

## “The Future is Ours”: Youth Activism as a Matter of Equality

Seran Demiral, PhD (Boğaziçi University)

seran.demiral@boun.edu.tr

This article examines how social status reflects children’s awareness of climate change, youth activism, and human and non-human dynamics. Adult-centered perspectives often generalize children as homogenous, as if all children share a common childhood experience and similar ideas about the world. To challenge this perspective, I illuminate diverse childhoods in the face of climate change and climate change activism. I share preliminary observations about the diversity of childhood(s) (Hecht 2002) by discussing two different fieldwork moments and sets of findings: the first reflects my doctoral study on children’s engagement with digital spaces where I met upper-class children from Istanbul, Turkey in a school atmosphere (Demiral 2019); the second reflects an ongoing child participation project at Boğaziçi University that focuses on children’s diverse and everyday environments.

During my PhD fieldwork in 2019, I met sixth graders in a private school that supports students through social and cultural aspects of life beyond high academic success. As part of their innovative pedagogy, the school employed critical thinking education and provided an ideal environment for me to utilize the aligned Philosophy for Children (P4C) methodology (Lipman 1992, 2003). I sometimes gave children various scenarios to hear their perceptions of the future and how they interacted with technological development. As they explored these scenarios through the P4C methodology, I observed three different clusters of children separately (forty-five children in total). When I asked about their particular interests and tendencies to organize and rearrange our discussion topics, one group spontaneously directed our conversation to child activism in the middle of a debate on child-adult distinctions.

Subsequently, I opened a philosophical inquiry about children’s capabilities regarding school strikes, inspired by climate change activist Greta Thunberg. In our discussions on contemporary world issues, most of the children raised concerns that included “environmental issues, pollution, air pollution, greenhouse effect,” and eventually “humanity” itself. They usually lamented about “the human desire to pollute nature” and “negligence of the environment.” Conspicuously, most of the children I met knew about the greenhouse effect, the concept of a carbon footprint, or youth climate activists. From that moment, I decided to focus on how children’s perceptions of climate change may have relevance to social and ecological movements.

The following year, I joined *The Children Have A Voice Common Network Project* at Boğaziçi University, where we came together with children from lower and low-middle classes. The project then expanded to include children with disabilities, migrants, and minority groups from Istanbul and other parts of Turkey. In 2020, children ages 9 to 16 gathered to attend creative drama and philosophical inquiry workshops. In a focus group about children’s experiences in the city, they simultaneously raised the topic of climate activism and children’s exclusion in climate activism spaces. While talking about domestic animals on the streets in Istanbul, one child mentioned intimacy between younger children and animals; then, another added, “But, there is

something: nobody listens to the children.” When it came to the topic of children’s voices in climate activism, a 14-year-old boy said:

Perhaps you heard of Greta from Sweden, who is 16 years old... I think it is a good thing to give a child the right to speak. But, there is another question here: when do children in Africa have a word? Things that the girl [Greta] talks about are really nice. The damage to the world... but I am sure that her living conditions must be good.

This boy and his peers challenge Global South and North binaries, along with global and local dynamics, as they consider their lives in relation to the planet and environmental concerns (Balagopalan 2019, Hanson, Abebe, Aitken, Balagopalan and Punch 2018, Imoh et al. 2019). To translate Turkish child activists’ radically inclusive, integrationist, and intersectional perspective toward climate change and ecological concerns, I theoretically draw upon histories of childhood and complicate common understandings. Childhood as a universal, separate, socially protected life stage is relatively new in human history (Heywood 2018; Stearns 2005). It is the product of modern institutional projects, popularized in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Growing up in the Anthropocene is experienced as radically different from earlier generations of children who shared the planet and often had relationships with diverse “companion species” (Haraway 2016). Turkish child rights activists ask that we reconsider what it is like to grow up in the Anthropocene: an increasingly human-centered world that children perceive as in need of attention.

In 2022, my research with the Boğaziçi University-based project focused on children’s digital lives, from ecology to technological developments (Support Foundation for Civil Society 2022). I found it remarkable that these children perceive digital environments as free, comfortable, and happier spaces when compared with the material worlds of home, study, and leisure. These Turkish youth experience virtual spaces as more trouble-free and inclusive of their voices. In these virtual spaces, children more openly criticized the negligence of adults regarding both the environment and human rights.

Beyond caring about the climate crisis, many young people I talked to cared deeply about and struggled for children’s rights. In our conversations, they were quick to point to the intersections between struggles for educational rights and other social justice issues, discussing at length the need to promote equality for refugees and those with disabilities. Therefore, by paying attention to youth digital practices, one gains a prefigurative glimpse at emergent, politicized generations that participate in the digital society, sometimes transcending international borders and other limitations placed on children’s voices. By engaging with communities of like-minded youth across the globe, they developed virtual friendships that were deeply meaningful and made online connections with other activist groups across the world. For example, Turkey’s Green Thought Association helps to connect local children and youth with their comrades in Britain’s Extinction Rebellion (Demiral 2021).

These technologically-interested children seemed particularly curious about the broader world and ways they might intervene in it, articulating the desire to communicate with other species in order to rescue the world. Children aspiring to “save the world” reveals their knowledge of human-caused climate change but also reveals two more problems: First, their desire to “save the

world” illuminates the ongoing anthropocentric belief that humans are in a privileged position among living things and thus have the potential to intervene or rescue the planet from destruction. Second, their desire to “save the world” suggests that young people, given their temporal associations with futurity, will be protagonists in this burdensome struggle.

Adults, especially parents and teachers, who are deeply concerned about the world they are leaving for their children, may romanticize younger actors’ interest and involvement in ecological activism to such an extent that a distorted, adult-centric vision of youth activism emerges and becomes hegemonic in popular culture. This can obscure *the actual* interests, aspirations, and future-oriented imaginaries of youth themselves. This resonates with the findings of scholars elsewhere that youth resent being excluded from the present and temporally imprisoned as future citizens (King 2016; Holden 2006). In addition to the future young people have, they surely have the present time. More importantly, they cannot be generalized since there is no homogenous, singular childhood just as there is no singular adulthood or personhood.

To underline the oppositional politics of their generation, children criticize both local and global troubles and contemporary problems. Their discontent is diagnostic, the common ground where possible future solutions may be forged. For example, they link the climate crises to all structural social inequalities (e.g., gender, age, citizenship, ethnicity). They also criticized the perceived anthropocentrism of their elders. They were deeply interested in ongoing political debates about the rights of nature and the recognition of the “legal personhood” (Tanasescu 2016) of non-human nature. My informants drew a parallel between their status as less-than-full-citizens of the nation (in comparison with adults) and non-human nature, as sentient, present beings, and yet excluded from important decision-making processes, including the basic right to exist.

Turkish middle-class children articulated a sense of endangerment and exclusion, and thus felt solidarity with non-human species. Although they clearly have political subjectivities, they too are deprived of political, civil, social, and legal rights and citizenship as compared with (certain types) of adults. Children's capacity for language and speech, however, makes them distinctive from other species and forms of non-human nature, yet, whether they are *listened to* is another matter altogether.

Perhaps, for the first time, being a child (particularly in a class privileged position) may be considered advantageous, at least in Turkey. Due to the comparative advantages they enjoy as digital natives, they inhabit a world that we (as adults) may not yet fully understand, with words and domains of experience to be explored. As this article has demonstrated, even as they are denied political rights and are excluded from important political processes, children draw important parallels in their understanding of environmental degradation, the climate crises, and the starkly unequal worlds in which we now inhabit. Through their associations and transnational networks, they hold novel conceptual understandings of the world and ways to challenge multiple crises at once: to promote a more egalitarian, inclusive form of politics, perhaps capable of expanding the rights of human and non-human nature.

By seeing parallel forms of exclusion and exploitation among certain classes of people (children, refugees, migrants) and considering analogous treatment of non-human nature, these youth seek to create strategies capable of dealing with human and non-human rights crises. Imaginatively

thinking of possibilities beyond typical modern dichotomies (Haraway 1991; 2016) and with implications for understanding the challenges of our contemporary world, these children challenge us to see excluded humans and non-human nature as occupying similar sociopolitical positions. Yet, due to their ability to speak and work creatively and collectively together, they have the power to pursue resistance strategies by considering to whom the future belongs. By claiming stakes over the future, in assertions that “the future is ours,” these children transform a mundane, empty expression into something worth listening to. Thus, adult-centered political projects ought to pause and seek to include the perceptions of 21st-century children in their political theorizing and action.

## References

- Balagopalan Sarada. 2019. “Teaching ‘Global Childhoods’: From a Cultural Mapping of ‘Them’ to a Diagnostic Reading of ‘us/US’.” In *Global Childhoods beyond the North-South Divide*, edited by A.T-D. Imoh, M. Bourdillon, and S. Meichsner, 13-34. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Demiral, Seran. 2019. “In Virtual Space, You Will Never Die!” *International Journal of Pedagogy Innovation and New Technologies* 6 (2): 40-50. DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0013.6835.
- Demiral, Seran. 2021. “Children in the Age of Uncertainty.” Critical Childhoods and Youth Studies Collective Blog, Digital Technologies: Changing Childhoods and Youth theme. Accessed March 5, 2022. <https://www.theccysc.com/post/children-in-the-age-of-uncertainty>.
- Hanson, Karl; Abebe, Tatek; Aitken, Stuart C; Balagopalan, Sarada and Punch, Samantha. 2018. “‘Global/Local’ Research on Children and Childhood in a ‘Global Society.’” *Childhood* 25 (3): 272-296. doi:10.1177/0907568218779480.
- Haraway, Donna. 1991. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149-181. New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hecht, Thomas, ed. 2002. *Minor Omissions: Children in Latin American History and Society*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Heywood, Colin. 2018. *Childhood in Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holden, Cathie. 2006. “Concerned Citizens: Children and the Future.” *Education Citizenship and Social Justice* 1 (3): 203-210. doi:10.1177/1746197906068122.

- Imoh, Afua Twum-Danso. 2012. "The Convention on the Rights of the Child: A Product and Facilitator of a Global Childhood." In *Childhoods at the Intersection of the Local and the Global. Studies in Childhood and Youth*, edited by A. T-D. Imoh and R. Ame, 17-33. London: Palgrave Macmillan, London. doi:10.1057/9781137283344\_2
- King, Laura. 2016. "Future Citizens: Cultural and Political Conceptions of Children in Britain, 1930s-1950s." *Twentieth Century British History* 27 (3): 389-411.
- Lipman, Matthew. 1992. "On Writing a Philosophical Novel. In *Studies in Philosophy for Children*," edited by A. M. Sharp and R. F. Reed, 3-7. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Lipman, Matthew. 2003. *Thinking in Education*, Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stearns, Peter. 2005. *The History of Childhood in a Global Context*. Texas: Baylor University Press.
- Support Foundation for Civil Society. 2022. "The Child's Voice Partnership Network Project." Accessed February 11, 2022. <https://siviltoplumdestek.org/cocuk-fonu/toplumsal-haklar-ve-arastirmalar-dernegi-ile-cocugun-sesi-ortaklik-agi-projesini-konustuk/>.
- Tanasescu, Mihnea. 2016. *Environment, Political Representation and the Challenge of Rights: Speaking for Nature*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

---

**Author contact:** Seran Demiral, PhD (Boğaziçi University), [seran.demiral@boun.edu.tr](mailto:seran.demiral@boun.edu.tr)

**To cite this article:** Demiral, Seran. 2022. "'The Future is Ours': Youth Activism as a Matter of Equality." *NEOS* 14 (1).

**To link to this article:** <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol14iss1sp22/demiral/>