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Children as stakeholders in education: Does their voice matter?

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Children's right to freely express their opinion in education is very rare, and it is critical for schools to realise it. Although at times they are consulted about their difficulties, children are seldom asked to participate in the development of programmes that affect their lives. The aim of this conceptual article is therefore twofold: (1) to explore the extent to which schools recognise children as rights holders and protect their right to freedom of expression in educational matters, and (2) to determine the implications of the previous findings in children's right to freedom of expression in their education. Literature on children's participation in education was reviewed. Legislations and policies on the right to freedom of expression were also analysed. The study revealed that regardless of their legitimate position in education and positive outcomes from engaging children as stakeholders in education, schools resist change. A significant finding of the study was that learners' engagement in school affairs deepens democracy, and hence school improvement. Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' on involvement of children in school matters is therefore recommended.

Introduction

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right. All children have the right to freely express themselves on all questions concerning their lives. So, children should not be victimised by pressure from adults, who would try to influence children's opinions or who would prevent children from expressing themselves freely (Children's Rights International Network 2010). The freedom of expression for children also involves their right to be informed. It is the right of the children to know what happens and to access information that interests them. Then, children can comprehend current problems, inquire and build up their own opinion on topical subjects. In fact, this right is a good marker for gauging perceptions of children in any society, because the extent to which children are able to express their opinions and feelings can show how much they are recognised as rights holders (Powell, Hills & Nash 2010).

In order to enable, empower and support children to access these rights in schools, national legislations and policies as well as International Conventions and Protocols are put in place. However, regardless of their legitimacy, freedom of expression is rarely part of children's rights advocacy – at least as a stand-alone issue – yet it is critical for the realisation of all children's rights (Children's Rights International Network 2010). In other words, children's voice pertaining to their education appears to be a missing component on the education system. The lack of access to freedom of expression is a problem that particularly affects the already marginalised, that is, minorities facing discrimination both in developed and developing countries and their children (Powell et al. 2010).

The question that this article attempts to answer is thus 'to what extent do schools recognise children as legitimate stakeholders in education and protect their right to freedom of expression in educational matters?' Informed by the body of knowledge around this phenomenon, it would also be of importance to determine the implications of the previous studies on children's or learners' participation in education. In order to respond to this question, relevant literature in the form of scholarly articles will be reviewed. International conventions, and national legislations and policies will be analysed. The section that follows presents the theory through which I review, analyse and interpret the literature and the legal documents.

Theoretical overview

Informed by Hart's Ladder of Participation model (1992), 'rungs' 4 to 8, I argue that children's participation is not a once-off thing. It gradually develops over time once introduced. Rung 4 'Assigned but Informed' introduces children to the learning environment where their role is

mainly to understand the intentions of the project, know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why, have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role and volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them. In rung 5 'Consulted and informed', projects and activities are outlined and directed by adults (i.e. the teacher), but children understand the process and their opinions are taken seriously. Rung 6 'Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children' requires that projects are initiated by adults, and decision-making powers are equally shared with the children. In rung 7 'Child Initiated and Directed', children identify those issues of primary concern to them and develop strategies, activities, networks, organisations or campaigns through which to pursue their objectives. This is the indication that they have reached a level of empowerment. Lastly, in rung 8 'Child initiated, shared decisions with adults', projects are designed and managed by children with decision-making powers shared with adults.

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism theory complements Hart's theory, in that it is through involvement of children in decision-making forums that learning takes place. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a collaborative process that takes place on two developmental levels. The first level is that learning happens at the level of *actual* development that the child has already reached. It is at this level where the child is capable of solving problems independently. The second level is that of *potential* development that the child is capable of reaching under the guidance of adults and in collaboration with peers. At this level, the child is capable of solving problems and understanding material that he or she is not capable of solving or understanding at the level of actual development. This is to say, it is on the level of potential development where learning takes place because it comprises cognitive structures that are still in the process of maturing, but which can only mature under the guidance of and in collaboration with others. Grounded in these theories, I maintain that schools create platforms for stakeholders such as children to have a say in decisions about their education. Besides, they are bound by both national and international legislations.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore from literature and relevant legislations the extent to which children's voice matters when decisions about their education are made in South Africa. The research questions in this article are as follows: To what extent do South African schools protect children's right to freedom of expression in educational matters as it is provided in the legislations and International Conventions and Protocols? What are the implications of the previous findings on children's active participation in their educational matters?

To answer these questions, five journal articles that are published in English from peer-reviewed journals that follow a standard of article writing and reporting were reviewed. Google and Google Scholar were used as search engines. The key terms used for the search were 'children's participation', 'children as decision makers', 'children as stakeholders in education', 'children's right to freedom of expression', 'learners in school governance' and 'learners as SGB members'. The articles were chosen using the following criteria: focusing on defining children's participation, providing indicators of children's participation and reporting on effective ways to involve children in educational matters. National legislations and policies (i.e. *Constitution Act* [108 of 1996], *South African Schools Act* [84 of 1996], *Children's Act* [38 of 2005]) as well as International Conventions and Protocols (i.e. UNCRC 1990, 2010; African Charter on the Welfare and Rights of the Child of 2002) were also analysed in terms of their provision of children's right to freedom of expression in matters that affect them. The findings from the reviewed articles were inductively analysed. This means that I used the information from the articles to structure the analysis without imposing a theory (Creswell 2013).

Analysis of articles

The analysis focused on the following articles: Moses (2008); Mncube and Harber (2013); Mncube (2012); Campbell and MacPhail (2002); and Bansilal, James and Naidoo (2010). Table 1 provides a summary of each article in terms of the names of researchers, purpose of the study and the findings.

TABLE 1: Summary of analysed articles.

Researcher(s)	Purpose of the study	Findings
Moses (2008)	This article examines the current policy and practice around children's participation in South Africa.	Focus is too narrowly on processes internal to participatory processes.
Mncube and Harber (2013)	The study investigates the following: • barriers existing to learners' participation • key issues of training for learners' participation • whether school governing bodies have contributed to the development of democracy in South African schools.	The study found that learners do not always play their part in decision–making.
Mncube (2012)	The study explored the actual or theoretical involvement of learners in school governing bodies.	The findings are still that learners do not always participate in decision-making forums.
Campbell and MacPhail (2002)	The study outlines a framework for conceptualising the process underlying the successful peer education and provides a critical case study of a school-based peer education programme in a South African township school.	The study found the following to have direct impact on the programme: • peer educators' preference to didactic methods and biomedical frameworks • unequal gender dynamics among peer educators • negative learner attitudes towards the programme.
Bansilal et al. (2010)	The study elicits learners' understanding and expectations of teacher assessment feedback.	• Some learners viewed educator feedback as a tool to probe their understanding. • Others viewed it as a mechanism to get educators point of view.

Source: Mpofu and Nthontho (In print)

Legal context: International and national

Children's participation in decisions that affect their lives has become a global concern. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 2010:9) and Article 2 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC 2000), a child is someone under the age of 18 years. This article is therefore going to view children through that age lens. The UNCRC (1990, 2010) requires all children to be respected as persons in their own right, including the very youngest children and, in so doing, it establishes a new kind of universal standard. In terms of Article 12 of the Convention, children have the right to *express an opinion* and to have that opinion taken into account when decisions are made on any matter that affects them. Article 13 adds that children have the right to seek, get and share information in all forms (e.g. through writing, art, television, radio and the Internet) as long as the information is not damaging to them or to others.

It is my understanding that through expression of one's opinion, learning takes place. In other words, when schools create platforms for children to express their opinion and have those opinions heard, they in a way extend access to education. This viewpoint is well rounded in Article 28 of the UNCRC (1990, 2010), Article 26(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (2015) and Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (1979). According to these Articles, every child has the right to education and primary education shall be free and compulsory. Articles 29 of the UNCRC, 26(2) of the UDHR and 13 of the ICESCR further pronounce that education should be geared towards the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship among all people. I am therefore of the opinion that in no way are these indicators are going to be realised when children are not free to express their views. For this reason, the majority of State parties that are signatories to the International Conventions and Protocols related to education became compliant and responsive in one way or the other.

Viewing this obligation from a continental point of view, Article 4 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2000) concurs that children like any citizen of the continent have the right to voice their opinions and have those opinions heard and taken into consideration during legal and administrative proceedings. In accordance with these Conventions and Protocols, African State parties declared primary education free and compulsory in their education legislation and policies. New school governance systems were created with an intention to democratise school education. In so doing, decision-making is localised with power being devolved to the individual school and community. By implication, the forming of citizen or community and State partnerships is legislated. For instance, South Africa adopted the school governing bodies (SGBs) model comprised of parents, staff and learners (in secondary schools) (Republic of South Africa 1996a). It must, however, be brought to light that the rights of the children as prioritised by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa appear more protection-oriented rights. This gives the impression that children are vulnerable citizens but not citizens with agency. It would therefore not be surprising to have schools that do not comply with these legislations and policies.

In the case of Lesotho, the government also established the so-called *School Boards through the Education Act* (No. 3 of 2010) in both primary and secondary schools. These boards comprise the following: two parent representatives who are elected by other parents, two teacher representatives elected by other teachers (including the principal, who acts as secretary to the board), a church representative from the church's congregation, and local traditional leaders and councillors (Ministry of Education and Training [MOET] 2010). We shall realise that children still fall out of school leadership system. This indicates that some State organs resist policy changes. In Namibia, the school board is composed of parents (constituting the majority of a school board), teachers, principal and not more than two learners in the case of a secondary school (Republic of Namibia 2001).

Principles of children's voice in education have been effectively enacted within schools in different ways internationally. The Denmark government has emphasised the child's voice as a vehicle for creating democratic schools (Flutter 2007). In the United States, child's voice in education has been about promoting diversity and breaking down racial and class barriers (Mitra 2001). Voice has been one of several strategies used in New Zealand to foster active and widespread children's participation within schools and the local community (Ministry of Youth Affairs 2003). Welsh Government has developed a 'Pupil Voice' Wales website (www.pupilvoicewales.org.uk) containing information, training materials and case studies so that learners and professionals are supported in developing and sharing good practice (Welsh Government 2011).

In general, but with very few exceptions, children's right to freedom of expression is theoretically legalised across the globe and this marks a 'step forward' (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie 2006:127). This then gives us the opportunity to track the balance between this theory and practice. In so doing, I discuss the findings of studies that were undertaken both nationally and internationally.

Perspectives in children as stakeholders

In an ideal world, children are the most affected by planned changes, hence are the principal key-actors of suggested reforms. That is, rather than recognising children as merely targets of change efforts and services, policymakers, researchers, professionals and school leadership must treat them as partners in change. Fletcher (2005) equates the concept of stakeholder with 'partner', a synonym which

implies sharing of equal decision-making powers. According to him, schools serve as sites of democracy where participation is more than sending the child to school. Thus, the notion of partnership in its purest form is more rooted in school practices where all stakeholders interact as co-learners and leaders, and where children are encouraged to speak out about their education.

A 'stakeholder' in the school context is therefore anyone or an organisation with a stake or interest in the welfare and success of a school and its learners regardless of age. This includes children whose stake is personal success throughout school and future opportunities. It is therefore undemocratic that even though children constitute a major stakeholder group and have a role to play in more democratic forms of distributed leadership, decision-making and policy implementation (Shah, Wilson & Nair 2010; Woods 2005), they are the most marginalised and disadvantaged group in terms of decision-making powers.

According to Welsh Government (2011), the literal definition of the concept of 'participation' is 'taking part'. In the context of children's rights, however, participation is about them having their voice heard when decisions that affect their lives are being made, and being actively involved in decision-making processes. Unlike consultation, participation is a process rather than an event, with varying degrees of involvement from being consulted on predetermined issues to them choosing their agenda, making their own decisions and taking them forward (2011).

Viewing children's participation from an educational perspective, Jeruto and Kipbop (2011) refer to it as participation of children in collective decision-making at school or class level and dialogue between children and other decision-makers. These scholars concur with Welsh Government that consultation with or a survey among children should not be equated with participation.

Children's participation in a South African context

Although children are included in school governance structures of countries like South Africa, their inclusion can be described as window-dressing or they are used in a tokenistic way (Mncube & Harber 2013). In other words, children are said to be effectively invisible when it comes to actual decision-making (Mncube 2012; Naidoo 2005). Several reasons are attached to their non-participation. Primarily, the conception of children's participation in decision-making is relatively new in developing countries. From the social constructivism theory, societies have conceptualised childhood from biological immaturity. Children are referred to as social beings that are vulnerable, incompetent and immature to make trusted decisions. Ideally, age tends to be the main yardstick the society uses to ascertain who should and who should not enter into decision-making forums. That is to say, age is interlaced with wisdom. This is marked by the fact that in many countries, it is only at age 18 that the child can vote in national and local elections.

Based on this viewpoint, it is evident that children are viewed predominantly as a preparation for adulthood and considered only in terms of their future 'becomings', rather than 'someone' in their own right (Walkerdine 2004 as cited in Kehily 2008). Scholars like Thornberg and Elvstrand (2012) contend that socially developed educational policies, programmes and curriculum with children as objects of their enquiry have focused on, and been justified as, producing adult citizens. Prioritising 'futures' and 'outcomes', however, neglects children's every day, 'now', experiences and the complex relationship between their past, present and future (Thornberg & Elvstrand 2012).

In arguing the age factor, the author refers back to his or her own experience as a child and teacher at a primary school some years back that children at any level of education are capable of and have potential to engage in sharing and exchanging views and opinions. Article 12 of the UNCRC further affirms that the child as rights holder is 'anchored in the child's daily life from the earliest stage'. That is, the child is able to form views from the youngest age, even when he or she may be unable to express them verbally (UNCRC 1990:9). State parties are therefore obliged to fully implement Article 12 in recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences.

Fullan (2007:170) also asserts that children, even little ones, are people too. In the author's understanding, children's voice matters regardless of age. Thus, children need to be involved in meaningful projects with adults to enable, empower and support them more in their own learning and learning choices. They need to be actively involved in strategies about quality and improvement of teaching, and substantially engaged in the overall governance of the school and its development at their early age. In his sociologist outlook, Hart (1992) argues that it would be unrealistic to expect children suddenly to become responsible, participating adult citizens at the age of 18 or beyond without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved.

It is for these reasons researchers like Becket and Brookes (2008) view children not only as 'customers' of education but also as 'actors' in education. According to these researchers, children in education are customers in the sense that as an individual he or she acquires new knowledge, skills and attitudes, on the one hand. On the other hand, the child is also an 'actor' who participates in the delivery of education services and whose behaviour influences the quality of services offered by the school. For instance, the action of going to school and taking part in the teaching and learning itself makes them actors. As part of their learning process, children are nominated or recommended to leadership roles such as prefects, classroom representatives or group leaders

to monitor others behaviour in the absence of the teacher. We have also witnessed children promoting businesses (i.e. billboard advertisements), entertaining the public (i.e. dances, music, poems etc.) and even delivering speeches during social events. The implication is therefore that the society has not completely denied children's participation in education. The only alarming issue which the author would like to bring to light is their missing voice in all these activities that they perform. Sociologists, such as Hart (1992), refer to activities that involve children without their consent to be manipulative and tokenistic: models of non-participation.

Preparing children for their future not our past

Gradual increase in opportunities for children to participate in any aspiring democracy can enable them to acquire the confidence and competence they need to participate as adult citizens (Hart 1992). It is against this backdrop that I present the practical experiences of involving children in activities that encourage their views and opinions. I will engage Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' from rung 4 to 8 as my frame of reference.

Rung 4 – Assigned but informed

In this rung, children understand the intentions of the project. They know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why they have a meaningful (rather than 'decorative') role. They, therefore, volunteer for the project after it is made clear to them. For instance, as Grade 4s, we see a need to extend a hand to the needy in a nearby community. We then come up with a project 'Caring for Others'. Ideas are brainstormed to conceptualise the theme, why such project, how to run it, who are involved and in what way and who the beneficiaries are.

Rung 5 – Consulted and informed

In this rung, the teacher may invite learners to speak at a conference and share their experiences and views, or to participate in research, interactive websites, informal consultations, youth councils or parliaments. Asking children their opinions about the teaching and learning methods that work, relevance of the curriculum and assessment would contribute in the development of programmes, policies or models that will improve their lives. Although these activities are essentially about consultation rather than participation, the child's contribution plays an important role in building his or her confidence.

Rung 6 – Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children

For example, a government or non-governmental organisation (NGO) may identify the need to provide better information to children about climate change and decide to develop an awareness-raising programme. Although the programme is initiated by adults, it is subsequently developed to allow learner's opinion in the planning, implementation and evaluation phases. The study of Campbell and MacPhail (2002) is a case in point where peer educators' preference to didactic methods and biomedical frameworks mattered most. The negative learner attitudes towards the programme act as an indicator that attention is required.

Rung 7 – Child initiated and directed

Children reach the level of empowerment when they are able to identify those issues of primary concern to them and to develop strategies, activities, networks, organisations or campaigns through which to pursue their objectives. For instance, Grade 5s may decide to establish a vegetable garden on the school premises for teaching and learning as well as nutritional purposes.

Rung 8 – Child initiated, shared decisions with adults

Because adults are not really attuned to the interests of young children, it is usually teenage learners that tend to incorporate them into projects they have designed and managed.

This ideology is echoed in Fullan (2007:170) that unless children have some meaningful (to them) role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education, will fail. Quaglia and Corso (2014) also contend that when children's hopes and dreams come first and the rest of the school is aligned to their inwardly motivated desire to be successful, then schools and children can achieve their goals together. The fact that children present themselves to school, cheerfully participate in social activities as cited earlier on, is the indication that they want to participate in taking action and making decisions that make a difference to them and others. They need to experience being part of the solution rather than passive observers and listeners (Matsepe 2014).

Enabling children to air their views at an early age strengthens their commitment to and understanding of human rights and democracy. In so doing, schools fulfil Article 29(d) of the Convention that education should be geared towards the 'preparation of the child' (UNCRC 2010:28). In other words, it is in democratic decision-making processes within schools and local communities where children learn what their rights and duties are, how their freedom is limited by the rights and freedoms of others and how their actions can affect the rights of others. As a result, they learn to abide by subsequent decisions that are made. School practices, processes and procedures that utilise children's decision-making powers are tuned to provide them with skills to confront, handle and lead internal conflict and tensions that threaten democracy within their country (Robinson 2014).

Lastly, children's participation leads to better decisions and outcomes. When children experience decision-making as early as at primary school, chances are high that they become better decision-makers and problem solvers later in life. This has been evident in South African universities in the beginning of 2016. The Student Representative Councils in

various universities launched campaigns to raise funds for needy students. The campaigns resulted from students' protests against fee hikes. It is in these protests where truancy and vandalism were experienced in most of these universities. These campaigns are reported to have accumulated millions of Rands from sources such as students, university staff, businesses as well as the community. Although student protests ended on a positive note, the indication is therefore that prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities pertaining to children's education could have prevented '#feesmustfall' protests.

In the incidents above, equity, one of the Constitutional values in a democratic environment, was promoted. In order for them to learn that democracy works, children need to experience that by influencing events and their own living conditions through participation (Luescher-Mamashela 2013). In this way, their conceptual understanding of democracy develops. Hart (1992) further maintains that it is in the learning process where children learn that with the rights of citizenship come responsibilities. For them to learn these responsibilities, they need to engage in collaborative activities with other persons including those who are older and more experienced than themselves.

In conclusion of the above discussion, Fullan (2007:170) projects that teachers and school leaders must not think of children as running the school. Instead, they must entertain the following question: What would happen if we treated the child as someone whose opinion mattered in the processes of teaching and learning? Based on the cases cited above, it is imperative to understand that children in education have a body of experience unique to their situation, and they have views and ideas that derive from their diverse experiences. If viewed as social actors with skills and capacities, they are capable of bringing about constructive resolutions to their own problems. Failure or even refusal to recognise their legitimate contributions to programmes, policies and decision-making results in social ills that schools experience (United Nations 2003:274).

Conclusion

Based on the preceding discussion, it is evident that countries through their legislations and policies recognise children's right to freedom of expression. It is also important to bring to light that children's potential to make things happen is receiving great attention. It is, however, alarming to realise that despite the plain evidence that schools can greatly benefit from children's involvement in decision-making, children are still sidelined when decision-making about their education is made. Not involving children in their education denies them their opportunity to relate better with the rest of the stakeholder groupings. In other words, their right to education is being violated. Not only that, they are also denied their rights to democratic participation and freedom of expression as expressed in the national laws and international conventions. Gradual children's participation as presented in Hart's 'Ladder of Participation' is therefore recommended.

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