Nowadays, in a diversity of practices dealing with children, one can observe a strong discourse on child participation. Many supporters of the children’s rights movement strive for a full membership of children in society. The interventions they undertake in order to enhance such membership are often inspired by citizen’s strategies and actions of adults. This observation prompts us to reflect critically on following questions. Is it meaningful to provide children with an adult-centric notion of citizenship? If not, in what way can children be seen as citizens?

Before answering those questions, the context in which children are supposed to be citizens needs to be clarified. This context is very turbulent. Our western society has gone and is still going through considerable changes. Against such social background there is a revival of the participation discourse. The social meaning and position we attribute to childhood is changing as well. Today, the childhood years present themselves as a very ambivalent reality. On the one hand, children are seen as autonomous individuals, on the other hand, as objects of protection. Nevertheless, today children can be seen as active citizens. Their ability to learn and play allows them to give active meaning to their environment. Accepting playful and ambivalent forms of citizenship, child participation presents itself no longer as an utopia, but as a fact.
so, we deal with the actual participation discourses, the social construction of childhood and the specificity of children. On the basis of these elements, in conclusion, we present a contemporary, child-size concept of citizenship.

Late modernity

The current generation of children are growing up in what Beck (1986) and Giddens (1991) call the risk society. By this they refer to a transition in the development of our western society. They observe an evolution from a modern industrial to a late modern society. Characteristic of that development is that the traditional institutions like class, family, science, work, state and democracy are increasingly the subject of systematic reflection and continuous change. These developments are driven by two seemingly opposite tendencies, namely individualization and globalization.

Together with Qvortrup (1990), we start from the idea that childhood and the living conditions of children are fundamentally influenced by the same economic, political and social powers that constitute the context of adults’ lives. Tendencies like individualization and globalization do not necessarily need to have the same impact on children that they do on other groups in society, but, nevertheless, they determine the living conditions of children and the social construction of childhood.

Individualization refers to the fragmentation of classic institutions, such as the family. Adults, but also children, are less able to fall back on the certainties of an attributed social position. The great ideological orientations no longer offer foolproof and general – in the eyes of former generations sometimes even compelling – behaviour perspectives. In this way, people get space, but they are at the same time obliged to design their own life, to rewrite their own biography, every day (Geldof, 1999). The increasing risks of individualization as a result of this, form the reverse of the liberation process that individualization was and still is. We have to deal with new fears and worries, but also with new possibilities (Giddens, 1998). These possibilities and risks are in the last decades more and more open to children. Children in the West are encouraged to be the author of their own lives (Beck, 1997). They seem to utilize these possibilities and to present themselves as social actors with their own interests and rights (Wyness, 1996). They, for example, successfully claim ‘agency’ within the contours of the family. In this context, du Bois-Raymond (2001), du Bois-Raymond et al. (1998) and de Swaan (1982) speak of ‘negotiation’ families. But also, outside the sphere of influence of the family children grasp the opportunity ever more to show themselves as individuals. The market recognizes children and youngsters as consumers with their own desires and means. On the basis of specific consumption patterns, children develop their own (sub)cultures. Torrance (1998) mentions in this respect and by analogy with youth cultures the appearance of children’s cultures. This has also not escaped science.
Zinnecker (2001) states that lifestyles and life histories were once exclusively attributed to adults, while recently children’s cultures and children’s lifestyles have become popular research domains.

Despite the tendency towards individualization, we should not think that today writing one’s own biography is a strictly individual matter. When organizing their life, people borrow examples, alternatives, principles and norms from the networks they belong to, such as family, neighbourhood, (circles of) friends, colleagues, sociocultural networks, action groups and so on. Children as individuals, and not solely as representatives of families, get increasingly integrated in non-familial activities and organizations (Näsman, 1994). When designing their early biography this development offers children possibilities to borrow examples, alternatives, values and norms from social practices they are involved in outside the family. More and more the family is becoming the framework for the development of its individual members rather than being a target in itself. The possibilities of the individual family member determine the meaning of the family as collective property and no longer the other way round. Solidarity within the family increasingly is based on a contract rather than on the expression of a joint destination.

Next to individualization our present-day society is also characterized by a globalization tendency. Events taking place elsewhere, whether or not on the economic field, more than ever have direct consequences for our own lives. The process of globalization means that many of the cultural and leisure options available for western children have become very similar (Smith, 2000). The rapidly growing information technology is by no means new to this. But also the decisions we take as individuals often have global consequences. These consequences are increasingly made visible for children in the framework of environmental education, peace education, development education and so on.

Apparently globalization is opposite to individualization, but they are in a strange way complementary. The international Treaty on Children’s Rights, accepted by the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, is an obvious example of this. Such an international convention was only made possible because of the progressing globalization, but at the same time it also supports children to present themselves as individuals with their own rights. Verhellen (1994) talks about a historical milestone and sees the treaty as the green light for a renewed way of thinking and doing concerning children.

Due to individualization and globalization, our society becomes complex. These developments often involve – among others – expanding fragmentation: diverse standpoints and interest groups claim a right to exist. Children also present themselves as a group with specific interests. In view of the growing complexity it is no longer obvious, as in the golden era of the 1960s, to start from the idea that it is possible to shape our society. Instead,
we pay more and more attention to the control of all kinds of individualization and globalization risks. This is translated through a need for reflection. Giddens (1991) speaks in this respect of the self-reflexive society. Also the education and growing up of children seem to be attended by more insecurity. The need for and the growth of initiatives and institutions aimed at the support in education show this. Also, we can find this need for reflection on the level of local policy. Local authorities are supposed to develop a vision on diverse policy domains. Childcare policy, youth work policy and youth space policy are just a few examples that affect children and youngsters.

Against the background of the risk society, a shift takes place that is of specific importance to the social position of children, namely a shift of institutionalized education focusing on childhood and youth to lifelong and life-spread learning embedded in everyday life (Vandenabeele and Wildemeersch, 1997). Learning no longer exclusively belongs to the domain of the school and no longer is restricted to the youth phase. Today learning is an integral part of our everyday life at every age and in diverse domains. The evolution of institutionalized learning to learning processes in everyday circumstances changes the classic relation between children and adults. In this respect, Hengst (2001) dares to speak of the end of modern childhood. He points out that the difference between children and adults can no longer be indicated by a classic modern frame of concepts, in which children are the ones who need to be qualified and adults the fully qualified. This does not yet mean however that childhood is absorbed by adulthood. Hengst (2001) states that we are witnessing the liberation of childhood from modernity’s educational project.

The current participation discourse

The risk society inevitably has an influence on the social meaning we give to participation and active citizenship. Individualization and globalization processes generate a growing gap between individualized and isolated citizens on the one hand and influential global systems and structures on the other. In such a context there is a need for new models to shape democracy (Wildemeersch and Berkers, 1997). New participation discourses have arisen during the last decades. These discourses aim to bring about new connections between the individual and the community. Van der Veen (2001) distinguishes two perspectives to establish new participatory models, namely a system and a life-world perspective.

From a system perspective, participation is quickly interpreted as a requirement for the well functioning of society. As a result of the challenges and risks we are confronted with in late modernity, various groups claim diverse and sometimes opposite interests. Consequently, ideas on participation become more significant. The input of various actors, also of citizens, can increase the creativity when looking for solutions. For this reason,
among others, Hart (1992, 1997) pleads for the participation of children in matters that are of direct interest to them. Authorities however, often promote participation as a strategy to broaden their policy basis or as a strategy to keep growing conflicts of interest under control.

In political circles the participation discourse obtains a new elan under the name ‘active welfare state’. All citizens are considered to actively take part in the development and the maintenance of our welfare state. In the wake of this discourse, social groups that formerly did not or only hardly participate and mainly were submitted to care, are stimulated to have an active input in society. This neoliberal version of the active welfare state narrows down participation too much to employment on the labour market (Stroobants and Jans, 2002). As long as education does not acquire the same socioeconomic status as paid labour, children as actors will fall outside the scope of the discourse of the active welfare state.

A system perspective on participation implies an instrumental approach of participatory initiatives. Participation becomes an instrument to deal with the insecurities and unpredictability of a risk society. Although this perspective is not necessarily reprehensible, it is unidirectional. When we want to clarify the meaning of participation and active citizenship for children, this approach seems too limited. Models for participation and citizenship developed from a system perspective often neglect the specificity of children and are unilaterally designed for adults (Qvortrup, 2001). As long as system-controlled participation models do not relate meaningfully to the specificity of children, they can hardly involve children successfully. It is not likely, sometimes even undesirable to change all these models in a child-friendly way. Some well-meant initiatives, like child councils, often become training grounds for children, who, due to their lack of political rights, cannot fully participate.

A life-world perspective on active citizenship and participation seems to open more possibilities for linking childhood and active citizenship in a meaningful way. From this perspective citizens feel challenged by all kinds of matters in which collective interests are at issue (van der Veen, 2001). The more capacity and connection with groups and/or ideas in proportion to these challenges, the more one can behave as an active citizen (Stroobants et al., 2001). This may also be the case for children. Children, for example, are strikingly sensitive about global social themes like the environment and peace. Society, however, mainly plays upon this in an educational way. This sensibility of children is mainly considered as a solid base for future citizenship and only rarely as a base for actual citizenship.

From a life-world perspective it becomes difficult to give a standardized meaning to citizenship. As a consequence of individualization, a centrally promoted ideal of citizenship no longer seems realistic. Citizenship is more like a learning process in itself than a predefined learning objective (Stroobants et al., 2001). As mentioned earlier, the difference between
children and adults seems to change because of the evolution from education to everyday learning. Citizenship, certainly when it is approached from a life-world perspective, is related to learning processes and can ever less be considered as the outcome of educational efforts. This idea possibly offers chances to meaningfully link childhood and active citizenship. Today, children and adults are becoming ‘peers’ in the way that they both have to learn to give meaning and shape to their active citizenship.

The social construction of childhood

Just as the participation discourse, the social construction of childhood is strongly determined by the developments in late modernity. To confirm this we briefly go back in history. Ariès (1962) noticed that the construction of childhood is rather recent and started with the beginning of the modern ages. Before, children were hardly seen as a distinct social group. Until the 18th century, children were protected and cherished till they were 6 or 7 years old. Later they were considered to be pocket-sized adults, who were mostly involved in employment (Dasberg, 1975). Romantic philosophers like Rousseau and Locke began to criticize this perspective (Depaepe, 1998). According to them, children had to be protected against exhausting, unhealthy labour and had a right to care, education and, more generally, their own social environment. Philanthropists played a central role in realizing this range of thought (Cunningham, 1995). Their initiatives were important, but did not lead to an improvement of the quality of life of all children. Children from the working class, for instance, hardly noticed any difference in their life. Towards the end of the 19th century, the understanding grew that only governmental intervention would guarantee a childhood for all children. In the early 20th century, with the generalization of compulsory education, a separation was realized between the environment of children and that of adults. This governmental input should not solely be interpreted as a deed of ultimate pedagogic charity with regard to children and their families. By restraining child labour and introducing compulsory education, the government did not only want to achieve the ability to read, write and calculate for children. It also wanted to teach them virtuousness and patriotism – in other words, to educate them as exemplary citizens. As a consequence, citizenship became the exclusive territory of adults. For children, it was the final destination of their childhood.

Whatever intentions the government had, the way was prepared for a dramatic change in the experience of childhood as well as in the way we think about it (Cunningham, 1995). Children were no longer considered to be members of the labour force to which also adults belonged, but as a separated social group. The position of children has evolved from a strongly social (professional) participation of children with minimal protection during the 18th and 19th centuries, to a strong protection of children with minimal
Categorizing children gained importance in the course of the 20th century. The way in which parents started to look at their children changed dramatically as a result of this. Due to the lack of an economic contribution of children, parents had to look for new reasons to appreciate them. As a result, they had fewer children and respected them mainly for emotional reasons (Raes, 1996). Nowadays we live in the era of the ‘cherished child’, an era in which children no longer render an economic advantage. On the contrary, they form a considerable cost (Giddens, 1998). This evolution gradually brought along a change in the social structure of the family as well. Parents, and especially fathers, became less distant and authoritarian. We already mentioned the increased democratic relationships between parents and children. In literature this is referred to as ‘the transition from a command household to a negotiation household’ (de Swaan, 1982; du Bois-Raymond, 2001).

The children’s rights movement today not only works for the negotiation position of children within the family, but also wants to strengthen the social position of children. In the period of modernity ample protection and separate facilities were created for children, certainly in the West. As a result of this, children spend most of their time in ‘youth land’ (Dasberg, 1975), a psychosocial moratorium, and live for the greater part secluded from the rest of society. For this reason society partly presents itself as an anonymous greatness for children. But from adolescence on, these children are suddenly expected to behave in a socially involved manner, to be independent and responsible. This reality incites some adherents of the children’s rights movement to all kinds of initiatives and experiments in which they try to actively involve children when social decision-taking is also of importance to them. In this domain Hart (1992, 1997) has inspired many initiatives.

Science has not been left behind in the course of this historically grown social construction of childhood. Scientists from various fields, not least psychology, were interested in the child. Large amounts of knowledge on education, upbringing, development and health of young people became available. An endless number of books with all sorts of childrearing advice to parents were published. Characteristic of these publications, and of the sociopolitical climate with regard to children and young people in general, is their specific orientation to problems (de Winter, 1997). As a result of the increasing individualization, this problem-oriented approach towards children gains importance even today. Next to the free space for individual profiling of children, individualization also brings along new risks, risks against which the maturing child has to be protected. This mainly psychological and pedagogical conception of childhood through science paradoxically enough had only little interest for the life of the child itself. Currently, the ‘Sociology of Childhood’ (Alanen, 1992; Eckert, 2001; Jenks, 1982;
Qvortrup, 1990; Qvortrup et al., 1994) offers an alternative perspective on childhood. Research in this approach takes the life of the child in its whole as a starting point and studies children as an independent social group with their own culture and own characteristics and meanings (Torrance, 1998).

The ambivalence of current childhood

Summarizing, we conclude that today there is a social ambiguity vis-a-vis present childhood. Parents and society are on the one hand inclined to cherish and protect. On the other hand, children are increasingly stimulated to present themselves as autonomous individuals. This ambivalence is characteristic of current childhood and has already been noticed by several authors (James et al., 1998; Percy-Smith, 1999; Prout, 2000). In this respect, not only does ‘raising children’ become an ever-harder job, but also growing up proceeds with more potential tensions (Bouverne-de Bie, 1997). Starting from different positions in the field of ambivalence, interactions between child and adult generations can entail confusion for both the educators and the children. To what extent can children and young people be expected to be autonomous, independent and responsible, while their living situation also supposes dependency and inequality (de Winter, 1997)?

These tendencies towards more autonomy and regulation do not necessarily have to rule each other out (James et al., 1998). Children themselves signal that they simultaneously need protection and space for self-development (van Gils, 1999). Rather than cancelling out this ambivalence, it is appropriate to understand it as a social phenomenon proper to the growing up of children. However one is sometimes inclined to stress unilateral control rather than autonomy, or vice versa. This should be avoided, because one insufficiently takes into account the ambivalence itself. Learning how to deal with this ambivalence is the challenge. In this learning process both children and educators can manifest themselves as learning subjects. Moreover, they are interdependent in this learning process.

Typical children

It has already become clear how childhood is highly determined by the spirit of the times. Today, children lead another life than say during the Middle Ages. Also cultural factors determine the life of the child. In the western world children lead another life from their peers in the South. However, we found few publications with regard to culturally set differences of current childhood. The greater part of the intercultural research goes to the comparison of different educational systems and styles of upbringing between cultures. In the Dutch-speaking region, for example, we can refer to Eldering (2000). In such studies the pedagogic relation of institutions and adults with regard to children is emphasized, rather than the culturally set characteristics.
and living conditions of the children themselves. The publications of Boyden (1985, 1990) are an exception to the rule. She compares the childhood of British children to that of Peruvian children. In the UK, children from say 6 to 14 years old mainly go to school. In Peru, however, many children within this age group are already the main breadwinner of the family and head of the household. Boyden proves that the transition from childhood to adulthood for children in Peru passes much faster due to economic necessity, cultural norms and the specific social context. But differences in cultures do not only occur outside the borders. Also within a geographical unit, differences can be observed, for instance according to the social class environment in which children grow up (Lareau, 2000).

Despite this strong sociocultural embedding of childhood, we are of the opinion that, independent of culture and time, children share some typical characteristics. Both propositions, namely the sociocultural definiteness of childhood and typical characteristics of all children, are not by definition opposed. Prout and James (1990) and Percy-Smith (1999) among others point out that immaturity of children in a certain sense is a biological fact. At the same time they emphasize that the meaning given to this immaturity is culturally determined and hence varies in function of place and time.

Always and everywhere children are growing up. They are young and have less experience in comparison to most adults of their environment. There is still a lot to discover. This perhaps explains why children are of a very curious nature. They manifest this curiosity diligently by actively giving meaning to their environment. Children’s ability to learn while doing so is often astonishing. Although children are almost continually learning, they go through life in a playful way, especially when growing up in sufficiently stimulating circumstances. Actively giving meaning and playing is what children did in the past and still do today. The games children play and the world around them, to which they actively give meaning, is of course determined by culture and time-set factors, but playfulness and giving meaning could very well be a universal characteristic of children. This is important for a children-sized concept of citizenship. We discuss this in due course.

First we examine children as active meaning-givers and as playful beings.

**Children as active meaning-givers**

The theory of ecological zones according to Bronfenbrenner (1977) was introduced by Baacke (1985) in the framework of youth research. This theory gives an interesting insight into the way in which children are active meaning-givers. The notion ‘ecological’ refers to the environment, the community and especially the space in which a child grows up. Because of their attention to the interaction between subject and context in the development of children, Bronfenbrenner and Baacke extend the psychologically inspired studies on children and youngsters, which mostly focus on the subject (Graue and Walsch, 1998). In the theory of Baacke (1985), children and
young people are seen as developing personalities who appropriate their environment and simultaneously influence it. In this way, Baacke gives children the status of active meaning-givers, of agents and not purely objects. He distinguishes four socioecological zones. When growing up, people appropriate these zones one after the other. The first zone, the ecological centre, is the place that can be denominated by ‘home’. In our western culture this will mostly be the family. Close emotional relations, direct contacts and a high degree of dependency characterize this zone. The second zone, ecological proximity, is the unspecified surrounding of the ecological centre. In our culture this mostly exists of the district, the neighbourhood. This is where the first relation with the external world begins. The ecological sectors, the third zone, show less cohesion. Function-specific relations dominate: school, sports field, swimming pool and so on. This zone is entered at a certain time and with a special intention. Children are confronted with well-defined role-expectations. The fourth zone, ecological periphery, is best characterized as occasional contacts, contacts one has every now and then with someone or a certain authority. The more varied and stimulating the ecological periphery presents itself, the more experiences can be gained.

The appropriation process of the different ecological zones is more or less age-bound. In general we can start from the idea that a person first orients him- or herself in the zone of proximity; as he or she gets older they enter the other zones. For the very small child the parents are the most important nearby others (ecological centre), with whom he or she interacts on a limited variation of places. Later on, the child gets to know the ecological proximity. In school, an ecological sector, the child enters into a functionally set relationship. The transition to the ecological periphery mostly follows later. The action radius of children and young people increases when they move in the direction of the ecological periphery. The institutional representations of these different zones are nevertheless culture and time-bound. We take the principle of continuous appropriation as a characteristic of growing children, independent of culture and time. In this way, children manifest themselves everywhere and throughout history as active meaning-givers.

In former days the process of meaning giving and appropriation could be considered as a task for children and as an attainment of adults. In our current late modern society, however, adults also are more than ever challenged to continuously give meaning to their interactions in the different zones, even in the zone of proximity. The social developments we face change the structure, positions and meaning of the zones for adults as well. Just think about the development from a ‘command’ family to a ‘negotiation’ family. Nowadays processes of meaning giving and appropriation seem to be a joint task for both social categories. Concomitantly, as we stated earlier, active citizenship today has become a learning process in itself for both children and adults.
Children as playing creatures

Together with Roopnarine et al. (1994), we claim that all children, no matter where in the world, play. Lasater and Johnson (1994), Farver and Shin (1997) and Mouritsen (1999) also agree, but state pertinently that the content and the cultural meaning of children’s games can be very different. But ‘playing’ is in any sense an important activity in the life of every child, just like ‘labour’ is associated with adults. A lot of research has been done on the game and the playing of children. Despite the broad attention literature has paid to this theme, there is still no unanimous definition of ‘game’ and ‘playing’ (Saracho and Spodek, 1998). It is apparently not so simple to catch the most characteristic activity of children in words. Lavega (1998) conveys it as follows:

One who tries to define or conceptualize the game, clashes inevitably with a reality which is just as evident, known and familiar as complex. As a result the game as social phenomenon does not let itself be caught in any attempt to definitive ‘conceptual outlining’.

Nevertheless, from different scientific disciplines frantic efforts have been made to define children’s play. From a psychological perspective play mainly gets its meaning in service of the development of the child to adulthood. Play is considered to be essential for a good and healthy development of the child and is viewed as an important method in the learning process. Up until today playing principally gets a pedagogic interpretation. This is witnessed by the huge number of publications expressing the relationship between play and development. Recent titles like Child Play: Its Importance for Human Development (Slade, 1995) and Play and Child Development (Frost et al., 2001) are only some illustrations. The mainly pedagogic approach, which manifested itself in the course of the last centuries in various living domains of the child, has also influenced the most important activity of the child, namely playing. In this way adults leave their mark on the playing of children. They choose ‘sound toys’, provide for educational supervision and build safe playgrounds. The meaning and interpretation children themselves give to play is mostly overlooked.

Together with Mouritsen (1999) we want to leave this very adult-centric vision of playing. Instead, we start from the playing children themselves. What is playing currently? How does it mean something for children? What does it mean for children? In this respect, the play of children presents itself as something valuable. While they are playing, children reveal themselves as meaning-givers that can actively intervene in their environment. While playing they are shaping their environment and social networks. Play allows them to be actors. Exactly because play is somehow without obligations, it is of such an importance to children. While they are playing, children experiment with their environment and are regularly called by that environment to account for their activities. When these consequences of the play become
uncontrollably complex for the child, the child may lose control over the game. At that moment he or she can stop the game. The child thus has the liberty from one moment to the other to drastically redraft his or her responsibility for the involved environment. This liberty is characteristic of the game and allows children to extend their action radius without too much risk.

**Citizenship – child-size**

On the basis of the different concepts elaborated in the previous paragraphs, we can now examine what the meaning of citizenship for current childhood could be. We only need a good description of citizenship. But just as the play of children has a lot of different meanings, so too does ‘citizenship’. According to Delanty (2000), depending on the author and the perspective, one or more of following four elements defines citizenship:

- Citizenship as a whole of rights (I get to vote);
- Citizenship as a whole of responsibilities (I have to be decent);
- Citizenship as identity (I am Belgian);
- Citizenship as participation (I feel involved and can participate in community life).

For each of these four elements we examine how they link with the present-day construction of childhood and the specificity of children.

Let’s start with citizenship as a whole of rights. Within this approach, full citizenship for children only comes into reach when they have the same rights as adults. Apart from the question whether all of this is desirable, we have to note that this equality does not exist in the West. Children do not have a right to vote for instance. When we link citizenship exclusively to this discourse of rights, children cannot be seen as full citizens. Moreover, an excessive stress on full rights could be in conflict with the current ambivalence of childhood. The children’s rights movement should guard against an unilateral encouragement of the rights and autonomy of children. One should not lose track of the children’s need for protection. A case in point is that children, who however very interested in taking part in a civilian jury, are not prepared to openly speak out on guilt and innocence (Tolley et al., 1998).

When we want to design citizenship within the reach of children from a focus on responsibility, we cannot get around the playful character of children. Due to their playfulness, children are extremely in the position to put responsibility into perspective. They can make an end to their game, once its consequences become too complex. This gives children the ability to withdraw from certain responsibilities. We learned earlier how convenient this
ability is when they want to appropriate their environment. However, this does not mean that children are irresponsible persons. They may be called to account from time to time. For they bear responsibility for the way in which they deal with their ability to put things into perspective. However, it becomes clear also that an imposed discourse of duties does not allow us to design a full citizenship for children.

Citizenship as an identity is only of use when children can borrow this identity from the ecological zones they appropriate. When citizen identity is connected with the sociocultural legacy of still undiscovered peripheral zones, children will not be able to be a full citizen. We may for instance presume that European citizenship fits in little with the environment of most children. But this is probably also true for many adult Europeans, except for the four-yearly elections. On the other hand, we find that for children ‘being part of the group’ is an extremely important agenda. This desire of belonging is not limited to the peer group. Children bond with all kinds of ‘companions’ and are very apt in bringing about connections. How often have parents experienced that their children were the basis of their involvement in new, mostly informal networks. Just think of the friendships many have from their vacations. These connections are a prerequisite to be able to identify them with a collectivity. Children seem to possess the ability to identify themselves with larger social groups and communities. Whether they do this is strongly connected to the accessibility of symbols, values and norms going with such an identity. Because of the progressive way in which children appropriate their environment, at first mainly local forms of citizenship are within the reach of children.

Finally we can look at citizenship as a form of participation and involvement. At the very beginning of this article we stated that in current society participation, also increasingly child participation, is considered to be of paramount importance. But at the same time, because of the influence of the modern idea of protection, the possibilities for children and young people to get acquainted with social participation is mainly offered in artificial training rooms. Nevertheless, various authors note that children actually participate in society, also outside these training grounds (among others, Honig et al., 1999; McNamee, 2000; Prout and James, 1990; Qvortrup, 1990; Wyness, 1996). Just by giving meaning to their environment they intervene in their environment. However, we should avoid unilaterally stressing the subject. We do not want to suggest that children are not influenced by their environment. Their agency is a complex interaction in which children simultaneously are determined by their environment and help determine their environment. Corsaro (1997) refers in this case to ‘interpretive reproduction’. He considers children as actors involved in the construction of society and at the same time states that children are determined by the ruling social opportunity structures. This reasoning is also of relevance for adults and was already elaborated by Giddens (1984) in his structuration.

Because we are of the opinion that children actually participate in society, they have the status of citizens, for as far as we can see citizenship as participation and involvement. From a life-world perspective (van der Veen, 2001) on participation, one can find several possibilities for the design of a citizenship within the reach of children. It is important for future research to gain more insight into the way in which children actually help to shape their environment. This can only be done when the competencies of children are focused on and not their possible limitations.

The participation and involvement approach especially offers the opportunity for the design of children-sized citizenship. In former days, citizenship used to be a static given and the final destination of childhood. Nowadays, within late modernity, citizenship presents itself as a dynamic and continuous learning process. Stroobants et al. (2001) state that this learning process is embedded in the biography and practice of each individual. Because humans are in essence social creatures, their biographical work and their practices are social activities. Just as adults and children are interdependent in learning how to deal with the ambivalence of current childhood, they are also interdependent in the learning process by which they give a meaning and shape to their citizenship. Cockburn (1998) sees this interdependence between children and adults as the starting point for his conception of citizenship. When we recognize this mutual dependence, the social position of children is less problematic. Citizenship of children no longer presents itself as a utopia, but as a fact. Precisely because of this interdependency it is important to stimulate social participation of children.

Conclusion

As long as we unilaterally define childhood from a modern, educational perspective, the potential citizenship of children will remain in the shadow of the problems, of the need for protection and of the inauguration ritual they face. However, the condition of late modernity, current participation discourses and the ambivalence of childhood raise the question whether children can or cannot be seen as active citizens. Because of the need for protection and of the playfulness of children it is not self-evident that we give children the same rights and responsibilities as adults. From a life-world perspective and understanding of citizenship as social involvement and participation, we can define children as actual citizens. The late modern condition allows children increasingly to present themselves as social actors, within as well as outside the family. This citizenship of children is based on a continuous learning process in which children and adults are interdependent. In this interdependency, the playful way in which children give meaning to their environment has to be taken into account. The play of children cannot merely be considered as socially unimportant child play.
In order to have a better understanding of playful and ambivalent forms of citizenship, further research is needed. A lot of research was and is focused on the way adults can and do support the social impact of children. Such focus starts unilaterally from an intervention perspective. But a life-world perspective and research methods, allowing us to gain more insight into the perspective of the child, such as biographic and ethnographic research methods, are needed. New research could focus on the way in which children have actual impact on their environment. A crucial question is: ‘Which meaning do children themselves give to their forms of actual citizenship?’ We noted that children are challenged by all kinds of matters in which collective interests are at stake. What are those matters and how do children correspond to those challenges? How can we see this social involvement, together with other abilities children have, as a basis for actual citizenship and not only as a basis for future citizenship?

Further on, we could try to connect and design relevant interventions in order to support those actual forms of child participation. A lot of current interventions start from adult-centric models of social participation. Such interventions mainly have an educational significance. There is also a need for other kinds of interventions: interventions that support actual forms of playful and ambivalent citizenship.

Notes
Thanks to Kim Maes, masters student in educational sciences at the University of Ghent (Belgium) for her help in the literature search concerning the ‘construction of childhood’ and ‘the play of children’.
Thanks also to Dr Veerle Stroobants, of the Unit of Adult and Continuing Education, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium), for her language support and her critical review of this article.

1. The UN Convention defines children as aged between 0 and 18. It is obvious that we meet a lot of differences within such a broad child population. At the Research Centre Childhood and Society we are mainly focused on children aged between 6 and 12. This article is written from that perspective. Nevertheless we do not advocate strict definitions of childhood, youth and adolescence by age.

References


