

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Should six-year-olds get to vote?

Featuring Gabrielle Oliveira with Stanton Wortham (host) and Samantha Ha (commentator)

Original Air Date: March 22, 2021

Stanton Wortham 00:08

Welcome to Pulled Up Short. This is a podcast that's devoted to a particular kind of activity, where we're told some new perspectives on things that cause us to stop, to be pulled up short, and think a little bit about something that we believed but which turns out not to be true, or at least that we need to reconsider based on some new information that we've been given. This is an important thing to do. It requires that we recognize deeply held presuppositions, that we entertain the possibility that our typical ways of understanding are incomplete or distorting. We need to be open to questions and alternative formulations of basic issues that we tend to take for granted. We have to be willing to consider alternative ways of thinking. This requires a commitment to imagination, to seeing the world in new ways, a commitment to systematically inquiring based on evidence and reason, wherever it leads, a commitment to being open, to moving beyond dogmatism, and considering alternative beliefs and practices, or commitment to conversation to listening deeply to others and inquiring jointly.

So in each episode, we're going to hear from someone who has an insight or something we don't typically think about that requires us to be pulled up short, to rethink something that we tend to take for granted. And we hope that you'll enjoy.

Hello everyone. Today we're very pleased to have with us Gabrielle Olivera, who is a professor in the Boston College Lynch School of Education. We're excited to have her join us to talk about what she's observed with young children and the surprisingly sophisticated political and other ethical beliefs that they have. So Professor Olivera is bringing to us a very provocative idea: the notion that children, even very young children, should have the right to participate in political and ethical conversation; that we as adults, really are not warranted in our dismissal of them as not being fully experienced or fully rational agents who deserve to have a say over what they do with their lives, how we treat them, and how we treat the shared social and natural world. So she's really trying to pull us up short by saying, "You think you can rule children out from being political participants. You think you can rule them out from the universe of people whose opinions that we have to listen to." But really, that's not the way it is. We have an obligation to not only listen to our children and treat them as full moral agents, fully rational interlocutors, but also that we should think seriously about giving them an opportunity to participate, to have power in some of the decision making that affects things that are central to their lives. So I hope that you'll enjoy hearing her articulation of this position. Welcome, Gabi, we're very pleased to have you with us.

Gabrielle Oliveira 03:09

Thank you so much for having me here with you today, Stanton, and hi everybody who's listening. I'm really excited to be here today to talk about something that for me feels very important, not just from a research perspective, but also as a parent and as a person, and in this moment in time. So today, I wanted to present an idea that for some may be obvious, but for many may be more complicated. So kids, and I'm talking about kids ages three to teens have political thoughts. With that in mind, I want to propose that kids not only have the capacity of reasoning just as much as any other adult, but they can also surprise adults with their rationales, with how they present their views and their takes, and on things that are current like the environment or politics. So I believe kids, you know, should have a seat at the adults' table, as many would say. But then perhaps we should think about adults, you know, sitting with the kids

at the table and then how their participations in political decisions regarding things that are important to kids like their schools, their communities, and ultimately their countries. So I'll just start with a quick snippet here of something that came up in my own research that helped really shaped how I understand kids' political participations.

"I don't agree!" yelled Lillian outside of her second grade classroom in her school. Her mom was inside the classroom having a parent-teacher conference with Lillian's teacher. I was in the hallway where Lillian was. Her mom stuck her head out, angry at her and said, "What are you saying?" Lillian did not miss a beat. "I'm saying, I don't agree with what the teacher is saying to you, but I don't have the right to be in there. You will not believe me later." She sat down on the floor, crossed her arms and told me, "Why is it now called 'student-parent-teacher conference?'" I couldn't tell her. So with that in mind, I wanted to start with a few questions to you and to folks are listening to us. Why do we always assume that adults have the right to speak on the behalf of children? Why don't we take what children say seriously? And why have we as adults constructed childhood and the everyday lives of children as not worthy of full consideration and political participation?

Stanton Wortham 05:43

I laughed a little bit at that episode, of course, because with my own kids, I remember them making arguments about how they deserved more of a say in this and a say in that. And my initial reaction is, well, I guess I hear what you say that kids do have their own points of view and their beliefs. But I'm a little bit skeptical. You know, my immediate reaction is to say that I've got a lot more experience than my kids do. And they're just learning. And so do we really want to give them a full seat at the table the way that you're saying?

Gabrielle Oliveira 06:12

That's a really great point. I think that also in that thought process, we are already assuming that we are the folks who have to give them permission to participate, when in fact, kids are doing that already. So I almost feel like it's a matter of recognition of what they're already doing. So not to get too academic here -- I can't help myself. So just bear with me for one second. We know that historically, there have been developments in the different ways that people think about childhood, research, and practice. So your assumption, and what you just shared -- it has to do a lot with how the evolution of thoughts on childhood have kind of happened in our world.

So an example was in the 1990s when sociologists and historians argued for this idea, this new paradigm of studies in childhood. And one of the main features is this idea that childhood is socially constructed, and I think you would agree with me on that. What that means is that each one of us carries what a child is and what their capabilities are. And that's really rooted on our social and cultural worlds. So the way that you were brought up, the way that you were raised, the way that I was raised -- that really impacts the ways that we see what children are able to do. So scholars have suggested that we should focus on understanding the role of child or childhood in cultural contexts. So this move emerged as a response to earlier studies and discussions surrounding childhood that was really dominated by behaviorists who over-emphasized this idea that children were purely receptors of adult teaching. So researchers, academics, reporters, teachers, social workers, psychologists, and parents, have largely debated what is appropriate and not appropriate to discuss in front of children or with children. Adults have historically regulated what children's participation and political life looks like. They get to make the rules, they get to legislate on their behalf, they get to decide if they have the rights to vote, right? So with all of that background in mind, I really want to push for the idea that we as grown ups need to listen to children's reasoning on political matters, and really put our assumptions aside and think about that while their words and their narratives and their writings and other expressions may not ring or register in adults ears as valid, I think they are.

Stanton Wortham 08:49

So that makes sense to me. I mean, I do understand that in different eras that historically, there were children who were doing jobs like adults at very young ages by our contemporary standards. So I clearly think you're right, that childhood is in some sense, a historical creation, and this notion that children are immature is something that isn't necessarily so. But I'm still wondering, does that mean that we should really accept children's political arguments as equivalent to adults?

Gabrielle Oliveira 09:19

Yes, I would say yes. Because kids as young as they come are talking about political issues, from Chile to Hong Kong, and they are responding to a lot of political unrest across the world. So at very early ages, even in preschool, kids are making decisions about what feels fair to them, when to share, how to self-control. And yet, they are incredibly flexible beings as they inhabit extremely regulated environments, as schools and places of worship and home and sometimes when they're with their parents at workspaces. So adding to this mix the effect of the pandemic that has had adult caregivers and children spend significant amount of times together, kids have thoughts about everyday decisions. And I think adults simply don't hear them and don't see them enough.

Stanton Wortham 10:15

I guess I agree that it is true, it seems unfair in some sense that we forced children into institutions where all their time and energy is taken up with things that they had no choice over, that they were just told what they have to do. So I'm sympathetic to that notion that we need to give them a little more say over those kinds of things. How far are you willing to go? Like, what would this really look like if we did what you're arguing for?

Gabrielle Oliveira 10:40

So bear with me here, again, not to get too academic, but I need to bring in not just my position, as a parent and as human being, but also as a researcher, as an anthropologist as well. So what would happen to our adult worlds of reason and rationality if we turned our thinking into listening to children's thoughts on politics, on immigration, on poverty, on violence, and the economy? What would happen? What if around the world children, as soon as they can talk, could interview political candidates, could express public opinions on matters related to civics? What if we ultimately worked toward a democracy that lowered the voting age of kids? So many thinkers have said that young children can't fully understand or grasp the idea of long term consequences -- so that being one of the main arguments as to why they are so different from adults. But young children are perceived as always developing, or are in the process of becoming, which then hinders our adult views on what they're capable of doing. Teens are also sometimes put into the category of acting too passionate, or lacking wisdom to make informed decisions. So in many ways, they're never good enough. They're either not knowing what the consequences are, or they're discarding the consequences as teens, right? Around the world, children as young as three, take on different roles that include caring for others, teaching their young ones, working. Why is it so hard, then, for adults to give them the platform that they deserve?

Stanton Wortham 12:29

Yeah, I guess I'm starting to become a little more sympathetic to the argument that you're making here. I'm thinking about the COVID pandemic that we're going through right now, and as we thought about what kids would do when they came back to college, for example, there was a lot of lamenting about how they don't understand consequences, and they're gonna misbehave, and they're just young and irresponsible. It seems to me as if on a lot of campuses, young people have been able to think seriously about it and control their own behavior in ways that people didn't give them credit for. I guess it's good to be suspicious of a patronizing view that says that we know better than they do, and they aren't going to be able to control themselves. So I know that you've done lots of great research with young people and their caregivers across national boundaries. So tell me a little bit about how you came to these ideas in the empirical work that you've done.

Gabrielle Oliveira 13:23

Yes, that's a great point to think about. So maybe it would be helpful for me to dig into a few examples from the data that I've collected over 10 years of doing this research. So children in my research have either been detained at the border, separated from their families (so stayed in the countries where their families are originally from). Maybe they were left in the countries of origin. Maybe they've migrated with their parents or are themselves sons and daughters of immigrants. So I call them you know, 'immigrant children,' because they're coming from all of these particular situations. So through these hours and hours and months and years of recording through participant observations and interviews, I've listened to over 100 children expand their political takes on immigration policies, the border, most recently, the Trump administration, detention centers. And I keep thinking, shouldn't they be allowed to voice their

concerns to Congress or to the UN? And you know, some of them are, but they seem to be the exception to me, not the rule.

So let's go into the case of a conversation I've had with Caleb, who's a six year old Brazilian immigrant in a first grade classroom. So the set was the following: Caleb was waiting to be called to practice the song he was going to sing at the end of the year recital at school. So it was a very serious moment of rehearsal, right? Kids are sitting there waiting to be called, and I'm sitting next to him in the cafeteria where these rehearsals happen. So while we're both sitting on the bench waiting, he turns to me. I didn't ask him anything. He asked me, "You know Mr. Trump?" And I replied that I knew of him, but that I have not met him in person. I always find that a really interesting distinction to make to children: that I may know of a person, but I don't know them personally. So Caleb turns to me and says, "You know, he has thing that is called a green letter. And this green letter decides who comes and who goes in America. So my mother can't go to Brazil, because she doesn't have the green letter. I think I can get the green letter, but I study here, so I am a good person." I asked him what he meant by what a 'good person,' right and he continued, "If you follow the rules, study, treat people nice, one day, you can tell people like Mr. Trump, that what he's doing doesn't help many people. So many families that he doesn't help." I agreed with Caleb, but he wasn't done. He was relentless, this one. "I told my teacher and my parents that I can write him and explain how he makes things better. But then they said I could draw. I will not be sending him a drawing." I asked him about the drawing part, and Caleb told me, "All the kids, they just want us to draw. They just want us drawing. They don't want my mind." Caleb and I continue talking. He questioned the rule that allowed people's mobility to come and go, as he put it, was rooted in which land you were born. Who invented that rule? I honestly couldn't come up with an answer to him. Right before his teacher called him to sing, he turned to me again and said, "I wonder who makes the rules. It doesn't look like you do." And I said, you know, I absolutely agreed with him. I didn't make the rules. I barely myself understood them. And he again, put me in check in many ways, even you know, to check my own knowledge as an adult. He got up and walked to stage to practice. He sang a song in Portuguese as loud as he could and felt pretty proud of himself.

Stanton Wortham 17:12

That's a great story. It particularly striking is that one line where Caleb said, "They don't want my mind, you know. They just want some stupid drawing from me. They don't want the way I think about things." But it's clear from the excerpts that you gave us that he actually is thinking seriously about some of these issues, and he does understand and have ethical positions on them. And so you're saying that Caleb and children like him should have, you call it, a seat at the table? What exactly does that look like?

Gabrielle Oliveira 17:43

So another example that I wanted to present you. So this idea of what Caleb was talking about, and you can see how he talks about the green letter, for example. And the green letter means the green card, right? So again, I think that there's so many instances that we discard what children are saying because of our own lack of understanding, right? So it is on us as adults to engage and to understand what they're saying. So that's what I mean about 'the seat at the table' is that we make those divisions so apparent that we cut them off even before they can express things that are important to us. We already work, we already exist with the assumption of less than or not knowing, or the "cuteness" of a drawing, as opposed to the mind.

So the other child I wanted to present to you is Yaritza, who may also give us another reason to question our assumptions about children. Again, I am focusing on the stories of immigrant children here. So Yaritza's parents were from Mexico, but she was born in New York. She was twelve when when I met her, and in one of our exchanges that stayed with me, happened while we were at the park. She was taking a water break from running after her younger brother, and her mom was on the phone. So she asked me, "Why do you think we're here?" And my literal mind, my adult literal mind, replied to her, "Here, at the park?" She quickly returned, "No maestra, [or no teacher], here on this earth!" I then thought to myself, "This feels like an existential question I have often thought about actually. In fact, I have vivid memories of feeling so anxious at her age thinking about what was beyond the universe. And when I think about it now, it still makes me anxious."

Stanton Wortham 19:30

Yeah, that's something that all of us think about.

Gabrielle Oliveira 19:33

So Yaritza took a minute, criss-crossed her legs and told me, "If I could be a lawyer right now, maybe I could be a politician and help my parents." I asked Yaritza how she thought being a lawyer would help her parents. She told me, "My parents don't have papers, so they can't vote. If I could help them now, I could vote for them, be them, for them. That's what I need. Is that why I'm here on this earth? I need to find a way for them in the US?"

I was taken aback, again. Because of my adult mind, trying to find an arc for her story, trying to place it into something that she saw or that she heard, she immediately got up to play and walked to the swings. And as she was pumping her legs back and forth and swinging as high as she could go, she yelled, "We need to aim high, right? Go high, right? But they want us to stay low."

Caleb and Yaritza both initiated these conversations with me because those topics, their thinking, their reasoning was ever present in their minds. So it is how they're thinking about things every day, and we need to recognize where they exist and how these things make sense for them. It is on our adults frames of expectations that the exclusion of children as agentic thinkers exists. What would happen if Caleb was part of his school committee? What would happen if Yaritza could provide public commentary on legislation that impacts her family? While they were both motivated by their closest realities, as in their families, aren't our adult actions also informed by our own lived experiences?

Stanton Wortham 21:18

It's interesting to me that both these cases you've shared with us about Caleb and Yaritza -- both of them came to you. It's not as if you were trying to get the kids to talk about something, seeing if you could get them to say something cute. They had some serious issue on their minds about the meaning of life or about the political situation in this country that they're in. They came to you with these arguments. And you're right when you say that, we often assume that children make political arguments by just parroting what they hear from adults, you know? They're just repeating whatever it is that's around them. That is a typical assumption. So we assume that kids don't deserve a seat at the table, because they don't have independent voices. But these two kids, as you say, seem to have thought about stuff on their own. You're also right that adults tend to parrot other people as well. There are lots of adults who just repeat what they hear, and that doesn't really seem qualitatively different from what we're hearing from various kinds of kids. So tell me more about the conclusions you draw.

Gabrielle Oliveira 22:23

So again, I think as an adult and as a researcher, I also have to be mindful that I was there with these children for a long period of time, right? Because I do ethnography, I was able to stay and get to know them deeply. I think that makes a huge difference to establish relationships of trust, right? I also get a critique where folks can say, "Well, I haven't heard any of that, right? Like, why are you hearing these things?" But I also think that it is in my own framework, to exist in this particular way, as a close listener to children's reality. So I wanted to finish you know, this bit by mentioning a few more cases where decisions are made for children, but that don't consider children as independent thinkers and deserving of a space to talk about how policies impact their lives.

So school committees around the country have student representatives, but they're usually middle schoolers and high schoolers. Why not elementary level students? What is the the discourse and the narrative on what's appropriate, and developmentally appropriate, that children as young as eight, or seven, or nine cannot be in those discussions? For example, the country of Chile, who just voted to have a new constitution and had large parts of their youth advocate for these changes. So a deep understanding of the meaning of a constitution. Or in California, where youth are petitioning for the voting age to be lowered. And then finally, you know, preschoolers who want more outdoor time in the times of COVID. Are administrators listening to them? So as a parent of a six year old and a three year old, I catch myself bossing them around in my house. So I'm here saying to you all these things, but I also have to exist in this heavily adult-regulated world that I'm part of, that I contribute to. But I believe caregivers must provide a safe

space for children to flourish, and that happens when they feel like adults in charge care about them. I have worked hard to make adjustments in my own thinking and to listen to my kids' explanations of what feels fair and right to them and what values they would like to see in grown ups. So it is hardly a democracy in my house, but I tried to listen deeply to their concerns, their fears, and their thoughts on how to improve their little lives.

So during 2020, multiple pandemics hit. A year of managing the unknown virus, a year of racial reckoning, and an election. I see my six year old asking me why he couldn't vote. So I talked to him about the voting age in the U.S., and then, because I'm from Brazil (and he knows about Brazil, he has been there a ton of times), he asked if he could vote in Brazil. And I told him that in Brazil, again, there was a voting age that he couldn't vote. So he paused, and he proposed, "How about a family vote?" And I agreed with him, but that meant that we would both have to do our research and listen to the candidates and kind of reason together, and it would take work. And he told me he agreed.

So again, I think that in this case, even with the small snippets that I've only presented here, I'm trying to show that children are engaged in thinking about how larger policies are enacted by governments and how that affects their surroundings. But they're never quoted in newspapers, right? They're never included in the bigger narratives. They're not included in these decisions. In fact, we're all getting big grants to make decisions for them and to propose ways to care for them, instead of listening to them. So most of their opinions and their feelings about things become mediated by adults. Again, what would happen if 6, 7, 8-year olds had student organizations and had a seat at the table during PTO meetings, policy briefings. Especially now in the time of COVID-19, where children's main space for exploring, the school, has been even more regulated by rules that they themselves never provided input for. Could we learn from children about how to structure a day at school? So these assumptions that 'adults know better' is one that needs to be questioned. And that's really all I'm asking here is that we question these assumptions of who gets to hold knowledge, and what kind of valid knowledge exists out there? Maybe children know better. And we as adults would probably have to be much, much better at our jobs in order to learn from children. So as Caleb said, we should not settle for drawings.

Stanton Wortham 27:08

That's great, Gabi. Thanks so much for bringing us this particular instance, that, for me, at least, this really is an excellent case of being pulled up short. We do go through our lives as adults assuming that we have the right to make decisions for kids. And of course, kids shouldn't vote... and we shouldn't have to listen seriously to their arguments either because we think they're just repeating what adults say or because we don't think they're mature enough or experienced enough to make valid judgments.

But it is true that kids say some remarkably insightful things, and it is true that we make some decisions that seem inappropriately to impinge on their lives in ways that you would think that perhaps they should have a voice in. So it's got me at least thinking about, well, so what age should we let them start participating in decisions? And how far do we push it back? You know, in California, there's a movement to let 16 and 17 year olds vote in certain local elections and other topics. But maybe you're saying that's not young enough. Maybe even younger kids should get to participate, and I'm wondering exactly where we draw the line, or what sort of participation we allow. So I appreciate your stretching our minds in this way. We're fortunate today to have with us also Samantha Ha, and I'm hoping that Sam can chime in and ask a couple of questions and share her perspective on all of this.

Samantha Ha 28:30

Thank you, Dr. Olivera. I'm still processing through all of the different implications of what you said. I think it's true like Dean Wortham said, there are so many instances... I was going through my brain about the insightful and profound things that children have said to me. So thank you for bringing this up and sharing those illustrations from your own work.

I've been thinking about Hannah Arendt, a philosopher, and her reflections on the events surrounding the Little Rock Nine. She wrote this very contentious dissent in 1959 after the Brown versus Board landmark Supreme Court decision. She wrote this essay that basically said she didn't agree with forcing the Little Rock Nine, the nine Black students, to integrate at an all White school because she felt like segregation and racism was something that we as

adults haven't even solved yet, you know? And so we're shifting the burden of this problem that we can't figure out yet, we're shifting the burden onto the shoulders of students.

So my interpretation of the her stance is that our world and our society and our politics can be very damaging, even to adults. And so she uses the metaphor of glare, like of light -- sometimes the public world can be too much like a full glare on children, over exposure you know? And as adults, shouldn't we try and mediate that a bit? I'm wondering in today's world, especially thinking about racism and our racial reckoning like you said, what do you think about this as well. Like when we include children and political conversations and public matters, are we exposing them to dangers or burdens that we as adults should shoulder? And if we recognize children as independent thinkers, like how do we also balance the risk that might be associated with that participation?

Gabrielle Oliveira 30:44

That's a brilliant question and a beautiful one. And I really appreciate you just being so thoughtful in how you landed on this question. That was very moving, so I appreciate it. When Stanton was talking, I was thinking about context, right? So that's why I was talking about for preschoolers, if the issue at the preschool is time outside, they should be involved in what pertains to their world. And I think that they're not, you know, even in those situations, they're not getting to speak about or talk about what they want to do and how they want to play, and it's still so structured. So I think it's about thinking about the particular context that makes sense for children to exist and to think about it.

What you're explaining, though, I think it's something different, which is... I understand why she wrote her dissent. Right? I think it makes sense, and I agree with the argument of putting the burden on the younger. I feel like in this election, we saw a lot of that right? Even, not to go on a tangent, but Taylor Swift had a final video of an election campaign and she lent her song, "Only the Young" to Get Out the Vote, video. And she says on her song, "Only the young get to run." So kind of saying that there is this idea that the young are going to save us from our mess from what we've done as adults. So we're like, "Come on, young folks, vote! Come on, young people, mobilize because as adults, we messed up so bad, that they're now cleaning up our messes." So I understand that idea of thinking about putting on the burden of a very complicated society on young folks. And I think that's very complicated, and that's definitely not what I think we should be doing as adults.

I'm also thinking that the glare that you talked about -- for some children, that glare is their full reality. I also think it comes from a point of view of privilege. For these children that I was talking about - immigration, separation, detention - it's not something that they were exposed to, little by little. They were in it. It's their lived experience. So if you deny the expression of lived experience and their participation in decisions that are about their lived experience, you're taking their right away. I think that's different from arguing for children... it's a privilege to say my kids are growing up in this very protective bubble, in this cocoon, and now they're going to have to deal with this very complicated life, when there are children who at very young age, the parents are having these conversations about racial profiling and what happens in the streets. So I think that the 'glare' is a reality for some, and the 'glare' is a glare for others. And that's something that we have to kind of come to terms with, but I do think that there's a very important lesson in this idea of passing on the hopes to the young and not supporting them in their attempt to fix the mess that we have left, you know, as adults.

Samantha Ha 34:09

I mean, it makes so much sense that the glare is very much rooted in in privilege and your identity and the context that you're in, because I think you're right, if we think about children whose realities, you know, deal with very much the political issues that are on the ballot, then given that context, why shouldn't they have a role in that? Because that is their context. That is their reality. So thank you for sharing that.

Gabrielle Oliveira 34:44

And listen, it's complicated, right? Like when I took my six year old... I took him to vote with me, and he understood presidential votes, but then he wanted to understand a senator, and then he wanted to understand other positions, and then he wanted to understand the questions we had to vote on here in Massachusetts. And I barely understood one of the questions, specially question one for me was very 'out there.' I had to ask for multiple explanations for multiple

people to break it down for me in so many ways. So I also feel like, sometimes on purpose, we want to make things more complicated in order to create this illusion, so that we can exclude people from participation. So it's also a cycle that we're kind of stuck in, producing things that we know are going to be argued that are not developmentally appropriate, so then it already excludes younger folks to participate. So it's almost an entire systemic change that we need to happen. But then in the micro level, I think we can shift our thinking, to think about this idea of validity, this idea of truths, this idea of knowledges, and really think about that with children.

Samantha Ha 36:07

Yeah. And I'm thinking a lot about... something that's staying with me about what you said is that we as adults, if we take what you say, seriously, like if we take children seriously, it forces us as adults to do better. Like you said, we have to take on the work to make sure we are explaining complex issues and that we are trying to reason and sit at the child's table and understand them. Something I've been thinking about is over the summer, when we are talking about George Floyd's murder and all of the Black Lives Matter protests, I was speaking with one of my friends whose a mom, and I was thinking about my relationship with my little cousins, because I don't have children yet. So those are like, the children I think about in my life. And she was saying, I don't know how to talk to them about this, because how do I explain to them that racism exists and that police violence... you know, like, this entire phenomenon that feels so heavy and dark? How do I explain it to them? And in our conversations, we realize that in a lot of ways children already know. They already know in some ways that something is wrong. You know, they can feel it from our behavior, they see things on TV, they hear it from their friends. It comes through to them, and so, us ignoring that, like you said, like us just pretending like it's not developmentally appropriate for them or something. It just kind of gets us off the hook of doing the work to engage with them and to explain it in a way that does make sense to them, and doesn't think about them like they don't have agency and they don't have thoughts. So this conversation just inspires me in a lot of ways to make sure that we do better as adults to be able to explain and engage with children in the way that you're talking about.

Stanton Wortham 38:18

So I have an example that I think is relevant here. When my son was in second grade, I was invited to come in, and I was supposed to be talking about what I did in my career. But actually, what I did was something that I engaged with both undergraduate and graduate students in quite regularly. I posed an essentially contestable question. The question was: Are humans fundamentally different than animals? It was a question about learning. Do humans learn the same way that animals learn? So I asked the children, "When you learn something, like you're learning how to read or you're learning something about here where we live in this society, are you doing it in fundamentally the same way as your pet, your dog, say? When you train your dog, you punish the dog or reward the dog for doing what you want, and you shape the dog's behavior over time so the dog goes outside or the dog doesn't bite people or whatever it is you're trying to train the dog to do. Are you guys the same? Like, do your parents shape your behavior? Do your teachers shape your behavior, just like we shaped the dog's behavior? Or are you different somehow?"

And I remember the teachers face when I asked this question, and subsequently, she explained to me that she was horrified because she thought, "They can't understand that question. I mean, that's too complicated a question. That's a philosophical question. So you're a university professor, and that's why you talk that way. But why are you wasting my time, basically." But in class, actually, several of the kids really understood what I was talking about, and you could tell that they were puzzled. They were trying to figure out, "Wait a second. I don't know. Like, am I just like my dog? I don't want to be just like my dog, but I can't really see why I'm not." We really got into a good conversation several of these seven year old children and me. And so there's a case where I was treating them like adults, and they were responding like adults. If I had treated them, like sort of incapable agents, and just ask them simple questions and done a little show and tell about my job, they would have acted like kids, you know, but I treated them like adults, and in fact, they were able to respond even at age seven. So I wonder if that's the kind of example you're thinking about.

Gabrielle Oliveira 40:26

I love that example. First, because at least it helps me think when I go in to do my day for my kids, you gave me something to talk about. Maybe I'll I'll do that experiment next time I go in, because I think that's a great question, too. I totally agree. I think that you bring in a really important piece, which is the classroom and the teachers, right?

And kind of our role in the case of the teacher saying, "What are you doing?" And kind of saying, "No, listen, you can actually also do that." But we're so informed by the expectations that we have, that it becomes really hard for us to see possibilities. And what you were able to do was to see a possibility and engage in a conversation, and children make sense of things. It was also a sensibility on your side to know that they were making sense of that. Maybe somebody else on your shoes would have said, "Actually you didn't get it, and I'm going to move on." Right? So I also think that there's a training within ourselves to be okay in being in these situations where we have to shift and change and rethink our own assumptions in order to ensure participation. So I absolutely agree, but I'll just challenge one thing from this case that you present. I think that there could be something interesting about also thinking about how to engage with children as children that is a positive thing. And not having this idea of if you engage them with adults as being the mature positive thing, but also seeing the value in the children's way of doing it, if that makes sense. I think that, you know, we can all learn a lot from this particular example.

Stanton Wortham 42:10

Great. Well, thanks, Gabi. We really appreciate your contributions, and we will hope to be in touch with you about this and other issues.

Gabrielle Oliveira 42:17

So excited to be here. Thank you for having me. I look forward to hearing you know, comments and questions when this goes live. Thank you.

Stanton Wortham 42:27

Thanks for listening to this episode of Pulled Up Short. We hope it's provided an opportunity to reflect on unexamined assumptions and consider alternative ways of thinking about and being in the world. Hope to have you with us next time.