

The ethics of children's participation: Fundamental to children's rights realization in Africa

Andries Viviers

University of Pretoria and UNICEF, South Africa

Antoinette Lombard

University of Pretoria, South Africa

Abstract

Children's participation in decisions affecting them is a fundamental human right. This article proposes an ethical framework for meaningful, authentic children's participation consistent with children's rights, one developed within the context of international and continental human rights treaties, global commitments and declarations on children's rights and legal provisions within South African legislation.

Keywords

adult-child relations, child, children's participation, children's rights, ethical principles, human rights treaties

Introduction

Children's participation has become progressively more prominent in child rights discourse and application since the late 1990s, and many processes and organizations now have children participating in matters affecting them. The importance of children's participation on the African continent is

Corresponding author:

Andries Viviers, University of Pretoria Postgraduate and Senior Social Policy Specialist, UNICEF, PO Box 1067, Menlyn Central, Pretoria 0077, South Africa.

Email: aviviers@unicef.org or andriesviviers@gmail.com

expressed by Dr Benyam Dawit Mezmur, Second Vice Chairperson of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, as follows:

[The] attitude that says. . . that ‘children are to be seen and not to be heard’. . . needs to change, and needs to change fast. This change needs to take place fast within the family, community, in schools, in policy and law making, in international development partners etc. Since children’s rights are predominantly children’s issues too, we need to include children as much as possible in the work that we do. (African Child Policy Forum, 2011: 14)

Children represent a majority on the African continent and are often obliged to participate and play their part as social, economic and political stakeholders in the midst of the tensions of their continent (Terenzio, 2011). Badham (1999) avers that the participation of children and youth in their communities on matters affecting them is not only essential, but a fundamental right. A widely acknowledged turning point in South Africa’s history and the anti-apartheid struggle was the 1976 student uprising against the system, and demanding quality education (Moses, 2006). This historic event shows the important role children can play in changing their own destiny, while asserting their ability to claim both their rights and political power through participation.

Chambers (1998) states that participation, particularly of children as a previously excluded or marginalized group, has entered mainstream development vocabulary and must be responded to constructively. This implies mindfulness of how children’s participation is facilitated, whether it really serves children’s best interests and whether policy formulators, service providers and children’s rights activists across the African continent who engage in children’s participation know how to deal with the complexity of appropriate, meaningful and authentic children’s participation. These concerns can only be addressed within an ethical framework for children’s participation.

This article proposes an ethical framework that will ensure children’s participation is facilitated in a manner consistent with children’s rights. The framework was developed within the context of international and continental human rights treaties, global commitments and declarations on the rights of children, and legal provisions within South African legislation. The empirical study was conducted within a South African context, but integrated with a thorough analysis of said international and regional African treaties, commitments and declarations. The framework is thus relevant and applicable in work with children across borders.

An overview of children's participation as a fundamental right safeguarded in international conventions, African treaties and South African legislation will be presented. This will be followed by an exploration of the impact of adult-child relations, power and status on children's right to participation, and of the concept of ethics in children's participation. Thereafter, the research methodology will be briefly outlined, before the findings are discussed and the ethical framework for children's participation is presented.

Children's participation as a right

Children's right to participation is embedded in human rights provisions across a range of international treaties and domestic legislation. As a civil and political right, it is safeguarded in multiple articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), as one of the fundamental principles, together with a) the best interests of the child; b) survival, protection and development; and c) non-discrimination (Hodgkin and Newell, 2007). The UNCRC regards children's participation as a cornerstone of children's (human) rights, as does the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which declared that children's views are fundamentally important in the implementation of all aspects of the UNCRC (Hodgkin and Newell, 2007).

Children's right to participation is further endorsed by other international treaties, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), which provides for participation rights for all people, including children in articles 19 and 20. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966), against which the civil and political rights of people worldwide are measured, provides for participation rights in articles 18, 19, 21, 22 and 25(1), which are clear on and fundamental to the fact that children have the right to participate in matters affecting them and their well-being. The United Nations Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000) not only reaffirms the commitments made under other treaties, but commits nations to 'work collectively for more inclusive political processes, allowing genuine participation by all citizens in all our countries' (article 25). It also undertakes to ensure a high level of participation for all citizens, including children, in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

South Africa ratified two treaties that impact children's rights to participation on the African continent. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (OAU, 1981) provides for participation as a civil and political right, as reflected in articles 8, 9 and 10. This is expanded in the principle-based

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 1990), which includes non-discrimination; the best interests of the child; survival and development; respect for children's views and supporting African unity. The latter is seen by some as the most progressive treaty on children's rights in the world (Byrne, 1998).

South Africa's rich and progressive legislative framework supports children's participation as a right, provided for either directly or by implication in the Bill of Rights (Chapter 2) of the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996a). Legal interpretation is complex and the Bill of Rights in particular has both a direct (actual rights in the Bill of Rights) and indirect (values that must be respected in the interpretation of law) application (Currie and De Waal, 2005). The complexity of children's civil and political rights within South African society is deepened by the fact that the South African Constitution affords certain political rights, which translate by direct implication to the right to participation in political processes, other than those directed at adult participation (RSA, 1996a; Viviers, 2010). This provides a solid foundation for safeguarding and facilitating children's participation in the country, which must, in the long run, crystallize in practice.

In line with international treaties and in support of the South African Constitution, three main pieces of domestic legislation emerged since the advent of democracy in 1994 that allow for children's participation in matters affecting them. The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (RSA, 1996b) was a landmark piece of legislation that provides for children's participation. It places a legal obligation upon schools to ensure children's participation in the development of the school's code of conduct; in school governance, through a Representative Council of Learners comprising learners in grade eight and higher; and on the School Governing Body (learners in grade eight and higher). Thus, it ensures that – especially older – children, have a voice in the governance of their schools.

The National Health Act 61 of 2003 (RSA, 2003) also recognizes the importance of children's participation. The Act requires that health service users (including children, with some restrictions) participate in all decisions that influence their personal health and treatment (section 8). It also stipulates that research or experimentation, whether for therapeutic or non-therapeutic purposes, may only be conducted under certain conditions, one of which is the obtaining of consent from a minor who is capable of understanding.

The Children's Act 38 of 2005 (RSA, 2005), as amended, has the most substantive provisions for children's participation in South Africa thus far, and makes explicit provision for children's right to participation (section 10), stating:

Every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration.

It can be concluded that the provisions of international and domestic human rights treaties and laws create a solid foundation for children's participation as a right. On the other hand, a legal and policy framework is provided by defining children's right to participation as an equality right that affords children the right to express their views; to be consulted; to have freedom of thought, conscience, religion, culture and association; to have privacy; to have access to information; and to be educated and supported in their right to participation. This civil right and freedom to participate, however, is influenced by power, status and relationships between adults and children.

Power, status and relationships in children's participation

Despite global progress on the importance and value of children's participation, tension persists between children's right to participation and society's construct of children and childhood. Ennew (1998) identifies a tendency to view children's participation with fear, dismay and caution, which may be connected to a supposed natural hostility between adults and children expressed in previous centuries. Hence, power, status and relationships influence perceptions of childhood and children, and impact children's participation in an adult-dominated society. Hill et al. (2004: 88–9) see power as a vital concept in children's participation, stating that those who have the power (usually adults) influence policy agendas, political priorities and which issues should be 'ignored'. Moses (2006) asserts that children in South Africa see power in adult–child relationships as undermining their participation and that the extent of children's participation in South Africa is limited by conceptions of childhood and gender.

Lansdown (1995) indicates that the situation of women in previous decades (and still today in many societies) is analogous to that of children, that is, lacking social, economic and political power; undervaluing their potential for participation; and denying them their civil rights. In society children generally have no right to express their opinions and are seldom taken seriously. Evidently, children's right to participation is linked to society's perception of children as participating members, and to adult–child power relations. Valuable lessons can be learned from the feminist movement in changing

perceptions based on stereotypes, culture and biological predispositions that are used as a basis for discrimination. According to Cashmore (2002: 837–9), children’s participation ‘demands a shift from a paternalistic approach to one where children are seen as stakeholders in decisions with a right to have the same input rather than merely being the object of concern or the subject of the decision’. Martin (2000) confirms that children should no longer be content with being treated as second-class citizens and that society and the law must accept children as rights-bearing national and global citizens.

Adult society’s construction of childhood, across the African continent and the world, directly affects children’s ability to claim and exercise their right to participation. Children’s right to participation, without society’s perceptions of childhood influencing the quality of meaningful participation, must be protected within an ethical framework.

Ethics in children’s participation

Save the Children (2003b: 6) indicates that an ethical approach to children’s participation will counter the inevitable power and status imbalances between adults and children, which is an important step in ensuring that ‘children are able to freely express their views and opinions, that they are listened to seriously and that their views and opinions are taken into account’. ‘Ethics’ refers fundamentally to the principles that are expected to underlie the right conduct in general or specific contexts (Thomas and Pierson, 1995). Based on an analysis of principles in children’s participation that have been crystallized in the literature over the past decade, Viviers (2010) identified these key principles that drive ethical children’s participation processes: adults’ capacity to understand and facilitate meaningful children’s participation; transparency, accountability and honesty with children; children’s right to self-determination; access to information and communication; respect for children’s views and their ability to present views on matters affecting them and their lives; children’s physical, social, emotional and psychological safety and protection; respect for diversity and the inclusion of minorities; non-discrimination towards children; children’s best interests; adequate resources (timing, funding, planning and human resources) to ensure an enabling environment; and commitment to children’s participation at all levels (see Black, 2004; Cashmore, 2002; Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2007; Feinstein et al., 2005; Lansdown, 2001; Ramsden and Prest-Talbot, 2007; Save the Children, 2003a, 2004; Viviers and Blankenberg, 2008). These principles were further explored and refined in an empirical study (Viviers, 2010).

Research methods

The research followed a qualitative approach (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010). It employed an instrumental case study, which facilitated a better understanding of the theories underpinning children's participation as a social issue, and the ethical considerations that are paramount in children's participation processes (Fouché and Schurink, 2011). Purposive sampling was used to select child and adult respondents who were knowledgeable and experienced in children's participation processes (Neuman, 2009).

As this study included child respondents, due consideration was given to all relevant ethical aspects (Strydom, 2011). Data were collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews from a sample of seven South African adult experts. Furthermore, eight semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with a sample of 75 South African child participants (Babbie, 2009; Greeff, 2011). The age of the child participants were nine to 17 years, comprising males and females from urban and rural communities. Transcripts of the interviews and focus group discussions were systematically analysed to identify themes and patterns in the data (Babbie, 2009; De Vos, 2011).

An ethical framework for children's participation

The empirical study provided critical perspectives from adult experts and child respondents on the important principles that guide ethical children's participation. The views of both groups were generally similar, with a few exceptions, which emerged as themes that were analysed based on recurring appearances (Viviers, 2010). Six main themes emerged: children's views are important; children's participation is empowering and developmental for children; an enabling environment is important for children; children must be respected as active stakeholders in children's participation; children's participation is a process; and the role that adults assume in the children's participation process is important (Viviers, 2010).

A synthesis between the crystallized principles of children's participation in the literature and the empirical findings of the study provided a framework for the ethical principles intended to direct conduct in children's participation (Viviers, 2010). Ethical principle refers to a rule or code of conduct or law as the basis for reasoning or action (see *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1996; *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, 2011). The following ethical framework proposes 13 ethical principles that will facilitate ethical, meaningful and authentic children's participation (Viviers, 2010).

The first principle identifies children's participation as a right safeguarded by relevant international conventions and domestic legislation. As such, organizations and individuals involved in children's participation must ensure that they know the provisions of all relevant conventions and legislation as it pertains to children's rights, particularly children's participation, and that child participants are made aware of their rights, including their right to participation, in a manner that is understandable to them. As one adult respondent put it: ' . . . when we look at the legal situation in South Africa, it's their constitutional right . . . they are citizens of the country, so they should participate.' This view was echoed by a child respondent, who stated, 'I think it's important because children's rights must be protected and children must have a say in everything that they think they have a right to.'

The second principle is respect for children's views and input. Children must be regarded as able to share their opinions, feelings and ideas during the participation process, and must have the right to exercise self-determination, including, as a minimum: voluntary participation; assent to participate; the right to withdraw or limit their input at any time; the right to speak out when they are treated unethically; and the right to contribute based on their own experience, knowledge and insights. As one child respondent explained: ' . . . I might know things that they don't know'.

The third principle covers children's access to information and resources prior to, during and after the children's participation process. Communication and information-sharing with children prior to their involvement in the participation process must take into account their age, language and culture, and must contain as many details as necessary for them to decide whether they wish to participate. Resource materials must be easy for the children to understand, taking into account the age and language of the child as well as the format of the materials. In the words of one adult respondent: '[we should be] simplifying the policy and asking children to comment on the policy with whatever they are saying. [Using words] that are simplified for children.'

The fourth principle requires adults involved in children's participation to have the capacity (knowledge, skill and attitude) to facilitate meaningful and authentic children's participation. As one adult respondent explained: ' . . . if you are going to have child participation, the adult must be prepared to really just hold the process together, to prompt on occasions but really just to back off and allow the child to come through'.

The fifth principle requires adults to be honest and transparent in all engagements and communication with children, and to be accountable for all actions during the planning, consultation and feedback phases. Adults must never, by any means, influence or attempt to influence children's

thoughts and contributions during the participation process, including by forcing a certain direction, manipulation, bribery with gifts, or making suggestions. One child respondent confirms the importance of this principle: 'Talking to children in a manner that they feel that they are not intimidated or something and letting them speak. . . giving them the opportunity to speak and hearing what they say.' Adults must support children with mentoring and guidance, and must constantly demonstrate and confirm their commitment to children's participation. Facilitators must be trained in approaches, methodologies and ethics of children's participation, and non-facilitating adults or participants (e.g. policy-makers who observe a consultation with children) must be orientated on the methods and ethics of children's participation prior to any engagement in the children's participation process. Chaperones and adults accompanying children, usually from a child's community, school or organizing agency, must receive in-service training and orientation on children's participation and on their role. Adults must also be aware of the power relations between them and the children to ensure that these relations do not hamper or influence children's participation. One adult respondent captured this well:

. . . the challenge of the role of children in child participation is that it's an adult-dominated world. It's the same arguments you can use for gender where it's a male-dominated world. So at the end of the day we believe that we hold the power and if we cannot create that space for children to participate, then they don't get to participate.

The sixth principle is that children's participation must respect diversity. Every child must have the right to communicate and receive communication in their chosen language, one in which they can easily express themselves. Due consideration must be given to children from different geographical areas (urban, peri-urban and rural), and every attempt must be made to include children belonging to minorities or particular groups, such as children with disabilities. An adult respondent underscored the importance of this principle, saying, '. . . we are not inclusive enough [of children with disabilities and children in rural areas]'. No child should be discriminated against on any grounds, either during or after participation, and every effort must be made to protect children from discrimination.

The seventh principle is safety and protection from harm, which must be a priority in all children's participation processes. This includes obtaining consent for children's participation from their parents or legal guardians prior to involving the children in any children's participation. Adults must also be adequately prepared to facilitate and support children's participation,

with sufficient emphasis on contingency planning. Clear safety and protection measures must be established and communicated to all involved, including the children. Safeguards must be established to prevent the use or abuse of power or influence during the children's participation process. Boundaries and rules that apply during the children's participation process must be negotiated with the children as far as practicable, and must be communicated clearly to all parties. In the words of one adult respondent: ' . . . I think, if you are engaging with eight-year olds, you need to provide them with that structure to get them together, to create the forum for them to come together.'

The eighth principle requires that sufficient resources – human, financial and physical – be available for the planning and implementation (consultation and feedback) of the children's participation process, and that no children's participation process be embarked upon without sufficient resources to ensure that it is meaningful and ethical. An adult respondent indicated, 'Whether it's logistics, resources in any form, . . . the crux of the issue is to engage them, to guide them and to provide the support and . . . to provide that protective environment . . .'.

The ninth principle is the creation of a responsive and enabling environment for children's participation. This principle is embedded in establishing rapport with all participants, and requires that activities, techniques and methodologies take into account the children's age(s), and that the physical environment be safe and comfortable. Where practical, children's natural environments, such as schools and clubs, should be used, taking into account the nature and purpose of the participation and whether children feel that these spaces are conducive to them providing their input. Due consideration must also be given to the needs of children with special needs. One adult participant captured the essence of a responsive and enabling environment well:

So you need to talk in a language, and I am not talking about language like in English or Sotho or whatever, I am talking about engaging on such a level with the child that he [she] can feel that he [she] can participate.

The 10th principle proposes that children's participation processes always be designed to contribute to children's well-being, enhance their life skills and build their confidence. As one child respondent put it: ' . . . as a group we . . . share our knowledge so that we can help other children who don't have knowledge about things that we do, or things that we experience in future'.

The 11th principle is planning. This is an essential component of the children's participation process that requires the allocation of sufficient

time and resources to the planning of children's participation processes. This planning must be guided by all the ethical principles of children's participation, and children must be involved and consulted during this phase. In the words of one adult respondent: '... make sure that the child is part and parcel of that process all the way through'. This sentiment was echoed by one of the children, who stated: 'They must involve us in every phase that we need to do.' Another adult participant highlighted the importance of resources, stating, 'I know they are very time-consuming, but building a nation and policies and stuff that we think will contribute to a better society, should be time consuming at best.'

The 12th principle identifies feedback to all stakeholders as an essential part of children's participation. Children's input must be presented in its most authentic and uncontaminated form to interested or commissioning parties (those who requested the views of children), and children must agree on the messages to be conveyed, taking into account that messages may be diverse and not homogenous. Children must also have the right to receive feedback on how their views were used to influence larger planning and/or decision making processes, as well as the opportunity to indicate how they want to receive this feedback. Furthermore, this feedback must be appropriate to their age and comprehension ability. On this, children said, 'We would like to know where is all this information going to go. Is it like going to the newspapers, to the parliament, to The Presidency ...?', and '... you can[not] just take our ideas right now and just put them in a closet somewhere. You have to do something about them.'

The 13th principle for ethical children's participation concerns the children's best interests. Involvement in children's participation must not deprive children of any other rights, and children's participation activities must take into account children's rights to education, leisure and culture, amongst others.

Conclusion

Children's right to be heard and take part is one of the fundamental principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union, 1990). These provide, either directly or by interpretation, for children's right to participate in claiming their civil and political rights, as well as their social, economic and cultural rights on the African continent.

The large differences in power between children and adults, where adults hold the power and decide when and how much power will be given to

children, and children's perceived status as 'lesser' than adults, who require them to behave and respond in certain ways, influence meaningful children's participation. This is further compounded by socio-economic factors and civil rights challenges that are common on the continent. In Africa, including in South Africa, children are exposed to poverty; malnutrition; the impact of HIV/AIDS; and a lack of access to education and/or low quality education.

Despite the fact that children's right to participation is safeguarded in international treaties, inequity prevails in the realization of this right, and many children either do not have the opportunity to claim their right or are exposed to unethical practices when they do have the opportunity to have their voices heard. Thus, even if children have the opportunity to participate, the manner in which this is done should reflect respect for their rights. If children's participation is not conducted in an ethical manner, their rights are violated.

The ethical framework for children's participation provides a guideline to ensure that children's participation is conducted in an ethical and authentic manner, and also facilitates respect for children as active contributors to their development and their society.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Author biographies

Andries Viviers is a graduate student of the University of Pretoria and Senior Social Policy Specialist, UNICEF South Africa. He works actively in the field of child rights and is particularly interested in promoting the participation of children in social dialogues through ethical participation methods and ensuring that information in the public domain is accessible for children. He has contributed to many child rights-related publications and was member of the editorial team of the *South African Child Gauge 2010/2011* that focuses on children's participation.

Antoinette Lombard is Professor in Social Work and Head of the Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria. She is actively involved in social work education and professional development of Social Work in South Africa. Her research focuses on developmental social work and social development which is embedded by a human rights approach and inspired by people who are vulnerable and affected by structural causes of poverty, unemployment and inequalities.