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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.

03:09

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?

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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?

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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 -- th

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

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

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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?

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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 gs e-2(h)10i

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

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?

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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

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.

36:07

Yea

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.

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

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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.

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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.