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‘Staying active’ in confined living conditions: participation assessments of young asylum seekers (aged 12–23) in the Netherlands[†]

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This article contributes to the critical literature on child participation discussing the positionings of young asylum seekers (aged 12–23) residing in a Dutch asylum centre. It queries participation as an institutional measure, outlining the informants’ perspectives on the creation of a youth council within the confines of an asylum centre. Contradictions and tensions in the wider societal context, in the asylum centre, and in the functioning of the youth council are identified. They demonstrate the gulf between theory and practice in the fulfilment of children’s participation rights. The authors scrutinize concepts such as ‘methodological immaturity’, ‘voice’, and ‘recognition’ and argue for the integration of the perceptions and practices of young asylum seekers through dialogue. This can assist in creating an atmosphere conducive to an ethically responsible and meaningful collaboration with young asylum seekers and adapted policy interventions to enhance participation against an on-going backdrop of insecurity, exclusion, and forced inactivity.

Keywords: governmentality; participation; methodological immaturity; dialogue approach; youth council; young asylum seekers

28th of February 2013

Birlo had to go to the hospital for a stomach operation today. I agreed to drive Birlo and his friend Salvador¹, who spoke some Dutch. This was a last minute decision. The public transport refund they had obtained from the COA² did not allow them to arrive in time and Birlo could not return safely after general anaesthesia having to walk long distances.

Immediately after the operation, Salvador and I were asked to come urgently to the first recovery, where normally no visitors were allowed. Birlo was very agitated and nobody understood him. We found out he was not in pain but terrified due to the impossibility to communicate about his physical condition.

After the operation he was sent home, still groggy and unable to walk. I was fortunate to be able to drive him back to the centre. Upon arrival, I asked the guards to open the crossing gate in order to bring the young men safely to the entrance of the living areas. The guard responded: ‘Are you careful with these guys in your car?’

3rd of March 2013

Discussing the issue with the COA location manager, I was informed that if Birlo had communicated better about his medical condition and transportation problem, he would have been authorized

[†]The empirical data in this article is drawn from master research of Pozzo (2013), Dr Sandra J.T.M. Evers was her research supervisor. This article is the fruit of their collaboration.

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payment for a taxi. Salvador commented: 'If you understood, and we did, why didn't the COA?' I answered: 'Apparently, the COA expects you to 'speak up'. This is the reality you have to operate in. You have to assert yourself.'

20th of March 2013

Salvador has decided to withdraw from the youth council. He had become cynical about whether a youth council could improve the living conditions of his friends and others in the centre. A few days earlier, his handicapped friend Ali was put out on the streets. He said: 'I don't want to sit with these people at one table anymore. It is unjust what they do to us all from the start.'

(Excerpts from field notes, March 2013)

Introduction

The above research vignette succinctly captures how youth living in a Dutch asylum centre struggle with restrictions of their rights and access to society while simultaneously being expected to 'speak up'. Well-intentioned interventions such as the creation of a youth council in this setting confirm increasing critical concern about the gap between theory and practice of child participation as institutional measure sparking comments on its adult-centred and regulatory nature (Percy-Smith 2014, 211). It also is important to consider that granting agency is often assumed inherently to be positive and desired by all children and young people (Tisdall and Punch 2012, 256) as promoted by a recent orthodoxy in research that risks to distort or ignore our key understandings of diversity in the conceptualization of childhood and the contours of agency (Lancy 2012, 1). Furthermore, the authors are of the view that the broad language of the Rights of the Child leaves the door open to interpretation and arbitrary (Tisdall and Punch 2012, 257). As Phillips and Coppock (2014, 59–60) argue, in order to enhance its minimal actualization in practice, 'participation should recognize children as participants in society'. This condition, however, is problematic in the case of asylum-seeking children, who are often powerless in interactions with adults and excluded from certain rights that 'legitimate' citizens have as well.

Since the late 1980s, legislation and policy in the Netherlands and other European countries have been increasingly restrictive in order to discourage asylum seekers from entering. In the Dutch case, policy is also designed to prevent those who are already in the Netherlands from becoming active participants in society. As long as doubts persist about asylum seekers being 'real refugees', they are not allowed to learn the Dutch language or to find paid employment (Ghorashi 2005, 193; ACVZ Report 2013, 82).

Foucault's analysis of 'discourse' (1977) and later theories on 'governmentality' (1991) offer valuable frameworks for understanding international asylum policies (cf. Lippert 1999), which tend to take precedence over the internationally recognized Human Rights and the Rights of the Child. Foucault argues that 'discourse' constructs and defines people and their place in the world. It can be used as a tactic in the process of 'governmentality', defined as the 'ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power' (Foucault 1991, 102).

More specifically, labels such as 'asylum seekers', 'refugees', 'aliens', 'legal', and 'illegal' immigrants define people as transitional actors and challenges to the political order of citizenship, borders, sovereignty of nation states, and consequently 'in need' of measures of reception, assistance and integration in order to successfully integrate. At the same time, these labels are used to justify much of the institutional power with which they are confronted. This can be viewed as a 'domopolitics' agenda (Walters 2004), in which boundaries are created between those who are 'at home' and those who are not.

The Dutch system of locating asylum centres in remote locations leaves it open to the charge that it is pursuing such an agenda. The centres were initially introduced in 1987 to lodge asylum seekers for a few months before moving into society to await the outcomes of their asylum procedures. Since 1996, however, they have had to live, often for years, at the centres until their residence permits are either issued or rejected. During their stay, they are fully dependent upon the state for the provision of benefits, shelter, health services, education, etc.

Lippert (1999, 308) makes reference to Foucault's 'quarantined city' and sees refugee camps as its descendants, as in both places individuals are kept out of the public view and controlled through surveillance. Lippert (1999, 313) also points out that within a context of advanced liberal rationality in the international refugee regime since the 1990s, characterized by an increased distance between the decisions of formal political authorities and the conduct of a variety of other authorities and actors, camps are increasingly considered to be harmful to the 'active potential' of refugees, who need to be provided with 'empowerment' and 'community' programmes.

We observe a similar development in the Dutch asylum centre system, where people are removed from the dialogue and social space of the agora, while concurrently participation initiatives are introduced. In 2013, the COA decided to set up a programme entitled 'Kind in de Opvang' (Children at Reception Locations) after the publication of Kloosterboer's (2009) research according to which the living conditions of children in Dutch asylum centres are often at sharp variance with the Rights of the Child, including their right to participation (UNCRC 1989, art. 12, 13, and 31). One of the measures taken to alleviate this perceived injustice was to create youth councils at each centre 'to enhance participation of children and youth in asylum centres in order to create the appropriate care and reception'.³ The Vrolijkheid, a Dutch NGO that organizes creative activities with children and youth residing in Dutch reception centres, agreed to conduct a pilot.

Likewise, in 2014 the COA designed and implemented a programme entitled 'Activation of asylum seekers' in the wake of publication of a report according to which the combination of a long-term stay in a Dutch reception facility and the general boredom makes residents regard their situation as hopeless and become increasingly passive and institutionalized (ACVZ Report 2013, 82). These findings align with earlier findings such as those of Korac (2003, 19–20), where refugees report that the experience of Dutch asylum centres and measures of assistance and integration often do not correspond with their needs and goals, to which they, nonetheless, are required to conform due to their lack of power and voice.

As the Dutch programmes are still in a development phase and the aim is to enhance participation, the inclusion of the perspectives of asylum seekers in a critical reflection on their implementation would be primordial. As young people in particular are marginalized in debates and research on migration despite their significant representation in historical and current migration movements (Sirriyeh 2013, 3), it is particularly salient to include their views and experiences in a study that is epistemologically anchored in research *with* them rather than *on* them. Such research should recognize them as social actors able to contribute to measures that are meant to be in their interest. This article focuses on how young asylum seekers navigate and experience their contexts of exclusion, marginalization, and forced inactivity, and how they assess the creation of a youth council within the confines of an asylum centre. The theoretical definition of our rights, access, and participation framework presented below is largely based upon comments made by the informants during the research process.

The research group

The research group consisted of mixed 'categories' of asylum seekers: some were subject to expulsion orders, others received a residence permit, while the legal status of some remained

in abeyance pending the outcome of legal proceedings. The group was also characterized by diversity in age, gender, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds.

Most informants were native to Afghanistan, Iran, Armenia, Somalia, and Iraq. Some had arrived in the Netherlands a few months earlier, but most of them had already resided in the country for several years at the time of the research in early 2013. All 40 informants residing at the centre were involved in the research, half of the group consisting of older minors and the other half of young adults. Ten informants who spoke fluent Dutch or English acted as key informants and translators during the course of the inquiry.

The research methods

The original methodology plan inspired by Clark and Moss's (2011) 'mosaic' approach needed to be constantly adapted to better suit the informants. Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008, 499) proposal for researchers working with children, that recommends an attitude of 'methodological immaturity', proved very useful in this regard. The concept is a reaction to the automatic adherence to pre-planned 'child-friendly' methods and the correlated risk of containing a 'considerable slip-page between pedagogy and research' (500) and a conceptualization of children as 'becoming adults'. In fact, the rigid assumption that children need to be 'empowered' by adult-devised 'participatory' methods airbrushes the reality that children as social agents might prefer certain methods over others or may even be resistant to the very concept of 'child-friendly' methods *in toto*. Even actions or reactions that can be understood as 'non-participation' may provide insights into children and their worlds.

The concept of 'methodological immaturity' also opens the door to researchers working with children rather than superimposing participatory methods. As Thomson (2007) proposes, this suggests a conceptualization of both children and adults as 'becomings'. It entails a conceptualization of power as dynamic and relational and shifts away from the dichotomous view of power where the researcher always embodies power and the research participant is powerless. It also provides opportunities to deal with the fact that research, as life, and any dialogue, is inherently unpredictable.

To summarize, the key methods consisted of jointly organizing activities, participant observation, and extensive informal conversations. These took place face-to-face and through mobile phone online applications (Facebook and WhatsApp). As chatting contains features of both conversation and correspondence, it provides opportunities for spontaneous expressions as well as well-considered questions and answers. Significantly, although initially photos and videos were distrusted as channels of communication, eventually, through these media, these were sent spontaneously. The joint organization of activities and participant observation provided data about social interactions as well as power imbalances and power struggles.

Preliminary writings were discussed orally with each informant in order to enhance ethical integrity, create profound dialogues, and analyses and guarantee the processes of respondent validation and informed on-going consent. Final consent was asked after the research was completed and the final report was discussed and edited collectively. Upon completion of this process, informants had developed a comprehensive understanding of the research and were able to make fully informed decisions. The final research thesis was the fruit of a meaningful collaboration with the informants rather than an exercise in consultation.

The asylum centre

'It's an open prison. We're stuck here.' (Mizan, 20 years)

The research centre is located along a country road, at an approximately 40 minutes walking distance from the nearest village.⁴ The bus stop is a 20-minute walk away. The entrance features a

red and white crossing gate. All visitors and employees have to register at the office building of the COA before entering the centre.

The residents live in furnished 3.5 by 3.5 metre double rooms. The rooms are assigned according to strict rules. Children up to 14–15 years old live with their parents. Those who do not yet share their room live in anticipation of the arrival of a new roommate any day. Each toilet and shower is shared by eight residents. Each kitchen is used by 32 people and is closed between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. The residents are responsible for keeping these communal areas clean.

The informants described the centre as 'an open prison' where they felt reduced to the status of being 'unwelcome asylum seekers' and from which they hoped to leave as soon as possible. They also endured the additional stress of witnessing at close quarters how residents suffered from mental problems due to their insecure positions in the Netherlands and/or post-traumatic stress and the prospect of seeing entire families deported.

Most informants complained about the guidelines governing use of the communal areas and about how residents were placed together without regard for their cultural or religious backgrounds. This frequently led to incidents such as people blaming each other for standing on the (Western) toilet seat to squat down or for urinating outside the toilet when standing.

Informants also expressed their dissatisfaction with the increased restrictions to create a private environment in their rooms after a recent renovation. They were no longer allowed to drill holes to hang paintings and mirrors inside or private satellite dishes outside. The new iron furniture now had to stay inside each room, hardly leaving space for a private couch or other furnishings. 'Homemaking behaviour' (cf. Van Horst 2004) was no longer possible. Some informants commented: 'It is a beautiful prison now'.

Participation in society

'We just want a normal life, you know? Nothing special.' (George, 23 years)

During research it became clear that the interrelated concepts of 'rights', 'access', and 'participation' form a useful framework to analyse the youths' societal positions and participation from different angles. The first discussed concept uses rights as the starting point of what determines the youths' positions in society. The relation between the three concepts is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The three basic concepts determining the informants' positions.

Rights

‘Oh come on, it’s all about luck.’ (David, 17 years)

The history of Human Rights throughout the twentieth century has been marked by a progressive extension to include more people around the world, yet recent events display a clear reticence to extend these rights to asylum seekers in European countries (Bloch and Schuster 2002). Arendt already observed in 1958 that the supposedly inalienable Human Rights were dependent upon access to citizenship in the nation-state system and that stateless people did not have the ‘right to have rights’ (1958). Although the second half of the twentieth century saw the establishment of international institutional arrangements that seek to guarantee Human Rights at a supra-national level, according to Sirriyeh (2013, 102) the significance of a membership of a nation-state system as a marker of rights is certainly not in decline.

In the Netherlands, it is unclear whether adult asylum seekers are actually entitled to Human Rights as these apply to citizens instead of inhabitants. The Rights of the Child appear to be applicable, as children have the right to education until the age of 18 and those rights have been further enhanced in recent amendments to Dutch policy regarding immigrants. For instance, the so-called ‘Children’s Pardon’ makes it possible for children who have resided in the Netherlands for more than five years to apply for a residence permit. This difference in consideration of the Rights of the Child and Human Rights appears to relate to incompatible conceptualizations of ‘the child’ and ‘the asylum seeker’. While it is considered to be ‘unacceptable’ for a child to be socially excluded, when the discussion moves to asylum seekers, it is often defined as ‘unavoidable’ (cf. Seeberg, Bagge, and Enger 2009, 409).

Informants did not know or speak of rights and were sceptical about them during their time in the centre that they considered as ‘the pause of my life’. Turner (1995) described this as a ‘liminal’ or transitional phase between two life stages. Paradoxically, it was restrictive Dutch alien policy that increased the informants’ yearning for a residence permit, as they perceived it as the only way to develop meaningful activities besides their obligations within the private sphere and to obtain rights.

The acquisition of legal status as a refugee and a residence permit was often seen as dependent upon luck rather than law. The Dutch government and administration was viewed with distrust. Firstly, they felt ‘put on hold’ and excluded by its policy and regulations. Secondly, they observed how rejected asylum seekers were sent back to areas regarded as ‘safe’ while they had received contradictory information from relatives and friends still resident in their original jurisdictions. Thirdly, they witnessed how residents who were caught between the impossibility of return and the denial of a right to remain in the country, were put out on the streets, sent to family centres with even more restricted freedom or, including children, to detention centres. From the youths’ perspectives, what was determining their lives in the confines of the centre was not their rights but their access.

Access

‘There are ways. I will tell you all about it. If you want to help others, of course.’⁵ (Risha, 19 years)

For the most part, fieldwork was eventually comprised of tales and anecdotes of how the isolated position of the centre and the informants’ lack of access to basic needs as finances, transport, healthcare, education, employment, activities, and information interacted. Various levels of insecurity – political, economic, social, physical (health), existential – appeared to act concomitantly upon asylum seekers, who perceived lack of access as placing them under chronic and persistent duress, compromising their sense of well-being.

Informants constantly tried to gain or improve their access to Dutch society. 'Access theory', although originally applied in natural resource analyses, is of analytical interest here. Ribot and Peluso (2003, 153), who developed the theory, define 'access' as 'the ability to derive benefits from things' and 'a bundle of powers' rather than focussing on a definition of 'property' as 'the right to benefit from things' and 'a bundle of rights'. The theory is applicable to our work as the major difference between 'access', 'ability' and 'power' on the one hand, and 'property' and 'right' on the other hand, is that the first three are dynamic; the concepts are useful to understand how and why people or institutions are actually (en)able(d) to benefit from resources beyond the sphere of formal rights. Similarly, Watters (2008, 157) distinguishes 'entitlement', relating to questions in laws and policies at a macro level, and 'access', relating to actual practice on the ground.

Within their insecure and restricted circumstances, informants creatively navigated through their environment as 'social navigators' (Vigh 2009, 204), each in uniquely conscious and unconscious ways. Vigh's (2009, 420) attempt to make the implicit value of the concept of 'social navigation' explicit provides valuable insights: while it is often used to explain how agents act in difficult situations, he argues that navigation allows us to focus on how people move in 'moving' social environments, like the frequent relocations and changes in policy and procedures in the research context.

In their actions, key informants also displayed the attributes of 'culture brokers'. Formulated and refined over recent decades, this concept refers to persons who understand different cultural systems, are able to interpret these systems from one frame of reference to another, can mediate cultural incompatibilities, and know how to establish linkages (Gay 1993, 293). The key informants' language knowledge, Dutch or English, was the most important asset to increase their sense of self-determination, albeit within restrictions.

The concept of 'access brokers' more accurately encapsulates the youths' actions and ambitions. Some key informants navigated in all the space available to them and exposed themselves to small risks 'beyond rights' to obtain access to what they yearned for. Others walked in straighter lines, keeping their conduct relatively simple and safe. Again others moved in ways of which it was not easy to understand to what extent these were conscious or effective, as they appeared to find or to lose themselves somewhere between distance and withdrawal.

Participation

'You have to stay active in our circumstances. Otherwise you collapse.' (Jamshid, 12 years)

Against a backdrop of restricted rights and limited access, virtually all informants translated the concept of participation into 'staying active'. They considered it not only as a basic human need but also as essential to maintaining their mental equilibrium within the context of their chronic uncertainty concerning the outcomes of their legal procedures. Informants identified activity as the key to survival on three fronts: firstly to provide distraction from worries, secondly to build self-reliance in relation to a future with few guarantees of security, and finally as insurance to prevent informants from 'doing bad things'.

Child researchers are usually careful to emphasize the agency of their informants in a research context, and resist facile, binary classifications. In the research group, however, a clear distinction emerged between those who said 'I'm busy, I have to' and those who described their days as 'I eat and sleep, eat and sleep', and a tendency of informants to choose one of two alternate routes.

As Eriksen (2010a, 12) argues, 'when one finds oneself in a setting with no preordained script to be followed, a typical reaction is withdrawal, but it is equally common to try to redefine the situation to make it resemble something familiar'. This form of brokerage, however, requires a

range of competencies – organizational, linguistic, presentational, and relational – that can lead to ‘a step upwards leading ultimately to social promotion’ but also to ‘a loss of confidence in the unstable marginal worlds in which brokers operate’ (Bierschenk, Chauveau, and Olivier de Sardan 2002, 24).

Becoming a broker was not easy for young adults, particularly if they did not speak Dutch or English upon arrival in the Netherlands, as the statutory right to education was not extended to people over the age of 18. As language fluency was the main tool to gain access and ‘stay active’, their agency was so hampered that most of them lost their sense of self-determination, suffered from psychological problems and became almost passive victims, tending to ‘migrate inwards’ (Grønseth 2013, 14). The proximity of behaviours of passivity, mental breakdowns, and the duress of institutionalization of residents created an atmosphere of precarity and of a certain contagion factor where it concerned the avoidance of mental instability.

Significantly, most informants expressed their eagerness to learn Dutch instead of English, despite the possibility of eventually being sent out of the country. They explained it was crucial in order to gain major access, which would keep them mentally stable, a condition from which they could benefit even if they had to start all over again in another country.

They also explained that learning Dutch would provide them with opportunities to ‘speak up’ and ‘do it yourself’ as was expected of them by the COA. These expectations are also embedded in the perception of participation in Western participation models broadly applied in practices. Hart’s (1992) ‘participation ladder’, for instance, aimed at providing clarity of goals and enabling practitioners to gradually improve their approaches, is divided in eight levels, with self-initiated participation valued as ‘the best’.

These hierarchical and normative rather than explanatory categorizations of participation risk reinforcing the marginalization of target groups if the assumed cause of not achieving the goals is identified as a shortcoming of the ‘other’ (cf. also Lancy 2012). The informants indeed explained that the expectations of the COA were in any case difficult to live up to as they did not correspond with their contexts of (inter)dependency as well as the absence of (adult) mediators most of them were used to. These issues were not taken into account and also played important roles in the youth council.

Participation in the youth council

‘I’m quite nervous and afraid, you know? This is not something we normally do.’ (Kitrauhl, 15 years)

The researcher worked as an independent researcher and concurrently with the Vrolijkheid, which provided her access to the field and the informants. She and the informants organized activities together, for which they jointly raised funds. They also installed a youth council that was representative with regard to ethnic backgrounds, ages, and gender. The council consisted of eight members.

Becoming a youth council member was restricted to the ‘happy few’ speaking Dutch or English. This created power imbalances and the risk of the members determining whose views would be included or excluded. Therefore, during the fieldwork, individual conversations were held and general meetings were organized in order to involve everybody’s views. Subsequently, the youth council members elaborated these and prepared meetings with the COA. After that, all informants were involved again to determine if the requests and arguments corresponded to everybody’s needs and views. During the fieldwork period, this circular process occurred twice as two meetings took place between the youth council and the COA.

After the meetings with the COA, youth council members expressed considerable disappointment. Almost everything they desired in order to improve their living circumstances was

restricted by policy, regulations, and the COA's own plans. In relation to the few issues the youth council members were allowed to influence, they complained about a lack of the COA's commitment to investigate raised issues and/or to inform them about investigations.

They even felt their proposals to solve the problems with the cleaning schedules of communal areas and related fines, which were in the interest of all parties as these created tensions among residents, to be misunderstood. As the kitchen's garbage bins were overflowing, their first proposal was to remove them in order to encourage residents to deposit their garbage in the larger containers outside and to stop them from emptying the waste bins from their rooms in the kitchen's bins. They explained to the new location manager of the COA that this had worked well five years previously. Their second proposal was to divide the cleaning tasks per room per day instead of two or three rooms in order to involve all residents and avoid tensions about the fines.

The location manager of the COA was enthusiastic about both proposals as well as the involvement of the youth council members in this regard, and agreed to investigate the issues. Subsequently, councillors asked repeatedly to be informed and found out after six weeks that the executive employee, who had been present during the meeting, had understood their proposals to be to place more instead of no garbage bins in the kitchens and not to divide the cleaning tasks per room but per person, a proposal that he had not considered realistic as the population changed frequently.

The youth council members were upset about the entire process. The lack of recognition and opportunities to 'stay active' in the council eventually led to a loss of confidence and sense of well-being. They decided to quit temporarily. They explained that as long as they did not feel their issues to be investigated seriously and were not provided with clear answers, they considered the youth council as no longer fulfilling its original purpose. Ultimately viewing their participation in the youth council as pretence, they preferred taking care of their lives as 'access brokers' and to help people in their own ways.

Discussion

'They are just not serious about taking us seriously.' (Risha, 19 years)

Eriksen (2010b, 167) makes reference to 'muted groups' as 'powerless' due to their lack of communication channels, organization, resources and possibilities to promote their interests in efficient ways. Refugees are often also considered to have no 'agency' and processed into victimhood through institutional programmes in host countries (Ghorashi 2005, 185). The status of refugee, besides being a legal category or socio-political condition, is also an imposed (and to an extent claimed) identity that undermines their chances to be considered as 'ordinary people driven by ordinary desires' (Kohli 2006, 708). Sirriyeh (2013, 31) adds that this threatens to engulf and draw out other elements of people's identities and ways in which they know themselves.

It is clear that although the creation of a youth council within asylum centres appears to be a step forward on the participation agenda, it brings about considerable challenges and pitfalls in the institutional 'governmental' context of the asylum centre itself. The stories of the informants were fundamentally oriented towards the future while contained in 'an inflexible, static structure that prevents them from moving' (Mikola 2013, 144). Within this structure, the centres themselves represent a paradox because, as Pinelli (2013, 41) puts it, they 'often live off the very weaknesses they produce, nourishing instead of removing vulnerability and other forms of marginality'.

This said, we must also pay attention to the increasing questioning of the well-intentioned but not unproblematic appropriation of 'voices' as the most effective framing of children's participation in particular (cf. Tisdall, Davis, and Gallagher 2009). Such critiques call our attention to

the ‘powerful adult agendas at play’ in the opportunities we afford children to ‘have a say’ (Clark and Percy-Smith 2006, 2). James (2007, 261), for instance, argues that ‘giving voice to children’s voices’ masks some important conceptual and epistemological problems.

The first relate to matters of authenticity, translation, interpretation, and mediation. What roles are the ‘voices of children’ meant to take on? The Vrolijkheid has to work within the existing framework of the Dutch alien policy and the regulations of the COA, and at each location needs the COA’s permission to reach its target groups. The activities of the Vrolijkheid are often also co-financed by the COA. This makes not only the independence of the foundation a challenge, but also that of the youth council.

As Thomas (2012, 463) argues, child participation is often described in non-conflictual terms, both in practice and in theory. Encouraging them to participate in creating knowledge about themselves, however, can be the same as encouraging them to take part in processes used to regulate them in terms of ‘governmentality’ and contribute to a conceptualization of children as in need of guidance and assistance, a perspective that still engages with children as ‘adults-to-be’ (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008, 504), or ‘becomings’.

The second challenge highlights the hidden danger underpinning the very conceptualization of giving ‘voices of children’: to perceive children as a category. While some researchers have attempted to disaggregate childhood by stressing the problems of certain groups of minority children, it is less clear how participation relates to diversity (cf. Wyness 2009). In fact, at the centre, the youth varied in ethnic backgrounds, ages, gender, stages in their legal procedures, socio-economic positions, etc. This diversity was the main reason why their choices to carve out their personal lives and their ways to deal with the opportunities and constraints within their worlds were mainly individual.

Moreover, the informants connected to one another because they lived together at the same centre, but their interaction was characterized by an absence of any general sense of community. During the activities that took place during the fieldwork, they simply enjoyed ‘staying active’ and did not put any effort into getting to know each other or to move beyond the friendships they had already. Language knowledge was again the most powerful boundary marker, also to include or exclude each other.

The third concern is related to the very nature of ‘giving voices to children’, as it appears to implicitly assume children’s active collaboration, which in reality is not always the case. The informants considered their tasks to take care, gain access, and build bridges for people belonging to their private domains as self-evident priorities. Reaching out to those beyond their private sphere was far from a given.

Assumptions about children’s active collaboration simultaneously do not take into account that in other cultures they may not be used to, or even allowed to ‘speak up’, especially towards adults. As Liebel and Saadi (2010) argue, although these customs are often perceived as oppressing in Western eyes, this respect for elders may also be interpreted as intergenerational solidarity and interdependency, and may be reciprocated with respect to children.

It also undermines children’s abilities to decline participation, nowadays implied in research by the conceptualization of consent as a process and not as a one-time signing of a form.⁶ In fact, as we have seen, Salvador, who was the only one of his ethnic community who spoke Dutch, withdrew during the process. Creating a structural representative council was also utopic due to constant forced relocations.

Moreover, none of the involved youth council members or the employees of the Vrolijkheid or the COA was informed about Kloosterboer’s (2009) research about the Rights of the Child being violated in Dutch asylum centres and about the original purpose of the youth council to bring change in their circumstances. The lack of change also highly contrasted with the high expectations of the youth council members, especially because they were asked to express their opinions, a

practice with respect to which they were not accustomed. Once they had overcome this major bridge they had hoped that at least they would be taken seriously and listened to. They did not have that impression and this was reflected in the meagre outcomes of the meetings with the COA.

During the meetings with the COA, there were obvious power discrepancies between the youth council members and the employees, who could not do otherwise than negotiate as adults. The youth council members were furthermore in a relatively powerless position in relation to the COA as institution. Many residents also imagined the COA to have the power to influence their asylum procedures.

It should also be noted that youth were given voices in a context where there were no (adult) residents' councils. In other words, their adult counterparts had no voice at all. In some cases in the Netherlands, the COA even determines whether or not issues brought forward by youth council members possibly derive from adults and therefore need to be put aside. It is unclear whether this is meant to protect the young members, to reject the desires of adults, or both. As Jans (2004, 28) states, however, 'childhood and the living conditions of children are fundamentally influenced by the same economic, political and social powers that constitute the context of adults' lives', an approach that can be extended and refined to include the experiences and roles of older minors and young adults (Sirriyeh 2013, 39).

Huijsmans et al. (2014, 164) point out how a rigid conceptualization of chronological (rather than relational) age, as reflected in the Rights of the Child and in national law and policies, focuses on young people as in an isolated position. They argue that it fails to consider the heterogeneity among young people and how their lives are interrelated with the lives of people in other life phases (165). They also emphasize that well-intended interventions in young people's lives rarely take into account the power relations from which such interventions emerge and how these are reproduced or transformed in the process (168).

In the same line of thought, Thomas (2012, 463) argues that the concept of 'recognition' refers to a wide range of social settings in which fundamental questions about the place of children in society and intergenerational relations surface. He seeks to advance Taylor (1995)'s and Honneth's (1995) theories of 'recognition', according to which participation is not just a process of hearing children's voices, but holds out possibilities for children to discover and negotiate the essence of who they are and their place in the world. Both argue that misrecognition consists in the depreciation of such identity and may inflict damage and harm. Fraser (2000, 109), however, proposes a 'status model' under which recognition is not so much a question of identity, but rather of social status. Accordingly, misrecognition refers to social subordination. We believe that in the research context both formulations of recognition are helpful in that they attest to the importance and relevance of recognition itself – both of the youths' identity and status.

In order to more fully recognize children, Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) add that a 'dialogue approach' holds potential. Similarly to Gallacher and Gallagher's (2008) concept of 'methodological immaturity', they explain that, firstly, through dialogue adults are ontologically forced to consider how they understand the nature of dialogue itself. Secondly, they are epistemologically required to take the self-understanding of children seriously. Children's competence, determination, dependency or vulnerability do not determine their inclusion or exclusion from participatory processes, but rather the ways in which their participation takes place. Thirdly, how adults respond to new insights generated through dialogue will significantly influence how children are recognized and how their sense of themselves, and what matters to them, is shaped through the encounter. Finally, it enables new understandings and insights that cannot be generated by just one of the partners.

Despite the efforts of the COA and the Vrolijkheid, there is a chasm between the theoretical insights of this 'dialogue approach' and the creation of a youth council in the research setting, the latter having been very limited in terms of facilitating meaningful participation. On the other

hand, these insights highlight that youth perspectives should be at the centre of the dialogue if the aim is to achieve their participation.

Conclusion

‘If people are so concerned about our circumstances, why do they put us in these places in the first place?’ (Mizan, 20 years)

We critically examined the opportunities provided to young asylum seekers to participate in a youth council at the asylum centre where they lived. In terms of ‘governmentality’, whereby the sovereign right of the Dutch state is seen as paramount over individual asylum seeker’s rights, they were offered opportunities to participate within the confines of the imposed centre, policy, regulations and (Western) views of what participation should entail. There was an evident gap between the rhetoric on participation by the institutions involved and how it was experienced as constrained and pretence by the youth.

Firstly, it did nothing to resolve their issues and feelings of societal exclusion and marginalization and even reproduced and reinforced these. Secondly, it did not take into account limited language skills, (inter)dependency, diversity, and lack of a sense of community within the centre. Thirdly, cultural aspects, such as their priorities given to their tasks within their private domains and their acquaintance with mediators negotiating their views instead of raising their voices themselves, especially towards adults, were not considered. Last but not least, the realization of the youth council failed due to a lack of recognition by means of a genuine dialogue.

We argue that a participatory approach that seeks to facilitate the recognition of children and youth entails much more than ‘listening to their voices’ and points to the potential of an ‘immature’ ‘dialogue approach’. Such an approach to participation is oriented towards children’s self-understanding and individual agency, as well as to the self-understanding of the adults involved. It is also useful to ensure that all are aware of what they engage in, to consider together how participatory mechanisms can be enacted and whether or not participatory mechanisms are appropriate.

As Grønseth (2013, 10) brings to the limelight, living ‘in the fringes of society’ not only engenders sufferings from losses and insecurity, but also supplies an existential and agentic force in creating new beginnings, selves and well-being. Intrinsically, it refers to a human need, including that of children, to be able to actively extend and involve oneself, to be recognized and mirrored by others (12) beyond distinctions and diversity. Disregarding children’s and youths’ own views and experiences can result in interventions that do not address their real problems and may even increase their (sense of) exclusion. Acknowledging their agency to help themselves does not mean that they do not need support, but rather that by including their perceptions and practices, interventions can be more effective (cf. Woodhead 1999, 27; Evers, Notermans, and Van Ommering 2011, 18).

With this article, aimed at bridging critical theoretical insights on child participation and real life experiences of young asylum seekers in the Netherlands, we hope to contribute to enhancing policy measures that enable young asylum seekers to develop meaningful activities according to their own needs. More specifically, we wish to encourage a meaningful ‘immature’ dialogue with young asylum seekers in the development of programmes as ‘Activation of asylum seekers’ while they are waiting, often for years, for the outcomes of their asylum procedures within the confines of reception centres.

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Notes

1. The names are fictitious and invented by the informants themselves.
2. COA: Centraal Orgaan opvang Asielzoekers (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers), the Dutch governmental authorities at the centres.
3. Our translation. The original Dutch text is: *Het bevorderen van de participatie van kinderen en jongeren in azc's om te komen tot gepaste zorg en opvang*. The source is a confidential document. The Vrolijkheid has given consent for the publication of this definition.
4. For security and privacy the precise location of the centre will not be revealed here.
5. The researcher's role was obviously also considered as a means to obtain and spread 'insider's' information and gain access to society for the informants themselves as well as for others.
6. Method developed by the EASA Anthropology of Children and Youth Network: www.anthropologyofchildren.net.

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