

## **A Critical Examination of the ways Researchers have Conceptualized Children's Political Understanding and Participation**

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### ABSTRACT

Although a growing number of children take part in political actions in various ways, Korean society seems to be without consensus on what forms of civic/political actions are desirable or allowable for such young students. Educational researchers could contribute to this ongoing discussion by deepening our knowledge of children's civic/political understanding and participation. However, existing research has not settled on any single theoretical lens for approaching this topic area. What theoretical framework would help educational researchers better understand this topic? This paper is intended to lay some of the groundwork for answering this question by examining the ways that scholars have conceptualized children's political understanding and participation, particularly in the field of psychology and childhood studies.

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## I. Introduction

Our society is observing a growing number of children who express their voices regarding political issues and are active in the political arena—an arena that has been traditionally considered the domain of adults. Although individuals under the age of 19 have not been allowed to exert their voting rights in South Korea, there are numerous alternative ways for them to take part in civic/political actions (e.g., individual picketing). However, Korean society does not seem to have arrived at a consensus over what forms of civic/political actions are desirable or allowable for such young students. Educational researchers could contribute to this ongoing discussion by deepening our knowledge of children's political understanding and participation. However, not surprisingly, existing research has not settled on any single theoretical lens for approaching this topic area. What theoretical framework would help educational researchers better understand this topic? This paper is intended to lay some of the groundwork for answering this question by examining the ways that scholars have conceptualized children's political understanding and participation.

It is political scientists who have been generally interested in the political participation of citizens. However, as the interest of educational researchers lies particularly in children's civic/political understanding and participation, it would be more beneficial to focus primarily on how this topic has been conceptualized by psychologists and childhood educators, rather than by political scientists who are more focused on adults and have less of a commitment to civic education in their research. This is not to say that I ignore the theoretical contributions of political scientists to the studies done by scholars in other fields; in point of fact, it is hard to separate one particular field's influences from those of other fields, as the topic itself requires an inter-disciplinary approach.

This paper begins by reviewing how children's political understanding has been approached in the field of psychology. Then, it reviews the ways of conceptualizing children's political participation in the area of childhood studies, which examines early childhood in its own right and takes a more sociological view in studying childhood. It is almost self-evident that some consideration of children's knowledge about political worlds is needed in order to address their political participation. However, while psychologists seem to hone in on what children know about political worlds and how they acquire this knowledge, childhood studies puts more emphasis on the political actions that children may take part in. For this reason, it was necessary to draw from the frameworks applied in these two distinct yet interconnected areas of study.

Culminating in a discussion of how the topic of children's political perceptions and participation may be more productively addressed in the future, this paper first introduces

distinct ways of conceptualizing this topic found in existing studies conducted in Europe and North America. While individual frameworks reviewed along the way may be of interest to the reader, they will also provide necessary context and substance for the larger question of how best to move forward in future research.

## **II. Field of Psychology**

In the field of psychology, scholars have studied the topic of children's political understanding and participation from several different approaches according to how they conceptualize children's political development; referring to two seminal books in the field, *The Development of Political Understanding: A New Perspective* (1992) and *Children's Understanding of Society* (2005), I identified three distinct approaches, named the 'political socialization approach', the 'traditional developmental approach', and the 'contextualist approach'. Research under the umbrella of political socialization surged in the 1950s and later diminished around the early 1970s, reflecting the era's special interest in maintaining political stability. Then, heavily influenced by the stage-based developmental theories, the traditional developmental approach remained dominant until developmental psychologists shifted their emphasis from age-related changes in child development to the sociocultural contexts in which development occurs.

### **A. Political Socialization Approach**

The political socialization approach is distinguished from the others in that it conceptualizes political development as socialization. Based on the belief that children can be molded by social forces into holding a certain political orientation, it is mainly concerned with "how a society is reproduced from one generation to the next" (Haste & Torney-Purta, 1992, p. 1). In other words, from the political socialization approach, if socialization agencies, such as family, school, and media, adequately function, a society can continue to flourish by raising societal members having a desired set of faculties and behaviors associated with the political arena (Hess & Torney, 1967).

Unlike the traditional developmental approach and sociocultural approach, the political socialization approach sees children as passive beings who merely consume given political knowledge and information; their capacity to construct knowledge is not adequately appreciated. Early childhood is regarded as important stage under the socialization model—not in its own right, but because some antecedent conditions for future outcomes such as voting are observed among young children (Astuto & Ruck, 2010). According to the socialization model, children's political understandings (e.g.,

their perception of authoritative figures and political institutions) emerge in early years (even at ages under 6-7 years) and have association with their anticipated political participation in adulthood.

For scholars using the political socialization approach, while parents' beliefs, teachers' attitudes and media exposure have been considered critical factors in shaping children's political understandings or attitudes, the influence of the different sociocultural contexts in which children live, such as ethnicity, gender, or social class, has not been fully acknowledged. When gender or class differences are discussed in the socialization studies, they are considered as just one of the independent variables that are separated from the individual's thinking, attitudes and behaviors. It should be kept in mind that the main purpose of research within this approach is to find out general paths of political socialization rather than to zoom in on individual differences among social groups.

## **B. Traditional Development Approach**

Unlike the political socialization approach, which views political development as a process by which children can be assimilated into a given society, for developmental psychologists, political development is understood as the growth of children's societal cognition. The most notable differences lie in its different perception of the relation between society and individuals. Unlike the political socialization approach that gives social forces precedence over individual agency, developmental psychologists emphasize individual agency. In other words, from the developmental psychologists' perspective, children are active in making sense of the social world. Political cognition, as one aspect of children's understanding of the large society, involves a slightly narrower sense of the word 'political': "political institutions and their operation, political values and ideologies" (Berti, 2005, p. 71).

Although developmental researchers share a belief in children's capacity to construct knowledge among developmental researchers, they can be divided into two camps according to their explanations of how this process occurs and how the sociocultural contexts are involved in the process. To distinguish the stage-based developmental models from more recent trends in developmental psychology that emphasize contexts, I refer to the former 'traditional developmental approach' from now on.

Early studies on children's understanding of society have been guided by the stage-based developmental models proposed by Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erickson. Among others, the Piagetian stages of development have had tremendous influences on the research into the children's political understandings. In Piaget's theory, a child's societal cognition develops in a consistent order of succession following certain stages: 1) egocentric and preoperational characteristics (up to 6-7 years of age), 2) concrete

operational characteristics (between 6-7 and 10-11 years of age), and 3) relatively decentered abstract thinking (from 11 years of age onwards) (Barrett and Buchanan-Barrow, 2005). Drawing on the Piagetian theory, many researchers have tried to look for distinctive age-related changes in children's political understanding, and their findings commonly echo the Piagetian developmental stages (Hess & Torney-Purta, 1967; Melton, 1980; Moore, Lare, & Wagmer, 1985). For example, Melton (1980) concludes that children's conceptions of rights progressed through three distinct levels, from egocentric to more abstract modes of thought.

The influence of Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory of moral development can also be found in this line of study, particularly where researchers seek to identify the stage at which children reach an understanding of abstract principles of the political world such as justice. Moreover, Kohlberg's (1976) theory has been employed to explain young adults' active participation in protest movements from the late 1960s to the 1980s. Researchers relying on Kohlberg's theory attribute young adults' risk-taking actions aimed at political change to their strong commitment to moral values; it was seen that their firm belief that the cause they advocate for is just leads them to their political activism (Berti, 2005). In addition, to explain why a certain age range—late adolescence and early adulthood—is most represented in the protest movements, Erickson's (1968) lifespan development theory has been employed. According to Erickson, adolescence is critical for identity formation, and the development of political commitment is considered a fundamental component of one's identity (Berti, 2005).

Whether drawing on Piaget, Kohlberg, or Erickson, there are commonalities in the traditional developmental approach. It seeks to identify distinctive age-related stages in the development of children's political understanding, assuming linear progress. Also, the developmental stages are regarded as universally applicable, regardless of the sociocultural contexts in which the development occurs. Barrett and Buchanan-Barrow (2005) discuss further the assumption underlying the traditional developmental approach:

the development of societal cognition proceeds through the child reflecting upon his or her own personal experience, actively constructing explanations of the observed phenomena using this or her current cognitive capacities and skills. Furthermore, these cognitive capacities and skills were often assumed to be domain-general rather than domain-specific. (p. 3)

This individualistic and universal notion of child development, however, has been critiqued because of its lack of attention to the sociocultural and historical context in which children live, as well as to the social processes that facilitate or inhibit particular constructions (Lee, 2010; Rogoff, 2003; Walsh, 2002). Being aware of these lines of critique, developmental psychologists began to pay attention to the interactions between children and their contexts, beyond focusing on what happens inside individual children's

heads (Haste & Torney-Purta, 1992). In what follows, I discuss how this embracement of the importance of context has broadened the field's discourse around children's political understanding and participation.

### **C. Contextualist Approach**

Both the traditional developmental approach and the contextualist approach see the process of developing political understanding as the social construction of knowledge. However, there are significant distinctions between them. The contextualist approach casts doubt on the traditional Piagetian stance emphasizing the role of children's first-hand personal experience of the relevant phenomena and institutions in the development of their understanding of the social world. According to contextualist approach, "children's experience of the social world is not direct and unproblematic but is mediated by the interpretations circulating in the communities in which they live" (Berti, 2005, p. 74). Children, to learn about the social world, often rely on indirect sources of information. Hence, the process by which children construct personal knowledge of political institutions and issues cannot be solely individualistic, but rather must be social.

However, it should be noted that the contextualist approach's consideration of social discourses does not imply its endorsement of the idea of irresistible social forces. It would be reasonable to locate the contextualist approach somewhere between the political socialization approach and the traditional developmental approach in that it admits the individual's capacity to construct social knowledge, and yet, at the same time, places emphasis on the sociocultural influences that shape this knowledge construction.

Some of the theories grounded the contextualist approach include Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system (Berti, 2005). Influenced by Vygotsky, the contextualist approach suggests that parents, caregivers, peers and the culture at large are responsible for developing higher-order functions. However, children take one step further by actively integrating the information obtained from their interaction with others at the individual level and entering into the formation of concepts by themselves. The contextualist approach pays particular attention to this process in order to grasp children's political development and often tries to reveal children's naïve theories that they "construct to explain phenomena in particular domains" (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2005, p. 4). From the contextualist approach, the development in political thinking is described as "increasing complexity and differentiation in these schemata of the political and social world" (Haste & Torney-Purta, 1992, p. 7).

Influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system, the contextualist approach embraces multi-dimensional aspects of social contexts. Children are directly or

indirectly involved not only in microsystems, such as homes, schools, and neighborhoods, but also in mesosystems, exosystems (e.g., mass media and local government) and macrosystems (e.g., dominant beliefs and ideologies). As Barrett and Buchanan-Barrow (2005) suggest, “children’s understanding in many different societal areas can exhibit variation as a function of the particular sociocultural context in which the child lives” (p. 3). Hence, from a contextualist approach, children’s political development can be fully understood only when holistically considering ecologies where the development occurs.

In sum, the political socialization approach, the traditional developmental approach, and the contextualist approach have conceptualized children’s political understandings and participation in different ways. The political socialization approach is characterized by its strong interest in factors that predict children’s desired affective and behavioral outcomes as future citizens. Children’s political understanding is paid special attention from this vantage point, focusing on whether a desired set of political knowledge and concepts is successfully transmitted to children. Unlike the political socialization approach, both the traditional developmental approach and the contextualist approach are more interested in how children construct the knowledge and concepts of their political worlds. In spite of their shared interest in cognitive development, they are distinct in that, while the traditional developmental approach seeks to identify the sequential processes of development that can be applied to all children, the contextualist approach tries to delve into how children make sense of political phenomena in particular, considering the sociocultural contexts in which they are situated. Overall, scholars in the field of developmental psychology have paid more attention to children’s political understanding than to their political participation. This trend is understandable when considering their characterizing of political development as increasingly complex in terms of cognition.

### **III. Field of Childhood Studies**

Childhood studies is a relatively new field spanning multiple disciplines sharing the goal of better understanding how childhood is experienced by children. The scholarly effort in this field “encompasses the meanings that adults place on children’s innocence or competence, and interrogates the notion of child as a social category” (Childhood studies). Scholars in this field have taken multiple epistemologies and methodologies in an attempt not only to expand theoretical understanding on childhoods but also to influence public policies affecting children’s lives, including most notably the formation of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

As many scholars have noted, UNCRC has considerably changed the discourse around how children and youth are perceived and treated and resulted in stimulating

lively research regarding children's rights (Astuto & Ruck, 2010). In this wave of inquiry, the topic of children's political participation started drawing more attention from childhood scholars. However, this topic has not been conceptualized in a single, unified way; this is not surprising when considering the multidisciplinary and multi-epistemological nature of the field.

When looking over articles published within the last two decades in the major childhood studies journals (e.g., *Childhood* and *Children and Society*), one can detect two distinct groups within the scholarly work regarding children's political participation: one conceptualizes children's political participation as the inclusion of children in the policy making process, and the other one adopts a broader definition of political participation that includes advocacy activity. This observation is supported by Finnish scholars Kallio and Häkli (2011) when they state,

Within the multidisciplinary field of childhood studies, there are two major research streams that approach children's political roles from somewhat different angles and with diverse motivational backgrounds. First, there exists an extensive literature discussing children's roles and agencies in local, national and supranational policy-making (for example, Lee, 1999; Matthews & Limb, 1999; Such & Walker, 2005; White and Choudhury, 2007; Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2010; Skelton, 2010). ...The second major tradition relating children and politics springs from somewhat different grounds. An extensive scholarship seeks to address children's everyday lives in relation to certain politically relevant and often major issues such as economic imbalance, new modes of governance, war, health crisis and education (e.g. Stephens, 1995; Sheper-Hughes and Sargent, 1998; Buckingham, 2000; Katz, 2004; McIntyre, 2005; Kesby et al., 2006; Mitchell, 2006; Abebe, 2007; Benwell, 2009). (pp. 22-23)

Following the introduction of these two major streams, Kallio and Häkli (2011) suggested a new approach reframing the meaning of 'the political' and highlighting children as political agents who perform politics through the spaces of their everyday lives. Although their approach is still considered obscure in the field of childhood studies, it has been taken seriously by some spatially oriented researchers (e.g., Cele, 2013) who regard it as providing meaningful theoretical implications for the field. Hence, I decided to add this approach to the two previously identified traditions. In what follows, the first one is called the 'social inclusion tradition,' the second one, the 'child oriented tradition,' and the last one, the 'politicized childhood approach.'

## **A. Social Inclusion Tradition**

Social inclusion tradition highlights the need for involving children as citizens. This idea is based on what has been called the "new paradigm" for the sociology of childhood



(Kallio & Häkli, 2011a; Reynaert, Bouverne-De-Bie, & Vandeveld, 2009)—particularly on its conceptualization of children as social actors who can and should construct and determine “their own social lives,” “the lives of those around them,” and “the societies in which they live” (Prout & James, 1997, p. 8). Scholars within this tradition argue that children’s voices should be brought into political procedures that concern them, whether the processes take place at the local, national, or supranational levels. In this context, children are enthusiastically encouraged to participate in “youth parliaments, consultation exercises, reference groups, advisory boards, research, audits, and inspections”, particularly in European countries; even the Welsh Assembly government and the UK government now require children’s involvement in policy development (Drakeford, Scourfield, & Holland, 2009, p. 250). Consequently, as Cavet and Sloper (2004) have noted, a growing body of research has been conducted into children’s experiences of participating in these political arenas.

In this line of research, children’s political participation is characterized as the engagement in official or semi-official processes discussing plans or policies that affect children’s lives—for example, the matters regarding education, health care, and juvenile justice. Acknowledging children’s right to participation and the positive consequences that children’s participation has both for the children themselves and for society, this line of research has been welcomed both within academia and on a broader societal level.

However, there has also been critique on the ways in which the social inclusion tradition conceptualizes children’s participation. It has been noted that “the ‘adultist’ official and semi-official arenas for this type of involvement tend to propose children’s roles that differ notably from those in children’s everyday environments” (Kallio & Häkli, 2011, p. 23). Researchers have pointed out that performing such roles demands specific skills and faculties that are valued among a certain group of people, with the result that the already privileged children are again privileged in these political arenas (Drakeford et al., 2009; Kallio & Häkli, 2011). The caution against the narrow conception of children’s political participation is supported by Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De-Bie’s (2006) statement:

We should be aware of the fact that the focus on negotiation, self-expression and verbalization of the self are a white, western, middle-class norm. It is a discourse taught in middle-class education settings that is more familiar and attractive to some children than to others. (as cited in Drakeford et al., 2009, pp. 249-250)

When the norms of certain groups are taken for granted in performing political activities, “disabled children, ethnic minority groups and younger children” are likely to be excluded from political participation (Reynaert et al., 2009, p. 522).

Another criticism reflects concerns about neglecting the complex aspects of power

struggles inherent in politics. When children's political participation is understood as simply their involvement in public deliberations with representatives, it is often ignored that politics is a multivalent power struggle in which "societies are constituted through action that takes multifarious and extraordinary forms" (Kallio & Häkli, 2011, p. 23). Kallio & Häkli's critique calls for rethinking the notion of children's political participation as mainly focusing on political administrative procedures and policy-making and instead to embrace politics as complex power relations in everyday lives.

## **B. Child Oriented Tradition**

The child oriented tradition has proposed a new approach that acknowledges the role of children's life experiences in defining what constitutes political participation (Buckingham, 2000). Assuming that children and adults may view participation differently, those in this tradition seek to identify "child sized citizenship" (Jans, 2004). Researchers in this tradition seek to define political participation from children's perspectives, trying to identify which political issues and activities attract children.

Politics has often been defined as participation in formal political systems (O'Toole, 2003). When unquestioningly accepting this narrow and traditional definition of political participation, children, as Buckingham (2000) points out, are viewed as inactive and disinterested in politics. However, children may be more interested in other types of activities instead of political actions led and defined mostly by adults (for example, initiatives for the government). In proposing child sized citizenship, Jans (2004) argues that children's political participation should be approached from a stance that embraces playful and ambivalent aspects of citizenship that are closely relevant to children's life-worlds.

Relying on qualitative research that takes a broader view of political participation, O'Toole (2003) questions the pervasive discourse of British young people's declining political engagement. In-depth research on young people's conception of politics reveals that:

young people are indeed turning away from formal, mainstream politics, but this does not mean that they are necessarily politically apathetic—rather young people are reasonably interested in politics and political issues, but cynical about politicians and formal mechanisms for political participation. (O'Toole, 2003, p. 72)

O'Toole (2003) further emphasize young people's capacity to be "highly articulate about political issues that affect their lives as well as about the disconnection between these and mainstream politics" (as cited in Cele, 2013, p. 77). It seems clear that young people are less engaged by "formal, mainstream politics" and are more likely to engage in

“informal politics” (O’Toole, 2003, p. 73). However, as O’Toole (2003) admits, it is not straightforward to draw a line between formal and informal politics.

Employing a life-world perspective, scholars in the child oriented tradition have put effort into developing a richer understanding of what political participation is from children’s views. In particular, Tuukkane, Kankaanranta and Wilska (2012) attempt to investigate the issues that are important for children in their life-world and that they wish to be engaged in. Tuukkane et al. (2012) pay attention to media and consumption as inextricable parts of children’s lives today. They believe that the extension of children’s life-world has resulted in the diversification of their options to participate and of the social and political issues that they are aware of. In this changing context, media, particularly social media, is viewed to play a critical role in expanding the ways that children can participate in public spheres. Moreover, it is believed that today’s children, ever since the explosive growth of social media, have been increasingly aware of many social themes and global issues such as the environment, poverty, war and peace (Jans, 2004; Tuukkane et al., 2012).

Collectively, the child oriented tradition takes a broader conception of children’s political participation instead of a narrow and traditional view of it. Within this tradition, children’s political participation is described as engaging in social and political issues that they think relevant to their lives at informal settings. For those in this stance, the most important questions to answer become identifying: “what kind of matters children want to participate in and thus, which issues are relevant for children regarding their life in general?” (Tuukkane et al., 2012, p. 134).

## **C. Politicized Childhood Approach**

The politicized childhood approach is named to refer to what Kallio and Häkli (2011) proposed as an alternative to both the ‘social inclusion tradition’ and the ‘child oriented tradition.’ Recognizing children’s worlds as political arenas where power relations are constantly negotiated and performed by the children themselves, Kallio and Häkli critique the ways in which the previous traditions have related children to politics. The main point on which they critique the social inclusion tradition is that “political involvement may take place in less official arenas” and can be based on “personal motivation rather than representation” (Kallio & Häkli, 2011, p. 24). In this vein, it appears that Kallio and Häkli and the child oriented tradition share the aim of expanding the notion of political participation to include unofficial political arenas and the personal causes of participating children. However, the child oriented tradition is also criticized by Kallio and Häkli (2011) because of its failure to acknowledge “politics

as a pervasive aspect of human life and political identities as socially embedded” (p. 24). Kallio and Häkli (2011) express the concern that when children’s political participation is described as involving in a matter of interest to them, “children are seen as if they were detached from the constant renegotiation and constitution of the political” (p. 24).

Kallio and Häkli’s (2011) proposition reflects the influence of de Certeau in emphasizing the political aspects of children’s agency enacted through their everyday lived spaces. According to Kallio and Häkli (2011), “the webs of power relations” permeate their mundane worlds and encompass all actors who influence their daily lives (p. 22). However, children are far from passive beings trapped in the webs; rather, they are viewed as competent political agents who shape power relations constituting the basis of their political lives (Kallio & Häkli, 2011).

Similarly, Cele (2013) highlights that “children are political agents who construct and perform their political subjectivities through the spaces of their everyday lives” (p. 84), requesting the redefinition of what is “political” among children. Cele (2013) suggests that the notion of children’s political participation be expanded to include “both everyday interactions and contexts, as well as identities that already are politicized in adults’ terms” (p. 78). When redefining children’s political participation in this way, researchers’ focuses shift from the formal structures of political systems into a micro-level where children exercise their political agency through their everyday practices. As Cele (2013) points out, researchers who seek to capture children enacting political practices should keep in mind that “they use other means of communicating their political selves than adults do” (p. 85).

In short, what political participation is taken to mean among children varies in the field of childhood studies. Although all three of the stances identified in this section recognize children’s agency and rights, they approach where and how these are mainly exerted from different angles. While the social inclusion tradition focuses on children’s involvement in democratic processes at the local, national and supranational levels, the child oriented tradition puts more emphasis on child sized citizenship, such as participating in the informal discussion of and movement on social and political issues that children are interested in. Lastly, critiquing both traditions, the politicized childhood approach proposes that children’s political engagement should not be limited to their involvements in certain types of activities perceived as relating to politics, whether taking place in formal or informal public arenas. This approach breaks the binary way of thinking between public and private and puts forward that children are already political in that they constantly shape and are shaped by power relations embedded in their mundane spaces. In this sense, the politicized childhood approach proposes for children’s political participation to be redefined in a way that captures how children negotiate and perform their political subjectivities in their everyday lives.

## IV. Discussion

A great portion of this paper has been devoted to describing scholarly trains that conceptualize children's political understanding and participation in various ways. In the field of psychology, three camps have been identified as taking distinct approaches to researching children's political understanding: the political socialization approach, the traditional development approach, and the contextualist approach. These variations are seen to reflect their different stances toward larger discourses, such as how human nature and actions should be or can be understood and how the relation between human agency and social structures is viewed.

After reviewing those three distinct approaches, I noted that the contextualist approach provides us with the most useful framework for exploring how contemporary children make sense of the political world. Children's political understandings are not the product either of socialization or of individuals' cognitive function. Rather, I believe that, as the contextualist approach suggests, children construct political knowledge, yet at the same time, their knowledge construction is shaped by sociocultural influences.

Advocacy for the contextualist approach is supported by findings from empirical studies. Emler et al. (1987) examined how class, culture, and type of formal education influence children's perceptions of institutional authority—a form of knowledge foundational to understanding how political institutions work. Ohana, one of the co-researchers of this study, especially zoomed in on the different representations of social structures and formal authority, comparing “children attending experimental schools in the Paris region with children attending more traditional schools in the area” (as cited in Emler, 1992, p. 75). Ohana found that the children from both types of schools described the school authority in terms of a hierarchical network with several levels. However, their perceptions of rules and social relations functioning in the institution were different. According to Ohana, the children attending more traditional schools described teacher-pupil relations in “authoritarian terms” and affirmed “the necessity of obeying rules” without exception (as cited in Emler, 1992, p. 75). By contrast, “the social relations at the experimental schools appeared to be organized in terms of respect for authority,” and school rules were perceived as being established and legitimated based on “social consensus through discussion and negotiation” (as cited in Emler, 1992, p. 76). Ohana's findings suggest that children's experiences of formal education provide the context for developing their conceptions of institutional authority; furthermore, the contexts may not be identical, reflecting school cultures as well as cultural influences from a larger societal level.

In addition, a contextualist approach appears more compelling than a traditional developmental approach, which seems to overemphasize age/development as a factor, to

the neglect of other pertinent elements of children's context. While empirical studies taking a traditional developmental approach seem to put forward a maturation discourse around children's political knowledge, some scholars question whether the maturation paradigm is sufficient. Among others, it is worthwhile to note Allen's (1994) investigation into children's changing conceptions of the American presidency and of presidential elections during an election year. Allen found that significant qualitative development in children's conceptions of the American presidency (i.e., functions, qualifications, and conditions of presidency) and of presidential elections (i.e., the basic principles underlying an election, conditions of participation, and factors determining the outcome of an election) took place in a short period even among first graders. It was reported that

fifth-grade children's knowledge of the presidency and presidential elections was more elaborated, abstract, and accurate than that of first-grade children 12 months and 6 months prior to a national election, with third graders consistently being scored as an intermediate group. However, these differences disappeared by the time the elections were imminent, as the knowledge of first and third graders grew along multiple dimensions. (Allen, 1994, pp. 367-368)

There are several points to consider regarding these findings. It is apparent that a simple maturation discourse cannot explain the dramatic increase in the first graders' thinking about presidency and elections within a few months and the small gap in political knowledge between the first and fifth graders. As Allen (1994) discussed, these results could be attributed to children's increasing exposure to relevant current events and experiences and in turn to their exposure to a great amount of related information during an election year. In particular, media reports addressing election campaigns could be inextricable from children's conception of presidency and elections when considering the fact that "all of the subjects who gave responses above zero in the interview reported television as either the primary or secondary basis for their responses" (Allen, 1994, p. 370).

When we take a traditional development approach that assumes that, as children grow, their knowledge becomes more sophisticated, we might be trapped in a binary way of thinking between 'biological' and 'social'. As Lee (2010) acutely notes, it is unproductive to try to isolate biological factors from social factors in understanding a child's development; rather, considering both factors will make our understandings both deeper and richer.

With regard to children's political participation, I have identified three distinct approaches within childhood studies—the social inclusion approach, the child oriented approach, and the politicized childhood approach. These three approaches define what political participation means from widely divergent perspectives. Such markedly differing perspectives naturally lead researchers to direct their attention to different areas even

when addressing the same topic. For example, while the social inclusion approach is more interested in children's participation in the decision making process in formal political institutions, the child oriented approach takes more seriously alternative spaces where children exert their political influences. Lastly, the politicized childhood approach views children's exercising power in their everyday lives as political participation, and thus its focus lies on how children interact with others in everyday places.

Before closing, I would like to take stock of the implications that each approach may hold for future research on this topic—rather than to argue for which approach is “best” in and of itself. If one adopts a somewhat narrow definition of ‘politics’ that indicates the dynamics of political institutions and representatives, the social inclusion approach appears most appealing. However, it should not be ignored that children, under this paradigm, merely participate in politics through official or semi-official political activities determined by adults (e.g., youth parliaments). It may also be possible for children to engage in the so-called ‘adultist’ political arenas in their own ways.

Furthermore, both the concept of child sized citizenship (from the child oriented tradition) and the notion of enacting politics in everyday lives (from the politicized childhood approach) help researchers to imagine alternative ways for children to participate in a formal political system. For example, children may take part in policy making or presidential elections by simply clicking ‘like’ on Facebook posts. They also may influence formal political systems by giving different meanings to political events in their daily conversations with friends rather than unquestioningly repeating what they have heard through news media.

Although this paper is primarily based on the intellectual products of European or North American scholars, there are several applicable takeaways for Korean scholars. For example, children's political knowledge is not a mere product either of socialization or of development. By giving serious consideration to the contexts in which children develop, researchers can produce more meaningful findings about children's political understanding. In addition, as the various approaches within childhood studies demonstrate, there is no universal definition for ‘political participation.’ By questioning taken-for-granted definitions of key terms (e.g., politics) and beginning to consider how children's perspectives may be brought to bear on research in this topic, researchers could make great strides towards deepening our understanding of children's political participation.

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