CHAPTER 10

Section overview

Listening to young people: Negotiating gendered perspectives on voice and agency

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VOICE, AGENCY AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The concept of 'agency' and ideas about young people as agentic actors are firmly established in the field of childhood and youth studies (Corsaro, 2011; Johnson, 2017; Tisdall, 2016). 'Agency' is widely understood to refer to 'an individual's own capacities, competencies, and activities through which they navigate the context and positions of their life-worlds fulfilling many economic, social and cultural expectations, whilst simultaneously charting individual/collective choices and possibilities for their daily and future lives' (Robson et al., 2007: 135). As such, agency involves both decision-making *and* action; it is exercised, not owned (not a characteristic that a person 'has' but a process they exercise within particular social, cultural, economic and political contexts); and it is recognisable in the form of 'agentic practice', the expressions of agency that are visible to others and achieve certain effects or outcomes within different places or relationships (Bell, 2012; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2014).

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Voice, especially within political and civic engagement, is integral to agency. 'Having a voice' is an important part of rights-based research, intervention and evaluation (Johnson, 2017) and is upheld in Article 12 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which specifies young people's right to express their opinions on issues affecting their lives (Van Beers et al., 2006). Voice is usually understood as expressing one's opinions on issues through a wide variety of mediums, including verbal and non-verbal communication, such as songs, plays, music and art. Johnson (2017) asked a crucial question: 'Is anyone actually listening to young people's evidence… and if not, what processes or mechanisms can help decision-makers to value their contributions?' When considering young people's participation, voice is particularly important given the expectation of personal responsibility for activism, even when resources and supportive frameworks for participation are lacking (Ochieng et al., 2022).

It is widely recognised now that gender and age pattern young people's voice and agency in interrelated ways, generating differences not just in how adolescents engage in civic matters but also in their opportunities for doing so. Whilst work on girls' empowerment has long asserted that representations of girls in the Global South position them as passive victims and deny their agency (Shain, 2013; Switzer et al., 2016), this literature is only beginning to explore the implications for girls' political and civic participation at different scales (e.g., Haffejee et al., 2020).

More attention is also needed as to how adolescents in Global South contexts who are marginalised on the basis of disability, sexuality, legal status and ethnicity, for example, exercise agency. Recognising that those who are girls and young women, LGBTQ+, disabled, displaced or from ethnic minorities face specific barriers to participation does not mean assuming that they lack the ability to exercise agency. Improving our understanding of adolescents' own strategies for navigating social constraints, and the outcomes of this for individual and collective empowerment, is key to a more nuanced definition of their citizenship.

Recognising the limitations of existing approaches to adolescents' voice and agency in relation to citizenship, this chapter critically examines the use of the concepts of agency and voice, explores how these have led to 'allowed' notions of participation – especially for girls and young women – and the problems that this presents for understanding adolescents' participation in politics across different scales and spaces. Taking an intersectional lens to the notion of young people's 'everyday politics' (Kallio et al., 2020), this chapter asks:

1 How might we reimagine 'agency', especially for adolescents who face marginalisation on the basis of gender and other social identities?
2 What are the different spaces and scales in which adolescents exercise agency?
3 How can an intersectional lens nuance understanding of the different expressions and exercises of agency by adolescents?

CONCEPTUALISING AGENCY AND VOICE

Theoretical understandings of, and stances on, 'agency' and 'voice' are many and varied. Table 10.1 provides a summary of some of the different ways agency has been conceptualised in the wider literature, alongside implications for practice, young people's participation and civic engagement. Within international development, 'agency' is described as processes through which individuals are able to consider and choose between potential future trajectories or paths of action, to make and transform purposeful (and often political) choices into individual or collective actions and outcomes (for example, Bell, 2012; Bell and Payne, 2009; Petesch et al., 2005). As a process, understandings of agency necessarily demand simultaneous attention to the sustainability of such actions and the various outcomes (both anticipated and unexpected) that arise from their capacity to act.

Amartya Sen's (1999) understanding of freedoms and capabilities is widely applied as a framing for development interventions in the Global South and conceptualises voice through its relationship with agency. Sen's work helps to show how voice is operational to individual and collective agency. 'Freedoms' include a person's capability to be considered – and consider themselves to be – a citizen who matters and who has a voice that is heard and counts. If someone has the capability for voice, they inhabit spaces that provide the necessary conditions to express their points of view (and to be taken seriously), which in turn enables them to exercise their agency and influence the decisions that affect them. Therefore, an individual's capability for voice, and therefore their capability for agency, is rooted in their capacity – perceived or actual – to make decisions, act in certain ways or take action (Bell, 2012, Maxwell and Aggleton, 2014). 'Agency' goes beyond capacity; it requires attention to context and involves influences that trigger, support and inhibit agentic practice.

As such, the exercising of agency is influenced by a variety of individual (attitudes, knowledge, know-how, skills, gender, age etc.), proximal (interpersonal relationships and interactions with formal and informal organisations and institutions) and distal factors (such as cultural beliefs, experiences

TABLE 10.1

Concepts of agency

Concept	Definition	Explanation	Implications for young people's civic engagement and participation
Ambiguous agency (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012)	Expressions of agency that contrast with normative conceptions of childhood.	Young-person–centred and participatory social interventions are designed around principles of young people's agency and their right to participate in decision-making processes. However, expressions of agency that unsettle normative moral and iconic notions of childhood can pose challenges for practitioners and risk paternalistic stances on agency in practice.	Young people require support to achieve goals that align with their own local socio-cultural contexts, lived experiences and expressions of agency, rather than having goals imposed upon them that are not local, are externally driven and often adult-driven.
Everyday agency (Payne, 2012)	A perspective on agency which encourages attention towards the ways children and young people perceive and experience their expressions of agency as part of 'everyday life' rather than an extraordinary form of coping and survival.	The concept of 'everyday agency' theoretically extends the notion of 'ambiguous agency' by drawing attention to the fact that such expressions of agency are not necessarily 'out of place', extraordinary or inherently connected with (often externally imposed ideas about) 'coping' and 'survival' but instead perceived by young people themselves as part of 'everyday life'.	Young people's perspectives and their own terms and explanations for agency must be at the centre of efforts to expand their participation, rather than perceiving their agency to be rooted within a discourse of crisis and something in need of correction.

Concept	Definition	Explanation	Implications for young people's civic engagement and participation
Constrained agency (Bell, 2012; Punch, 2015)	Agency exercised within the confines of particular sets of power relations and structures in different aspects of young people's daily lives.	Young people's constrained agency may derive from interaction with parents, teachers and elders as custodians of social values; it may also reflect the impact of rural location and poverty, socio-cultural norms and patriarchy and moral constraints.	Support from trusted adults may help adolescents and young people to navigate these constraints, and intergenerational care and support may be harnessed and built upon to be a positive force in expanding adolescents' and young people's agency.
Subtle agency (Bell, 2012; Scheyvens, 1998)	The quiet, often invisible ways in which marginalised individuals or groups attempt to (re)assert themselves in their homes and communities. 'Subtle agency' refers to how groups generally considered powerless exercise power through informal strategies designed to quietly resist prevailing dominant power relations (Scheyvens, 1998).	Drawing on similar gender and development frameworks of constraint and control as the concept of 'constrained agency', but with greater emphasis on individuals' ability to exert influence over their own lives through 'subtle strategies'(Bell, 2012) The concept of subtle strategies (efforts to achieve profound, positive changes without stirring up wide-scale dissent) (Scheyvens, 1998: 237) offers a lens through which to understand how young people navigate constraining influences in order to improve their own lives.	When agency is subtle, the challenge is how to mitigate the potential for negative consequences – and the risks for young people where their agency is more obvious. If young people's agency remains subtle, there is likely to be little impact on structures inhibiting what they do in relation to different areas of their lives. Alternatively, if young people's agency becomes more obvious before public attitudes are more accepting of these actions, negative outcomes are more likely to arise (such as punishment, social exclusion or parent-led restrictions), but this might result in longer-term change.

(*Continued*)

TABLE 10.1 (Continued)

Concept	Definition	Explanation	Implications for young people's civic engagement and participation
		A distinction between subtle and public forms of agency offers analytic opportunities for exploring consequences arising from young people's agency, sustained agency and resulting change in societal structures. Young people may generate small, positive changes in their personal lives – enhanced self-esteem and happiness – through subtle different forms of agency, but this may or may not lead to long-term change in the structures that constrain or inhibit young people's ability to act for themselves.	
Agentic practices (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2014)	The ways in which agency can be expressed, rendered visible and impactful.	Whereas agency might refer to behaviours, 'agentic practices' focuses on the different forms these behaviours take in different settings by different people, recognising that young people's agency is practised differently from place to place or within young people's many different relationships.	The practice of political agency will vary according to the different spaces and in the context of the different relational dynamics in which young people are located; this must be recognised in efforts to support political participation.

Concept	Definition	Explanation	Implications for young people's civic engagement and participation
Agency in action (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2010)	The processes in which young people: (a) think through (or reflect on) their experiences of living in a particular place (within a set of relations with peers, friends, families or being part of formal and informal institutions); (b) realise that they are unhappy (or feeling other emotions) with their circumstances or that their circumstances need changing; and (c) develop and implement new strategies, behaviours or practices (i.e., exercising agency in response to these circumstances) to make things better or different for themselves.	This form of agency is rooted in emotional experiences of being, making decisions and acting for change. It highlights the importance of making links between the attitudes and emotions that drive young people's decisions and actions in day-to-day life. It promotes: (a) following young people's experiences over time and asking them to reflect on these experiences to enable an understanding of the temporal aspects of their agency; (b) examining the extent to which agency is short or long term; and (c) exploring what happens when agency is maintained beyond fleeting and sporadic moments and what the long-term consequences of this can be, in relation to wider life plans.	Young people's own narratives and reflections on their lived experiences create an affect-laden systematisation of understanding(s) of oppression (or marginalisation, constraint, and control), and this must be at the centre of support. Young people's own interpretations of their experiences may open up possibilities for more sustained agentic practice to make things better or different for themselves through civic engagement and participation.

Adapted from Edmonds and Bell (2016).

of poverty, national policies and laws) that are found within the social environments young people inhabit and which influence, support or inhibit the public and private nature of agentic practice (Petesch et al., 2005: 45). Klocker's (2007) discussion of 'thick' and 'thin' agency suggests a 'continuum of agency' to describe the extent to which young people can exercise a capacity to decide and act. At one end, 'thin agency' refers to decisions and everyday actions carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few viable alternatives. At the other, 'thick agency' is having latitude to act within a broad range of options. Agency can be thickened or thinned along this continuum, whereby 'structures, contexts, and relationships can act as 'thinners' or 'thickeners' of agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choices', i.e., different layers of multiple factors (such as moral and gender- and age-based ideologies and beliefs) impact differentially on young people in different situations.

However, understandings of 'agency' and 'voice' have been critiqued. There has been a persistent normative stance on 'agency' in the literature and in practice, positioning agency in largely positive ways where it is synonymous with decisions and actions that are considered to align with moral and social ideals about how young people should behave (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). Critiques use the concept of 'ambiguous agency' (ibid.) to highlight the theoretical distance between such normative ideas about agency and locally situated expressions in different global contexts; the latter are often in stark contrast to these normative ideas and viewed as either problematic, invisible or simply not expressions of agency at all because they do not conform to recognisable and acceptable forms of the 'right' kind (Edmonds, 2019). For example, research with adolescent girls in Rwanda (Edmonds, 2016) revealed stark contrasts between girls' goals and one international development organisation's programme goals for addressing early pregnancy. Girls aspired to getting pregnant only once they were married in order to preserve their *agaciro* (their value and reputation in the eyes of family and community members), even if the marriage occurred during adolescence. By contrast, the organisation's goal was for them to delay pregnancy until a later biological age (irrespective of their marital status), which was not of importance to girls themselves. Such critiques matter because the normative stance on agency effectively limits how the concept can be used as an analytic tool for understanding young people's agentic practice (Edmonds, 2019) – especially given the need for an intersectional lens that goes beyond binary understandings of gender.

Understandings of voice have been similarly critiqued, highlighting problems with what is recognised as or deemed to be 'voice' in the first place (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Johnson and West,

2018). As with agency, there is a tendency to acknowledge young people's voices only when they are reflective of normative expectations and ideals about who should be speaking and how, on what kinds of issues, with whom and within which contexts. Some studies have observed how young people's 'local' voices can be more reflective of dominant and/or external discourses, such as those driven by adults in positions of power, rather than young people's own lived experiences or 'local realities' (Corcoran et al., 2021; Payne, 2012). Payne's (2012) research with child-headed households in Zambia highlights the importance of young people's voices to ensure we truly understand their perspectives, especially where they are in stark contrast to our ideas. Introducing the concept of 'everyday agency', she offers a new view of young people's agency which is not framed only within concepts of 'coping' and 'resilience' but is instead more closely connected with the perspectives of young people by acknowledging that, for them, the daily realities of life are not always seen through a lens of crisis.

Too often, the structures within which young people are encouraged to 'have a voice' are actually unsuitable, because they do not emphasise the modes of communication that make the most sense for young people (Corcoran et al., 2021; Ochieng et al., 2022). For example, putting the banal and everyday practices of young people and their creative practices at the centre of research and activism (Batsleer, 2011; Horton and Kraftl, 2009; Pahl, 2019; Rowley, 2019). It has also been noted that young people 'having a voice' do not necessarily equate to them being listened to or being heard.[1] Despite this, in practice, the notion of giving space for young people's voices is often equated by default with listening to and hearing young people. Ochieng et al. (2022) describe how members of a young-person–led community organisation in Nairobi were invited to various decision-making tables without being given enough information about the questions they were going to be asked. This meant their views could be effectively dismissed whilst organisers ticked the youth consultation box. Such tokenistic involvement of young people in decision-making fora is not sufficient for them to contribute effectively. Johnson and West (2018) go even further with their critique of 'voice', arguing that it is time to go beyond collecting young people's voices to effect change. Their critique suggests that understandings of voice have hitherto been too passive – preoccupied primarily with collecting young people's voices rather than creating genuine spaces for young people's participation (ibid.). As Singh explores in her contribution (see Chapter 15), there is no sustainable development without young people, but intergenerational dialogues with high-level stakeholders require clear and accessible accountability mechanisms and implementation strategies. Samonova's case study from Sierra Leone (see Chapter 12) focuses on how intergenerational dynamics

can constrain agency and voice for young people as modern processes (such as the expansion of education and introduction of children's rights legislation) start to shake up the social order as young people express the desire to gain more voice in decision-making processes. Jason Katya Muhiwa's contribution (see Chapter 14) on political participation in the DRC describes the systems that supported his participation and the need for these to centre youth voices.

Edmonds (2019) highlights the absence of work adequately exploring young people's agency and voice from the vantage point of different socio-cultural contexts, as well as the problematic ways externally driven theoretical framings for agency are applied – often uncritically – to the exercise of agency by young people in different local contexts around the world. Such gaps and misunderstandings require that agency (and voice) be 'made visible' through more nuanced theoretical understandings (Edmonds, 2019: 1) to ensure they can be truly supportive of developing good policy and practice. More naunced approaches require efforts to localise theoretical concepts of agency by going beyond the currently popular generation and use of young people's own perspectives to understand agency and voice (Edmonds, 2019). Rather than focusing on the tip of the iceberg, in other words on what is observable and describable about young people's agency and voice, interpretive methodologies which can uncover what is below the water – the deep cultural elements or 'premises' (Carbaugh, 2007) – are needed. These cultural premises, which are shaping agentic practice in local contexts (for example, the concept of *agaciro* in Rwanda mentioned previously), enable the development of situated theories of agency which are informed by, and grounded in, the socio-cultural context (Edmonds, 2019). Therefore, rather than relying on externally derived socio-cultural preferences and assumptions (which are not universal) for making sense of young people's agency and voice in local contexts, localising concepts of agency enables interpretations to become actually *contingent* on local socio-cultural understanding.

SPACES IN WHICH AGENCY IS EXERCISED

Within the literature on young people's citizenship in the Global South, two broad approaches can be identified: one sees those below the age of majority as 'citizens-in-waiting' who should be equipped with the appropriate skills for their future participation as political actors; the other views them as citizens in the present. The former body of research has focused more on adolescents than younger children, who are more distant from their role as future citizens (Keegan, 2019; Zembylas, 2013). This work is largely normative,

with an emphasis on the role of civic education for preparing young people to belong to a defined polity, focusing on formal modes of participation such as membership of youth groups or active involvement in social movements. Youth organisation and activism beyond these forms is only considered 'civic engagement' when they are pro-democratic and constructive (for example, having clear objectives that relate to formal politics). Adolescents are also generally framed as an inherently politically progressive social group, whose political participation – if appropriately encouraged – will lead to social justice outcomes and democratic futures. Yet, reflecting the ambiguous nature of their agency, it is important to recognise that young people may also play a role in social continuities in low- and middle-income countries that prevent social change and even be key actors in conservative and reactionary political shifts (Antonopoulos et al., 2020; Huijsmans et al., 2014; Lavie et al., 2022).

Widespread exclusion from formal political processes alongside material inequalities and precarity also means that adolescents and youth are vulnerable to being targeted by reactionary political actors and even mobilised into armed violence and extremism (Ingiriis, 2019). Yet while there has been limited research on adolescents' and young people's ambivalent or destructive expressions of 'citizenship' (Bachmann et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2018), this has generally not engaged with questions of voice and agency. Work on voice and agency in this area has, however, explored their role in armed conflict and peacebuilding. The piece by Jones et al. (see Chapter 21, this volume) brings together these two framings in relation to the *Qeerroo* youth movement in Ethiopia. Research about young people's participation in peacebuilding processes reflects normative ideals about young people as inclined towards constructive conflict resolution. Moreover, its focus on young men and boys has overlooked how gender and age intersect with other identities to shape opportunities for participation in conflict resolution. Young peoples' participation in violence and conflict in the Global South – and the predicament such participation presents for conceptualising their agency – has been explored in critical literature on 'child soldiers', highlighting tensions between global framings of such young people as manipulated innocents on the one hand and young people's own identities and experiences, local discourses on childhood and material realities on the other (Shepler, 2005; Utas, 2005; Vermeij, 2011).

However, within this more critical literature, young men remain the focus of research and participation in conflict is framed as a *departure* from, rather than an alternative expression of, citizenship. Explorations of gender and indeed age (even research on young men focuses on those above the age of majority rather than adolescents) in relation to political and civic voice and agency in the Global South remain conceptually limited. Although

Lopez-Fogues and Cin's (2018) work uses a capability lens, focusing on how gender configures opportunities to engage in political practices, their emphasis – as with most work on youth 'civic engagement' – is on formalised participation. Although seeking to counter the portrayal of young people as somehow disengaged from politics, in doing so, this literature presumes there is a particular way in which it is appropriate for young people to engage. This becomes even more pronounced when applying an intersectional lens to consider the participation of young women, who are often marginalised through gendered or patriarchal traditions of political engagement (Berents, 2019; Memusi, 2020). While this is important, a broader framing is needed which considers other modes and opportunities for civic participation, including those which challenge normative conceptualisations of what such participation looks like.

Literature on young people's emergent citizenship in the Global North has moved away from binary framings of formal and informal politics, recognising 'everyday politics' as an important arena for the contestation and transformation of political modalities and norms (Dickinson et al., 2008; Wood, 2012). Skelton (2010) argues that binary distinctions between the formal 'political' and informal 'political' need to be deconstructed because young people blend elements of both in their interactions with institutions and legal-political practices. Events such as armed conflict, environmental degradation, mass displacement and rural-urban migration have also challenged the 'site' for young people's participation, extending beyond settings such as homes, schools or neighbourhoods, which have traditionally been emphasised (Hart, 2008). Thinking in binary terms about structure and agency is, therefore, not helpful as it obscures the multidimensionality of young people's lives. Rather, young people's political agency is best understood as relational, taking place through everyday means (Kennelly, 2009). This connects closely with the nuances of agency and voice outlined above and, especially, conceptualisations of agency that emphasise structural constraints and the use of young people's everyday lives as a lens through which to understand expressions of agency (see Table 10.1).

GENDERED AND INTERSECTIONAL AGENCY

Young people need to navigate discriminatory or constraining gender norms to practise and negotiate their agency and may either oppose or strategically utilise these to achieve their goals. Kabeer (2008) distinguishes between agency that individuals exercise in their day-to-day interactions and decision-making and 'more consequential forms of agency' that are involved in making strategic life choices that either reinforce the status quo or 'seek

to question, to challenge, and perhaps to transform' it (Gammage et al., 2015). Exemplifying these tensions, Odhiambo's contribution in this section explores the limited power of rural Kenyan adolescent girls to make choices about their own bodies and notes the use of transactional sex as a means for navigating poverty.

Grieve's (2016) research in Ethiopia finds that boys are epitomised as free agents, able to move more freely and safely, while girls' movements are deemed undesirable as they are 'vulnerable'. For families, their standing in the local community is bound by adherence to certain social rules (both explicit and implicit), including how they successfully 'control' their daughters, also highlighted in Heinonen's (2011) exploration of *yilunta* (local understandings of shame, honour and family pride) and its impact on street-connected adolescents living in family homes or on the street in Addis Ababa. Where they conform to expectations, girls gain status, but this is not fixed as they can be sanctioned for breaching the status quo. Girls may be perceived as a burden or able to bring shame, unless their sexuality and reproduction fit within patriarchal societal structures that shape allowed possibilities for social advancement (Grieve, 2016). However, girls can deploy their knowledge of social restrictions on their movements to exercise 'subtle agency' (Bell, 2012), for example, by successfully fending off proposals for early marriage in favour of completing their education (Grieve, 2016).

Exercising agency that challenges local conventions and power relations is risky. It involves foregoing the immediate protection that children would normally enjoy and prohibits many from attempting such activity. For those who succeed, relationships with sisters and friends provide an 'agency thickener' enabling resistance to pressure and helping girls stay in school (Grieve, 2016). As such, adolescents' (lack of) social networks and relationships are key to explaining the contexts within which agency is exercised. The role of relationships in 'thickening' agency in the face of restrictive social norms is highlighted in the case study by Alam and Rashid on lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in Bangladesh, where having family, peer and political allies was integral to feeling accepted and able to live a more authentic life – even in a context of deeply ingrained homophobia. However, it is also important to consider how gender and age intersect and have consequences for access to wider potential support networks beyond the home (see Chapter 13). In Samonova's case study in this volume (Chapter 12), intergenerational power dynamics constrain the agency and voice of very young adolescents, for whom peers play a much less significant role than for older adolescents. The degree to which young people can rely on local social structures depends on context, especially in rural areas where the most feasible agency thickening is located within close relations and friendships

rather than within formal structures (Grieve, 2016; Morrison et al., 2019). For example, girls may attempt to assert their rights by reporting adults (including family members and teachers) to the local authorities about early marriage (ACPF, 2020; Jones et al., 2020; Stark, 2018). However, while such reporting can gain them an advantage, it also increases their vulnerability. In more serious cases, where attempted abduction or sexual assault occurs, girls find the reporting process challenging due to the wider societal, cultural and institutional context that serves to reproduce existing gendered practices.

An intersectional approach to 'everyday politics' offers a lens through which young people's voice and agency in relation to citizenship and political participation can be situated within these relational and contextual dynamics. With its roots in Black feminist activism, an intersectional approach recognises that individuals occupy multiple social identities at once, and their experiences of these identities unfold within wider systems of power. The interaction between individuals and contexts produces structural inequalities. Intersectionality offers a lens through which to see how people are situated differently in relation to politics based on gender, age and other social identities (Yuval-Davis, 2015). For example, if obligations to young people's ability to exercise their rights are to be fulfilled for everyone, the approach needs to go beyond the legalistic framing of human rights to understand how intersectional identities shape opportunities for agency (ACPF, 2020). For example, street-connected children must be 'distinguished – but not isolated – from other children in policy frameworks and intervention planning' (Thomas de Benitez, 2011: ix). Moreover, the agency of street-connected children themselves will depend on their particular situations and how gender (Kolkata Street Champions, Chapter 6 in this volume), disability (Taylor et al., 2019), relationships with peers (Beazley, 2003; Davies, 2008) and connections to family (Consortium for Street Children, 2018) play a role.

People sit at the intersection of multiple social identities, and this can create more complex situations for some. For example, race can place limitations on young people's rights within Brazilian urban peripheral communities (Lannes Fernandes and Rodriguez, 2022). Racialised and territorialised distinctions of young black men and boys' rights pose impacts the opportunities they can access, such as their right to free movement. Young Afro-Brazilian women and girls must also negotiate racist social terrains that devalue their identity as they mobilise towards changes in citizenship and identity politics (Caldwell, 2007), but from a starting point of even less freedom as a young woman's status in their household and wider community determines their capacity for agency. Acceptance of a young person's gender or sexual identity on its own does not enable true understanding of the complex ways their multiple social identities overlap – especially with regard to sexual citizenship

(Carr and Hanbury, 2022). Decision-makers must, therefore, pay attention to young people's particular contexts, considering whether they may, for example, be living in poverty, disabled, displaced, separated from family, street-connected, working, caring, pregnant, exposed to conflict and violence and developing specific strategies to realise their right to civic engagement (ACPF, 2020).

However, intersectional work that seeks to emphasise the plurality of young people's experiences has been critiqued for diminishing the political power of 'children's rights' within the social studies of childhood (e.g., James, 2010). Postcolonial feminist work has emphasised the wider contexts of global inequality within which such relationships are created, and cautioned against constructions of multiply-marginalised 'groups' which are treated as an issue only for the global South'. As the case study by Cuevas-Parra (see Chapter 11) demonstrates, applying an intersectional lens to understand barriers to participation faced by young people must emphasise not only individual social identities but also the ways these shift across space and time, making marginalisation a dynamic process rather than a one-off encounter. For example, the Disha young people's 'speak out and peer support group' for first-generation university students in India has developed its own radical democracy through conversations, inter-mixing and sharing that transgresses social divisions based on caste, class, gender or sexuality to create a community of care that speaks 'truth to power' in its own way and adapts to the specific needs of the students who are part of the group at the time (Natu, 2022).

CONCLUDING POINTS

Different concepts of agency and voice have been used to understand the evolving capacities of young people in adolescence. The repertoire of agentic practice exercised by young people, especially those most marginalised, is often in tension with dominant framings and assumptions, particularly in citizenship and political participation spaces. However, an intersectional lens that draws from the wide range of concepts of agency and is applied to young people and their evolving capacities allows insight into how young people negotiate the situations they find themselves in and exercise agency in different ways. There is a wealth of discussion on recognising voice and agency but all too often this is framed within narrow and externally imposed ways of seeing young people's participation, which neither reflect how young people make sense of their experiences from their own vantage points nor adequately account for the socio-cultural elements that shape these experiences. Listening to young people is neither easy nor simple, yet it is imperative.

The case studies that feature in this section of the volume reveal both the complexity and the importance of young people's voice and agency and ultimately offer useful directions for those involved in research and practice with young people so they might do a better job of really listening in the future.

BOX 10.1 DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What are the key differences between 'voice' and 'agency' as concepts?
- How do relational dynamics within families, peer groups and communities impact the ability of adolescents and young people to exercise agency and voice?
- What strategies can adolescents and young people use to navigate constraints on their voice and agency?
- This chapter includes an overview of concepts of agency (see Table 10.1). Which of these concepts resonates the most with each of the case studies in this section, and why?
- What role does context play in the agency of marginalised adolescents and young people (e.g., adolescents and young people with disabilities, who are LGBTQ+, who are from an ethnic minority)?
- How do the chapters in this section offer ways to reframe understandings of young people's agency and voice which are more resonant with their own realities or lived experiences?
- How might future research efforts go beyond 'collecting' young people's perspectives and develop 'situated theories' of agency and voice?

NOTE

1 See Table 10.1 on participation typologies, p. 124.

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