Mapping out the field of children’s participation.
Meanings, narratives and disputes

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Abstract: In the last two decades the concept of participation has been a frame within which researchers and to a lesser extent policy makers have heightened the status and capacities of children and altered inter-generational relations. As the participating child has become an orthodoxy within childhood studies, so in more recent years it has been subject to theoretical and methodological interrogation. Hitherto, the idea of the child as participant was a critical reference point for those challenging the dependent and developmental status of children. As the participating child has now become a taken for granted feature of research, policy and practice agendas, so it has been challenged in terms of its institutional bias, its limited range and its capacity to offer genuine alternatives for children.

This paper provides a critical overview of research on and trends within children’s participation. It starts by outlining the contested meaning of participation and the ever expanding range of contexts within which we can talk about the participating child. The paper goes on to explore three approaches or narratives within the field. First, there is a dominant narrative that shapes policy and practice as well as research focal points. Second, there is a narrative that critically engages with the dominant and normative model. Third there is a newer emergent narrative that both expands and deepens the idea of children’s participation in theoretical and empirical terms. While a more contested and expanded concept of participation is embedded in the emergent narrative, in the final part of paper I will draw on Rawl’s distinction between ‘concept’ and ‘conceptions’ in offering a definition and framework for thinking about children’s participation.