

A CHILDREN'S ELECTION – DILEMMAS OF CHILDREN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Abstract: In this article, we explore how fifth graders (9-10-year-olds) and their teachers view children's participation in a parliamentary election for children arranged by Save the Children Norway in 2017. The participants draw on available discursive resources when making sense of children's political positions in society. In the discursive resources, longstanding tensions surrounding children, childhood and politics come to the surface. We conclude that although children's position in politics remains marginal, there are ways to move beyond the tensions to be able to imagine children as political actors.

Keywords: Children, political participation, citizenship, ideological dilemmas.

Introduction

The last decades have seen an increasing emphasis on children's citizenship, rights, and participation, both internationally and in Norway. Along with other Nordic welfare states, Norway is often viewed as a country at the forefront when it comes to acknowledging children as rights holders and citizens (Brembeck et al., 2004). As the first country in the world, Norway appointed a Children's Ombudsman in 1981, and afforded children rights of co-determination the same year, a decade before the ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Ursin and Lyså, 2019). In contemporary Norway, there is wide political agreement on the importance of securing children's right to be heard in matters that concern them (Sandberg, 2012). Goals of educating children about citizenship while also promoting active participation are stated in national curricula (Udir, 2015) and most public schools have student councils (Børhaug, 2007). Advances in digital media technology have also provided novel modes and opportunities for engaging children in politics. The last decade has seen the emergence of several Norwegian children's news providers that broadcast and communicate with children on the Internet and social media, on a children's TV channel, and in a children's newspaper (Lorgen, 2019). Still, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2018) is not pleased with children's participation in political decision-making processes and requires the Norwegian state to ensure the meaningful participation of children in political arenas. Though such challenges are well known and researched (McMellon and Tisdall, 2020), the Committee's

observations demonstrate a need for updated knowledge about Norwegian children's possibilities for political participation.

The relationship between children and the political sphere has long been neglected within the social sciences (Wyness et al., 2004; Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020). As suggested by Cohen (2005), this may be a consequence of political rights being perceived as the most controversial part of children's participatory rights. However, certain aspects of children's relation to politics have been explored through research in recent years, including a renewed interest in the study of political socialization (e.g. Van Deth et al., 2011; Gordon and Taft, 2011; Habashi, 2017). The past decades have also seen theoretical discussions of how constructions of citizenship can be adapted to children and made more inclusive (e.g. Jans, 2004; Lister, 2008). The reasons for withholding political rights for children have been examined, and some have argued for child suffrage (Wall, 2014; Olsson, 2008). Further, empirical contributions have offered valuable insight into children's views of citizenship, government and participation (e.g. Bjerke, 2011; Drakeford et al., 2009), and children's experiences of their possibilities for participation through for example school councils (Alderson, 2000; Morrow, 2008). Children's political actions and engagement, particularly concerning climate issues, have also received much media attention in recent years. Yet, it has been highlighted that children's political agency continues to be ignored in many fields of research (Holmberg and Alvinus, 2020), warranting further work on the subject.

In this article we focus on a recent initiative addressing children as political participants. In September 2017, Save the Children Norway launched *Barnas Valg* (*Children's Election*), an online parliamentary election where children in Grades 5-10 were invited to vote for the political party they wished to see in Government. The children's election preceded the national parliamentary election in Norway. The event was without consequences for the official parliamentary election. Yet it was framed as a way of promoting children's rights to be heard and taken seriously, with reference to the UNCRC, and an opportunity for children to learn about democracy and politics (Redd Barna, 2017). Online educational resources were developed for *Barnas Valg*, including animated short Lego-themed films explaining political concepts; a 10-episode talk show featuring prominent politicians; and easily accessible pamphlets and one-minute videos representing the political parties in Parliament. Although the election and the educational resources were primarily intended for use in schools, it was open to the public online. Over 60,000 children voted.

Barnas Valg is exceptional, providing a historical opportunity for Norwegian children to voice political views on a national scale. Documenting experiences of this event offers a unique opportunity to study contemporary perceptions of children's political participation. In this article we draw on qualitative interviews with 25 fifth graders (9-10-year-olds) and three of their teachers. The central question addressed is how children and teachers make sense of *Barnas Valg* as a political event, and more broadly of children's positions as political actors in contemporary Norway. The election was tailored for use in schools, making teachers' interpretations and treatment of it in class important for children. We have therefore chosen to include the perspectives of both children and teachers, acknowledging that adults' views and the language and thinking in society contribute to children's ways of viewing themselves (Hengst, 2009). As we will demonstrate, the participants navigate different notions of children's capacities, responsibilities, interests, and desires, and their sensemaking is marked by dilemmatic tensions. We start by introducing the analytical framework used, including the concepts *interpretative repertoires* (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and *ideological dilemmas* (Billig et al., 1988). Central methodological and ethical considerations are then discussed, before presenting an analysis of three areas of dilemmatic tension identified in the data. In closing, reflections are offered about possible implications for children's possibilities for viewing themselves as political participants.

Studying sense-making practices about children's political participation

Although our study's data features children's 'voices', our theoretical and methodological approach is attuned to recent calls for moving beyond a preoccupation with 'authentic' views of children (Spyrou, 2018) and instrumental interpretations of children's voices as synonymous with agency (e.g. Kraftl, 2013; Spyrou et al., 2018). Building on perspectives from discursive psychology, we interpret our data as "samples of discursive action that provide evidence concerning the interpretative resources on which speakers are drawing, and the cultural norms and values to which they are orienting" (Condor and Gibson, 2007: 121). In other words, conversational data are used to elucidate the symbolic resources both adults and children have access to when making sense of children's positions in society. People's everyday accounts are viewed as situated and occasioned constructions, as opposed to direct expressions of cognitive or emotional states (Dixon and Wetherell, 2004: 173). Discursive psychological approaches are founded on a view that people speak and make sense through the use of discursive resources,

drawing on understandings and concepts that are products of history, but are also subject to continuous reconstruction and negotiation (Billig et al., 1988; Dixon and Wetherell, 2004). Further, people are not seen as internally consistent, but rather as continuously navigating discursive landscapes that may contain ambiguities, dilemmas, and contradictions (Condor and Gibson, 2007). A discursive psychological approach is therefore well suited for tending to what Tisdall and Punch have described as “the intricacies, complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences of children and young people’s lives” (Tisdall and Punch, 2012: 259).

In the analysis, we use two concepts to explore how children and teachers make sense of *Barnas Valg* and children’s political participation; *interpretative repertoires* (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) and *ideological dilemmas* (Billig et al., 1988). An interpretative repertoire is “a culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes (doxa)” (Wetherell, 1998: 400). As Edley (2001) explains, such repertoires are essential components of any community’s common sense, providing a basis for shared social understanding. When children and adults make sense of children’s capabilities, rights, and social positioning, they do so by drawing on available interpretative repertoires about children and childhood. Using this concept allows us to pinpoint ways of making sense that permeate our interviews, which we believe are indicative of wider discursive patterns in contemporary Norway. As our analysis will demonstrate, different ways of talking about what it means to be a child and a potential member of the political sphere give rise to certain tensions and ambivalences. To theoretically cater to these tensions, we use the analytical concept *ideological dilemmas* (Billig et al., 1988). As explained by Holmberg, ideologies are here understood as “ways of speaking that pass as common sense at a certain time and in a specified context” (Holmberg, 2018: 161). Billig et al. (1988) argue that common sense is dilemmatic in nature and consists of contrary themes that form the foundation of difficult decisions facing people in everyday life. Ideologies are in other words seen as incoherent or self-contradictory, and can therefore be described as dilemmatic (Holmberg, 2018). While much work within discursive psychology focuses on naturally occurring data (Huma et al., 2020), these concepts have also been fruitfully applied in interview-based research (e.g. Condor and Gibson, 2007; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Aarsand, 2012).

Methodological and ethical considerations

To study how children and teachers make sense of *Barnas Valg*, we contacted schools located in Trondheim, Norway, to find classes that were going to take part in the election. We located a public school in a middle-class neighbourhood where teachers of three Grade 5 classes were interested in participating in both *Barnas Valg* and our study. Due to the short time span of the event, we opted for a small-scale qualitative study combining group- and individual interviews, enabling us to talk to a selection of students (25 in total) and the three teachers shortly after the completion of *Barnas Valg*. During the week leading up to the election, students learned about issues concerning politics and democracy, using both textbooks and the online educational resources developed by Save the Children for *Barnas Valg*. They created collages and did oral presentations about political parties and voted online in the children's election during class. The children were verbally informed about the research project and its voluntary character in class whilst guardians received written information in advance of the study. The recruitment process was based on an opt-in-approach (Alderson, 2004) where children were encouraged to talk with their guardians if they wished to participate and sign up for the study in class. Those who signed up were interviewed after parental consent was obtained by the teachers through an electronic messaging system used for communication between the school and parents. This process secured the anonymization of all child participants.

The recruitment process resulted in 12 individual child interviews, three group interviews with four to five children, and three individual interviews with teachers. All interviews with child participants were conducted on the school premises and during school hours whilst interviews with teachers were conducted after school hours. The children were given the choice to participate in a group or individual interview to make the interview as comfortable as possible (Langevang, 2009). The group of participants was balanced in terms of gender, but as we do not focus on gender or other means of social differentiation in the following analysis, we have refrained from using gendered pseudonyms. Participants from individual interviews are numbered as P1-P12, participants in group interviews are identified with both participant number and group number (G1-G3), and teachers are referred to as T1-T3.

The interviews were semi-structured, and participants were asked to talk about what they had been doing in school related to the parliamentary election and *Barnas Valg*. Questions to child participants included: *Do you think those in charge (government/politicians) should listen to what children have to say? Why do you think Save the Children created an election for*

children? What do you think is good/not good about having an election for children? What do you think about the fact that children are not allowed to vote? The interviews with teachers addressed similar questions, focusing on their experience of the class' participation in the election and their views on children's participation in politics. The interviews were transcribed and anonymised by the first author, allowing close familiarity with the data to ensure a solid understanding of the 'discursive terrain' of the topic of study (Edley, 2001). Both authors read and discussed interview transcripts. We sorted the data by patterns of arguments and ways of talking about children and politics to identify salient repertoires used by the participants. The analytical process involved making interpretive schemes, which were gradually developed and revised (Edley, 2001). We were drawn to the many ambiguities in the interview material and turned to the concept of ideological dilemmas to complement the identification of repertoires. In the following analysis, we present three areas of dilemmatic tension that can be viewed as the result of a coexistence of different and sometimes contradictory repertoires. The study is based on a limited sample of mainly middle-class participants' sense-making practices, and the discursive patterns identified are products of the relations and encounters in this specific context. However, the interpretive repertoires used by participants are derived from constructions of children and childhood in contemporary Norway, and the patterns we describe can serve as examples of discursive tensions and limitations that children may face when considering their possibilities for political participation.

Children's involvement in politics as preparation or participation

All the participants in our study voiced positive views of *Barnas Valg* and endorsed the idea of having a children's election. The reasons for doing so were manifold, as demonstrated in the following quote, where P1 offers an interpretation of why Save the Children has made an election for children:

Maybe it's...they're called Save the Children, um, and maybe they thought that the children should be able to give their vote too, or like...you could like test what it's like to be in an election, like adults do, so that they will be interested, like...when they're older – that they will want to join the adult's election (P1) (all quotes translated into English by authors).

P1 explains that maybe the election is about giving children an opportunity to vote, thus indicating that the election is about children's participation in the present. As exemplified later, P1 used this interpretation several times. P1 then offers a second interpretation, that the initiative is about making children familiar with elections, thereby fostering interest in future

participation as adult voters. This illustrates two reoccurring interpretations found in our material, viewing *Barnas Valg* as inviting *participation* in the present or as *education and preparation* for future participation. Use of the latter repertoire is further illustrated in the excerpt below, where one child participant explains why children should pay attention to politics:

- P10: Because they're the ones who are going to take over the earth when the adults...are old. So, it's good for children to know a little bit about it.
- I: Yes...um...but then, what do the children do with what they know? Now, when you're 10...and then you watch, and you pay attention – what will you do with that knowledge?
- P10: Maybe...write it down? And then...we have it for when we're older, so we know a little more about it.

Here, being informed about politics is framed as education and preparation for when the children are 'older' and ready to 'take over the earth'. When asked what to do with political knowledge in the present, the possibility of participation is not raised. Rather, P10 suggests writing down information and saving it for the future, thus positioning children as citizens-in-the-making (Fitzgerald et al., 2010), emphasising their *future* roles as political actors. This repertoire was also used by the teachers, who rarely used the repertoire of participation and mainly described *Barnas Valg* as a good way of teaching children about politics, government, and democracy. This is illustrated by T1, who describes positive aspects of having an election for children:

It's so they get to know how a democracy and elections work, and...become more conscious about it. So I think that...when they do get the right to vote...when they go through a few rounds of this...it can lead to community involvement and...and it can make them more aware that they have a responsibility to vote, in order to have a democracy (T1).

This interpretation frames *Barnas Valg* as a tool for gradually making children more 'conscious about' the workings of democracy. The teacher puts forth a view that children need to go through a phase of learning and awareness-building, not only to be able to exercise their future *rights* as engaged citizens but also to comply with their *responsibilities* as dutiful citizens in the future. Similarly to P10, T1 portrays children as political novices and *becomings* rather than as political *beings* in the present (Bjerke, 2011; Liebel and Saadi, 2012), building on a view that children need to develop political awareness and knowledge before participating. While T1's statement focuses on children's political development, it focuses on the *outcome* while overlooking the value of children's active participation during the *process* of development, a distinction made clear by Peleg (2019). Like the other teachers, T1 portrays *Barnas Valg* as

good for fostering engagement and interest in politics, but they do not emphasize that this engagement should be utilized actively *during* childhood. This is in tune with traditional understandings of political socialization as an adult-led and one-directional flow of information and experience (Gordon and Taft, 2011), where children are receivers of adult knowledge and expertise (Loader et al., 2014).

The child participants also drew on a repertoire of *participation*, voicing a view of children as political beings and citizens in the here and now (Mannion, 2010). This repertoire did not emerge in the interviews with the teachers to the same degree. For example, all three teachers mentioned that the students responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to vote in the children's election but did not frame this as a way of making children's voices heard in the political sphere. But as illustrated by the statements below, many child participants drew on principles of *equality* and *inclusion* and voiced a view that children are part of society and should therefore be able to participate:

It's not just *them*, who are supposed to decide. It's *us* too. We live in a society...*everyone* should be able to decide (P7) (emphasis in original in all quotes).

It's very important that they are heard too because children... they also have the right to say what they think, and not just the adults – In *my* opinion at least (P1).

Because...*children*, they have to be able to...adults have to *let* children give *their* opinions because adults aren't the *only* ones who *have* opinions. Because I think it's important that children...are actually allowed to vote because adults aren't the *only ones* that have something to contribute (P5).

Adults shouldn't be the only ones allowed to decide...kind of. That they like...they should go around and ask children what *they* think. So that they can...like...make it better for them. Because *children* are the future for us humans (P8).

P7 argued that *all* members of society should be able to participate in decision-making. Like several others, this participant voiced ideals of a democracy where the people ('demos'), including children, are represented (Wall, 2014). As many child participants, P1 leaned on child rights rhetoric and stressed the importance of children's views being heard. A recurring argument, as voiced by P5, is that children, just like adults, have opinions and can contribute. P5 was also one of a few participants who argued that children should have the right to vote. In tune with academic discussions about children's citizenship (e.g. Lister, 2008; Wall, 2014), many child participants argued for the possibility to participate as a universal principle. Further, the fourth statement, by P8, demonstrates the flexibility of discursive resources. In their understanding of children as future citizens, P8 does not argue that children should wait until they are educated about society and politics before participating. Their argument is that

children's opinions should matter here and now because they are the future, implying that listening to children's experiences in the present may serve as a basis for creating a better society for them in the future.

Overall, the excerpts above illustrate that the children know about and use a rhetoric of rights and inclusion, indicating that children's identities as subjects of rights and fellow citizens have a strong standing in contemporary Norway (see Drakeford et al., 2009 for similar findings in the UK). Although interpretations of *Barnas Valg* as an educative initiative suited to shape future citizens and realise children's rights to be heard in the present co-exist, the dilemmatic tensions between the interpretations are not resolved. Thus, the uncertainty of children's position in the political sphere remains. However, as Peleg (2019) suggests, the interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Peleg argues for a hybrid model of childhood that acknowledges children as both beings and becomings. Building on the distinction between the process and outcome of development, he underscores that meaningful participation is essential in ensuring development. This is in line with Lawy and Biesta (2006), who underscore that "young people learn to be citizens as a consequence of their participation in the actual practices that make up their lives" (p. 45). In relation to political elections, Cook (2013) argues that voting enhances political competence as it provides "opportunities to engage directly in real epistemic and moral deliberation" (p. 455).

The characteristics of the child

The tensions discussed above are intertwined with tensions between different notions of children and childhood found in the empirical material. On the one hand, there was a taken-for-granted view that children are competent and have valuable insights among child participants, for instance underscoring that children's opinions are: "important for society" (P12) and "good for Norway" (P5), which we will return to below. On the other hand, children's lack of capabilities and competence were emphasised when children and teachers argued *against* child suffrage. As demonstrated by Wall (2014), arguments against granting voting rights to children can be divided into deontological and teleological arguments. Whereas the former concerns children's lack of political capacities, the latter concerns potential harmful consequences of children's participation – to themselves, adults, and society. Both arguments were found in our interview material. In cases where children argued against voting rights, children's assumed characteristics and capabilities were addressed in a range of ways:

[...] if 10-year-olds could vote [...] they would have to pay attention to news and read the papers about all that stuff. And not everyone thinks that's like...fun and exciting. And then they'll just think; I'll just vote for something and be like – done (P3).

P3 suggests that child suffrage might lead to unwanted responsibilities for children. The obligation to keep updated and informed at age 10 may indeed be a burden (see also Bjerke, 2011). To substantiate this view, P3 draws on a modern western view of childhood as a time of play and freedom from burdensome responsibilities (e.g. Gullestad, 2006). P3 describes how a lack of interest might cause child voters to “just vote for something” to finish the task quickly without due diligence. The statement implies that children might not take the responsibility of voting seriously. The teachers were all sceptical of child suffrage, leaning on developmental perspectives on political competence and maturity: “I think that many are mature enough when they're 16 [...]. I would think so...but not earlier (T2)”.

As within public and academic debates, children were sometimes portrayed as malleable by both children and teachers. One teacher expressed concern that children might be prone to influence from their parents if given voting rights: “Well, I don't really think children should have the right to vote. I think they should be given the time to mature and... because I'm afraid that parents will use children and their right to vote” (T1). The teacher highlights the power asymmetry between parents and children. This not only reflects a widespread conviction that children will copy the political views of their parents (Habashi, 2017), but also rests on a perspective of parents as manipulative. This standpoint against voting rights may be interpreted as means to both shelter vulnerable children from power abuses and protect vital principles of democracy. Peer-pressure was also addressed by both teachers and children, as demonstrated by P4: “I think it might be good [that children do not have the right to vote], so that they...don't joke around too much. And *talk* to each other and...yeah...agree to vote for a party...together.” When it comes to adults, talking about politics is often seen as a legitimate part of reflecting, deliberating, and making a political choice. But here, with reference to child voters, it is framed as damaging to the democratic process. Similarly to P4, P8 expressed concern that children are likely to *joke around*, and not take voting seriously: “[...]..there are those who just joke around with things and like [...]...if there's a party that few people think do good things – and they would just vote to be funny...” In other cases, children younger than themselves were described as prone to making political decisions based on *superficial* reasons, such as liking a political party's logo.

Another repertoire frequently used by both children and teachers builds on a view of children as *self-centred*:

P1G1: Because I think...children don't think a lot about...for instance *jobs* for adults...and if we were in charge, I don't think we would do so much about school for example. I think we would use more money on the things we wanted.

P2G1: So that all computer games cost...if you bought several a day, they would cost less and less and less and less. Then you would use all your time on games.

These two participants discuss how children might make poor choices because they focus on short-term and fun-related wants rather than thinking of long-term consequences and issues such as employment and education. Overall, both children and teachers drew on a range of familiar assumptions about children's immaturity, malleability, and irresponsibility, portraying children as likely to be preoccupied by their own interests and unable to understand larger political issues facing society. These attributes were often presented as leading to detrimental consequences should children be given the right to vote.

On the other hand, the child participants viewed children as holders of important experiences and insights, which is prevalent in Norwegian law and policymaking (Ursin and Lyså, 2019). In several cases the same participant would portray children's political participation as problematic, but also argue that including children in political processes is important. Many child participants argued for including children in political decision-making both on grounds of competence and potential for making valuable contributions to society. Some children emphasised that their schooling provides them with updated knowledge and competence: "I think adults should listen a little to children's views because sometimes adults are actually the ones who are wrong, while children are right – since they've learned about it in school that day and...adults maybe haven't" (P3G3), indicating that competence is not "limited to adults, and neither is incompetence restricted to children" (Theis, 2010: 346). Most frequently, listening to children in relation to educational and environmental matters was considered important. Children's experiences here and now were emphasised: "I think adults should listen more to what *children* think could be better about school...because *they* don't go to school!" (P1G3) whilst their imagined futurities were also highlighted: "When we're older, we're going to be in charge and things like that, and we kind of don't want everything to be destroyed" (P3). Overall, the statements shown in this section illustrate that children draw on contradictory repertoires of children's characteristics and abilities for political participation. They describe children as

competent and valuable contributors *and* as unfinished people, ill-equipped for political rights and responsibilities.

Delineating childhood from adulthood

The third area of tension concerns questions about differences between adults and children, which is a central feature of debates about children's rights (Hanson, 2012). Arguments that children are politically incompetent implicitly rely on an image of a competent adult, who is less easily influenced, more mature, informed, and responsible than children, as demonstrated in statements such as: "[...] adults are more *mature* maybe...than children, because their thinking is different" (P10). As argued by Evans (2008), it is important to examine not only the social construction of childhood, but also that of adulthood. In the interviews, moments when assumptions of adulthood are called into question reveal ideological dilemmas brought up by co-existing notions of children as both citizens and citizens-in-the-making. The following excerpt illustrates how such dilemmas can play out:

- 1 I: What do you think about the fact that children aren't allowed to vote?
2 T3: ... Well I...I think it's...it's pretty hard to grasp all of it, so it might be alright that children
3 don't...get to vote that early on. They're going to be...if they're going to be educated into good
4 citizens in the end...and [...] have knowledge... But...when you're 10...you might not know
5 what...well...what's best, for example...because they have their own opinions, relating to
6 *themselves* – you know – but maybe don't understand... No, I don't know, no...I'm messing it up
7 now...
8 I: No (laughter)
9 T3: No...
10 I: Well...so you think it's alright to wait a bit then...
11 T3: Yes...well...they might not have as much...insight...into everything going on in Norway. And
12 what's important to consider...maybe.
13 I: Yes...mhm....
14 T3: But...at the same time you do...I vote based on...what *I* feel...right?
15 I: Yes...
16 T3: Because people do vote based on their own feeling and...children also feel – they *too* have
17 something to *say*, and have views...so that's alright – but...I just think that they don't
18 *understand*...maybe not quite...
19 I: Yes...because what you're saying is interesting – that, well, adults do the same...maybe...
20 T3: Mhm...
21 I: But...do you think...well...should the voting age be lowered, or what do you think?
22 T3: ...
23 I: Yes, it's a very difficult question (laughter)
24 T3: I don't know – I know they've talked about lowering it to 16, but... Um...I think...they have
25 to...see it in relation to... relation to everything...so...whether a 10-year-old can understand all that.
26 There's that. Because they...might not have the same opinions – they might just: Yeah, we want...no
27 school, you know?

In this interview, the teacher went back and forth on the subject of (10-year-old) children's lack of voting rights. The main justification used by the three teachers was children's lack of knowledge about, or ability to understand, politics. The teacher quoted above describes that

children are being shaped into ‘good citizens’ and may at the age of 10 lack an understanding of ‘what’s best’ (line 3-5), which may result in poor choices based on short-term wants, such as voting for ‘no school’ (line 26-27). However, what is most clearly expressed is a degree of ambivalence or uncertainty about the foundation for excluding children from the democratic process of voting. In line 5-7, T3 explains that children *do* have opinions, although these are related ‘to themselves’, before expressing a sense of ‘messaging up’ the answer. A sense of ambivalence is subsequently repeated several times. The teacher describes how adults too vote based on personal views and feelings, and again highlights that children are people with views and feelings. After this, T3 returns to the argument that children lack insight and judgement. The excerpt above highlights how children’s participation can, in this case by an adult, be experienced as dilemmatic, particularly when juxtaposed with assumptions about adults. The teacher’s account touches on aspects of political rights discussed by Wall (2014), who emphasizes that political competence is not a criteria for adults’ rights to vote. Adults are free to use their vote as they see fit, even if it is based solely on their own wishes. The criteria used for excluding children are thus not applied to other groups. A similar dilemma was discussed in the interview with T2, who argued that adults are more mature and ready for voting, whereas children are “unable to see the complex picture. Because it demands quite a lot, as a person, to be able to see that there are many sides to one issue” (T2). When asked by the interviewer if all adults can understand such complexity and if they think that way when voting, T2 replied:

No, and that’s part of the problem...with the election campaign in a way, that it’s centered on single issues and front these single issues in a way. And those who don’t have the conditions to sit down and read and understand the whole political platform...they...will decide based on single issues. [...] So, it’s a challenge anyway, but adults at least have a better chance because you’ve lived life and experienced how things influence. But at the same time...well it can be challenging (T2).

Here, understanding complexity is described as relying on much more than individuals’ age and innate capacities. Decisions based on single issues are related to media framing of elections, as well as voters’ life conditions and access to resources. T2, similarly to T3, portrays the issue as challenging, but resolves the dilemma by arguing that adults are more experienced and therefore have at least a better *chance* of living up to the demands of voting. Overall, the examples from teachers’ sense-making in this section illustrate an ambivalent positioning of children as members of society. This ambivalence is enabled by contemporary understandings of childhood and adulthood as being in a relation of mutual constitution, reciprocally presuming each other (Alanen, 2009). Social constructions of ‘childhood’ are juxtaposed to ‘adulthood’ “as a norm, ideal and ‘finished article’, a state of ‘human being’ (‘complete’ in terms of

physique, intellect, biochemistry, self-presence, self-control, rationality, etc.)” (Horton and Kraftl, 2005: 135). Perceiving childhood and adulthood as inherently different impedes recognition of intergenerational similarities whilst enabling dilemmatic tensions regarding their characteristics.

Concluding remarks

In this article, we have analyzed interviews with fifth graders and their teachers about *Barnas Valg*, an online parliamentary election for children preceding the national parliamentary election in Norway. This event provided an opportunity for new insights into children’s relations to the sphere of politics after three decades of emphasis on child participation. Our main aim was to explore how children and teachers make sense of *Barnas Valg* as a political event, and more broadly to examine children’s positions as political actors in contemporary Norway. As the empirical material reveals, events like *Barnas Valg* have the potential for strengthening an understanding that children, like other groups in society, should be valued as active citizens. Political elections for children can provide a space for their political participation and afford children a more prominent position in the public sphere. However, *Barnas Valg* also reproduces a tendency that children’s participation occurs in separate arenas, detached from adults’ participation and public political debate (Kjørholt, 2010; Percy-Smith, 2006). The fact that *Barnas Valg* remains symbolic supports McMellon and Tisdall’s (2020) recent observation that challenges to children’s participation remain ‘stubbornly consistent’ (p. 157).

Both the child participants and teachers draw on interpretative repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987) that are part of familiar contemporary discursive patterns. By utilizing the concept of ideological dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988), we focused on ambiguities in the material and teased out three areas of dilemmatic tension that are interlinked and interdependent: 1) Children’s political involvement rendered as preparatory or participatory; 2) Perceived characteristics of ‘the child’; and 3) Delineation between childhood and adulthood.

While the repertoire of participation does not necessarily deny the importance of preparation, educative framing tends to ignore the possibility of children as political participants in the present. This makes it easy to ignore the participatory aspect stated by the organizers (Redd Barna, 2017), and to interpret *Barnas Valg* as first and foremost an educational initiative, suited

for shaping responsible, engaged, and knowledgeable future citizens. However, some of the arguments used by the participants carry the potential for moving beyond binary thinking of children as political beings versus becomings. For instance, education is not only seen as an investment in future democratic skills and attitudes aligned with the national curriculum, but also used as a pro-participation argument, making children well-informed and more knowledgeable than the adult generation. Their lived school experiences are also considered to render children's voices more valid in political discussions concerning education. There is thus a need to decouple children, education, and futurism (Lee, 2001), as information is required for real participation to occur. The data presented reminds us that learning and schooling have value here-and-now in children's lives and for children's political being. In the same way, participation is often perceived as embedded in the present, influencing the status quo, for instance in arguing that their schooling experiences should be accounted for in educational politics. However, some child participants argue that children's opinions should matter today because they are the future, implying that listening to children's experiences in the present creates a better future. Taken together, these perspectives highlight that children are both beings and becomings without this necessarily being incompatible and contradictory (Uprichard, 2008), a point we will elaborate on further below.

Children are faced with ambiguous messages about their place in society. They have access to repertoires that invite an understanding of children as competent with valid and valuable views, ("they know best where the shoe pinches"), and, at the same time, repertoires that render them as governable, superficial, self-centred and fun seeking, that tell them they are not yet ready to have their views and votes count in the adult sphere of politics. Implicit in such characteristics, is the third dilemma, the delineation between childhood and adulthood. Children are rendered as entitled with a range of rights whilst responsibilities are seen as part of adulthood. Whilst we frame participation as a right, political participation in general and voting in particular is commonly seen as a responsibility, a duty too heavy for children. The assumption about the political 'adult' as a 'finished article', as mature and autonomous, and as both able to and willing to see the larger picture and choose collective interests over individual interests, could easily be questioned *and* refuted. However, the ways in which we describe and perceive children and adults as inherently different, reveal and reinsert the child-adult dichotomization. Where children are passively 'told', 'taught', 'educated', 'socialised', 'influenced' or even 'manipulated' or 'mislead' into political standpoints, adults actively 'engage in discussions',

‘seek advice’, and ‘get informed’. Adults can be ignorant and uninterested in politics, yet their votes still count. If children are ignorant, then this is due to their inherent nature and lack of capabilities. Furthermore, rendering the experiences of adults—as they have ‘lived life’—as more valid contradicts basic principles of democracy. As Wall (2014) argues, by embracing children in politics, their experiences will inform and improve decision-making. He reasons: “Since nobody can rightly claim a monopoly on what is best for groups in society, it is wiser to allow the greatest possible diversity of voices to influence public debate” (p. 114). In agreement with Wall (2014), Olsson (2008) underscores that competence is not a criterion in any democratic society for the right to vote.

As suggested earlier, Peleg’s (2019) work on the child’s right to development offers a potential way forward in working through the dilemmas of children’s political participation. Peleg’s hybrid model of children synthesizes concepts of being and becoming and emphasizes that children should have the right to participate actively in their own development. Applied to politics, children should have the opportunity to actively participate while developing political capabilities – thus moving past a view that children should first learn before actively engaging in real political processes. As Lansdown (2011) underscores, participation is crucial for children’s development in general and more specifically in the development of their democratic skills and understanding (see also Cook, 2013). As Lawy and Biesta (2006) argue, we need to approach citizenship as a practice rather than as an achievement. This opens up opportunity for reconceptualization of adults as political becomings rather than beings. As Lee (2001) reminds us, children’s participation is always unfolding as an intergenerational performance wherein identifications, spaces, and power struggles are key and where both children and adults need to be considered as partial ‘becomings’.

Children in Norway position themselves and are positioned by others in manifold and even contrasting ways, as both political beings and becomings, as competent and incompetent. We argue that the repertoires drawn on are not mutually exclusive, although their co-presence seem to give rise to dilemmatic tensions. In elucidating such tensions, studies like ours can provide a starting point for working with children and adults such as teachers, parents, and organizers of events like *Barnas Valg*, to work through dilemmatic tensions and develop visions of what children’s active participation in their own political development may look like in practice.

- Alanen L. (2009) Generational Order. In: Qvortrup J, Corsaro WA and Honig M-S (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 159-174.
- Alderson P. (2000) School students' views on school councils and daily life at school. *Children & Society* 14: 121-134.
- Alderson P. (2004) Ethics. In: Fraser S, Vicky Lewis, Sharon Ding, Mary Kellett, Chris Robinson (ed) *Doing Research with Children and Young People*. London: Sage, 97-112.
- Billig M, Condor S, Edwards D, et al. (1988) *Ideological Dilemmas: A Social Psychology of Everyday Thinking*, London: Sage.
- Bjerke H. (2011) Children as 'differently equal' responsible beings: Norwegian children's views of responsibility. *Childhood* 18: 67-80.
- Brembeck H, Johansson B and Kampmann J. (2004) Introduction. In: Brembeck H, Johansson B and Kampmann J (eds) *Beyond the competent child: Exploring contemporary childhoods in the Nordic welfare societies*. Fredriksberg: Roskilde University Press, 7-29.
- Børhaug K. (2007) Mission impossible? School level student democracy. *Citizenship, social and economics education* 7: 26-41.
- Cohen EF. (2005) Neither Seen Nor Heard: Children's Citizenship in Contemporary Democracies. *Citizenship studies* 9: 221-240.
- Condor S and Gibson S. (2007) 'Everybody's Entitled to Their Own Opinion': Ideological Dilemmas of Liberal Individualism and Active Citizenship. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 17: 115-140.
- Cook P. (2013) Against a minimum voting age. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 16: 439-458.
- Dixon J and Wetherell M. (2004) On Discourse and Dirty Nappies: Gender, the division of Household Labour and the Social Psychology of Distributive Justice. *Theory & Psychology* 14: 167-189.
- Drakeford M, Scourfield J, Holland S, et al. (2009) Welsh children's views on government and participation. *Childhood* 16: 247-264.
- Edley N. (2001) Analysing Masculinity: Interpretative Repertoires, Ideological Dilemmas and Subject Positions. In: Wetherell M, Taylor S and Yates SJ (eds) *Discourse as Data: A Guide for Analysis*. London: Sage, 189-228.
- Evans B. (2008) Geographies of youth/young people. *Geography Compass* 2: 1659-1680.
- Fitzgerald R, Graham A, Smith A, et al. (2010) Children's participation as a struggle over recognition. . In: Percy-Smith B and Thomas N (eds) *A handbook of children and young people's participation*. London: Routledge, 293-305.
- Gordon HR and Taft JK. (2011) Rethinking youth political socialization: Teenage activists talk back. *Youth & Society* 43: 1499-1527.
- Gullestad M. (2006) Barndom i Norge. *Barn*: 41-56.
- Habashi J. (2017) *Political Socialization of Youth: A Palestinian Case Study*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hanson K. (2012) Schools of thought in children's rights. In: Liebel M (ed) *Children's Rights from Below: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 63-79.
- Hengst H. (2009) Collective Identities. In: Qvortrup J, Corsaro WA and Honig M-S (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 202-214.
- Holmberg A and Alvinus A. (2020) Children's protest in relation to the climate emergency: A qualitative study on a new form of resistance promoting political and social change. *Childhood* 27: 78-92.
- Holmberg L. (2018) The future of childhood studies? Reconstructing childhood with ideological dilemmas and metaphorical expressions. *Childhood* 25: 158-172.

- Horton J and Kraftl P. (2005) For more-than-usefulness: Six overlapping points about Children's Geographies. *Children's geographies* 3: 131-143.
- Huma B, Alexander M, Stokoe E, et al. (2020) Introduction to Special Issue on Discursive Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 17: 313-335.
- Jans M. (2004) Children as Citizens: Towards a Contemporary Notion of Child Participation. *Childhood* 11: 27-44.
- Kjørholt AT. (2010) Barn som samfunnsborgere - til barnets beste? In: Kjørholt AT (ed) *Barn som samfunnsborgere - til barnets beste?* Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Kraftl P. (2013) Beyond 'voice', beyond 'agency', beyond 'politics'? Hybrid childhoods and some critical reflections on children's emotional geographies. *Emotion, space and society* 9: 13-23.
- Langevang T. (2009) Movements in Time and Space: Using Multiple Methods in Research with Young People in Accra, Ghana. In: van Blerk L and Kesby M (eds) *Doing Children's Geographies: Methodological Issues in Research with Young People*. New York: Routledge, 42-56.
- Lansdown G. (2011) Every Child's Right to be Heard. A Resource Guide on the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No. 12. Save the Children UK.
- Lawy R and Biesta G. (2006) Citizenship-as-practice: The educational implications of an inclusive and relational understanding of citizenship. *British journal of educational studies* 54: 34-50.
- Lee N. (2001) *Childhood and society: Growing up in an age of uncertainty*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Liebel M and Saadi I. (2012) Cultural Variations in Constructions of Children's Participation. In: Liebel M (ed) *Children's Rights from Below: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 162-182.
- Lister R. (2008) Unpacking Children's Citizenship. In: Invernizzi A and Williams J (eds) *Children and Citizenship*. London: Sage, 9-19.
- Loader B, Vromen A and Xenos M. (2014) The networked young citizen: social media, political participation and civic engagement. *Information, Communication & Society* 17: 143-150.
- Lorgen LC. (2019) Nyheter for barn og forestillinger om barndom: Barns erfaringer og Supernytt's tekstlige strategier [Children's news and notions of childhood. Children's experiences and Supernytt's textual strategies]. *Institutt for informasjons- og medievitenskap*. Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen.
- Mannion G. (2010) After participation: the socio-spatial performance of intergenerational becoming. In: Percy-Smith B and Thomas N (eds) *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Perspectives from theory and practice*. London: Routledge, 330-342.
- McMellon C and Tisdall EKM. (2020) Children and Young People's Participation Rights: Looking Backwards and Moving Forwards. *The international journal of children's rights* 28: 157-182.
- Morrow V. (2008) Dilemmas in Children's Participation in England. In: Invernizzi A and Williams J (eds) *Children and Citizenship*. London: Sage, 120-130.
- Olsson S. (2008) Children's suffrage: a critique of the importance of voters' knowledge for the well-being of democracy. *The international journal of children's rights* 16: 55-76.
- Peleg N. (2019) *The child's right to development*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Percy-Smith B. (2006) From consultation to social learning in community participation with young people. *Children, Youth and Environments* 16: 153-179.
- Potter J and Wetherell M. (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*, London: Sage.

- Redd Barna. (2017) *Barnas Valg 2017*. Available at: <https://www.reddbarna.no/barnasvalg>.
- Sandberg K. (2012) Barns rett til å bli hørt. In: Høstmølingen N, Kjørholt ES and Sandberg K (eds) *Barnekonvensjonen: barns rettigheter i Norge*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Spyrou S. (2018) *Disclosing Childhoods: Research and Knowledge Production for a Critical Childhood Studies*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Spyrou S, Rosen R and Cook DT. (2018) Introduction: Reimagining Childhood Studies: Connectivities... Relationalities... Linkages.... In: Spyrou S, Rosen R and Cook DT (eds) *Reimagining childhood studies* Bloomsbury Academic, 1-22.
- Theis J. (2010) Children as active citizens: An agenda for children's rights and civic engagement. In: Percy-Smith B and Thomas N (eds) *A handbook of children and young people's participation*. London: Routledge, 343-355.
- Tisdall EKM and Punch S. (2012) Not so 'new'? Looking critically at childhood studies. *Children's geographies* 10: 249-264.
- Udir. (2015) *Prinsipper for opplæringen [Principles for education]*. Available at: <https://www.udir.no/laring-og-trivsel/lareplanverket/prinsipper-for-opplaringen2/>.
- UNCommitteontheRightsoftheChild. (2018) Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Norway. Geneva: United Nations.
- Uprichard E. (2008) Children as 'Being and Becomings': Children, Childhood and Temporality. *Children & Society* 22: 303-313.
- Ursin M and Lyså IM. (2019) Agency and rights - Norway. *Bloomsbury Education and Childhood Studies*.
- Van Deth JW, Abendschön S and Vollmar M. (2011) Children and politics: An empirical reassessment of early political socialization. *Political Psychology* 32: 147-174.
- Wall J. (2014) Why children and youth should have the right to vote: an argument for proxy-claim suffrage. *Children Youth and Environments* 24: 108-123.
- Wetherell M. (1998) Positioning and Interpretative Repertoires: Conversation Analysis and Post-Structuralism in Dialogue. *Discourse & Society* 9: 387-412.
- Wetherell M and Potter J. (1992) *Mapping the language of racism: Discourse and the legitimation of exploitation*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Wyness M, Harrison L and Buchanan I. (2004) Childhood, politics and ambiguity: Towards an agenda for children's political inclusion. *Sociology* 38: 81-99.
- Aarsand P. (2012) The ordinary player: teenagers talk about digital games. *Journal of Youth Studies* 15: 961-977.