Children as ‘differently equal’ responsible beings: Norwegian children’s views of responsibility

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Abstract
This article explores children’s views of responsibility and their position as responsible beings, drawing on an international research project with a focus on data from 109 children in Norway. Responsibility is explored as a practice that children experience as both a privilege and a burden in childhood. It is argued that there is an interwoven relation between participation rights and responsibilities for children, where ideas of the child as ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, ‘equal’ to and ‘different’ from adults are embedded. A difference-centred perspective is suggested as a way to accommodate children as ‘differently equal’ responsible beings.

Keywords
children, difference-centred, participation, responsibility, rights

In a focus group discussion, a 14-year-old girl suddenly interrupts the conversation which is about to conclude that young people are neither able nor willing to hold responsibilities: ‘But it’s fun to have responsibilities as well’, she says, ‘because then you are in a way able to decide a bit.’ One of the other girls looks thoughtfully at her and says: ‘Yeah – but you will have responsibilities when you become an adult.’ She agrees, but she is not quite satisfied with this answer: ‘Yeah – but then it’s only like boring responsibilities, such as bills and so on. When you are a child, then you have like fun responsibilities.’

These girls were some of the participants in an international research project that sought to understand the meaning of rights, responsibilities, participation and citizenship for children (8/9 years) and young people (14/15 years) by asking them to reflect on everyday experiences within their various social, cultural and political contexts (Taylor and Smith, 2009). The views of responsibility expressed here can be interpreted as being deeply embedded in ambiguous social constructions of children and childhood (Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup, 1994). On the one hand, children are seen as competent

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‘human beings’ with rights to participation and capabilities of being responsible in their childhood. On the other hand, children are seen as immature ‘human becomings’ (Qvortrup, 1985) that lack the adult competence and experience to be responsible, while childhood itself is constructed as a protected period of life, free from the burdens of responsibility in adulthood.

Ideas of ‘the participating child’ and the importance of children’s participation are firmly held beliefs in Norwegian society (Bjerke, 2009; Kjørholt, 2004). Based on research with children, it has been argued that children’s participation varies in different contexts, ‘and reflects ambiguities as well as uncertainties of what it means to be a child citizen [...] moving on a line from being equal to being different’ (Kjørholt and Lidén, 2004: 64). In this article, the complex relation between participation rights and responsibilities is examined. It has been argued that ‘Children who exercise participatory rights must also acknowledge their duties to others’ (Lockyer, 2008: 26). However, there is a general lack of research that questions the meaning of the concept of responsibility for children, and very little is known about the views of children and young people themselves (Morrow, 2008; Such and Walker, 2004). This article examines the kinds of responsibilities that children and young people ascribe themselves, how they value their responsibilities and how they position themselves as responsible beings compared to adults. A difference-centred perspective is suggested as a way of transcending the binary thinking grounded in either/or alternatives and of accommodating children as ‘differently equal’ responsible beings (Moosa-Mitha, 2005).

Understanding childhood and notions of responsibility

Both childhood and notions of responsibility need to be understood in their historical, social, economic, political and cultural contexts. For example, in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the responsibilities of the child are specified in terms of duties from the local level of the family to the social and cultural levels of the region and the nation (Osler and Starkey, 2005; September and Roberts, 2009). While in the European context, it has been suggested that ‘the concepts of childhood and responsibility do not, for many, sit easily together’ (James, 2008: 145). Studies have documented how adults seem to prefer to see childhood as a time of freedom, play and fun, where children’s responsibilities and work contributions are kept invisible (Morrow, 1995; Schrumpf, 2001; Solberg, 1994).

Studies documenting children’s responsibilities have been essential in the development of knowledge of children’s agency in their ‘normal’ everyday lives (e.g. Brannen, 1995; Mayall, 1994; Morrow, 1994; Nieuwenhuys, 1994; Solberg, 1994). Today we are starting to acknowledge children’s work, both within and outside the family, as an important part of childhood in different parts of the world (Abebe, 2008; Morrow, 2008; Schrumpf, 2004). It is also documented how children are care-givers, and not only care-recipients who are dependent on adults (e.g. Becker et al., 1998; Brannen et al., 2000; Haugen, 2007). Children in such studies are described as ‘being responsible’, meaning that they are seen as being accountable, capable, competent, reliable and trustworthy in a number of situations – qualities that are not usually used to describe children (Morrow, 2008). Children who exercise responsibility challenge social orders in which they are seen as
‘human becomings’, and adults are seen as having control and being the main providers (Qvortrup, 1994). This is also seen in the way children acting irresponsibly are framed, especially in the ‘rights and responsibilities debate’ in the UK, where ‘children appear only to be granted agency and autonomy in the context of wrong-doing: children are able to be wilfully irresponsible but not wilfully responsible’ (Such and Walker, 2005: 46).

Acknowledging the responsibilities that children and young people do exercise in everyday life is seen as a necessary step for children to be recognized as citizens (e.g. Lister, 2008; Smith and Bjerke, 2009). Studies have documented that obeying the law, contributing to society, helping the community, supporting the vulnerable and looking after the environment are important responsibilities identified by young people as part of their understanding of ‘good citizenship’ (e.g. Smith et al., 2005; Torney-Purta, 2002). However, not much is known about children and young people’s perspectives on their own responsibilities or their own position as responsible beings. A very promising start in deconstructing the concept of responsibility from children’s perspectives is Such and Walker’s (2004) small-scale pilot study of 29 children aged 9 and 10 living in the East Midlands, England. Their findings reveal that a responsibility like domestic work ‘was largely viewed as something that was “everyday”, part of the routine of daily life and relatively freely chosen’ (Such and Walker, 2004: 235). Responsibility is not understood as a static entity, but as a complex and rich practice embedded in relationships with others in the sense that it is judged in relation to the actions and attitudes of others.

Such and Walker (2004) find that children link increased responsibility with chronological age in a complex and nuanced way. Children’s experiences often contradicted their expectations of development, when, for example, parents underestimated the competence of younger siblings, older siblings acted ‘irresponsibly’ or adults’ examples failed to live up to the ideal model. As many have argued, children and adults are simultaneously both ‘human beings’ and ‘human becomings’ (e.g. Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005). The argument I am making is that children emphasize participation rights as important to both ‘being and becoming’ responsible. In their reflections on responsibility, children and young people do not see themselves as identical to adults, but rather seem to celebrate the ways in which children and childhood are different from adults and adulthood.

**Methodological approach**

As part of the research design in the international project, it was decided that children in two different age groups should be recruited, with approximately equal numbers of boys and girls and a mixture of socioeconomic backgrounds. Among the 109 participants from Norway there were 60 children aged 8/9 years and 49 young people aged 14/15 years, with 69 girls and 40 boys. Nearly 1.1 million children below 18 years of age are living at home in Norway, out of which nearly 10 percent are defined as immigrant children, 74 percent live with both parents and 82 percent live with one or more siblings (Statistics Norway, 2009). Participants in our study were recruited from strategically selected schools in different areas of a medium-sized city, to include children with a mixed family background related to key variables such as ethnicity, distribution of income and education of parents. Groups of marginalized children were sought in each country, including children from the Sami population in Norway. However, as in other
countries, this was not achieved, reflecting the perceived vulnerability and increase in gatekeepers to protect marginalized children (Taylor and Smith, 2009).

In Norway, 11 focus groups were conducted in three different primary schools, and nine focus groups in two different lower secondary schools. A focus group protocol was developed by an international research team, and later translated and adapted for use in Norway (Kjørholt et al., 2009). This included questions such as: What is a ‘responsibility’? Can you give me an example of a ‘responsibility’? Do children have responsibilities? What responsibilities do children have? Do children have the same responsibilities as adults? These questions were related to areas such as the home, school, neighbourhood, community and the environment, to explore how children’s understandings were embedded in different contexts.

To obtain more information about children’s participation in everyday life, including their responsibilities, it was decided to conduct interviews and field observations with a smaller group of participants. After becoming familiar with the researcher and the subject of the study in the focus groups, seven children and nine young people agreed to take part in interviews, and five children accepted a visit from the researcher at home, including an interview with their parents. The researcher selected participants based on their family backgrounds and experiences. This data collection was found to be valuable in obtaining the benefits of both the focus group and individual interview techniques (Punch, 2002).

The data have been thoroughly examined through different stages of investigation and steps of analysis (Kvale, 1996). Children and young people’s views have been interpreted in an analytical process in which the researcher is: ‘moving back and forth between empirical data on the one hand, and existing theory and relevant literature on the other’ (Nilsen, 2005: 117). Focus groups and interviews have been transcribed and analysed using the software program NVivo to manage the complexity and detail of empirical data and ideas generated in the course of the study (Bazeley, 2007). In our data, age differences are seen to be more dominant than variations based on other key variables, including gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. This is reflected in the following presentation of results.

**Children’s views of responsibility**

In all the countries covered by our international study, children say that they do have some responsibilities and they give a number of examples of their responsibilities in relation to their own self-care, questions of personal morality, their contributions to family life, daily activities in school and care and concern for others, including people in the community and the environment (Butler et al., 2009). Differences are seen in the ways in which various national contexts possess distinct historical, political, cultural and economic conditions that influence children’s understandings and practices of responsibility. For example, in Brazil young people talk openly about sexuality and many boys consider that both preventing pregnancy and doing domestic chores are a girl’s responsibilities while in South Africa another cultural feature is revealed, in the way that children, teachers and parents agree on children’s responsibilities to obey authority and follow rules made by adults (Butler et al., 2009). In this article, the focus is on the views of children and
young people in Norway. Results from our international study are mainly presented to illustrate how the Norwegian children’s experiences are similar to experiences of children in the other countries.

Like other Nordic countries, Norway is known for its extensive welfare policies for children and the high priority it places on children’s rights (e.g. Satka and Eydal, 2004). On the one hand, the question of responsibility challenges ideas of childhood where a happy child is seen to be a playing child with no obligations and responsibilities (Kjørholt, 2008). On the other hand, some responsibility is seen to be beneficial for children’s education and children are in many ways expected to be independent and manage on their own. Studies indicate that children and young people’s contributions are more important for the society and the family than adults tend to acknowledge (e.g. Frønes, 2007; Solberg, 1994).

In our study we have experienced that children and young people have no problems in relating the question of responsibility to their everyday lives. The most common responsibilities mentioned fall into three categories, namely personal responsibility, social responsibility and collective responsibility.

Personal responsibility includes first of all the daily self-care activities at home, such as brushing your teeth and being clean, getting dressed, eating food, getting enough sleep, getting ready for school, doing your homework and making sure you learn your lessons at school. Outside the home, children mention their responsibilities for being careful when climbing a tree or crossing a road and avoiding dangerous places to avoid getting hurt. In different contexts, children mention their responsibilities for their own belongings, such as toys, books and other things in their rooms, pets (if they have any), school materials, clothes, bicycles and other things they own. These responsibilities are part of children’s experiences as consumers and reflect a general commercialization of children’s everyday life in Norway (e.g. Buckingham and Tingstad, 2007; Frønes, 2007).

Social responsibility includes children’s actions in relation to other human beings, perceived as a moral claim to be considerate and thoughtful towards others. This is expressed as the golden rule: ‘To do unto others as you would have others do unto you’ (girl, 14 years). Specific examples mentioned include the responsibilities for being nice to your family, supporting your friends, not saying or doing anything that would hurt or make people sad, respecting rules of silence in school, helping fellow students, letting other children take part in play activities and being careful and kind towards younger children. This understanding of responsibility is highly normative by defining the proper way to behave as ‘good citizens’. Some young people find these standards limiting, and argue that adults prefer children to ‘be invisible, and not distinguish themselves in a negative way’ (boy, 14 years).

Collective responsibility includes children’s contributions as ‘fellow citizens’ in their local communities, including family and school. At home, some children are paid if they do work on a regular basis, for example taking care of siblings, helping parents at home by cleaning (most often only their own rooms), going to the shops, helping make food and set the table, filling and emptying the dishwasher and taking the rubbish out. Since often both parents are in employment, children’s work at home can be a valuable contribution to the household (Frønes, 2007). In school, responsibilities for helping teachers clean the classroom and maintain order is often rotated among the pupils in a class. In some schools pupils also have a responsibility during breaks for helping maintain the...
rules and regulations in different areas, and for picking up rubbish in the school and the local area. In the local community, children for example mention their responsibilities not to throw litter and to help keep the environment nice and clean.

**Positioning children as responsible beings**

On the one hand, the results of our study confirm the view that children see responsibilities as being a ‘natural’ part of their everyday lives as children, and as something that goes beyond the unidirectional delegation of tasks from adult to child (Butler et al., 2009; Kjørholt et al., 2009; Such and Walker, 2004). On the other hand, ‘There was widespread agreement amongst children that being an adult entailed new and demanding responsibilities, such as having a job, providing for the family and making difficult decisions – actions which not every child looked forward to’ (Butler et al., 2009: 177). We see that children and young people express ambiguous views of their own positions as responsible beings, in the sense that they both give a number of examples of how they exercise responsibilities and tend to view a number of responsibilities as falling into the domain of adults and not theirs. In the following, the views expressed by children in Norway are further explored in relation to two categories, namely responsibility as a privilege and responsibility as a burden.

**Responsibility as a privilege**

Children and young people view responsibilities as a privilege if it gives them opportunities for authentic participation and decision-making. This is the kind of ‘fun’ responsibility where ‘you are in a way able to decide a bit’ (girl, 14 years). Within this perspective responsibilities are seen as opportunities to influence decision-making and/or act independently, where the views of children as autonomous ‘beings’ are dominant. This view seems to coexist with a notion of responsibility as something that needs to be learned through experience and practice, where the view of children as dependent ‘becomings’ is emphasized.

**Decision-making and increasing independence**

Being responsible is by many seen as equivalent to being respected and given opportunities to do things on their own. For the youngest group of participants such ‘fun’ responsibilities may, for example, be going to the local shop. They then need to be responsible when they walk back and forth to the shop (crossing the road, walking on pavements, waiting for the green light, etc.) and when they are in the shop (making sure they buy what is expected, not stealing and making sure they don’t pay too much). Other examples given are taking care of younger children, being alone at home (e.g. when parents are running errands), visiting friends and playing in the neighbourhood.

Based on our data, we see that children acquire more independent responsibility as they get older, and it is first of all the older group of participants that talk about responsibilities as giving them the power to decide. It is still a common experience that adults doubt their ability to be responsible, and many complain about parents that worry too much.
much or ask a lot of questions in order to control their behaviour. There is also a clear tension between the benefits of being responsible and the disadvantages of having too much responsibility, as reflected in this conversation with two 14-year-old girls:

*Girl A:* . . . responsibility is like something you do not want to have.

*Interviewer:* Oh yeah, is it?

*Girl A:* Yeah, to some extent. Like, if you get responsibility for something or someone, then you feel like an adult and feel you’re mature . . . because, when someone trusts you and has so much confidence in you, then it is . . . then you feel that you are trusted, when an adult person gives you the responsibility for something.

*Girl B:* It feels good to have some responsibility, because then you know that you are trustworthy, and you know that people have confidence to you. [Girl A: Yeah]

But, at the same time, if you do something wrong then, it is the person that trusted you that in a way . . .

*Girl A:* You have to take the consequences . . . and that is not always funny.

They agree that it is positive to be recognized as a trustworthy person, able to be responsible, but not necessarily positive to have a lot of responsibilities, since you also have to take the consequences of your actions. This position may be interpreted as a challenge towards defining responsibility as something an individual needs to hold or accept as an autonomous person. Responsibilities are often given to children and young people by adults who are in a close relationship with them such as in the family or at school. Trust and confidence is then something that may have developed over years, and the adult’s judgement may be based on the behaviour of the child in different situations. Other research has also noted the ways notions of responsibilities are bound up with concepts of trust, and the dilemma children face because they have to demonstrate their ‘maturity’ to be acknowledged as responsible beings (Morrow, 2008; Such and Walker, 2005).

**Learning through experience and practice**

Children and young people argue that they are able and willing to be responsible, even if they are dependent on adults, and need to learn how to take care of themselves until they are adults. Ideas of themselves as both being and becoming are evident, for example, in the way an 8/9-year-old girl argues: ‘we are able to take care of ourselves in some ways, and that is why we have to learn how to take care of ourselves and like . . . until we are adults’. Both children and young people express the view that they will only learn to ‘become responsible’ if they are given opportunities to acquire experience and practice by ‘being responsible’.

The view that children are different from adults in that they have less experience of having responsibility is more dominant among the youngest participants, who argue that: ‘Like . . . adults have more responsibilities than us, because they are bigger than us, and we like don’t understand everything, but they understand a lot more than us, and that is why they have more responsibilities for us’ (girl, 8 years). Within the groups of older participants there are more disagreements and discussions when they reflect on their own capacities in comparison with adults. Two 14-year-old girls, for example, argue that they
first will attain their majority when they are 18 ‘because we have to learn to be responsible’, ‘you may not just let a bomb go off on us in a way . . . It takes some time to introduce it’, ‘that is why we go to lower and upper secondary school’, ‘scientists have figured it out in a way . . . when people are fully developed and like’. In their view, the age limit of 18 – ‘it’s what they [adults] believe or what they think’ – is the best solution. Being fully responsible is as such limited to normative ideas of being a rational adult, with the necessary life-experience and competence.

Most agree that children in many ways are less experienced, and therefore in need of practice in learning how to be and become responsible. As argued in another group of young people:

**Interviewer:** Is it okay to have some responsibility, or what?

**All:** Yeah

**Girl:** Yeah, because then we learn much faster when we like . . . until we are older then.

**Boy A:** Yeah, it is actually pretty funny.

**Interviewer:** Yeah . . . What’s funny then?

**Boy A:** Well . . . It’s funny to do things by yourself. To learn it until you are older.

**Boy B:** It’s fun that other children see you have more power than they do . . .

**Interviewer:** So it gives you like a good feeling, or what?

**Boy B:** Yeah, that you decide.

Here the girl emphasizes the need to learn responsibility through practice, but she sees it primarily as important for their future. The first boy argues that it is also beneficial in the present because it is fun to do things on your own, while the second boy sees responsibility as something that gives him more power to decide. The different views express some of the motives young people may have, and are an indication of the coexistence of the notions of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’.

**Responsibility as a burden**

Responsibilities are seen by many as a burden that children distance themselves from, try to avoid, actively resist, disobey, or in other ways react negatively towards. This is first of all the ‘boring’ responsibility of adults, but it also relates to responsibilities that are seen to be too much for children to have. Within this perspective, the view of children as ‘becomings’ and childhood as a life world free from ‘adult responsibility’ is dominant (Qvortrup, 1985). However, this view coexists with the view of children as ‘beings’, competent and capable of having responsibilities they see as a privilege (Morrow, 2008).

**Adults’ responsibility to care for children**

Across all countries in our study children agree that it is the responsibility of adults to provide for the family and to take care of children (Butler et al., 2009). As one 14-year-old girl in Norway argued: ‘They have more responsibility for taking care of us than we have for taking care of ourselves’, while a group of younger children said:
Girl A: Adults have to clean up and wash, and they have to nag us.

Interviewer: Yeah . . .

Girl B: And they have to do the dishes, set the table, and make food and so on . . . And it’s maybe not so very funny to be an adult.

Interviewer: Oh no . . .

Girl A: We may just laze about while they fix the food and so on.

The younger children tend to focus on adults’ responsibilities for ‘looking after’ and ‘controlling’ children in their daily activities: ‘so they don’t do anything wrong’ (girl), ‘so we don’t go and . . . for example run on to the road and like’ (girl), to ‘keep an eye on when to go to bed’ (boy), ‘wake up their children to go to school’ (girl), ‘look after my younger brother, so he is not too close to cats and dogs, because he is allergic’ (boy), ‘look after us so we don’t get sick so easily’ (girl). There seems to be some tension between what we have categorized earlier as ‘self-care responsibility’ and what these children describe as adults’ responsibility for ‘looking after’ them. The different views of children are clearly exemplified in a conversation with two 8-year-old girls:

Girl A: We don’t have the responsibility for not being hurt, or we have, but not as much as adults, because they may comfort us, but we cannot like . . . comforting ourselves . . .

Girl B: I know how to comfort myself! I just call on my pussycat, and when I think about my pussycat, then I’m like forgetting completely all the sad things in my head, and then suddenly I remember something else . . .

The first girl sees the responsibility for comforting children as an adult responsibility, while the second girl argues that she can comfort herself with the help of her cat.

Children and young people clearly stated that adults have the responsibility: ‘To earn money and to buy food’ (boy, 8 years), ‘to pay the bills . . . to pay taxes . . . to get a job and things like that’ (girl, 14 years), ‘so that children have a home, food and . . . things in the house’ (boy, 14 years). A few mention that they earn money from doing housework, baby-sitting and other work for family members, relatives and friends. In such cases, most of them agree that they still ‘will get money from your parents’ (girl, 14 years), and ‘we don’t like bother to pay the bills ourselves’ (girl, 14 years).

‘I am going to be a kid as long as I want to’

Children’s frustration and resistance towards responsibility in Norway can be seen in relation to dominant ideas of childhood as a separate life world, where children should be spared the burden of having too much responsibility in order to be able to play and enjoy their childhood free from ‘adult responsibility’ (Kjørholt et al., 2009). Such a view is also related to the perceived selfishness of children and their lack of interest in what is going on in society. This is clearly expressed by a 14-year-old girl in a discussion about participation rights:

Girl: We can be more selfish and only think about ourselves, and what we do, without worrying much about other issues. And that’s how it should be, when you are young, I mean.
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Interviewer: Do you think it should be a right not to worry?

Girl: Yes. And if adults say that we are not grown up enough, but still say that we should pay attention to what is going on in society – why should we do it actually? If they think that we are not adult enough to vote? It is like they have two opinions – that we should pay more attention, and that we are only kids who are not allowed to do very much. . . . I think young people should not need to take responsibility for what is going on in the world and so on. The only things I read in the newspapers are the cartoons, and I am satisfied with that.

She is frustrated about adults having ‘two opinions’, in the sense that their demands are greater than what they are willing to offer. This is something others in the group agree about, while also emphasizing that they are not willing to let go of their childhood:

Interviewer: Do you agree with her?

Girl B: Yes. They say that we are going to be like adults, but if we behave like adults then they get scared, and they want us back like kids again.

Boy: I am going to be a kid as long as I want too.

Girl B: Yeah, me too (laughs).

Girl A: I bet I will read cartoons until I am 30 (laughs).

Thus, this group of young people criticize adults for having two opinions with regard to children and responsibility, but at the same time they seem to be ambiguous and unclear in relation to the question of their own participation. At one point they emphasize that children, like adults, have both the knowledge and the capacity for participation, but, on the other hand, some of them want to be spared the burden of being a responsible person and to remain a child for as long as they want to. There is a tension between dominant ideas of the participating child and ideas of a childhood free from having too much responsibility. Children don’t want the same responsibility as adults, nor to be spared of all responsibility, because then ‘we will be spoiled’ as one boy (14 years) says.

Concluding discussion

Bearing in mind the privileges of responsibility, children and young people ask to be included as participants to be and become responsible. However, across countries children agree that they do not want the same responsibilities as adults (Butler et al., 2009). Our study indicates that for children and young people there is an interwoven relation between participation rights and responsibilities, not only in the sense that they acknowledge their responsibilities to others (cf. Lockyer, 2008), but also that they acknowledge the special responsibilities that rest with adults. For many, ‘being responsible’ is a characteristic mainly associated with adulthood, while children and young people need experience and practice in order to ‘become responsible’. In their analyses of children’s perspectives on responsibility, Such and Walker (2004) make a distinction between ‘doing things responsibly’ and ‘doing responsible things’, which describes how children’s participation is valued by adults and children themselves:
Doing things responsibly (sensibly, maturely, with trust) was... a means of accessing more responsible things (going places unaccompanied, choosing when and how to do chores, being left home alone). For many this implied improved status, power and autonomy. (Such and Walker, 2004: 240)

Such and Walker see this reciprocal relationship as the key to understanding the process of the formulation and negotiation of responsibilities in the family. Our results support this view. In addition, our study points to some general differences between the respective statuses of children and adults as citizens. As Lister (2008: 11) argues, it is ‘something of a conundrum’ for children’s citizenship that ‘in order to be able to participate they first need to be accepted as members of the citizen-community. Yet that acceptance is, in practice, partly contingent on children demonstrating their capacity to be participatory citizens.’ In relation to the question of responsibility, we may say that in order to be able to ‘do responsible things’ children first need to be accepted as ‘responsible beings’. Yet that acceptance is partly contingent on children demonstrating their capacity for ‘doing things responsibly’. If children’s responsibilities are kept invisible and/or they are excluded from doing responsible things, it is impossible for them to demonstrate their capacities and thereby be accepted as responsible beings.

Even in South Africa, where responsibilities are promoted as equally important as rights, parents and teachers’ views are ambivalent in the sense that ‘they were also concerned that children should not take up the responsibilities of adults but rather enjoy their childhoods’ (September and Roberts, 2009: 166). Notions of trust, respect and reciprocity are considered important for children to be able to demonstrate their maturity and responsibility (Morrow, 2008; Such and Walker, 2005). The views of children and young people in our study seem to support a position of themselves as ‘differently equal’ responsible beings, in the sense that ‘difference is the basis rather than the site of exclusions’, and ‘it is through difference that equality is defined, rather than difference being transcended through a claim to equality’ (Moosa-Mitha, 2005: 377). As Roche pointed out, ‘no one is arguing that children are identical to adults or that they should enjoy exactly the same bundle of political and civil rights as adults’ (Roche, 1999: 487). This holds for children and young people in our study as well, and can be transferred to the question of responsibility. Children and young people are neither arguing that they are identical to adults nor that they should hold the same responsibilities as adults. Rather they ask to be included, respected and acknowledged as persons with valuable contributions in social relations with adults. Important in this process ‘is the recognition and celebration of social difference... whether according to age, disability, ethnicity or gender, and childhood is something to be valued, protected and treated as special’ (Cockburn, 1998: 111). The equality that children and young people strive for is defined by adults recognizing how children are different in specific contexts by giving them the necessary provision and protection to be able to ‘be and become’ responsible beings and participate in the sense of ‘doing responsible things’ as children.

According to our study, ‘being responsible’ and ‘doing things responsibly’ are ways to strengthen one’s position within a relationship in a way that may give one more opportunities to have a say, take part in decision-making and ‘doing responsible things’ (cf. Such and Walker, 2004). Treating children with respect and accepting them as being
responsible are also seen as important for them to ‘become responsible’ in the sense that practice is needed to learn from experience (cf. Osler and Starkey, 2005; Solberg, 1994). Being a child does not conflict with being responsible, but being an adult clearly means more responsibilities, first of all in the sense that adults are also held responsible for the well-being of children. Our study has provided some critical perspectives on the focus on responsibility as something that children are not able or willing to acknowledge. Responsibility is not a fixed and static entity for adults only, but it is a dynamic and vital part of everyday life for both children and adults. More studies are needed to explore the complexity and meaning of responsibility for children in different contexts.

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Notes
1. The international research project, titled ‘Children’s Perspectives on Citizenship and Nation-building’, was developed and coordinated by members of the ‘Childwatch Citizenship Study Group’ from 2003 to 2007. See www.childwatch.uio.no. The director of the Norwegian Centre for Child Research, Anne Trine Kjørholt, was responsible for the Norwegian part of the project as one of three subprojects in the research project ‘Children as New Citizens and “the Best Interest of the Child”: A Challenge for Modern Democracies’, financed by the Norwegian Research Council. See: www.ntnu.no/noseb/english/research/projects/childrenascitizens.
2. In Norway the first data were collected in 2005 with a sample of 53 children. An extended data collection was carried out in 2007 with a new sample of 56 children. Data from the sample in 2007 are not included in the presentation of results given in the book Children as Citizens? International Voices edited by Nicola Taylor and Anne B. Smith (2009).
3. I would like to thank one of the reviewers for alerting me to this point.

References


