

# **Discovering child citizens' understandings and experiences of social justice**

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## **Abstract**

Among the contemporary needs of democratic societies are citizens learning to be adaptable, ethical, innovative, literate and aware of socio-scientific issues. To cultivate such citizens requires coherent early childhood civics curricula and teachers who are specialists in teaching and learning civics education. Civics education in the early years is crucial; however, the young child's cognisance is rarely expressed in empirical data. This qualitative inquiry gave voice to 60 (approximately 9 years old) child citizens' understandings and experiences of social justice in a democracy utilizing narratives and artefacts. By inductively analysing and interpreting the data, the findings revealed the intense yearning of children to live in fair and just democratic societies. These child citizens' accounts of lived-experiences echo the significance of relevant civic education in schools, governmental policy and acts as well as citizens' active involvement in all facets of civic and social upliftment.

## **Keywords**

Citizenship; civics education; civic ideals and practices; democracy; early childhood education; social studies

## **Introduction**

Considerable investigations have been conducted to herald the importance of intentionally inculcating social justice ideologies in the civics curriculum of the young child (Brodyk 2010; Preez and Niekerk 2018; Francis and Roux 2011; Goss 2009). Role players, from various areas of a child's life, advocate the responsibility to prepare children to flourish and cope with the demands that society raises in the ever-changing information era (Adey 2003; Preez and Niekerk 2018; Green 2014; Twigg et al. 2015). In his insightful work, Adey (2003) decrees elegantly that we need to equip children with the necessary knowledge, skills and values to oppose the superstition, prejudice and sectarianism that rely on prejudice.

The early childhood curriculum, by definition, can cultivate 'child thinking' communities (Green 2014). Ample literature is dedicated to outlining the nature of the content knowledge associated with a civics curriculum, together with the pedagogical knowledge to teach this knowledge system to the young child (Brophy et al. 2016; Preez 2016; Goss 2009; Maxim 2014; Parker 2012; Seefeldt et al. 2014). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS 2010) has developed ten themes that frame the civics curriculum and guide teaching, learning and assessment. These themes include (1) culture; (2) time, continuity and change; (3) people, places and environment; (4) individual development and identity; (5) individuals, groups and institutions; (6) power, authority and governance; (7) production, distribution and consumption; (8) science, technology and society; (9) global connection and (10) civic ideals and practices. These themes ignite discussions on how people create, relate, integrate, interact with and change the structures of power, authority and governance. The themes further elucidate the principles and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic (Herczog 2010; NCSS 2010).

It may seem natural to expect that the latter is too far removed from the world of the young child, yet we found that the contrary is true. The teacher and the child are continually reciprocating acts of social justice, democracy and citizenship during events such as: establishment of class rules; participation in class activities; fair and respectful conducting of meetings; assuming responsibility for own and classmates' learning; initiation of community projects; and the playing of games on the school grounds during breaks. As per example, a civics knowledge system should not be merely transmitted or transferred from the teacher to a child. The child should rather be transformed through a learning experience by being empowered to voice his/her interpretation of this knowledge system. Children should be given opportunities to take ownership of any moments of civic transformation where they can relate to their lived-experiences and express their understandings of social justice, democracy and citizenship. Teachers and policy-makers ought to end practices of regurgitating 'adult knowledge' and provide child-centred opportunities where child citizens can come to express their interpretation, thinking and lived-experiences of their own world.

Children are setting out on their way to adulthood when they will assume their future roles as members within a democratic society. The more reason for us as teachers and researchers to alter our present thinking. We should endeavour to meet children where they are at this very moment; as Dewey (1916) decrees, they *are* child citizens of a democracy. In light of the latter statement we intended to explore the research question: What are the Grade 3 child's (approximately 9 years of age) understanding and experiences of social justice in a democracy? The following is an analysis of insightful children's voices on social justice in the South African context.

## **Contextualizing the research inquiry**

Respective scholarly articles, by likeminded authors, share our conceptual, contextual, and methodological views on this particular hiatus. Which is, why are child citizen's voices on pressing socio-political issues not sufficiently researched? It is presumed that the young child cannot yet comprehend and identify with 'abstract concepts' as posed by the ten NCSS themes (2010). Yet, Deth et al. (2011) challenged this notion and fruitfully explored young children's political orientation, political knowledge and notions of good citizenship through verbal and pictographic techniques. Twigg et al. (2015) conducted an intriguing study about introducing global citizenship, social responsibility and lifelong learning in the early years. In their work they argue the importance of expanding on child citizen's local civic responsibility (near environment of home, family and school) by introducing knowledge, skills and values on global citizenry and socio-scientific issues from early on (Twigg et al. 2015). Another significant study conducted by Mistry et al. (2016) further postulates that children can accurately comprehend economic inequality and understand the impact of poverty, economics, mobility and helping behaviour. These ground-breaking international contributions confirm that teachers, researchers and policy-makers should not limit children's exposure to or underestimate their ability to acquire and consolidate civic related knowledge, skills, thinking and values.

South Africa, as a young democratic country, has shown social, political, moral and educational growth in its vision for future citizens, as explained in the intended National Curriculum Statement (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011). The radical shift from an autocratic (apartheid) to a liberating democratic society has been a challenging and invigorating endeavour, while the progression towards a higher level of social justice has been erratic (Booyse et al. 2013). Despite the rich socio-political and socio-

scientific environment South Africa as developing country has to offer, the voice of the South African child citizen is still negated. We are of opinion that the deep-seated assumption nested in cognitive constructivist theory – about children's readiness or immature cognitive structure – could contribute to fewer inquiries being conducted on children's understanding of 'abstract' socio-political concepts. As such, this research inquiry is located contextually, within this developing country, with the aim of exploring civics education in Early Childhood Education. The following extract from the works of Rudolf Steiner 1997 (as quoted by Twigg et al. 2015: 79) encapsulates the essence of this global, regional and local phenomenon:

It is really true that education cannot consist of external rules and techniques, but must arise from a true knowledge of the human being; this will lead to experiencing oneself as part of the world. And this experience of belonging to the world is what must be brought to children by educators.

## **Literature review**

Given the nature and complexity of civics education and its corresponding concepts, we will first highlight the intersections between the concepts of social justice, citizenship and democracy. This will be followed by an appraisal of children's ability to understand such concepts, before we finally explain how social justice is reflected in civics education during the early years.

### **Social justice, citizenship and democracy**

The delineation of civic-related concepts cannot be assumed as being obvious for the layperson, as disputes about universal definitions persist even in scholarly work. The

purpose of this article is not to develop scholarly definitions; however, it is important to demarcate our understanding thereof and emphasize our awareness that these concepts are distinctive but also intertwined.

*Social justice* has manifested as a concept that incorporates distributional as well as relational fairness and should be understood within its historical capacity and its contexts of enactment (Brodyk 2010; Francis and Roux 2011; Gewirtz 2006). Social justice also represents tolerance and perceptiveness for the rights of all humans to have equal access to resources and services, which include health, justice, opportunity and wellbeing (Brodyk 2010; Goss 2009; Hytten and Bettez 2011). In providing the broader criteria of social justice, a person has to be considerate of issues pertaining to distribution, recognition, opportunities and/or outcomes (Hytten and Bettez 2011). Lynch and Baker identified five dimensions as conditions for equality that are pivotal for justice in education, which are ‘resources; respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning’ (2005: 132).

*Citizenship* is not an isolated concept and is instead embedded in a larger vision of social, political and economic justice (Hytten and Bettez 2011). To understand what citizenship means, it is useful to explore it from the point of view of society. As a general understanding, this term encapsulates the status of an individual who, under the law, is vested with duties, responsibilities, privileges, functions and rights as a legal member of a sovereign state or a part of the nation (Banks 2004; Maxim 2014; Waghid 2010). Scholars make functional distinctions between three kinds of citizenship, namely personally responsible, participatory and justice-oriented (Hytten and Bettez 2011; Westheimer and Kahne 2004). First, personally responsible citizens assume a good moral character by displaying a sense of responsibility and respect towards others. Second, participatory citizens are individuals who become actively involved in serving

the community and local government in the pursuit of social change. Third, justice-oriented citizens not only value responsibility and participation. They actively investigate the possible causes of social problems and may unsettle privileged systems to enforce change. They do not merely rely on charity and volunteerism as the primary means to social upliftment.

The venerated vision of *democracy* comprises the disruption of oppression and the empowerment of communities and its individuals to purposely construct socially just systems, structures, institutions and policies (Hytten and Bettez 2011). The first international agreement to guarantee civil and political rights and cultural, economic, and social rights to all children, include: adequate nutrition and health care; equal treatment; free compulsory primary education; freedom from violence, abuse, hazardous employment, exploitation, abduction or sale; safe exposure/access to leisure, play, culture and art; and right to express opinions and freedom of thought in matters affecting them (Twigg et al. 2015: 81). The notion of democratic citizenship involve free and equal moral beings who can engage and influence one another in a civil and considerate manner (Waghid 2010).

The connection between these respective concepts irrefutably encompasses the perception that every human being has rights, roles, duties, aspirations, needs, responsibilities and a voice that is equally significant to others as members of a wider society (Derman-Sparks and Edwards 2010). These concepts constitute a collective identity, privileges of membership, and social rights and benefits (Waghid 2010) and are indicated by the NCSS's ten themes (2010). The essence of each concept reinforces the ideology that all humans have active hands, feet, hearts and minds primed to serve and improve a society (Maxim 2014). Waghid (2010) interpreted the scholarly work of Benhabib (2002) and came to understand that democracy and citizenship can coexist

due to the social nature of both concepts. This is because active belonging and participation indicate some form of engagement in relation to someone else within a given social context.

The vital importance of inculcating a comprehensive understanding of social justice, citizenship and democracy in the early years signals *justice* as a fundamental component of democratic citizenship that needs to be cultivated (Banks 2004; Hytten and Bettez 2011). Any democracy that safeguards the common good by prizing individual rights and responsibilities would bolster the understanding of why social justice is of such critical importance – ‘for without this vision of justice, democratic life is impossible’ (Hytten and Bettez 2011: 20).

### **Children’s ability to comprehend social justice**

Childhood, from a socio-political point of view, is generally described as the human lifespan extending from birth to the coming of age (18 years). According to Statistics South Africa and Hall et al. (2015), the South African population in mid-2014 was estimated at a total of 53.7 million people, of which 18.5 million were children. Therefore, children constitute 34 per cent of the total population.

Childhood begins with the infant who is completely dependent on an adult(s) for its survival. Adult(s) are largely able to assume responsibility for infants by performing necessary tasks and making decisions on their behalf (Bojer 2000; Smith 1998). In a later phase, the young child (5–9 years) can identify with civic topics or themes (Joubert 2010; Maxim 2014; Seefeldt et al. 2014). The child develops competency in learning and relating their understanding and experiences of democracy, active citizenship, and children’s rights. This fact supports the premise that children are able to grasp the basic meaning of social justice (Banks 2004; Maxim 2014; Mistry et al. 2016; Mthethwa-

Sommers 2014). Essentially, the young child's daily experiences of vulnerability and dependency on others serve to inform and feed their awareness of the concept of social justice (Mistry et al. 2016; Mthethwa-Sommers 2014; Parker 2012).

As children mature, they gradually become less dependent on adult(s) and progressively take ownership of their own will, choices, duties, actions (with their associated consequences) and life choices (Bojer 2000; Smith 1998). Children, while maturing, become increasingly more aware of themselves and their collective identity, and can recognize injustice, exclusion, discrimination and deprivation (Misty et al. 2016; Parker 2012; Smith 1998;). Child citizens' have a voice that enables them to take their rightful place on the public stage, and they are sufficiently developed to experience and evaluate people's rights, obligations and responsibilities (Maxim 2014).

### **Civics education in the early years**

Civics education, as a Social Studies school subject, is considered an integrated knowledge system that promotes civic competence and constructs social understanding in children. It further serves to scaffold their individual and communal identities, and helps children to steadily grow into and develop a good understanding of what it means to be an active and responsible local and global citizen ( Goss 2009; Parker 2012; Twigg et al. 2015). Civics education encompasses deliberate lifelong practices that promote well-being among their citizens. For example: individual and communities' belief systems; respect towards power and authority that incorporate human and children's rights, and accountability for own actions through the expansion of knowledge and skill sets as members of communities that support empowerment (Banks 2004; Goss 2009; Seefeldt et al. 2014). Civics education has the potential to intentionally introduce civic knowledge, skills and values to the young child by aligning the subject content to

academic standards and, ultimately, the vision and mission statements of government that aims to promote local and global citizenship (DBE 2011; Maxim 2014; NCSS 2010; Twigg et al. 2015).

**Figure 1:** Intended and implemented content structure for civics education in Grade 3.

**Social Studies** is an integrated focus area striving towards cultivating the child citizen to make informed decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world (Maxim 2014; Seefeldt et al. 2014).

A framework for teaching, learning and assessment of Social Studies include the themes: (1) culture; (2) time, continuity and change; (3) people, places and environment; (4) individual development and identity; (5) individuals, groups and institutions; (6) power, authority and governance; (7) production, distribution and consumption; (8) science, technology and society; (9) global connection and (10) civic ideals and practices (NCSS 2010).

The South African National Curriculum Statement (NCS) serves the **purpose** of equipping learners - irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical ability or intellectual ability - with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country.

This curriculum is based on the **principles** of social transformation, human rights, inclusivity, and environmental and social justice. It infuses these principles and practices to ensure that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population.

The **aim** is to produce learners who are problem-solvers and critical and creative thinkers who work effectively as individuals and with others as members of a team. They should be able to organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively. They should use science and technology effectively and critically. Show responsibility towards the environment and the health of others. They should demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems that are context bound (DBE 2011).

**Social Science concepts** include: conservation, cause and effect, place, adaptation, relationships and interdependence, diversity and individuality, and change. The topics instructed in Grade 3 to inculcate these concepts are:

Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
a. Rights and responsibilities b. Recycling c. Health, safety and protection d. Religion and religious days	a. Recycling b. Life cycles c. Religion and religious days	a. Public safety b. Pollution c. History and culture d. Religion and religious days	a. Relation to animals b. Products and processes c. Religion and religious days

Adapted from DBE (2015: 4–5; 54–57) and NCSS (2010).

Figure 1 summarizes an eclectic view of Social Studies' subject content. The top segment depicts the internationally accepted description of Social Studies, followed by an international framework of the grouping of subject content knowledge into themes (NCSS 2010). The bottom section of the illustration extends into the South African interpretation and implementation of Social Sciences in the early years. The intended curriculum (DBE 2011) elucidates the views that the South African government envisions for future citizens. Those views are strengthened through Social Science concepts that are formally instructed in Grade 3 using topics for each school term.

In considering Figure 1, it is important to reiterate that civics education should provide each child with a quality in-school and out-school experience by means of: intentionally creating an educational effort to attain a specific civic-related goal; providing ample opportunity to enrich the child's existing knowledge systems by engaging with knowledge and concepts; and broadening their skills and shaping their values through active participation (Dewey 1916; Joubert 2010; Maxim 2014; Parker 2012).

## Theoretical framework

In comparison, theories on social justice in general far outnumber the theories on social justice designed specifically for children. Theorists of social justice clarify that the latter concept does not have one primary ideological home and that it can rather be interpreted depending on the specialization, movement and/or discipline (Hytten and Bettez 2011). Among others, some movements include anti-oppressive education, critical theory, critical pedagogy, democratic education, feminism, multiculturalism, post-structuralism, progressivism and queer theory (Hytten and Bettez 2011).

Given the nature of the study and the availability of suitable theories, we had decided to hybridize Dewey's understanding of democracy and education (1916) with both

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of children's learning (1978) and Bojer's theory of social justice for children (2000).

Dewey theorizes that children must learn by obtaining experience and constructing their own meanings. Vygotsky emphasizes that children who acquire a socially instilled knowledge system can transform their understanding, experience, expression and functioning, while Bojer stresses the critical importance of child development and their acquisition of a civic voice.

Bojer's (2000) concern about childhood social justice is that children are more exposed to increasing distributional and relational unfairness, inequality or deprivation. Deprivation can inhibit the children from actualizing their potential physically, emotionally, cognitively and spiritually. Dewey (1916) makes special mention of the fact that, through deliberate practices, an individual can acquire an informed understanding of citizenship and civics-related notions through progressive lived-experiences. Sociocultural theory informs how teachers impart civics education as they understand that learning is not directed at the environment alone, but it is also collaboratively facilitated through cultural artefacts or tools towards a common goal (Vygotsky 1978). These scholars value the importance of developing a community, contextualized collaboration, using tools, and giving a voice to the young child on matters such as social justice, citizenship and democracy. The fused views of Dewey, Vygotsky and Bojer highlights the fact that children should be cultivated and encouraged to: make their own critical decisions, reflect on and contemplate their own and others' wellbeing, utilize tools for thinking and acting, and learn how to participate as responsible citizens within local and global societies.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative mode of inquiry with a case study design as the methodological framework best enabled us to assist young children to relate their understanding and experiences of social justice in a democracy. The case study design enabled us to do an in-depth investigation (Denzin and Lincoln 2008) of the children's collective and individual experiences and understandings. We conceptualized how we would accurately and ethically facilitate the scheduled sessions to encourage the child participants to express themselves openly. Their recorded expressions could then be analysed for meaningful interpretations.

In striving to conduct a fair research inquiry, we strictly adhered to the guidelines and principles of the university's Ethics Committee from whom we obtained ethical clearance. We ensured the voluntary participation of all child participants as permitted by the educational district, the school principal and parents. We established and maintained a healthy rapport by engaging the children in the study on more than one occasion. We intentionally and progressively gained their trust and respect, which advanced the level of dialogues on social justice in a democracy.

To ensure a benevolent research experience for the children, we, as qualified early childhood researchers, conducted this inquiry ourselves. We were acutely aware that one's own assumptions, understandings, biases and expectancies could influence our collective interpretations. Therefore, we regularly collaborated and debriefed our personal and collective concerns to help us to remain cognisant of our own influences when generating and scrutinizing the data.

A purposive and convenient selection of 60 Grade 3 children (approximately 9 years of age) from three dissimilar and diverse socio-economic schools was established. The

thirteen English Second Language child participants in Group 1 attended a private religious school. Group 2 consisted of 24 child participants whose Home Language is not English who attends a semi-structured government school (ex-model C) within a sub-urban context. The 33 English speaking child participants in Group 3 are enrolled in a government school in a rural high-needs context. The reason for only including Grade 3 child participants are twofold. First, they are more confident in expressing themselves socially, emotionally and realistically using both oral and creative visual means. Secondly, they have progressed through the foundational educational band of their school career (meaning, they have passed Grades R, 1 and 2) and have had more opportunity to experience and interact with the discussed civic concepts.

Before commencing our fieldwork, we first considered the broad contexts of the three respective schools where the research inquiry was conducted. We deliberated the conceptual prompts and resources we marshalled to assure the child participants could relate with the civic inspired activities in a meaningful manner. Because we understood the uniqueness of the contexts and the intended civics curriculum, we could logically frame our approach to conduct this research inquiry. We explored and interpreted the understandings and experiences of the child participants by utilizing age-appropriate data-generating strategies such as group discussions, individual drawings and creative writing related to their drawings.

The first ±40 minutes contact session was aimed at acquainting ourselves with the child participants and to introduce the topic of civics to them that will pave the way for future discussions. The unrecorded group discussion served as a metaphorical ‘ice breaker’ that assisted children to socially discuss the poster of South Africa’s president and the national flag as props with the prompts: Do you know who the person in the picture is? What do you think his job is? What is the purpose of a government?

This first session incorporated a general understanding of civics and set the stage for focused discussion. During our second ±50 minutes encounter, we continued building rapport with the participants. We created a safe environment for the child participants to creatively write about their socio-emotional stances specifically pertaining to social justice. We asked them to envisage themselves in the following situations and then to reflect on their thinking and feelings on paper about these questions: How do you think it feels to be poor? How do you think it feels to be rich? How do the circumstances between rich and poor people differ or relate? What does the word fair and unfair mean and can you give examples? This session mined into a more topical discussion.

In the final ±60 minutes contact session, we introduced the child participants to a typical voting campaign scenario where each of them could run for president. The theme on citizenry and democracy was implicated. The child participants were given material to visually construct – through drawing and creative writing – their justifications on the following prompt: If I was the president, how would I change South Africa? What do you like and dislike about South Africa?

The three respective data-generating opportunities enabled us, as the researchers, to glimpse the world of the child citizen and to answer the research question: What is the Grade 3 child's (approximately 9 years of age) understanding and experiences of social justice in a democracy?

The development in analysis involved an iterative process of labelling, coding and grouping data to document the similarities and differences therein and to summarize the collected messages in the datasets (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). To organize and manage the saturated datasets, we utilized a content and thematic analysis. These strategies enabled us to develop an in-depth appreciation of the child participants' understanding

of social justice, democracy and citizenship. All the data obtained from the sessions complement one another and merged in one dataset. We commenced the process by firstly capturing the visual data into a computerized format. We thoroughly analysed the recorded datasets by first familiarising ourselves with all the child participants' creative writing (CW) and individual drawings with writing (IDW). We coded the datasets using general descriptions and generalizing possible themes. We identified patterns and reviewed these identified patterns before assigning and defining each pattern with a suitable label. These labels were grouped into an encompassing theme and delineated. Finally, we constructed a summary of the derived and verified themes and delineations (see Figure 1).

Our theoretical framework enabled us to appreciate and develop a better understanding of how the child participants acquired a civics knowledge system and constructed their meaning of social justice in a democracy. The hybridized theoretical framework, which consist of Dewey (1916), Vygotsky (1978) and Bojer's theories, assisted us in insightful interpretation of the results.

Considering our methodological framework, we acknowledge that our sample size and number of research sites are small and that our findings, therefore, are context bound. However, we were able to generate rich data that incorporated various aspects of civics education in the early years that we believe shed significant light on how child citizens understand social justice in a democracy, as shaped by civics education and their own life experiences.

## **Results and discussion**

The five key themes are: (1) caring for the environment; (2) pursuing positive behaviour; (3) making the world just and fair; (4) adhering to the laws of the country

and (5) strengthening public services. Based on the collected visual and written expressions, we can justifiably argue that the understanding and experiences of child citizens indicate that Grade 3 children have a well-verses collective voice on social justice in a democracy. It is also notable how the topics that were discussed in the intended curriculum (in Figure 1) connected with the emerging themes (displayed in Table 1 below).

**Table 1:** Emerging themes and its correlation with the NCSS framework and South African civics curriculum.

Themes	Delineation	NCSS	CAPS
Caring for the environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protect our nature</li> <li>• Prevent pollution</li> </ul>	Themes 3, 6 and 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pollution</li> <li>• Relation to animals</li> </ul>
Pursuing positive behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultivate good values and attitudes and care for others</li> <li>• Discourage bad behaviour and destructive actions</li> </ul>	Themes 5, 7 and 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health, safety and protection</li> <li>• Rights and responsibility</li> </ul>
Making the world just and fair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality and equity for all citizens</li> <li>• Cultivate a desire for social justice</li> </ul>	Themes 2, 4 and 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rights and responsibility</li> <li>• History and culture</li> </ul>
Adhering to the laws of the country	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lawful repercussions for destructive, violating and abusive criminal deeds</li> <li>• Fair-minded punishment</li> </ul>	Themes 5, 6 and 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health, safety and protection</li> <li>• Rights and responsibility</li> <li>• Public safety</li> </ul>
Strengthening public services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intentionally advance public services</li> <li>• Conceptualize and implement new/relevant public services</li> </ul>	Themes 3, 8 and 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recycling</li> <li>• Health, safety and protection</li> <li>• Pollution</li> <li>• Public safety</li> </ul>

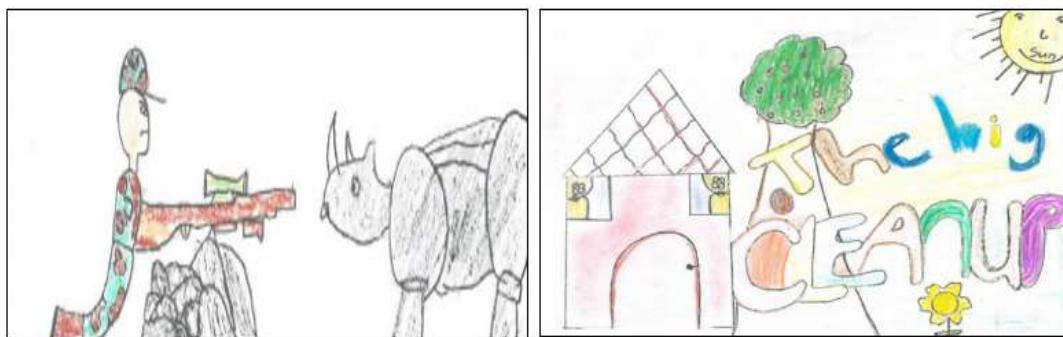
To ensure the anonymity of both the child participant and the school, we referred to the groups using the acronym G1/G2/G3, to participants as P1/P2/P3 and so forth and the two recorded data-generation techniques CW and IDW. To structure our reasoning, we will firstly report on the factual (generated) evidence of the child participants' visual and auditory expressions. We then interpreted the CW and/or IDW utilizing literature and finally concluded with a conceptual impression of how each theme contributes to what the Grade 3 child's understanding and experiences are of social justice in a democracy.

### **Theme 1: Caring of the Land**

The child participants managed to express their emotional and moral concerns about their environment. They are aware of the different types of pollution and the ways in which human acts upset ecosystems and threaten the conservation of South Africa's fauna, flora and natural resources. Some children even offered suggestions to punish any acts that cause destruction. 'I would say stop shooting animals and cut down trees. There must be more nature conservation to catch hunters' (G1/P4/CW). 'I will make a law to tell people to stop killing rhinos for their horns, they must stop wasting water. They mustn't dump oil in the sea because the animals in the sea will die' (G1/P1/CW). 'I would make the boats on the sea stronger and ensure that there is no oil in them and that they work on air. The cars will not produce smoke but air and will not use petrol but will use air' (G1/P6/CW). 'They have to pick up their litter, they must obey the road signs and not dump their litter in the rivers or sea' (G1/P1/CW).

An awareness of a global world was also valued: 'I want the world to be clean because if people from other countries come to visit us, then they say our land is dirty. I want our country to be the cleanest, and I want the grass and trees to be green' (G2/P12/CW).

To care for the environment means to protect fauna and flora and to take care of the environment of humans and animals, as illustrated here:



**Figure 2:** To take care of the land means eliminating rhino poaching and addressing pollution. Sources: (G1/P4/IDW and G3/P9/IDW).

The written and visual expressions denote the child participants' abilities to engage and function as thinking communities and to voice their cognitive, moral and emotional understandings about topics as depicted by the NCSS (2010). The main aspects that the child participants voiced relates to (3) people, places and environment, (6) power, authority and governance and (9) global connection (Herczog 2010). The child participants illustrated their awareness of the importance of conservation and the protection of people, places and environments. They further demonstrated their insights into the function and roles of structures of power, authority and governance in regulating and enforcing practices to protect natural resources, promote democratic citizenship and endorse international or global connections and interdependence (Twigg et al. 2015).

### **Theme 2: Pursuing positive behaviour**

The importance of social fairness emerged, notably, from this theme. The child participants had strong opinions about living in peace and harmony with each other and providing for underprivileged people by securing a safe physical and emotional

environment. Some of their statements included: 'I would be a fair president. I would give the beggars their own property and I would give them clothes' (G1/P5/CW). 'I was going to learn to build houses and make people houses that they cannot be poor. I would give poor people blankets' (G3/P2/CW and G3/P17/CW). 'No this resecting [disrespecting] people' (G3/P24/CW).

Another discussion that emerged pertained to good and bad demeanours: 'I wish that I could stop people fighting and stop them swearing' (G2/P2/CW). 'I would tell people not to curse, steal, or kill other people. I would say they must love each other' (G2/P6/CW). 'No fiting [fighting], swearing to people, no lieing [lying] and no booling [bullying]' (G3/P12/CW). 'Rich people must not brag because they make the poor people sad' (G1/P7/CW). 'I would change person that burns people's houses. I want to be a cop too' (G3/P26/CW).

In pursuing positive behaviour (as illustrated below), a person should avoid abusing any substances since it may result in unhealthy social-emotional events. A person should also share food and resources with others.



**Figure 3:** To pursue positive behaviour means taking care of others and not abusing alcohol. Sources: (G2/P8/IDW and G3/P10/IDW).

Their narratives and artefacts indicate that the children are conscious of the roles and responsibilities of citizens. Of particular interest is the rising levels of maturity and awareness of the kinds of citizens as described by Hytten and Bettez (2011) and Westheimer and Kahne (2004), relating to personal responsibilities and being participatory and justice-oriented. The main aspects revealed by their statements relate to (5) individuals, groups and institutions, (7) production, distribution and consumption and (10) civic ideals and practices (Herczog 2010; NCSS 2010).

The child participants demonstrated an acute awareness of the integral role that authorities such as government institutions and other agencies play in people's lives, especially in terms of fair and equal distribution of resources and services (Deth et al. 2016). The children also reveal their sensitivity to civic ideals and practices of citizenship, which are vital elements for being functional members of their communities and the wider society (Twigg et al. 2015; Deth et al. 2016).

### **Theme 3: Making the world just and fair**

The nascent desire for equity and equality for all people were evident in the child participants' expressions. Although not nationally or even globally attainable, these noble notions are admirable and of vital importance in the consciousness of responsible citizens. As some children stated, 'I will make the poor and the rich both equally rich' (G1/P2/CW). I would change the rules for everyone. Everyone must get food, money and house. I was going to be nice to everybody that is poor. If some pepol [people] don't have some money I will give them money'. (G3/P19/CW). 'Everyone should have the same amount of money' (G1/P9/CW).

One child participant associated equity and equality with a former president: 'Mandela was our president – he walked to freedom so that everyone in the country could have

freedom' (G2/P22/CW). Other statements referred to racial relations and social status. 'Black people and white people must not be nasty to each other' (G1/P2/CW). 'I will care for my country and for the people. I will give work to the people so that everybody can earn more money' (G2/P13/CW). The importance of literacy was also voiced: 'Teach children how to read books. All the children must learn to read because there are some children who cannot read and them they cannot be smart' (G3/P3/CW).

By means of illustration (below), the children expressed a belief that the world can be made just and fair if leadership groups symbolize the advantages of freedom for everybody and empower the population through the provision of educational and employment opportunities.



**Figure 4:** To make the world just and fair means to be free, have good country leaders and create job opportunities. Sources: (G2/P22/IDW and G2/P13/IDW).

The child participants infer a desire for collective upliftment and to become socially just by proactively thinking about ideas for the greater good of the whole nation, as opposed to a mere personal gain. These key topics are important to the promotion of education, democracy and citizenship, according to Waghid (2010) and Joubert (2010), which is a significant statement as some child participants indeed expressed their desire that

everyone should have the opportunity to excel educationally and have their basic needs for safety, belonging and health satisfied.

The primary aspects that the child participants illuminated relates to (2) time, continuity and change, (4) individual development and identity and (10) civic ideals and practices (Herczog 2010; NCSS 2010). The children's expressions signal their insight on the importance of developing one's own personal identity through one's culture, community and other social and institutional influences (Mistry et al. 2016).

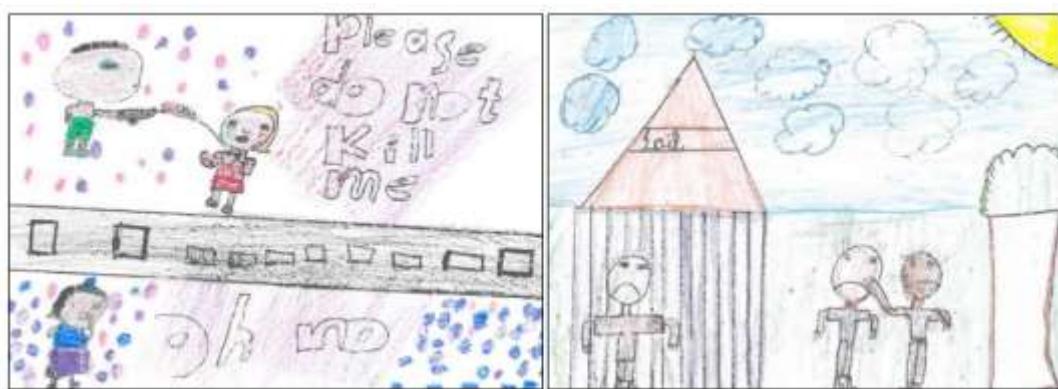
The children display an understanding of the historical development of South Africa's structures of power, authority and governance. Additionally, they seek to understand their historical roots and strive towards inclusion and democracy, which are essential for the development of a civic competence (Booyse et al. 2013; Francis and Roux 2011).

#### **Theme 4: Adhering to the laws of the country**

South Africa's culture of violence is a familiar concept to observers, and it is unfortunate that most citizens have become accustomed to this reality. Some child participants recalled their lived-experiences of criminal, violent and abusive events and, hence, expressed a desperate call for lawful repercussions to such acts. Some concerning and sobering statements include the following examples: 'They must stop bombing the country and they must stop murdering people' (G1/P3/CW). 'No steling [stealing] money from childin [children] and adults [...].no killining peppol [killing people]' (G3/P4/CW). 'You must not go with someone you don't know them. Childrens must not go alone because they will kill your childrens [children]' (G3/P8/CW), and 'Our children are killed. We are robbed and our children are raped' (G2/P22/CW).

The child participants also expressed their views on punishment and fair-minded retribution from authorities. ‘The police must catch the criminals and put them in prison’ (G2/P4/CW). ‘I would greatly punish the thieves’ (G1/P6/CW). ‘I will lach [catch] all the dugadiks [drug addicts]’ (G3/P7/CW). ‘I will change the straking [striking] rules. You must not strike, people get hurt and killing of police’ (G3/P26/CW).

Adhere to the laws of the country (as illustrated below) means having to protect citizens and prosecute acts of wrongdoing.



**Figure 5:** To adhere to the laws of the country means denouncing criminal deeds and sentencing offenders for committed crimes. Sources: (G3/P18/IDW and G3/IDW).

The wide spectrum of law-breaking offences requires various approaches to punishment and penalties that include jail sentences, according to the child participants. They understood that citizens should obey the law and that fair-minded punishment ought to be instituted. As already mentioned, children (child citizens) live in this world and they are not merely spectators to events. They should be afforded the voice and space in schools to participate in the dialogue about social justice issues (Bojer 2000; Brodyk 2010; Kuby 2012).

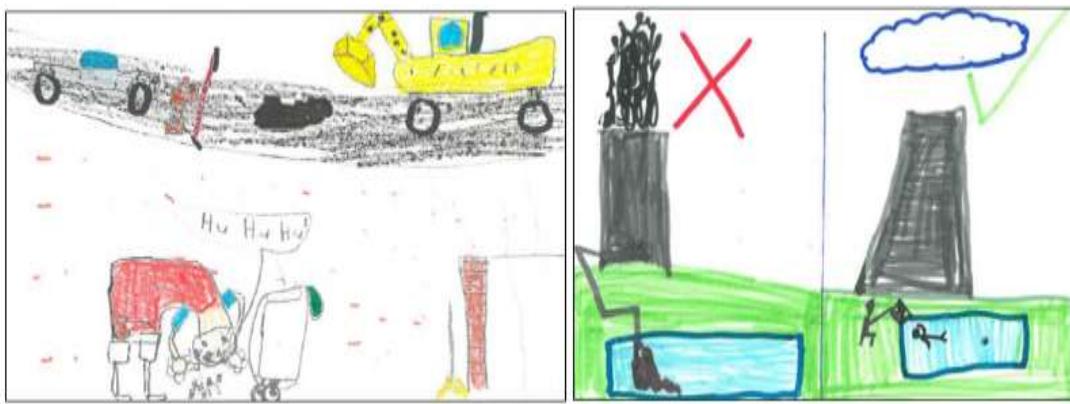
The noted trends in their statements on lawful behaviour and punishment pertain to (5) individuals, groups and institutions, (6) power, authority and governance, and (10) civic

ideals and practices (Herczog 2010; NCSS 2010). This re-emphasizes the youthful desire to experience respect and dignity, to value human life and to adopt responsibility for the consequences of one's own actions (Mistry et al. 2016).

### **Theme 5: Strengthening the public services**

The child participants were concerned about the state of the public roads that cause life-threatening accidents and the lack of proper public services and healthcare that further affect citizens' mortality rate. The children's voices revealed their concerns regarding shortages of medical personnel and proper medical facilities and treatment. 'I would make better roads and better hospitals' (G1/P2/CW). 'I will change all schools. I will change all hospitals to make it better' (G3/P25/CW). Some innovative ideas emerged too, such as, 'I would break down all the factories and build...make places where people can make the stuff themselves' (G1/P6/CW). 'More dustbins and more people to sweep the streets' (G1/P10/CW). 'I would put police services on every street corner so that they can catch the thieves' (G1/P1/CW).

To restore our environment, public services need to be strengthened (as illustrated below) through creative problem-solving strategies utilizing science and technology.



**Figure 6:** To strengthen public services means fixing roads and rehabilitating polluted water. Sources: (G1/P10/IDW and G1/P9/IDW).

The child participants were aware of the need for government to provide optimal services and, thereby, improve the living and social conditions of the country's citizens. Value is added to this study by observing the children's acknowledgement of their own responsibility in contributing to the maintenance of high standards in South Africa (Joubert 2010). Their awareness of socio-scientific issues emphasizes their innate ability to apply scientific and moral reasoning in response to crises in their immediate environments and real-world situations (Twigg et al. 2015). The primary aspects that the child participants highlighted relate to (3) people, places and environment, (8) science, technology and society; and (9) global connection (Herczog 2010; NCSS 2010). The child participants demonstrated an understanding of people, places, and human-environment interactions, as well as an awareness of the contribution made by science and technology in providing solutions to several socio-scientific issues and crises within and beyond their personal locations (Twigg et al. 2015).

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Child citizens are competent in understanding and voicing what they perceive and learn about the duties and activities of adult citizens. Their expressions are not merely

reproductions of the principles that were instilled in classes or descriptions of incidental real-life observations. Instead, child citizens can creatively analyse and rework the impressions they have acquired – through formal and informal means – about their own identities and character in relation to others in their environment.

Their ability to creatively imagine and assign meaning to social justice in a democracy serves as the internal platform for creating, altering or visualizing their roles as child citizens. Acknowledging that the child is already a citizen unlocks the opportunity for researchers, teachers and curriculum developers to begin to appreciate the child's inner mechanisms of reasoning, functioning and understanding of civics education. The following scholarly extract reinforces the importance of civic education for social justice in a democracy:

The purpose of education is to promote a democratic society based on principles of social justice and economic equity. Schools and education should be laboratories for democracy, where adults and children learn together, raise questions about issues and problems, both cognitive and social-critical in nature, and they work together to find the answers to those problems [...] A basic task of education is to support students' ability and disposition to analyse experience, as it relates to justice and equity issues, and then to address injustices or problems in that experience. (Moule and Waldschmidt 2003: 124–25).

Having studied the recorded opinions and expressions of 60 Grade 3 participants, we found that they understand and have experience of a variety of aspects pertaining to social justice in a democracy. Furthermore, having scrutinized the body of scholarship

that illuminates the meaning of social justice, citizenship and democracy and having aligned it to the subject content as included in the intended civics education for the young child, we can declare that their understanding relates to these knowledge systems.

The essence of child citizens' understanding and experience of the various means of promoting social justice in South Africa as a democratic country is evident in our generated data. The child participants – who are child *citizens* – emphasize that South Africa's population and environment deserve and should receive better care. They are mindful of the state parastatals' position and power, as well as the influence that a leader or president has in emancipating, empowering and actualizing citizens.

The child citizens have experienced or been exposed to hostility, violations of human and animal rights, threats, intimidation, crime and/or unsafe or contaminated environments. These lived-experiences also increase the intense longing for a just society. A desire to implement lawful and fair-minded prosecution of criminals in every capacity emerged, together with a communal need to exhibit zero tolerance for any manner of discrimination. The child citizens offered some solutions to these social problems, such as nurturing democratic values in citizens to minimize risky or harmful behaviour and promoting socially acceptable behaviour.

The data encapsulates the deep-seated desire and yearning among the child participants to create an equal and just South African society that encourages self-actualization and success for children. In expressing themselves, the children gave voice to their insights into the essence of social justice that includes various elements such as human rights, citizenship and equity.

They have shown themselves to be willing in assuming their roles and responsibilities as agents of change, that they understand the different facets of social justice, and that

their experiences can be utilized to inform civics education. Child citizens want to be part of the solution to socio-scientific dilemmas that are evident in their world; they do not want to be mere bystanders or containers into whom knowledge systems are poured. They yearn for the opportunity to become actively involved, and most of all, they want to be heard.

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