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## Deliberators, not Future Citizens: Children in Democracy

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# Deliberators, not Future Citizens: Children in Democracy

## **Abstract**

This paper is a "manifesto" for incorporating children into deliberative democracy. Although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasizes children's right to participation in the process of democracy, their activities and voices still do not receive the attention they merit. There exists a widespread skepticism reinforced by notions of socialization and remediation about children's capacities, knowledge, experiences, and interests in democracy, and this leads to a conceptualization of children as "future citizens." Drawing on the recent scholarship on deliberative democracy, particularly the deliberative system framework, this article reconsiders the capacities and actual contributions of children in democracy, and suggests reconceptualizing children as "deliberators." The perspective of deliberative system in particular helps us to notice the agency and deliberative capacity of children not only in "empowered" decision-making spaces but also in the context of previously unnoticed various democratic activities.

## **Author Biography**

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## **Keywords**

Children, Future Citizens, Children as Citizens, Deliberators, Deliberative System

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## Introduction

Children<sup>1</sup> are “neither seen nor heard.” This is an often-used phrase when childhood scholars discuss the relationship between children and democracy (e.g. Cohen, 2005). It points out the largely ignored places and roles of children in both theory and practice of democracy. Yet, during the past several decades, we also observe a gradual improvement of recognition of children, partly as a result of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, which enabled a number of scholars and practitioners to re-evaluate a variety of children’s participatory activities throughout the world (e.g. Lansdown, 2001; Invernizzi & Williams, 2008; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). These studies invite us to reconsider the role of children in democracy.

However, the serious issue today is that children are “seen *but* not heard” rather than “*neither* seen nor heard.” Despite empirical evidence of children’s crucial democratic role in society, there still exists skepticism about their capacities, such as communication skills, which prevents scholars from taking children’s voices seriously. Furthermore, some scholars fail to take into consideration earnestly children’s various and unique ways of democratic involvement. For example, although non-participation could be interpreted as a “reasonable” political strategy for children to resist adult-centered politics (O’Toole, 2003), it is usually seen merely as evidence of their apathy or rudeness (e.g. Crick Report, 1998). The ignorance of children’s present capacities, knowledge, and/or experiences is often grounded in the current mainstream conceptualization of children – children as *future citizens*.

The aim of this article is to counteract this understanding of children and to contend that it is possible to reconceptualize them and their democratic agency in contemporary societies. In particular, drawing on insights gained from various contexts, this article sets a theoretical agenda for “children as effective agents of democracy.” In doing so, this article engages with several key questions: Why are children often seen as “incapable”? Is a reconceptualization of children as effective democratic agents possible? What theoretical framework/s can effectively appreciate their activities in democratic process? In responding to these questions, this article situates children in the context of *deliberative* democracy, particularly within the idea of *the deliberative system*. Although no deliberative democrats

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines children as those who are under 18 years old. On the basis of this definition, this article will focus mainly on those who are at the period of compulsory education (e.g. aged 6-7 to 15-18) intended to distinguish children from infants. The definition of children is still controversial, and so far there have been many efforts to define and redefine the term. See also, Allison & Alan (2010).

consider the case of children thus far, the systemic understanding of deliberative democracy framework adopted in this article enables a better interpretation and evaluation of children's activities. This framework draws our attention to expanded notions of (a) actors of deliberation (deliberators), (b) spaces of deliberation, and (c) impacts of deliberation. Drawing on recent discussions of deliberative systems and using that as a theoretical framework, this article unpacks children's various democratic engagements as "deliberators" (not future citizens).

The opening section overviews some of the dominant arguments (namely, socialization and remediation) that underpin the conceptualization of "children as future citizens," then the next section problematizes these arguments. In so doing, it contends that children's unique capacities can contribute to the democratization of society in a different way from adults and that they already play a powerful role in democratic processes. In reconceptualizing children as "effective agents of democracy," the following sections argue that deliberative democracy, especially a systemic understanding of it, can provide a better theoretical framework for appreciating children's democratic agency in more defensible ways than the existing framework suggested especially by citizenship studies ("children as citizens" framework). The final section outlines some possible contributions of children as deliberators from the deliberative system's point of view.

### **Children as "Future Citizens"**

Even after the United Nations adopted UNCRC in 1989, a strong skepticism about children's capacities, knowledge, experiences, and activities is still pervasive. Thomas Christiano's viewpoint serves as a useful starting point because it summarizes the dominant approaches to children in democracy:

Children are not capable of elaborating or reflecting on moral principles; they adopt moral ideas from their parents not out of a sense of conviction but out of a desire to please and a sense of trust in their parents. For the same reasons, children do not have a developed sense of their own interests. As a consequence of these points, children are not likely to have elaborated or reflected on ideas of justice and whatever ideas they do express are not likely to reflect their interests. (Christiano, 2001, p. 207)

This view reflects two types of mainstream understanding of children in democracy. One is that children do not have appropriate capacities required for democracy. It sees children as "incapable" beings on the ground that they lack capacities of reflection, and/or judgment. Another is that children lack awareness of interests. In this regard, they are described as those who "do not understand what is at issue in debates about justice and decisions" (Christiano, 2001, p. 207). Thus far, these

arguments have been developed and bolstered by two education-related notions. The former perspective (children as incapable) has been suggested by scholars of *socialization*, while the latter (children as lacking of interests and trust) has triggered the discussion of *remediation*. As I explain further below, both ideas entail a strong future orientation, leading to the conceptualization of “children as *future citizens*.”

The central idea behind socialization, particularly political socialization, is to expect children to prepare to conform to the future democratic society. More specifically, it refers to “the process of how individuals find their place within a political community by acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes with respect to the political system” (Abendschön, 2014, p. 1). On this account, children are often treated as if they are in a state of *tabula rasa* from this perspective (cf. Moss & Petrie, 2002). Scholars adopting this approach place a special emphasis on the term *preparation* (cf. Kahne et al., 2000) so that children’s “emptiness” can be filled up. This line of argument tends to identify skills or virtues that children should acquire within the preparatory process, such as virtues required for liberal democracy (e.g., Gutmann, 1999); autonomy (e.g., Callan, 1997); or rational communication skills (e.g., Reich, 2007). These skills or virtues are seen as an “entrance ticket” to be involved in democracy, which can disqualify children because they are regarded as those who do not have this ticket at present. Several decades ago, Alanen (1988, p. 56) sought to challenge this approach and argued that “the child remains negatively defined...the child is depicted as pre-social, potentially social, in the process of becoming social – essentially undergoing socialization.” This challenge still persists today.

The second line of argument about the role of children in democracy centers around a notion of “remediation,” which problematizes children’s negative attitude toward democracy and then seeks to improve this attitude in order to revitalize democracy. This argument is originally based on the discontent with low levels of interest and trust that children in general have for today’s politics and democracy. Drawing on the low level of interest in political participation across the globe, especially voting, for example, the report from the International Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA, 1999, p. 9) describes this negative tendency as “weakening of democracy.” The “remediation” argument thus emphasizes the need for a citizenship education so that these negative tendencies can be remedied, and thereby democracy can be revived. This is also mentioned in the final report of the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in the UK, known as the Crick Report. According to its diagnosis, there are “worrying levels of apathy, ignorance and cynicism about public life...these could well diminish the hoped-for benefits both of constitutional reform and of the changing nature of the welfare state” (Crick Report, 1998, p. 8). It suggests that this situation “should and could

be *remedied*" (Crick Report, 1998, p. 16) by citizenship education in a way that encourages children to respect and to be interested in democracy. As Biesta (2011, p. 12) puts it, there is an idea that "an alleged crisis in democracy can be adequately addressed by (re)educating individuals by making them [children and young people] "ready" for democratic citizenship through education." Although the Crick Report focuses mostly on issues in the UK context, O'Toole's (2003) study shows that the same concerns, to date, can be found in other countries too.

Both socialization and remediation arguments illuminate children's lack of capacity and the insufficiency of their present agency from different angles. According to Biesta (2011), these sorts of arguments are widely shared, especially in the context of contemporary citizenship education. Yet, it should be noted that these viewpoints have also been found in the real world beyond education. For example, the image of children's "incapacity" underpinned by socialization can strengthen adults' disrespect toward children. This tendency is depicted in a statement made by a state government representative in Queensland, Australia: "I am a bit skeptical of young people being involved in this [community planning] ... What life experiences did they bring?" (Grant-Smith & Edwards, 2011, p. 8). Likewise, remediation can be utilized as a tool for justification of adults' paternalistic restriction of children's political engagements. The official advice letter published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan in 1968, for instance, allowed public schools to prohibit or restrict their students' (aged 15 to 18) political engagement in out-of-school settings such as protesting on the grounds of their insufficient interest in politics. Instead of getting children involved in politics, this letter insists that their insufficiency should be first remedied through a "proper" educational program.<sup>2</sup> Despite their contextual differences, these examples imply that children can and should be disregarded in "real world" politics, as a result of socialization- and remediation-focused viewpoints.

Surely, socialization and remediation are important points that need to be taken into account in the context of education. Nevertheless, children under these perspectives are often seen through the logic of "what they cannot" rather than "what they can" (Alanen, 1988). Even if some civic education projects allow children to engage in "tomorrow's problem ... to develop relevant attitudes, knowledge, and skills" (Kahne et al, 2000, p. 319, emphasis added), their activities still remain enclosed only in a preparatory process for future society. As John Dewey (2004, p. 59) noticed, this sort of future orientation can "sacrifice children's present potential,"

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<sup>2</sup> MEXT. (1969, October, 31). On the political literacy and political activity in Japanese high schools [written in Japanese], Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/118/shiryo/attach/1363604.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/118/shiryo/attach/1363604.htm) This document was finally revised in 2015 in response to the lowering of voting age (from 20 to 18) in Japan

and reinforce a conceptualization of children as *future citizens* (or Doek's (2008) term "children as citizens of tomorrow"). In this conceptualization, their present potential or condition can be implicitly dismissed as being frivolous because they are not regarded as full-fledged members of society until the socialization process finishes. Likewise, since their apathy and lack of interest are seen as something that would run the risk of undermining future democracy (Crick Report, 1998; see also, IDEA, 1999), children are expected to wait until they get interested in democracy to improve or maintain the quality of democracy (cf. Biesta, 2011).

### **Rethinking Children's Potential Capacities and Contributions to Democracy**

So far I have noted that the conceptualization of "children as future citizens" underpinned by socialization and remediation reflects today's mainstream understanding of children in democracy (for similar arguments, see also, Doek, 2008; Biesta, 2011). I contend that this conceptualization is insufficient as it misrecognizes or even downplays children's potential contributions to democracy. To substantiate this argument, in what follows I consider several problems stemming from socialization and remediation approaches.

A problem of socialization is that it assumes children do not have the capacities required for democracy. Anne (2007, p. 30) indicates that when socialization-oriented scholars approach children, their perspectives are often grounded in what she calls "developmental discourses," which place children in a middle stage of development and produce "images of children as vulnerable, immature, and in need of education and socialization if they are to develop into fully competent citizens." In this light, even though this might not be the explicit intent of scholars, adults are regarded as template (Lister, 2008), fixed standard (Dewey, 2004) or state of completion (Moss & Petrie, 2002). This viewpoint sees adults as those who have sufficient capacities to be profoundly involved in democracy and to exert their influence effectively on democratic processes, whereas children are labeled as "less competent" on the grounds that they fall short of this "standard."

Yet, this perspective tends to romanticize existing conditions of adults in the real world because, just as children are less capable than adult citizens, adults might also be more or less capable in actual democratic processes. According to Fishkin (2009), for instance, adult citizens usually have lower levels of knowledge or opinions on current political issues than scholars expect; they are vulnerable to manipulation because they receive information uncritically; they hesitate or even refuse to discuss issues with others who have different opinions. These facts raise the following question: Is it relevant to regard adults as "ideal models" when considering the role of children in democracy?

This, however, is *not* to suggest that adult citizens do not have capacities demanded for democracy at all. Rather, Stoker (2006) argues that a well-functioning democracy puts value on people's different skills, perspectives, and experiences for realizing and vitalizing democracy, even if each contributing individual does not qualify as an "ideal" citizen. He calls this idea "politics for amateurs." As such, "politics for amateurs" shifts the focus from the need to create "perfect" citizens to the overall design of democracy. If a well-functioning democracy should be open to the contribution of those who are not always fully capable citizens, as Stoker notes, there is no reason for postponing children's participation in democracy under the guise of "lack of capacities." Similar to adults who utilize their different capacities in democratic processes, children, in the context of "politics for amateurs," can potentially contribute to democracy, as well, by making use of their *unique* capacities in a different way from adults.

One of their unique capacities stems from what Dewey calls "immaturity." Contrary to the general understanding of immaturity as emptiness or lacking, Dewey (2004, p. 46) defines it as "a positive force or ability – the power to grow." Since children are immature physically as well as socially, they inevitably utilize their available possibilities to survive by learning from others, employing their sense of wonder or imagination, or challenging anything without fear of failure.

In the context of democracy, children's immaturity has multiple functions. First of all, immaturity enables them to question and challenge norms or taken-for-granted perspectives in the adult world. Since children are immature, everything in their world can be subject to their sense of wonder and curiosity, which encourages them to question, to inquire keenly, and to exercise imagination. Given this, several scholars describe children as "philosophers (e.g., Matthews, 1994; Gopnik, 2009). Their philosopher-like activities (most notably their questions such as "why?" "what is the meaning?" or contestations such as "why should I?") can potentially cast critical eyes toward cultural traditions or dominant discourses in society that most adults tend to accept uncritically, thereby helping adults deepen their understanding of social issues in a reflective way.

For example, in southern Malawi, there was a tradition that young girls were sent to a traditional "initiation camp" (called *kusasa fumbi*) that instructed them how to sexually please a man under the guise of "cleansing childhood dust" and "preparation for adulthood," and some children got pregnant in this camp. When Memory Banda, currently a young activist in Malawi, turned 11 years old, she resisted by refusing to go to this camp and began questioning this tradition as she could not understand *why* she should go there and please a man. Instead of going to this camp, she organized a female community with several social activists and initiated resistance as a leader of this group. Her efforts encouraged many women

and finally resulted in the outlawing of child marriage in her country. As this story illustrates, children's why-based interrogations can contribute to changing adult minds, posing important questions of their taken-for-granted cultural traditions or discriminative social norms.

Second, children's voices, activities, or even their existence itself can trigger broader sympathy and cooperation. Think about the following questions: Why do Malala Yousafzai's activities and voice strike many people's hearts more effectively than other victims of the Taliban? Why did the photo of a Syrian child refugee who was washed ashore in Turkey foster controversy on a refugee issue all over the world, though there are a lot of photos of the catastrophic condition of Syrian refugees?<sup>3</sup> Why does children's pain often pull our heartstrings directly, as Gopnik (2009) indicates? My, and Dewey's (2004, p. 46), answer is that children have a "power to enlist the cooperative attention of others." Compared to adults in general, children are so immature that they cannot survive alone. This fact gives them an ability to elicit adult's sympathetic care and responses – Dewey calls this ability "social capacity." Due to this ability, children's voices or activities can impact society effectively in ways that call for attention and sympathy from people who previously were not concerned about issues under discussion. By referring to the case of the children's peace-making movement in Columbia, for example, Cameron (2000) reports "the voices of children against violence can be an inspiration for adults ... their power seems to lie not just in the eloquence of their words, but in *the fact that they are said by children*" (p. 44, emphasis added).

These arguments help counteract the claims put forward by socialization scholars. Of course children may be less competent than adults from a developmental psychological point of view, and socialization can play a role in empowering children. However, what I emphasize here is that it is not the only perspective when thinking about the relationship between children and democracy. Children can have unique capacities and use them for democracy in a different way than adults do. This is what socialization scholarship often fails to recognize.

When it comes to the problem of remediation, it runs the risk of disregarding the powerful role that children *already* play in democracy in various spaces and ways. Children's present democratic actions can actually be found in multiple levels. In the formal level, for example, Lansdown (2010, p. 20) classifies their activities as consultative participation; collaborative participation; child-led participation. In addition, their democratic activities can also be found in everyday settings to revitalize their public life from the grassroots. As several childhood scholars already

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<sup>3</sup> It finally became the top trending picture on Twitter's hashtag (#KiyiyaVuranInsanlik (humanity washed ashore) in September 2015.

demonstrate (e.g. Kallio & Häkli, 2011a; Wood, 2014), children usually belong to variety of social spaces such as family, peer cultures, voluntary associations, or media, and these spaces often entail different types of political issues (e.g. poverty, discrimination, inequality). While these political issues risk discouraging children from participating in democracy, the process of negotiation and contestation for dealing with these political issues in their everyday life can also be a booster to get them involved in the process of democracy at a grassroots level (see Yousafzai with Lamb, 2013).

Moreover, some activities that are understood as “meaningless” or “lazy” from adults’ point of view could be interpreted as “reasonable” strategies for children to become involved in democracy. Jungkunz (2012) illustrates this happening through a story of a silent female student at school. During the class, this student says nothing to teachers or her classmates. When a teacher calls upon her several times, she keeps silent. Although her silence and non-participation in classroom activities seems odd, her engagement of silence turns out to be her protest against the harassment of her LGBT classmates. Jungkunz (2012, pp. 127-128) remarks, “her silence acts as a valuable protest and teaching lesson, as it exposes how the absence of a given voice really matters, thereby demonstrating how much we stand to lose due to exclusionary practices.” As this story illustrates, even seemingly “meaningless” activity could turn out to play a significant role in democracy when seen from different angles. Kallio and Häkli (2011b) call this sort of children’s activity “the voiceless politics.” The point here is that, as opposed to what proponents of the remediation suggest, children’s seemingly “apathetic” or “distrustful” (e.g. Crick Report, 1998) behaviors could be their “active” democratic engagement (see also, O’Toole (2003) in his case of non-participation as “active” political response).

Overall, the conceptualization of “children as future citizens” underpinned either by socialization or remediation arguments fails to capture the unique capacities children have and the ways in which children already contribute to the realization of democracy. The arguments that emphasize “children as future citizens” is just to oversimplify, or even downplay, children’s unique capacities and their actual democratic role. Insofar as children are situated in the future society rather than the present one, it would be next to impossible for their activities and voices to be taken into consideration seriously.

### **From (Future) Citizens to Deliberators in the Deliberative System**

In order to move away from the conceptualization of “children as future citizens” and to appreciate adequately children’s present capacities and various contributions to today’s democracy, we need to consider an alternative framework. What sort of

theoretical framework is effective? One alternative framework is suggested by what scholars (e.g., Austin, 2010; Fowler, 2014; Jans, 2004) call “children as *citizens*.” This framework has increasingly been discussed, especially after the adoption of UNCRC, and it is now widely utilized, especially in the study of children’s citizenship (e.g., Invernizzi & Williams, 2008). This framework attempts to acknowledge the equality (not equation) of citizenship between adults and children, arguing the significance of incorporating children into the process of decision-making or problem-solving on topics regarding not only children’s affairs but also others affecting the present and future societies (Liebel, 2008).

It is certainly true that the “children as citizens” framework enables us to capture more effectively the role of children in democracy. Yet, it still remains insufficient for fully understanding children’s unique capacities and their present involvement in democracy due to, as shall be discussed below, its narrow understanding of “actors,” “spaces,” and “impacts” regarding children’s democratic engagement. Instead, in order to overcome these limitations, I suggest considering a broader understanding of children in democracy, reconceptualizing their role from the perspective of *deliberative democracy*. This perspective acknowledges the strength of “children as citizens” framework discussed above *and* goes beyond it in several important ways.

Deliberative democracy currently stands at the core of contemporary democratic theory and practice. Broadly speaking, it is a normative theory of democratic legitimacy and inclusion, placing a special emphasis on a variety of communicative activities (e.g. reason-giving, storytelling, listening, rhetoric) that induce some sort of reflection (Dryzek, 2000). Deliberative democracy emphasizes the need for effective justification of positions, reciprocal understanding across difference, the inclusion of those who were previously ignored or marginalized, and reflective thinking. These activities are promoted through communicative processes without “coercive, deceptive, and strategic use of language” (Ercañ & Dryzek, 2015, p. 241). Deliberative democracy, in principle, values the inclusion of those who are marginalized as a result of challenging conditions (e.g. incapacity, poverty) by offering various opportunities for their voices to be heard. As such, it offers a promising starting point to understand and appreciate the role of children in democracy.

In recent years, deliberative democrats have come gradually to pay special attention to the idea of *the deliberative system* (Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge, 1999; Mansbridge et al., 2012) as a new theoretical framework. In its core, the deliberative system is seen as the ensemble of multiple communicative activities and their interactions occurring across different places and time. According to Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 4), “system” here means “a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but

to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labor, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole.” Instead of seeing deliberation as a one-off communicative activity occurring in an isolated deliberative forum, a deliberative system “requires some functional division of labor so that some parts do work that others cannot do as well.”

In what follows, I explain why the deliberative system offers a more effective framework for reconceptualizing children by comparing it with a “children as citizens” framework. In doing so, I pay particular attention to the way the deliberative system approach expands the notions of “actors,” “spaces,” and “impacts” of democratic activity.

### **Actors**

In recognizing children as “citizens,” one major strategy is to include them in the decision-making and problem-solving processes with adults (or under the supervision of adults). A number of projects have been designed for this purpose in the form of, for example, child congress, community planning, consultative forum, or child-led youth parliament (Lansdown, 2001, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2011). However, focusing intensively on these projects sometimes narrows the potential contribution of children. This is because this framework can recognize children as citizens *only when* they are recruited by adults to participate in the specific democratic activities and to engage actively with the selected and substantive issues (Kallio, 2012). Such projects and the underlying “children as citizens” framework appreciate only limited and/or exceptional children’s involvement in democracy. As such, they fail to recognize the potential role of the “outsiders” of the specific democratic forum, who may be involved in democracy in a different way.

One benefit of the deliberative system’s viewpoint, by contrast, is that it can acknowledge these “outsiders” as effective agents of democracy by focusing on how they contribute to and enhance the *overall* quality of the deliberative system. In other words, the deliberative system allows room for incorporating and taking into account children’s unique involvement in democracy, even if their individual activity does not always have a real influence on official policy actions. Protesting is one such example. Protesting itself may not have a direct influence on decision-making in the official discourse or solve a public problem immediately. Yet, children’s protests have the potential to vitalize deliberations as a systemic whole in ways, for example, that trigger adults’ public deliberation, bring previously unnoticed children’s voices to the wider public, or alter the preferences of adults

who represent children (e.g., Kallio & Häkli, 2011b).<sup>4</sup> Surely, as the “children as citizens” line of argument insists, participating in particular deliberative forums such as child congress or youth parliament is one of the crucial ways for children to act as agents of democracy. However, what the deliberative system emphasizes is that this is *not* the only way that children can be recognized as democratic agents.

## Spaces

The “children as citizens” perspective is often grounded in the single-forum-based understanding of children’s democratic engagement. Attention is generally paid to their performances in a specific forum (child congress, youth parliament, civil society, non-governmental public debate, etc.), and criteria to appreciate their democratic engagement are, therefore, based on the way in which they perform actively within the confine of the individual forum (Malone & Hartung, 2010). As Sinclair (2004, p.116) puts it, the challenge of this sort of understanding is “how to move beyond one-off or isolated consultations.”

The deliberative system framework makes this possible by emphasizing the need for considering a variety of social spaces and their interrelationship as potential components of the deliberative system. Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 2) note that the deliberative system “expands the scale of analysis beyond the individual site and allows us to think about deliberations that develop among and between the sites over time.” One beneficial point of this perspective is that it enables us to appreciate children’s various democratic actions beyond the wall of particular forums in terms of a broader deliberative system.

For instance, one particularly crucial activity that enables the deliberative system to occur is “transmission” (Dryzek, 2010). It refers to the activities that make a linkage and transmit a discourse between one component of the deliberative system and another. Lyons’s (2015) empirical findings show that Internet memes shared via hashtag and hyperlink on Twitter or Facebook makes transmission possible, provoking viewers’ emotional and reflective reactions and trigger their political talk across offline as well as online spaces. Although Internet memes *per se* are not deliberative, Lyons (2015, p. 8) indicates that they represent a communicative action that can vitalize public deliberation in ways that “allow for new species of linkage in the deliberative system.” This study does not explicitly mention the case

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<sup>4</sup> This, of course, does not mean that every activity is seen as a part of the deliberative system. As Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 19) note, “without criteria to evaluate when non-deliberative, weakly deliberative, or even anti-deliberative behavior nevertheless enhances the deliberative system, one risks falling into the blind spot of old style functionalism.” Hence, advocates of a deliberative system are seeking to establish criteria to evaluate various deliberations in the deliberative system. See, for example, Dryzek (2010).

of children, but it is also applicable in the case of children. This is because, as Hess and McAvoy (2015) discuss, Internet forums, especially social media, hosts various new and crucial means for children to represent their everyday lives and political experiences to broader publics (see also, Block & Buckingham (2007)).

Another significant aspect of the deliberative system is that it values children's everyday practices as a part of the system. While the majority of children do not usually enjoy the opportunity to participate in an official democratic forum (Wall, 2011), they carry out various activities in their everyday settings (e.g. family, friend groups) as democratic agents. The efficacy of everyday settings in the deliberative system has already been acknowledged by Mansbridge (2007, p. 267). who wrote that "when many individuals engage in everyday talk, update their earlier ideas, and coordinate on a new, temporarily settled conviction, the society itself may be said to have "decided" and a new "authoritative allocation of values" is born." This view provides useful insight into reevaluating the significance of children's everyday democratic engagement, even when such engagement occurs beyond the confines of a specific democratic forum.

## Impacts

One of the contributions of "children as citizens" scholarship is that it has demonstrated that children can play a powerful role in decision-making and problem-solving by exerting their active citizenship when given appropriate opportunities (Austin, 2010). In 1999, for example, more than 600 children from more than 100 countries gathered in Hawaii to participate in *The Millennium Young People's Congress* supported by the United Nations. In this congress, children discussed and assessed issues for their future (e.g. education, peace-building, HIV/AIDS); shared experiences; and determined strategies for the globalized world. As a part of the outcome of the five-day discussion, they decided to establish *Be The Change*. This is a child-led sustainable development action program, aimed at providing funding for small-sized community improvement projects in developing countries or areas that contribute to the sustainable development all over the world, such as a water supply project in Tanzania (Lansdown, 2001).

While this outcome indeed represents a tremendous impact of children's democratic engagement, proponents of a "children as citizens" approach tend to focus on and overemphasize this sort of "explicit" impact when evaluating children's contributions to democracy. As such, they risk underestimating the role and contribution of more "nuanced" but crucial impacts of children's democratic actions (Kallio & Häkli, 2011b; Kallio, 2012). The merit of the deliberative system framework here is that it can assess impacts of a children's series of democratic engagements, including *both* clear-cut impacts and more nuanced ones, by seeing

them from various angles. From the deliberative system perspective, as Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 3) indicate, “a single part, which in itself may have low or even negative deliberative quality with respect to one of several deliberative ideals, may nevertheless make an important contribution to an overall deliberative system.” As such, even when children’s deliberation is seen as “less influential,” the deliberative system approach could provide alternative pathways for interpretation and appreciation of these activities.

For example, as noted before, children’s protest activity, underpinned by their unique capacities, does not have a direct influence on official policy actions. Nor is it always deliberative. But, as discussed, children’s immaturity-based actions can still cause adults to question their taken-for-granted views and inspire sympathetic or cooperative responses by appealing to their heartstrings directly (e.g. Yousafzai with Lamb, 2013). This may occasionally produce other important “impacts,” such as achieving mutual understanding among those who have been hostile to each other or bringing previously ignored voices to the fore.

Overall, the strength of the deliberative system framework and its capacity to conceptualize children as *deliberators* lie in its broader understandings of (a) actors (deliberators), (b) spaces of children’s democratic engagements, and (c) impacts of children’s activities. In making these points, however, I do *not* suggest that “children as citizens” and “children as deliberators” frameworks are mutually exclusive. I appreciate both arguments because of their common focus, which seeks to move away from the conceptualization of children as “future citizens.” Yet, for the reasons discussed above, a “children as deliberators” framework enables a better appreciation and more effective interpretation of children’s various democratic engagements than a “children as citizens” framework.

### **Children as Deliberators in the Deliberative System**

What I have discussed so far is twofold: children already play a role as agents in democracy by utilizing their unique capacities, and the deliberative system framework offers a promising starting point to understand and appreciate children’s various democratic engagements. To support these arguments in more detail, the final section will discuss how children can potentially act as deliberators in the real world, viewing their varied involvement in democracy through the lens of the deliberative system.

### **Children as Deliberators in/over the Empowered Space**

As the discussion of “children as citizens” illustrates, children can play a powerful and influential role in decision-making or problem-solving in the empowered space

where “collective decisions and so exercising some kind of public authority” are produced (Stevenson & Dryzek, 2014, p. 28). There exists ample evidence that shows children can generate some sort of public authority in the local governance or law reform process when given the appropriate opportunities (e.g. Lansdown, 2001; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). After UNCRC in 1989, in particular, a number of deliberative practices in empowered spaces have been conducted worldwide, such as Children’s Parliament in India (1998); Dikwankwetla (children in action) in South Africa (2003-2007); and Child Friendly Local Governance (CFLG) in Nepal. From the deliberative systems perspective, these sorts of children’s deliberations are valuable in themselves as tools for children’s empowerment, but they are also appreciated in terms of the deliberative system as a whole because they can potentially exert a real influence on other parts of the system, such as triggering adults’ deliberation in the public space or in the official policy making process.

### **Children as Deliberators in/over the Public Space**

It is true that not all children can have an equal opportunity to get involved in deliberation in the empowered space. Regardless of this fact, the deliberative system framework can appreciate children’s activities in the public space as influential and beneficial components of the system as a whole. Compared to the empowered space, public space is a relatively freer and broader communication-based space with few legal restrictions (Dryzek, 2010). The public space is important for children because it can have the potential to bridge children’s everyday life and broader society (e.g., Moss & Petrie, 2002). Some children participate in deliberation in the public space in ways that join particular adult-initiated civil society (e.g., Anne, 2008), and some children act as deliberators in the public space by participating in child-led participatory projects (Austin, 2010; Lansdown, 2010). Even if some public spaces are still difficult for children to access and to exert their influence, they can act as deliberators in the public space because they have their own or child-led semi-public space – what Moss and Petrie (2002, p. 106) call “children’s space.” It is a space that “can encompass a wide range of out-of-home settings where groups of children and young people come together.” These may include youth clubs, churches, playgrounds, community centers, peer culture, and so forth. In these spaces, as Moss and Petrie (2002) note, “children are understood as fellow citizens with rights, participating members of the social groups in which they find themselves, agents of their own lives but also interdependent with others, co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture” (p. 106).

Activism can be considered as another example of “children as deliberators” in the public space. Children’s activism is often triggered by youth generation (aged 18

to 25) influences. In Japan, for instance, since the establishment of an anti-government student activist group (SEALDs: Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy) in 2013, a large number of young people, particularly university students, have been conducting protests against the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets and the Japanese prime minister's (Shinzo Abe) self-defense bill. SEALDs organizes a lot of demonstrations and protest activities in many places in Japan.<sup>5</sup> At that time, inspired significantly by SEALDs's activities, some teenagers, especially high school students (aged 15-18), established a teenager-centered anti-government protest organization (T-ns SOWL: Teens Stand up to Oppose War Law)<sup>6</sup> and continued their protest activity against the Japanese government. Aside from protesting, they frequently organized teenager-only deliberative meetings (called SESS10N). Utilizing Twitter and Facebook (e.g., #Seifukudemo (demonstration with school uniform)) as their main tool for transmission of their collective voice, slogan, or discourse generated from these meetings, they became a powerful activist group by mobilizing demonstration and deliberation of those who view and respond to their posts and hashtag. This sort of children's activism inspired by youth activity can be found across the world (e.g., Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan).

Skeptics might reject notions of activism as deliberative because it often rejects democratic deliberation and instead employs strategic use of language when appealing to the broader public (Medearis, 2005). They might also argue that activism is anti-deliberative because of the lack of representation in forums, potential government manipulation and the absence of actual consequences (cf. Mendonça & Ercan, 2015). Nevertheless, as Young (2001, p. 680) rightly argued, activism empowers relatively powerless citizens (e.g. children) in ways that "continue to criticize processes of public deliberation from the outside." Engagement in activism enables those who do not have access to the empowered space. It provides them with the opportunity to protest against illegitimate deliberative process, to call public attention to inequalities, and to offer remedies. Activism itself can oppose the idea of deliberation; however, the deliberative system approach allows room for incorporating activism as a legitimate democratic activity supporting the idea of systemic inclusion by giving voice to "voiceless" or previously "ignored" social agents. Hence, children's activism like T-ns SOWL can potentially be interpreted in terms of communicative activities that may undermine

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<sup>5</sup> On August 30, 2015, for example, the estimated number of participants in SEALDs's protest was 30,000. See, Julian, R., (2015, September 9). A look at Japan's anti-government protests. *DW (Deutsche Welle)*, Retrieved from <http://www.dw.com/en/a-look-at-japans-anti-government-protests/a-18693387>

<sup>6</sup> Details on their ongoing activities can be found at their official website (<http://teenssowl.jimdo.com>)

deliberation at a micro level but not at a system level because activism led by marginalized groups is “sometimes necessary to generate counter-hegemonic ideas” (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 7) to improve the democratic quality of formal deliberations.

### **Children as Everyday Activists**

Children can also act as deliberators even in their everyday settings in the form of “everyday activists.” According to Mansbridge (1999, p. 217), everyday activism occurs “when a nonactivist takes an action in order to change others’ actions or beliefs on an issue that the public ought to discuss.” As Kallio and Häkli (2011a) argue, children often struggle with “politics” in their everyday settings because these settings often entail major political and social issues such as economic inequality, war, or discrimination. Everyday activism usually centers on non-deliberative and strategic actions such as protest, negotiation, and persuasion to deal with these issues in a way that changes others’ minds or behavior. Yet, they can nevertheless produce “deliberative” outcomes when seen through the systemic perspective because they can evoke people’s reflective internal deliberation. As mentioned before, this is because children’s unique capacities of questioning adults’ taken-for-granted perspectives and of fostering sympathetic activity of others could potentially play a valid role in democracy. Using these capacities, everyday activists make their voices audible and visible in society.

Although little attention has been given by childhood scholars to children’s everyday activism both empirically and theoretically, it is possible to observe the way in which children act as everyday activists through a film titled *Entre les Murs* (English title: *The Class*) directed by Cantet Laurent (2008). This movie is based on an autobiographical novel of experiences of Bégaudeau, a French teacher in a high school where various non-French speaking students attend. At the beginning of this movie, Bégaudeau frequently gets angry with his students because of their rebellious attitudes and apathy toward learning French grammar. On the other hand, students also feel dissatisfied with Bégaudeau’s attitude because they are forced to learn only white-centric French language culture, and thus some of them rebel against him. For example, when Bégaudeau writes, “Bill eats a flavored food,” African female students protest by asking: “Why do you always use only white people’s names such as Bill?” Bégaudeau takes an oppressive attitude toward his students at the beginning of the first semester. Yet, through communicating with them and coping with their protests, he gradually realizes students’ political background on the immigration issue in France and the reason why they resist European cultures. In consequence, he alters his authoritative way of teaching and attitude toward them.

Everyday protesting and complaining of children are not always qualified as “deliberative” actions, and adults often think this sort of children’s activity is “annoying.” Yet, it would be possible to interpret the everyday activism as one possibly effective strategy to get children involved in the deliberative system. As the movie discussed above illustrates, children’s everyday activism enables them to organize some sort of counterpublic within the classroom by challenging and questioning Bégaudeau’s taken-for-granted perspective. Consequently, this enables them to democratize their school life in a way that provokes Bégaudeau’s internal reflection and deliberation about the multicultural conditions in French society. The deliberative system perspective acknowledges this sort of children’s action as it helps to foster mutual understanding among previously hostile groups. The mutual understanding generated from commutative actions is what Mansbridge et al (2012, p. 11) call the “ethical” function of the deliberative system aiming to foster prospects for deliberation across difference.

### **Children as Agents of Transmission**

In addition to such social spaces where children can be recognized as deliberators, children can also serve as the agents of transmission. As briefly discussed above, social media, like Twitter, Facebook, or blogs can transmit discourses across both online and offline spaces, whereby a new link within deliberative system can be produced (Lyons, 2015). Such Internet-based media also makes transmission possible by promoting people’s “discursive participation.” According to Jacobs et al. (2009, p. 3), discursive participation refers to “the process of citizens talking, discussing, and deliberating with each other on public issues that affect the communities in which they live.” It includes, for example one-on-one conversations, Internet communications, participation in more collective conversations, and so forth (see, Jacobs et al., 2009, p. 35).

Before becoming famous, for instance, Malala Yousafzai talked with her friends and father about political issues in their village almost every day (*one-to-one talking about public issues*), which motivated them to resist their dominant culture in Pakistan. This experience also triggered her to act as a BBC blogger (her pen name was *Gul Makai*). Building upon her daily conversations with her father and her classmates, she continuously expressed her opinion and feelings about the significance of education for everyone; terrible political conditions in her village; the terror of war; and Islamic culture (*Internet communication*). Her blogs received a great deal of attention both domestically and globally, which promoted people’s political talk all over the world (promoting *participation in more collective conversations*). Her transmitted opinions via Internet-based media finally evoked broader public deliberations of human right, women’s right to schooling, and peace-making. She described it as: “we are learning how to struggle. And we were

learning how powerful we are when we speak” (Yousafzai with Lamb, 2011, p. 131). As such, combining her daily interaction with the broad reach of the Internet, discourse produced in her everyday talk and BBC blog called for attention, sympathy, and deliberation from people who previously were not concerned about issues in Pakistan, and thereby created new linkages between her and the wider public space all over the world. Although her blog draws on her daily deliberations on various topics, this blog itself may not be “deliberative.” Yet, the deliberative system approach reveals the deliberative potential of the blog provided that it induces reflection and promotes broader discursive participation and public deliberation across the world.

In these ways, children do play an influential role as effective agents in the deliberative system. This article classifies these democratic roles of children for descriptive purposes. This classification helps us to appreciate various contributions of children in the deliberative system, although not each and every activity qualifies as deliberative in itself. Also, these democratic activities are often intertwined with each other. For example, in the case of T-n's SOWL in Japan, their use of Twitter and Facebook makes children act as activists (by expressing critical messages about Japanese government) as well as agents of transmission (by creating new linkages between their activities and broader public, using hashtag (e.g. #Seifukudemo (demonstration with school uniform))). In light of the deliberative system approach, even those activities and performances previously regarded as “less influential” or “non-deliberative” activities and performances (on the ground of their limited impacts) could be interpreted and reevaluated as pivotal components in democratic society. When seen through the deliberative systems point of view, therefore, children are no mere “future citizens,” but serve already as actual deliberators.

## **Conclusion**

This article is a sort of manifesto that seeks to incorporate children into democracy by moving away from today’s dominant understanding of “children as future citizens.” It problematizes particularly two dominant education-related approaches to children (socialization and remediation) for reinforcing the idea of “children as future citizens” and ignoring the actual and unique contribution children already make to democracy. In order to emancipate children from the image of “future citizens,” this article employs insights gained from deliberative democracy, particularly a systemic understanding of it. The deliberative system approach enables us to reconceptualize children as effective agents in democratic society – or as deliberators. By using the deliberative system as the theoretical framework, this article considers various examples of children’s democratic activities in the real world and suggests classifying these activities in four types – children as

deliberators in/over the empowered space and the public space, children as everyday activists, and children as agents of transmission. Even if this does *not* mean that every activity of children can be worth calling deliberation, this article suggests it is possible to re-evaluate and re-interpret the existing democratic activities of children as important components of contemporary democracies.

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