necessarily wrong; rather, we are asking them to pose
the question as to whether it is right. Is “provision” truly offering what is needed and are children “really” being protected? Advocacy can offer an opportunity to re-engage with these questions; however, the current approach by Provincial Advocates is far from consistent or equal in the impact that individual offices have (Howe, 2009).

What this course has allowed students to do, and we would argue which has lessons for society more widely, is first to test and to challenge where we are in terms of engaging with the “new paradigm” as a force for directing our response to children within society, and second to recognize the potential that its application might have. It has become clear that it may be relatively easy to continue to follow a rights agenda led by protection and provision, but what is more of a challenge is to re-engage with the notion of participation. This challenge is highlighted in a Canadian context by the range of approaches that sit within one country’s response to their commitments under the UNCRC. Without a figure head to direct an overall agenda, perhaps this is inevitable, but it certainly means that depending on where you live as a child will determine the extent to which your voice is of value in shaping an agenda that responds effectively to the issues that you face in your life. Yes, there is an expectation that all areas will respond to the horrors of child abuse, but what about those other issues that children face, those issues that we might not be aware of? A focus on vulnerable children, or a focus on case work with individual children (Howe, 2009) rather than with all children, means that many children’s perspectives and concerns are not incorporated into the work that the Provincial Advocates can do. Surely the role of advocates is to identify what those issues are, as they work with children to respond to them. It is not a sufficient response to simply take up the protection and provision model; rather, we should be encouraging our organizations to engage with the “new paradigm,” and from this to establish a response that does not assume understandings of childhood but rather seeks them out, by talking to children and by hearing their response. It is our desire to create such advocates that sits behind the advocacy program, but there is a wider need for a greater acceptance and willingness on behalf of us all to question the way we have come to position children and to be prepared to redefine the foundation of our engagement as a result.

We are thus training tomorrow’s graduate students in aspects of the social study of childhood, with a focus on children’s rights and participation. We hope that those working within children’s rights in Canada will begin to draw on the academic research and teaching on childhood studies in order to begin to carry out research in partnership with academic institutions.
In a recent editorial in the journal *Childhood* (Hanson, 2014), it was argued that while there are commonalities between childhood studies and the children’s rights movement, they are not the same. A more effective approach would be to take on a reflexive and critical approach drawing on the theories developed in the new social study of childhood and using them as tools to enhance both understandings of childhood and of children’s rights. As one student (during the “Children and Justice Practices” course, 2014–15) commented:

“Although this course is rooted in the theoretical, I believe it was much more successful in articulating how this theoretical knowledge may be utilised in a meaningful manner in improving justice practices in a more practical sense ... it is evident that my thinking has been forever altered ... [and] it was very interesting to see this program take the next step in addressing the root issues we have at King’s and in the community surrounding [it] in which individuals do not grasp the childhood studies perspective, or the ultimate goals or beliefs of our program.”

We have a committed core of students graduating every year with a firm background in the issues relevant to children’s rights in Canada, and who have a lot to offer. As Howe and Covell (2007) argued, change in seeing children as rights-bearers in Canada is unlikely to happen until there is an expansion in children’s rights education in schools and in society. The young people of today are the voters and possible advocates of tomorrow (p. 76). We would take this point further: that if we get the model of participation right, then children can also be the advocates of today. While children’s rights education in the elementary and high school context remains a work in progress, at the university level there is potential for educating students as vehicles for change in relation to children’s rights in Canada.

Participation as a concept for pre-new paradigm understandings of the child is restricted. It offers participation as nothing more than lip service or rhetoric to a protection and provision model that is keen to try and do what’s best for the child. It offers a defined hierarchy in which participation sits firmly as a final factor for consideration once protection and provision have been achieved. However, recognizing children’s agency inverts this model completely, presenting challenges to the students that also challenge the way in which we think about childhood education more generally. For participation can no longer be seen as a subsequent follow-on from protection and provision; rather, participation becomes the only foundation on
which effective protection and provision can be achieved. It is only by engaging with the child that we can overcome adult assumptions about children’s best interests and start to engage with children on a level that really asks them what is in their best interests and offers models through which this can be converted into practice.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank the editors of this journal and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

**References**


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