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Invoking the Discourse of Children's Rights in Campaigns Around Public Space

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ABSTRACT

Increasing emphasis is being placed on the need to consider children's rights in planning decisions. However, the way these rights are claimed by adults can be problematic, especially when planning decisions are controversial and contested. Drawing on interview data with participants engaged in campaigning around the development of a green space in Cardiff, we show how the adult appropriation of children's rights to support such campaigns may not only be misleading but potentially damaging. We conclude by discussing the limits of age-based rights claims and the need to ensure that children's rights are not appropriated for adult agendas.

1 | Introduction

There is little doubt that the citizenship status of children is partial and precarious. Even in higher income countries, where children can often hold nationality status with passports and birth certificates, they cannot be seen as 'full' citizens because of their age-based political and economic marginalisation (Osler and Kato 2022; Cohen 2005; Larkins 2014). From a legal standpoint, parents and guardians typically have the power to represent their offspring and make decisions according to what they perceive to be in the child's best interests. It is widely argued that the importance of parents' sovereignty in deciding on what is best for their child has stalled the ratification of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN General Assembly 1989) in the United States - the only UN member state not to have adopted the Convention (Human Rights Watch 2022). Indeed, whilst there has been a recent expansion in the recognition that children should have legal and material entitlements, especially through the UNCRC, children's on-the-ground experiences do not necessarily reflect the wider political

processes, particularly when these relate to what are seen as 'adult' spheres of decision-making, such as urban planning.

Existing research shows that current planning processes in the United Kingdom and elsewhere are largely exclusionary of children and young people (Driskell 2002; Mansfield, Batagol, and Raven 2021; Wood 2015). Whilst initiatives such as UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities programme (UNICEF 2004) attempt to incorporate the voices of children and young people in the planning and design of urban spaces, research evidence shows that children often find their needs, wishes and interests sidelined in these processes (Elsley 2006). Derr and Tarantini (2016, 1535), for example, wrote that 'despite the good intentions of many seeking to empower children as social agents, there are currently more critiques than successful models'.

Children's deficits in mobilising their rights and advocating on their own behalf mean they often rely on adults to advance their interests. Advocacy, allyship and solidarity have received some attention in academic research exploring

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both the positive and negative (Kutlaca et al. 2020; Liou and Literat 2020; Droogendyk et al. 2016; Alcott 1991) outcomes of advantaged groups speaking on behalf of marginalised groups. Whilst having powerful groups advocate on behalf of marginalised groups can be a way to redefine and expand constructions of rights, there are also concerns that invocations of the rights of others mean that the voices of the marginalised groups are silenced in favour of what the dominant group thinks their interests should be (Liou and Literat 2020). Writing on the role of adults in advocating for the rights of children, Osler and Kato (2022, 445) write that ‘adults responsible for representing children’s interests may conflate or substitute their own interests or beliefs with that of the child’.

Literature on claims-making is helpful for understanding this process of ‘speaking on behalf of others’. Claims-making is an often-used term in rights theory to describe the act of articulating entitlements either for oneself or on behalf of another (Lindekilde 2013). Bloemraad (2018, 4) sees ‘citizenship as membership through claims-making’ and that ‘by making creative appeals to the idea of citizenship, people can make demands on others’ (Bloemraad 2018, 5). Rees (2023, 1193), writing on the rights-claiming practices of migrants in France contesting their citizenship, defines rights-claims as the ‘political practice of engaging with others with the aim of persuading them through the language of rights’. However, the literature also shows that, to be considered legitimate, claims need to be spoken by the ‘right’ voices. For instance, Eleveld (2017, 150) writes that:

[R]ights claims may only be heard when they are uttered by recognisable subjects. To put it differently, playing the game by the rules does not mean that your rights claim will be heard. The question is, ‘which human counts as human.’ Indeed, where the way we can appear in public space is highly regulated, not all human subjects are equally recognisable.

This can help us to understand why rights claims made by groups who already hold rights (in this case, adults) can often be more persuasive than those made by the groups attempting to expand their rights (in this case, children). In considering how adults make claims on behalf of children and young people, we seek to understand rights as an ongoing, performative practice, which moves us from discussions about what rights *are* to a focus on what rights *do*. In this sense, we recognise claims-making as a relational process, paying attention to the ways in which rights are constituted, constructed and mobilised in the everyday, rather than as a static list of legal rights. Karen Zivi (2011, 9), in her seminal work on rights claims, challenges existing understandings of rights-claiming to explore them through a lens of performativity, to be understood ‘as an activity or, rather, set of activities, through which we shape—indeed, at times constitute, our world and ourselves’.

In this paper, we reflect on this process of adults making claims on behalf of children and young people and attempt to unravel what these invocations mean for how we understand children’s citizenship rights. After outlining our research methods, we examine the complex and contradictory ways in which adults’

claims-making on behalf of children might both expand *and* constrain children’s rights. We draw on Hart’s (1992) ladder of children’s participation to situate adult participant invocations of child-rights based arguments in relation to discussions about tokenism, decoration and manipulation. This framework, adapted from Arnstein’s (1969) typology of adult participation, describes and contextualises eight levels of young people’s participation. Recognising that children’s participation will vary with their socio-emotional and cognitive development and be influenced by a range of cultural factors, like Hart, we foreground the importance of children being able to choose their level of participation according to their preferences and abilities. While adult advocacy of children’s rights can be seen to increase the visibility of children’s rights, through appeals to their legal entitlement and education, claims-making on behalf of children can also restrict children’s rights. Adult invocations of both children and their rights are highly selective in terms of the kind of child and the kind of childhood whose interests they presume to represent. This leads us to place the accounts of our adult positions as being towards the bottom of Hart’s ladder of children’s participation, symptomatic of misguided, decorative and tokenistic forms of engagement.

2 | Researching the ‘Northern Meadows’ Campaign

This paper uses the case study of a contested decision over land use in the city of Cardiff (Wales, UK) to explore how children’s rights are mobilised by campaigners to advance their arguments. The dispute focuses on the proposed development of a new cancer care hospital on an area of land in the Whitchurch area of Cardiff known locally as the ‘Northern Meadows’. Whitchurch is a suburb in the city of Cardiff, Wales. Historically, Whitchurch was a village separate from the city of Cardiff, but it was amalgamated as a suburb in 1967. Residents of Whitchurch, although part of Cardiff, consider the area distinct from the city, maintaining the characteristics of a village. The area is popular with families and has three primary and one secondary school. According to the 2011 census, 23% of the population is under the age of 20. It is important to acknowledge here that we are not studying or critiquing the arguments for and against the development itself, and do not offer a position on the (il)legitimacy of the development of the Northern Meadows site. We focus instead on how children’s rights are mobilised in arguments made by campaigners.

2.1 | The Background

Northern Meadows is a 23-acre greenfield site, comprising meadow and woodland, and connected to a nearby nature reserve. The land is owned by the NHS and planning permission for houses (and other nonresidential units) has existed since the 1990s. As an undeveloped space, it has been accessible to the public for a number of years and has been regarded by locals as a public space, an extension of the local nature reserve, despite it being privately owned. However, in 2010, Velindre University NHS Trust (providers of cancer care across South Wales) identified the need for a new cancer centre. The existing cancer centre had been built in Whitchurch

in 1956, and the hospital was deemed too small to meet the demands of modern cancer care. In December 2014, Velindre NHS Trust received approval from the Welsh Government for their 'Strategic Outline Programme' to transform cancer services, which included the enabling of works for a new cancer centre. From 2014 to 2017, the Trust undertook work to develop the clinical service model of the hospital, as well as undertaking a range of consultation events with medical professionals, cancer patients and members of the public. In April 2017, the Trust published draft plans for the new hospital to be built on the Northern Meadows site. These proposals were put forward for consultation with the public, including public exhibitions, question and answer sessions, and social media outreach work.

Outline planning permission was granted by Cardiff Council's Planning Committee in December 2017, this included the building of permanent and temporary access roads. Throughout 2019 and early 2020, Velindre continued its community consultations. In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic resulted in significant delays in the planning process and public consultations were carried out online. During the same period, there was a growing awareness of the development within the local community and a petition to oppose it received thousands of signatures. A campaign group was formed by residents who contested the chosen location for the hospital and argued that the loss of green space would negatively impact the environment and the local community, who used the site for recreational purposes. Joining together with other groups campaigning on similar issues, they organised several campaign events, including a high-profile protest walk.

In December 2020, Nuffield Trust released a report, commissioned by Velindre, which concluded that whilst co-location of the new Velindre Hospital with Cardiff's University Hospital (situated in central Cardiff) would be a preferable model, the current model on the Northern Meadows site was found to be sufficient because of the urgent need for improved cancer services in South Wales. In the summer of 2021, Velindre carried out public consultations on the design of the centre, which included a competition for children to design the new hospital and grounds using the video game 'Minecraft Education'. However, throughout 2021, the campaign to oppose the development continued to grow, with campaigners holding events on the Northern Meadows and petitioning for air pollution monitors to be installed outside a local school. In September 2011, campaigners submitted a request for a judicial review of the Welsh Government's decision to approve the outline business case for the hospital, but this was thrown out by a High Court judge, who ordered the claimant to pay the legal costs. In October 2021, campaigners blocked the entrance to the Meadows to prevent construction workers from entering the site to carry out land surveys and associated ground cover maintenance. Campaigners were removed by the police and Velindre agreed to provide more notice ahead of any further work on the site. In January 2022, campaigners blocked lorries from entering the site, and Welsh news media reported that campaigners were chanting 'we will fight for our children' (WalesOnline 2022). Work on the Velindre Cancer Centre began in 2023 with the expectation of the Centre opening in 2025.

2.2 | The Methods

The analysis presented in this paper comes from a wider ESRC-funded project that explores children's rights in relation to socioeconomic, cultural and spatial considerations. As a multidisciplinary group of sociologists, geographers and sociolegal scholars, we took an interpretivist approach that sought to explore the meaning-making processes that individuals apply to their own experiences and perspectives. In order to explore people's perspectives on the campaign, we undertook semistructured interviews with 21 adult campaigners, residents and campaign group organisers, who were involved in the dispute over the Northern Meadows. We included people who were both for and against the hospital development, and we also sought to interview children and young people who were involved in campaigning on either side. We found, however, that despite images of children being prominent in news coverage of the dispute and the two campaigns, very few children and young people were involved in the campaign. We discovered that those children who were involved were mostly very young and their presence was parent-led. Regardless of this fact, the discourse of children's rights was frequently mobilised by campaigners on both sides of the argument to garner support for their position.

In recruiting the participants, we aimed to include people who were involved in these disputes, either peripherally or as key members of the campaign. To recruit these participants, we adopted a purposive sampling framework and contacted local campaign groups, community groups and organisations. In most cases, participants put us in contact with other campaigners, leading to some 'snowball' sampling. The sample includes adult participants of all ages, with the majority being in their thirties, forties and fifties. All the interviewees lived within Cardiff and had a connection to the Northern Meadows. The sample includes participants who were broadly supportive of the development, ambivalent about it and who were actively campaigning against it—however, the majority of participants were recruited through a local campaign group opposing the development and therefore greater focus is given to the views of those who opposed the development of the site. We interviewed participants with ($n = 10$) and without children ($n = 6$) and children themselves who had become involved in the campaign ($n = 5$). The data show that whilst participants sometimes spoke on behalf of their children in many instances, they also saw themselves as advocating for children more broadly and for future generations of children who were not yet born.

Interviews were conducted in 2022 using online videoconferencing software due to coronavirus restrictions. Each interview lasted around 1 hour, and the interview questions were developed under two categories. The first category was contextual, aiming to explore the general views of the participants and their views of the campaign (*What are your views on the development? Have you been involved in any campaign activities? Why did you decide to get involved? Who else is involved?*). The second category of questions encouraged participants to reflect on rights and tensions (*Whose rights do you think are being affected by the development? Who do you see yourself campaigning on behalf of?*). We purposely avoided asking the

participants directly about children's rights until the end of the interviews (*How do you think children might be affected by the development?*) as we were interested in how children's rights might emerge organically from participants' narratives. Data were coded and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006).

While it is inevitable that the geographical location of the campaign is identified, pseudonyms have been used for the interviewees and care has been taken to remove all information that might identify individuals and their campaign organisations. It is also important to emphasise that the purpose of the paper is to explore the ways in which adults invoke children's rights. We do not seek to make any judgement on the relative strengths and weaknesses of their arguments for or against the development of the proposed hospital.

3 | Invocations of Children and Childhood

Through their campaign to prevent the proposed development of the Northern Meadows, campaigners made appeals to a broad range of arguments, including: environmental harms caused by increased pollution and loss of biodiversity; an unsuitable medical location and a loss of community and family space which they argued was vital for the mental and physical wellbeing of the community. Children were also frequently mobilised as a distinct group of persons with unique needs, requiring additional protections. This was true of participants both with and without offspring of their own and seldom included reference to parental rights or duties. Indeed, as we shall see, adult participants positioned themselves as campaigning for the rights and well-being of *all* children—whether that be the current children of the city or the children of the future.

Rights appeals were present in the narratives of all the participants, as they claimed the development would infringe on their rights as well as those of distinct groups of people, and especially children. Basing their claims on already legally enshrined rights allowed the participants to achieve further legitimacy and warranting of their claims. As Landy writes, rights are 'a means for individuals and social movements actors to press their claims against existing power arrangements' (2013, 412) and that the 'indexical quality' (Landy 2013, 418) of rights-language allows campaigners to situate their concerns within a wider pre-existing framework. In this context, participants adopted rights-based language to justify their critical position on the development and to add further legitimacy to their claim by employing the language of the state. There was also a sense that the mobilisation of 'rights' could act as a 'trump card' (Dworkin 1977), capable of superseding all other arguments and claims. Rights-based language is neutral, universal and perceived as being difficult to contest.

In making claims on behalf of children and young people, interviewees frequently raised children's formal legal rights as a justification to oppose the development. Mostly, these were references to the rights of children as set out in the UNCRC, although not all the rights raised by participants have statutory support. In the following sections, we explore the principal ways that adult participants involved in the Northern Meadows campaign

invoked notions of children and childhood in their narratives and arguments, drawing on children's rights to health and wellbeing, to participation and to education. We then consider the extent to which these invocations were based on selective and idealised representations of childhoods in the past, and of imagined childhoods in the future.

3.1 | Children's Right to Health and Well-Being

Claims were often made about children's rights to health, both physical and mental, and their right to clean air and green spaces. In this sense, the rights claims 'function by simultaneously drawing on established arguments and ideas whilst also reinventing them anew' (Rees, 2023, 3). How participants mobilise children's rights in their narratives is exemplified in the following quotation from the interview with Lisa, a local resident who became involved in campaigning through her daughter's interest in the posters on display in the area:

I think that children have a right to play and a right to be safe. In a busy city that's quite difficult. I think the wellbeing the Meadows offers them the escapism to not feel that they're just pounding pavements and streets to get to a little stump of grass. I think connecting with nature is really important and something that a lot of children in the city don't have the opportunity to do. I think that's what the Meadows does, it's not a sterile environment. I think for the local children it's really important that it stays.

(Lisa, local resident and campaigner)

Although Lisa's interest was initially sparked through her daughter, this quote suggests that she is speaking on behalf of 'children in the city' and 'local children' rather than just her own offspring. Indeed, the majority of interviewees who saw children's rights as being relevant to the campaign discussed how 'natural' undeveloped spaces were particularly important to ensure the healthy development of children. There was a strong sense among the interviewees that greener cities also made cities more child-friendly and that children had a right to access green and natural spaces because they provided opportunities for health (mental and physical) and play. As Hannah explained:

You'd have to drive quite far to get to the next wild land that you can roam in for my little boy. All the parks are full of goalposts and rugby posts and you need a big, empty nature space for him [to play], to just run wild, instead of 'oh you're running across someone's football pitch'. There's no space for kids and it's really important for their mental health and wellbeing.

(Hannah, local resident and campaigner)

Underlying most of the participants' narratives was a belief that children and young people were not being appropriately considered or consulted in the planning process and that the adult campaigners had a responsibility to advocate on behalf of children

and their rights. Those participants with children, in particular, perceived themselves as possessing a greater moral obligation to advocate on behalf of the needs of their own children. In making these claims to the rights of children and young people, many of the parents would highlight their role as parent or teacher (e.g., ‘as a mother...’). Many of the interviewees’ rights claims could equally be applied to adults, but in invoking children in their narratives they saw themselves as adding further legitimacy and potency to their claims.

Although there seemed to be an assumption that rights could act as ‘trumps’ (Dworkin 1977), complications arose when rights came into conflict with one another. This was particularly the case when the rights of different age groups were invoked, or when the same arguments could be used to support either argument. In our data, this was most clear when participants made claims about the right to health, a right that was being appropriated by people on both sides of the dispute. Whilst those campaigning against the hospital development presented themselves as advocating for children’s health (campaign posters included the phrase ‘stand up for children’s health!’), those in favour of the development, including decision-makers and planners, also made arguments for the health of wider populations. This paradox was summarised by Sarah, a local resident who was largely ambivalent about the development:

If we’re talking about children’s rights here, and people you know, you could say this is an interesting and just position, isn’t it the right of the child to be able to have decent cancer care if they get cancer? Isn’t it their right not to be deprived of any close family member and for them to have the best treatment they possibly can?

(Sarah, local resident)

In this sense, rather than acting as ‘trumps’, when rights came into conflict with one another, there was a greater likelihood they would cancel one another out. This could also be seen when campaigners against the development made appeals to others who may have greater legitimacy in advocating for the rights of children. This included contacting local schools, teachers, governors, the Children’s Commissioner for Wales and the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, to seek support for the campaign. However, these appeals were often unsuccessful, with local schools, for example, choosing to remain impartial. Participants explained that the uncertainty about the extent to which the redevelopment of the land into a Cancer Hospital infringing on the rights of children, as opposed to benefitting potential family members suffering from cancer, meant that these stakeholders were reluctant to pick a side.

3.2 | Children’s Right to Participation

As well as making claims on behalf of children, adult interviewees also made claims about children’s right to be visible and participate in campaign activities. Most of the participants spoke about how they did not feel that children had been appropriately consulted in the planning process and several complained that children had not been included at all. Child participation events

organised by the planners were described by the research participants as being ‘superficial’ ‘tick-box’ exercises, rather than meaningful engagement. Similarly, a small number of participants felt that schools were not doing enough to support children in participating. For example, one participant argued:

There’s a massive failure on behalf of schools in amplifying their voice and letting them be heard. It’s their legal right to be heard.

(Nevil, organiser for an environmental campaign group)

Several of the participants, particularly those who were more actively involved in the planning and coordination of campaign activities against the development, believed they had a responsibility to ensure children and young people were provided with opportunities to be involved. To do this, those organising events spoke about the importance of making their campaign activities inclusive of children and young people—to ensure that they felt safe in the campaign and that they were able to contribute to the discussions. An organiser of one of the leading campaign groups set up to oppose the development of the land outlined some of the activities they had planned with the intention of encouraging children and young people to participate in the campaign. These included communal camping events, cake sales and kite-flying events which they hoped would attract children and families. They had also organised marches which they encouraged children to attend to have their voices heard. During rallies, visuals and posters that invoked notions of children and childhood were commonly used and children were encouraged to make and display banners. Posters for the campaign also used children’s imagery—including children’s drawings of animals and wildlife and slogans referencing the rights of children. Photographs shared by the campaigns following rallies and events often depicted children holding banners and placards. However, as noted above, we struggled to recruit children or young people to this study and were left with the impression that the driving force behind campaigning on both sides came from adults rather than young people. As Hart (1992) laments, ‘children are undoubtedly the most photographed and the least listened to members of society’ (p. 12). He adds that whilst adults often underestimate the competence of children, they frequently use imagery of children to influence their cause, in a manner that can only be described as ‘patronising’ (p. 12).

The participants who had involved their children in the campaign against the development saw it was important to provide them with the opportunity to voice their concerns and interests. Although this inclusion of children and young people was often narrated as being for their benefit—to help them enact their right to participation—a few of the participants also discussed the wider benefits of the visibility of children for their campaign. An example of this emerged from the interview with one of the local campaign groups:

It’s great to involve children and to give them space to talk about why these spaces were important to them and for them to have a good time as well. As well as that, it’s quite a good propaganda tool. To show that they

want to evict these kids from a space they really love. That's been a big part of the campaign. For example, we've had family events where the goal is to show how well the space is used, and to say look, 'You're taking this thing away from us and the children'.

(Eleri, organiser of a local campaign group that challenges controversial city planning decisions)

In this sense, the inclusion of children was being positioned as a useful campaign strategy capable of generating sympathy and drawing in more supporters to the cause. This was described by Amanda, a campaigner who had been actively involved in planning and supporting many of these activities:

It's encouraging children into areas where they might not have been, encouraging children to connect with [the space]. So, we have had scavenger hunts, and we would be out looking for fungi or for invertebrates. So that children were actively involved. By encouraging more people to experience the Meadows and everything it holds, hopefully, will give rise to more of a community feel and empower more people to join the campaign.

(Amanda, campaigner)

Unlike Eleri, whose account above suggests that the space was already being well-used by children and young people, Amanda's comments may be taken to imply that, before the campaign, children's use of the Northern Meadows had been relatively limited.

3.3 | Children's Right to Education

Another key appeal made by campaigners against the development was about the importance of including children in the campaign activities. This was argued to be important for children not only in the present but also for their benefit as future citizens. Parents, in particular, shared the view that involving their children in the campaign was a way of teaching them about a range of topics such as climate change, nature and wildlife, planning processes and advocacy.

The campaign group against the development organised several educational events for children and young people that doubled as a way of encouraging them to the Meadows with their families. Examples of these events include workshops, demonstrations and interactive activities on wildlife and ecology: an event which allowed children to hold and learn about owls, and an event teaching children and residents about flooding and rivers; and scavenger hunts that encouraged children to identify and search for certain trees, plants and animals. Campaigners also developed worksheets for local children encouraging them to engage more with the space and learn about the animals and plants that could be found there. Laura, a local resident and parent of two children, saw it as important that her children were able to use these activities and events to connect global concerns (e.g., climate change and habitat loss) with local issues. Laura's children were home-schooled, and she often used the Meadows as an educational space:

Children were involved in some of the marches, and I think that was directly connected to Greta Thunberg's climate strike marches. I think that had been, in some ways, children could see how this kind of connection between the big global ideas, and how they might be happening on your doorstep.

(Laura, campaigner and local resident)

Importantly, participants who were parents believed that this 'hands-on' education provided their children with the knowledge that they would not learn through school. Amanda, who had been very involved in the campaign and had ensured her two children were equally involved, spoke at length during her interview about the educational value of exposing her children to this type of experience:

I think the biggest part in terms of my children, for me, is the empowerment... I think if I can teach them not to be scared, if I can get that fear away, teach them to stand up for themselves, teach them that they don't have to follow the same drum as our politicians and they don't have to be sheep who just meekly go along with the system. It's okay to be an individual and these protests and the demonstrations are all things that allow them to be creative, have voice, and do things like that. Lots of people disagree with it but if they're interacting with people with similar views then they're going to learn more about the important things that we're not teaching them in school. They might teach them about the climate crisis in school but giving them a day off to go on a march. There will be consequences good and bad but hopefully, they will feel empowered.

(Amanda, campaigner)

In this sense, Amanda, as well as several other parents in the study, saw it as important that they were transmitting their values of environmentalism and advocacy intergenerationally. This echoes other research into familial patterns of civic engagement and the desire of parents and carers to pass down certain values and dispositions to future generations of their family (Muddiman, Power, and Taylor 2020). The sharing of civic and environmental values was seen by many of the parents as being a benefit in itself, regardless of whether their campaign was successful or not. It is telling that the parents in this study spoke about teaching and empowering their children rather than learning from them, suggesting that they saw the direction of intergenerational transmission as one-directional.

3.4 | Looking Back: Idealised Children and Childhoods

It is also important to consider children who were *not* included in the participants' narratives, characterised by absences in how participants talked about and made claims on behalf of children. These selective narratives of children and childhood meant that some groups of children, particularly those who were not

perceived as strengthening arguments against the development, were overlooked. Most notably, there was an overwhelming focus on the rights and interests of younger children, with teenagers being largely ignored by the campaigners.

Teenagers' use of the space was only mentioned in one interview and not in a positive way. Robert, a local resident, accounted for young people's use of the Northern Meadows on the grounds that they were 'probably dealing something'. The omission of positive depictions of teenagers using the meadows could be partly explained by adult participants believing that they only need to make claims on behalf of younger children, whereas older children could advocate for their own rights. However, adult campaigners' reluctance to consider the rights of teenagers might also be because they were trying to generate a particular narrative of the space to make their arguments more persuasive, and felt that the benefits that younger children gained from being present in the space strengthened this narrative. Several of the participants made claims on behalf of children experiencing poverty, and a block of flats that was adjacent to the Meadows was frequently referenced in participants' arguments. These participants argued that the people (and children) living within these flats would be more negatively affected by the loss of green space because they did not have gardens. However, these claims were made by people who lived outside of this vicinity. We found no indication that anyone involved in the campaign against the development resided in these flats (and no one in the study mentioned that they didn't have access to their own garden). Moreover, despite our efforts to contact community groups linked to these flats, we were not able to find anyone located there to participate in this research. It seems reasonable to assume, then, that adult campaigners were making claims on behalf of those living in the flats without having involved them in a meaningful way.

As well as making claims on behalf of limited groups of children, adult participants' invocations of children often presented a particular experience of childhood which was rooted within their own nostalgic memories of childhood and idealised childhoods. When talking about the site and children's use of space, there was the tendency for many of the participants to reflect on their own experiences of being young and to cast these ideas forward in time to current and future generations. This was common to the narratives of participants with and without children. An example of this can be seen in the quotation below from Peter, a campaigner who did not have children:

My own growing up was fields, farms and making and picking potatoes and all those things. For me, it is very much a reminder of those times. I think the feeling I get up there is that it almost feels like you're on top of the mountain... To think that you are minutes from the centre of Cardiff is just incredible. This is unspoilt, it could be in the middle of nowhere. Now it's heading in the direction of blackberry time and I'm sure you could pick tons of blackberries there. It's been allowed to just get on with itself and do what nature does. It's a beautiful, wild, green space.

(Peter, campaigner)

Participants talked about the possibilities of children using the space to fly kites, build dens, roll down hills and climb trees. These activities were not reflected in the narratives of the children and young people who told us that they predominantly used the Northern Meadows to walk their dogs or go for walks with family. One of the participants (Sarah, local resident) described this as a 'famous five' representation of childhood, referencing the children's adventure novels of Enid Blyton written in the 1940s. These nostalgic ideations of how children 'might' use the space were not reflective of children's realities. Robert (local resident), who discussed his experiences of growing up in the area, explained that children rarely frequented the space (outside of the campaign events and activities) because the site was currently largely inaccessible. Whilst the site's inaccessibility does not diminish its value, it raises questions about the authenticity of campaigners' depictions of the space as central to the everyday lives of local children.

3.5 | Looking Forward: Children of the Future

Intertemporal understandings of childhood also extended to include the children of future generations—those who had not yet been born. Many of the participants invoked the children of future generations to support their claims, arguing that the space was important for the rights of not only current generations but also future generations of children and young people. In this sense, there was some conflation in their arguments between the rights of children who exist now and those who will exist in the future. This is exemplified in the following quote:

When you talk about children's rights, you're not just talking about the children that are in front of you at this moment, you're talking about future generations of Cardiffians. It's everyone that comes after you, and that's a very hard thing to define and it's a very hard thing to consult with. We need to be planning beyond the immediate future because the future has a habit of coming whether one's planned for it or not. And if you don't plan for it, then what happens is incidental.

(Robert, local resident)

Participants reflected on decision-making for future generations of children and the complexities of getting things right. This was exemplified by Daniel:

If we can't stop cutting down trees in nature reserves and concreting over beautiful meadows, we can forget future generations. We've got to stop cutting trees down and stop building on greenfield sites. That's for future generations. We've got to get them really involved. I mean all the politicians are going to be retired in ten years' time and in the House of Lords. These kids have got to be involved in discussing what on earth we're doing with nature. What on earth we're doing with them? If we as a community and society can't stop cutting

trees down, then we've got no chance, the future generation has had it.

(Daniel, campaigner)

References to the rights of future generations invoke not just those of the children of tomorrow but the rights of today's children once they have left their childhood behind.

4 | Conclusion

This paper has shown some of the complex ways in which children's rights get invoked and appropriated—or perhaps even misappropriated—by adult campaigners. The consequences of this appropriation are likely to be complex and have positive and negative implications.

Looking at Hart's ladder of children's participation helps us to consider how our adult participant narratives situate the role and agency of children within their campaigning. It could be the case that some of the events and activities described by campaigners against the development, especially those that seek to draw children into the Northern Meadows space in order to argue that the space is widely used by children, constitute *manipulation*, the lowest rung of the ladder. Rather than attributing nefarious intent on behalf of adult participants, we prefer Hart's suggestion of categorising this type of invocation as 'misguided' rather than manipulative. In these instances, Hart (1992, 19) argues children 'have no understanding of the issues and hence do not understand their actions'. The Minecraft competition undertaken by planners and advocates of the development could also be seen through this lens if children were consulted but not given feedback on their submissions—indeed Hart highlights the way in which adults often 'consult' with children by asking for and collecting drawings of children's ideal designs for a certain space and then 'in some hidden manner synthesize the ideas' to come up with a plan with children being none the wiser to how their ideas were used (1992, 9).

It could be tempting to categorise some of the adult campaigners' invocations of children's rights as *decoration*, the next rung up from *manipulation/misguided*, however, Hart's definition of decorative children's involvement relates to situations in which 'adults do not present that the cause is inspired by children' (1992, 9) and use the presence and involvement to 'bolster' their cause rather than being central to it.

Perhaps the most fitting categorisation of the invocation of children's rights in the accounts of adult campaigners that we spoke with, is the third rung: tokenism. Tokenistic participation is described as instances in which:

Children are apparently given a voice but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions

(Hart 1992, 9)

This categorisation, with its tensions and contradictions, seems to fit the accounts of our campaigners well. Tokenistic forms of child

participation are particularly common in societies where progressive ideas about parenting are popular but, according to Hart, poorly understood. In these instances, Hart argues that adults feel they are genuinely acting in the best interests of children, but are acting in a manipulative (or misguided) way nonetheless.

The tokenistic approach of children's participation by the campaigners we spoke with is exemplified in the selective and idealised notions of children and childhood that they draw on. The partial and idealised accounts of our participants undermine the representativeness of their claims and indicate that they are only prepared to speak on behalf of *certain* children and particular, idealised, versions of childhood. We could not find evidence in the accounts of our participants that children and young people were well-informed about or felt any ownership of the issue at stake.

On the positive side, it is possible that adult advocacy of children's rights might lead to an expansion of those rights—if indeed adults *do* make space of children's and young people's voices to be heard in spaces where they may otherwise be ignored. However, it might well have negative consequences where adults co-opt children's rights in order to advance their own campaigns and claims. Claims over what rights should be given precedence are not straightforward and may at times be contradictory. How can the rights of children to have access to green space be measured against the rights of children and their families to access cancer care—both now and in their future? Where rights come into conflict with one another, there is the potential for them to negate one another as there is no clear understanding of whose and which rights should be prioritised.

All these issues raised here point to the limits of age-based rights claims. Children are not a homogenous social group—they are internally differentiated in many ways, not least by age. In adult articulations, most representations of children in children's rights discourse are of young, even very young, children, with older children and teenagers largely absent. Moreover, the representation of what the children's rights *should* entail appear to be based on adult evocations of idealised childhoods that may bear little resemblance of the experiences and opportunities available to children today. If we are to incorporate children's rights into decision-making in cities and elsewhere, we need to recognise the complexity of what this may entail and ensure that we do not appropriate their voices to pursue our own agendas.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Cardiff University Social Research Ethics Committee in December 2020 [Application number SREC/4055].

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Supporting data will be available to bona fide researchers, subject to registration, at the UK Data Archive (<https://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>) following the completion of the project.

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