

## **Do All Children Have a Say in Matters Relevant to their Lives? Towards Universal Participation for Diverse Childhoods**

**Panel organiser:** Natallia Sianko

**Panel participants:** Edita Fino (University of Bologna, Italy)  
Migena Kapllanaj (Marin Barleti University, Albania)  
Deborah Kunkel (Clemson University, USA)  
Natallia Sianko (Clemson University, USA)  
Mark A. Small (Clemson University, USA)

### **Themes**

- Child-focused indicators of social trends, policies, and child well-being
- Children's rights indicators
- Innovations in research design and measurement

### **Subthemes**

- Rights of children and adolescents
- Children's participation and voices

### **Summary of the panel**

Children's participation is a human right and a fundamental principle of children's rights. Upon signing and ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (where the right to participation is enshrined), governments around the world acknowledged their obligation to listen to children's views and to facilitate their participation in matters affecting their lives. However, despite nearly universal legal recognition, implementation of Article 12 has not been straightforward. A quick review of reports submitted by governments and the third sector to the Committee on the Rights of the Child reveals that obligations under the right to participation are only partially fulfilled. More than three decades after the UNCRC came into force, questions about how to implement the right to participation effectively remain to be answered. Multiple stakeholders in diverse modern societies, including policy makers, researchers, youth serving professionals and parents, need answers to these questions on behalf of all children who stand to benefit from the right to participation. At the center of this panel are issues regarding measurement of the progress towards implementation of the right to be heard. The central proposition underlying presentations in this panel is that to realize the right to participation fully, one must consider children's own views on participatory opportunities available to them. Without comprehensive assessment of participation through the eyes of children, implementation of the right to participation will remain incomplete. It is therefore paramount to focus our efforts on understanding children's perspectives and experiences regarding the right to be heard.

This panel session brings together four researchers from Europe and North America to initiate a discussion on how a novel approach to measuring children's views on participation can aid in monitoring and implementation of the right to be heard. Using data from the 3<sup>rd</sup> wave of the Children's World's Study, panel participants will share results of a study that examined how 10-year-olds in 18 countries ( $N = 24,807$ ) across Africa, Asia, and Europe view participatory and decision-making opportunities in daily life. In short, the panel consists of four parts and is organized as follows:

1. The first presentation introduces a typology of child participation based on results of latent profile analyses of children's perspectives in 18 countries;
2. The second paper examines how participatory profiles relate to individual characteristics of students (socio-demographic and well-being measures);
3. The third presentation further explores variation in participatory profiles and describes the distribution of each profile in relation to students' scores on safety, support and care measures.
4. The fourth presentation summarizes key findings from each study and offers implications for policy and practice.

In summary, the purpose of this panel is to highlight how and why it is important to consider diversity in children's everyday experiences in order to understand participation more fully. By sharing insights and implications for research and practice, this session aims to show that person-oriented approaches can compliment traditional indicators in measuring children's participation and ultimately fostering more of it.

### **Paper 1**

**Title:** Child-centered Typology of Participation: A Cross-national Analysis of Children's Views in 18 Countries

**Presenter's name, institution and contact:** Natallia Sianko, Clemson University, natalls@clemson.edu

**Abstract:** It is everyday settings, such as schools, community and family that give life to the right to participation. Yet, there is little empirical evidence that connects various domains with assessment of children's participation. Further, studies involving cross-cultural comparisons of how children in different parts of the world view and engage in participatory opportunities are even more scarce. This is an important gap considering that participation is context-specific and that all children, regardless of where they live, should be able to enjoy the right to participate. Using a person-oriented approach and a series of latent variable mixture modeling techniques, this study aimed to identify patterns of participation based on children's responses to questions about engagement in different domains (home, school, local community and the country). In each domain, two themes were explored – respect and participation. In total, eight statements were used to group students: four statements measuring perceptions that adults listen to children and take their views seriously and four statements assessing the extent to which children engage in decision-making with adults within each specific domain. Specific questions were as follows:

- 1) What patterns of participation can be identified among 10-year-old students?
- 2) Do patterns adequately represent children's views across all examined countries?
- 3) How do these patterns vary by country and by region?

The data came from a representative sample of 10- year-olds ( $N = 24,807$ ) in 18 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and South America who participated in the 3rd wave of the International Survey of Children's Well-being (ISCIWeb). We purposefully limited the

number of countries to include only those with complete responses to participation questions in all four domains. Additionally, we limited the analyses to 10-year-olds to avoid potential confounding developmental influences.

Results indicate that in their perceptions of decision-making, children belong to one of four groups: *Respected and Engaged*, *Family Supported*, *Academically and Locally Connected*, and *Alienated*. The patterns that emerged capture the diversity of participation opportunities for children in daily lives and suggest that different children combine these opportunities in different ways. This presentation will describe the nature and prevalence of the identified patterns across countries and discuss the findings in the context of a more holistic assessment of participation among children across diverse societies.

The ultimate goal of the present attempt to measure children's participation is to provide researchers and practitioners with tools to design and enhance various participation efforts that different children may find meaningful and relevant. A related goal is to help professionals working with youth recognize diverse forms of participation that different children might adhere to and to align their strategies with each form, ultimately fostering more participation for all children.

## **Paper 2**

**Title:** Who are the Children in Participation Profiles? A Socio-ecological Description

**Presenter's name, institution and contact:** Edita Fino, University of Bologna,  
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**Abstract:** This presentation builds on the previous work to extend an understanding of patterns of participation using a child-centered approach. Recognizing diversity in child participation and knowing that children combine participatory opportunities in unique ways is an important insight. However, until we know more about individual and contextual characteristics of children in each of the identified profiles, our understanding of the extent to which children enjoy the right to participation will remain incomplete. An issue that deserves attention concerns the links from engagement to well-being and satisfaction with life in different participation profiles and contexts. To this end, this presentation takes a closer look at the composition of each participatory profile and examines the role of socio-demographic characteristics in the analytically derived patterns. Specific questions were addressed in this paper:

- 1) Are participation patterns comparable for male and female students in each country?
- 2) How do family factors (family composition, family economic status, satisfaction with family life) relate to membership in specific participation profiles?
- 3) How do specific participation profiles relate to wellbeing measures (subjective wellbeing, domain-based wellbeing, positive/negative emotions)?

Similar to the first presentation, the analyses also used data from the International Survey of Children's Well-being (ISCIWeb) and included responses from 10-year-old children in 18 countries.

Results indicate that select sociodemographic characteristics (gender and family variables) were unevenly distributed among the identified groups, pointing to the need to account for individual and contextual influences in understanding heterogeneity in child participation. Findings also suggest specific participation profiles were differently related with wellbeing measures, highlighting the importance of examining the extent to which opportunities for participation and engagement can promote wellbeing among 10-year-olds. Understanding how children view opportunities for participation in their daily lives and how they use these opportunities to engage in decision-making is important for those interested in promoting participation and wellbeing among children.

### **Paper 3**

**Title:** Do Child Participatory Profiles Matter? Implications of Profile Membership on Students' Safety, Care and Support Outcomes.

**Presenter's name, institution and contact:** Migena Kapllanaj, Barleti University, [m.kapllanaj@gmail.com](mailto:m.kapllanaj@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This presentation continues the exploration of the four profiles created from latent profile analyses using data from children in 18 countries who participated in the third wave of Children's Worlds survey. Guided by the survey's design, which focused on essential children's rights (referred to as themes) such as safety, care, support, and respect, the presentation examines the relevance of profile membership for each theme. An additional aim of this presentation is to add to cross-national description of participation profiles by examining the distribution of each group while simultaneously considering children's views on safety, care and support. Specific questions for this part of the panel are the following:

- 1) Are there differences among children in different participation profiles in relation to how safe they feel, how much support they have, and how much care they receive from adults in key domains in their life?
- 2) To what extent do children's views on care, support and safety predict profile membership?
- 3) Are these associations evenly distributed across countries? Or does country residence affect the extent to which participatory profile influence other outcomes?

Primary data analyses show that children in different profiles also have different experiences regarding care, support and safety. Additionally, results reveal that profile membership is unevenly distributed among countries pointing to the need to consider local contexts. In sum, the presentation offers an opportunity to revisit the dual nature of child participation, namely its role as a right but also as an indicator of the fulfillment of children rights. The presentation will conclude by discussing how this study can contribute to existing and inform new initiatives to promote participation for all children. The key takeaway is that in order to respect children's rights countries should aim toward higher standards for respect and participation for all children, which will also have an impact on other themes of children lives, such as care, support, and safety, which ultimately could lead to greater well-being.

## **Paper 4**

**Title:** Assessing Child Participation: What Matters for Policy and Practice?

**Presenter's name, institution, and contact:** Mark A. Small, Clemson University,  
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**Abstract:** The opportunity for children to participate in everyday decisions is recognized as an important right within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. To elucidate this right, a first research step has focused on simple descriptions of children's perceptions. To be sure, descriptive statistics serve an important purpose of informing policymakers of which demographic groups may require more attention to increase participation. Additionally, comparing countries' means or percentages may provide some insights on universal norms and cultural influences. Another statistical approach, namely, person-centered analysis via latent variable mixture modeling techniques focuses on profiling particular groups of individuals within and across countries. Creating clusters of individuals has the advantage of providing a foundation to research how distinct groups of children perceive participation in important life domains of family, school and community. To date, there has been little interest in policymakers (and social media) to advocate for more and better participatory experiences for children based on descriptive statistical arguments of country-level differences. A person-centered cluster analysis presents an approach with potentially more appeal.

Additionally, for new child indicator research to be more useful, methodological approaches must also incorporate more contextual analysis. Especially important in child participatory research are questions related to whether children are surrounded by others like themselves, whether they come from traditional or non-traditional families, how schools are structured, and what outside of family and school experiences are available. Studies that utilize a person-centered approach describe how perceptions of participation cohere within an individual may be related to everyday life opportunities across settings. Ideally, such contextual information can be provided through a multi-level ecological model that places a child in the center.

As demonstrated in the three panel papers, what matters for practice and policy is understanding the lived experiences of children, not group averages. Latent profile analysis allows for the creation of groups who are high on participation in some domains, but low in others and the approach reveals variation and co-variation of different dimensions. Within countries, this has important implications for how civic education is both structured and implemented. Assuming participation is an important precursor to adolescent and adult democratic orientation, comparisons of similar clustering groups across countries can provide insight into the overall health of global democracy.

In summary, new methodological approaches to describing, explaining, and predicting child participation are needed by researchers and policy makers. A proposed ecological model is offered to illustrate how findings from a person-centered approach can contribute to policy and practice by increasing opportunities for meaningful participation of children.