

CHAPTER 23

PROMOTING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATION: DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

There has recently been a growing emphasis on listening to children's voices in different professional contexts, for example, legal, medical, social and educational. This can be said to have its root in the participatory rights of children, as dictated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child (UNCRC, 1989), commonly referred to as the children's rights movement. Drawing inspiration from this movement, the present research aimed at examining children's perceptions of their school experience. Twelve five- six year old children from a state funded primary school (Key Stage 1) in south-east England formed the sample for the study. To explore their understanding of the school experience, three qualitative participatory research methods: children's drawings, (adapted from Armstrong,

2007); children's pair interviews (adapted from Evans and Fuller, 1998) and finally; photographic/video evidence of different areas of the class/setting, taken/videoed by children themselves (Burke, 2005 and Punch, 2002), were used. Findings from all three methods explicitly suggest that children liked coming to school and enjoyed doing a range of activities with their teacher(s) and friends. It is also evident that they wanted to spend more time outside. These findings are discussed considering children's participation from a social-cultural context and how there is a need to develop a culture of participation, a culture that truly encourages children to participate in decisions affecting all spheres of their lives, including education. References are also made to participation from a pedagogical position and how its implementation intersects with the cultural beliefs and values of a given society.

Keywords

Participatory – children's perceptions – school experience

Introduction

With the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) by almost all countries in the world, the legal position of children has been enhanced significantly, reinstated by the current childhood research which views children not as objects or subjects but participants and social actors. Putting this into education context, children are perceived to be having a part to play in their own educational processes (see children's right to participation in UNCRC articles 12 and 13 which can be accessed from http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf). But after reviewing the states parties' reports that ratified the UNCRC through their governments, the United Nations (UN) committee realised that very little information was offered about early childhood. Therefore, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005), published General Comment No. 7,

clearly stating the implementation of child rights in early childhood. Early childhood, according to this committee, includes all young children- from birth and throughout infancy; during the preschool years; as well as during the transition to school. Drawing inspiration from the General Comment No. 7, the present research aims to explore young children's (5-6 year olds) perceptions of their school experience.

As a consequence of these developments in the children's rights movement, in particular the children's right to participation, there is a growing awareness that knowledge about children should be constituted on the basis of listening and hearing them (Formosinho and Araujo, 2004: 103). Such processes are believed to have long term implications for sustained educational experiences (Pascal and Bertram, 2009). One way of developing these processes is by integrating participatory approaches into our everyday pedagogy, commonly referred to as pedagogy of 'listening' (Rinaldi, 2001). Rinaldi (2001) gives a detailed account of 'listening' as a pedagogic tool and how listening to children helps both, adults as well as children. But before moving into the detail of pedagogical implications, it is first useful to define what participatory approaches are and where they are derived from.

Participatory approach can be defined as a collection of creative methods that act as a tool to assist the participants not only describe, but also give meaning to their experiences (adapted from Veale, in Greene and Hogan, 2005). These are commonly used in participatory research which can be said to be having its root in liberation theology (Chambers, 1997) and can therefore lay the foundation for empowerment (Veale, 2005). Participatory research is clubbed under the big umbrella of interpretive research where a combination of scientific rigor and critical analysis

(with imagination and creativity) is used as a means of coming to an interpretation of people's world within their cultural frames (Fals-Borda, 2001).

But when applied to research with young children, it needs to offer a combination of methods that can allow children to express themselves in a variety of ways. Children also need to be provided with both, the room and space (physical and mental), to be able to make choices and to take the initiative (Pramling Samuelsson and Fler, 2008). Referring to this from a cultural perspective, the degree to which children are given these mental and physical spaces can vary between different countries and communities. These differences are mainly because of the subjective nature of 'participation' which is rooted in the culture and common beliefs of any given society.

Putting this in an English education context, the evidence of child participation can be seen in the introduction of Citizenship classes in secondary education, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, 2008), Every Child Matters (ECM, 2003) (Her Majesty's Stationery Office: HMSO, 2004) and the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (DCFS, 2008). The development of policies and frameworks to support and encourage children's participation is definitely a positive step but may not necessarily translate directly into everyday practice. These frameworks seem to be having strengths, but arguably, the approach they dictate to learning may not be the most appropriate for young children (Baldock et al, 2009). Hence there is a need to develop a transient approach between the macro and micro level of education policy and practice and find creative ways of listening and attending to children's voices in education. Some of these methods, which are derived from participatory research approaches, are discussed below. These methods are believed to

help teachers attend to children's multiple voices, ranging from easily comprehensible explicit voices to the more implicit, subtle and quiet voices.

1. Participatory approaches to listening to children's voices

Most methods used in participatory research lend themselves towards the qualitative approach, as the experiences are perceived to be situated within the everyday working practices of those involved (Wimpenny, in Savin-Baden and Major, 2010), which in this case is young children's education. This section of the chapter discusses three qualitative participatory methods: children's drawings (adapted from Armstrong, 2007), paired interviews (adapted from Evans and Fuller, 1998) and photographs and video cameras (Burke, 2005 and Punch, 2002) the use of which are believed to help teachers reach a better understanding of children's perspectives.

In relation to the research conducted, due attention has been paid to ethical considerations where consent is obtained from both, parents and children. Parental permission is taken in the form of written forms and children's consent is collected with the help of easy to comprehend picture cues. They were also given information on to be able to decline their participation, should they wish so, and that this would not affect their school activities in any ways.

1.1. Method 1: Children's Drawings

Children's drawings have been used to understand varied perceptions of the world around them. Studies like Anning and Ring (2004) and Weber and Mitchell (1995) illustrate how drawings can be used to help educators and other professionals understand the lives of children in school and related settings, for example, to demonstrate teachers' pedagogic styles and

children's achievement in schools (Bonoti et al, 2003). Walker (2007) reaffirms drawings as the 'natural' method of enquiry for school-aged children, "who frequently are given the opportunities and tools to draw 'for fun' in schools or other settings" (pg 99). These schools/settings form part of children's culture, informing their everyday experiences and meaning making (Kendrick and McKay, 2004). Children's drawings can therefore be regarded as a tool to understanding the ways in which they are making sense of their experiences, which in this case is their school experience (Anning and Ring, 2004).

Children participating in research were asked to draw two pictures using a research instrument designed by Armstrong (2007). Armstrong (2007) used depictions of actual and ideal school pictures to understand children's instructional preferences and learning styles. This can be a useful tool for the teachers to differentiate instructions. She believes that this instrument can be used effectively with children, as young as age five. Taking inspiration from this method, picture 1 in my research was about children's 'actual school experience' and picture 2 about their 'ideal school experience'. In the 'actual school experience' they were advised to draw the day-to-day things that they do in the school/class. In their 'ideal school experience' they were advised to use their imagination and draw the things that they 'would like to see themselves doing in the school'. Children's production of the pictures of their own life in a classroom was aimed to act as stimuli to elicit narratives about their perspectives of the learning environment (Formosinho and Arajjo, 2006). In order to avoid losing the true meaning of their pictures, these narratives were tape recorded whilst children were actively engaged in the process of drawing (Roberts-Holmes, 2008). Each participating child was briefed this process beforehand and was given the

time to familiarise themselves with the equipment and the researcher.

The children were made clear that the two drawings could be similar or different and that in both drawings they could put themselves, their teacher, and a friend or two. They were encouraged to talk about what each person in their drawing was doing and also, if possible, label the people in their drawing (Armstrong, 2007). These instructions were aimed to facilitate children's imagination, giving their thinking some cognitive structure.

1.2. Method 2: Children's interviews

Historically, interviews with young children were seen as a very flawed research method but these limitations to young children's competence as respondents are now generally perceived as the limitations of those who interview them (Brooker, 2004). Interviews with young children (as young as 5) can yield valid results, provided attention is paid to certain preconditions. Firstly, it is important to consider the context in which interviews are carried out, for example, is the interview being carried out in a home environment, classroom, hospital, etc (Formosinho and Araijsjo, 2006). Secondly, the age of children who are being interviewed will affect the methods that could be used during the interview, for example, if very young children, a toy or a puppet could be used as a stimulus to elicit discussion. Thirdly, attention also needs to be paid to the number of questions being asked as persistent adult questioning has been shown to decrease young children's competence in making responses (Wood & Wood, 1998).

In this instance, interviews were carried out with the children in their classroom, giving them a familiar school context. They sat in a corner table with the

researcher. This is perceived to have favoured the interview process as familiar environment elicit better interview utterances (longer, clearer, more complex, more thoughtful) (Brooker, 2004). The child is also able to make an association between the process of interview and evaluation (promoted by school) and, by doing this pays more attention to questions (Formosinho and Araijsjo, 2006).

As the participating children were quite young, they were interviewed in pairs so as to offer (emotional) support to each other, if needed. In order to make it fun for them, a toy telephone was used as an interview medium (Evans and Fuller, 1998). Similar stimuli used in interviews have shown to promote children's interest and thinking (Brooker 2004; Formosinho and Araijsjo, 2006).

Lastly, the interview was kept short of maximum three questions and children's voices were tape recorded to allow the researcher revisit their response at a later stage. The questions asked were as follows:

Why do you come to school?

What do you like about coming to school/class?

If there is anything at all that you do not like about your school/class?

1.3. Method 3: Photographic and video evidence

There has been an increasing use of technology, such as, cameras and video cameras to engage children in contemporary research. Despite being fun for children, they can yield valid results due to their interactive nature and also due to them being able to capture action, which is not always possible through other methods, such as drawings (Punch, 2002). This method is mainly influenced by the belief that visual methodologies give children the opportunity to record distinctive ways of their seeing (Burke, 2005), a

process that can recognize them as experts in their own worlds.

The children in this research were given disposable cameras to take pictures of different areas within their classroom and school – inside or outside – capturing areas which they particularly liked or disliked. Areas of the school which repeatedly appeared in the photographs were placed into the broad categories of 'learning environment' and were later used as prompts during the interview process. Video cameras were used in a similar manner where children were encouraged to record their favourite (and not so favourite) places in the class/ school. They were advised to record a running commentary, clearly stating the reason(s) for their likes/ dislikes. The running commentaries were then noted carefully, identifying children's likes and dislikes and the reasons behind these. The whole process of taking photographs and video recording was aimed at encouraging children's participation and active involvement in research.

2. Analysing and interpreting children's voices: a way to developing reflexive pedagogy

Interpreting children's (multiple) voices is as important as capturing their views. The best way to analyse children's perceptions is by developing a shared understanding of children's views by having a dialogue and discussion with them. The methods described above have the potential to be adapted into pedagogical documentation which can further instigate reflexive practice among teachers. Reflexivity as a process is primarily aimed at promoting good practice by helping teacher understand not only children's views but also reflecting on his/ her teaching practice and behavioural attitudes.

On a precautionary side, pedagogical documentations (such as drawings, interviews records and photographs/ video recordings) may not always reflect true reality but a representation of social construction where teachers select what they believe as valuable to research and document. Being a teacher puts us in a powerful position to choose various methods to represent children's views, but what we do not choose is also a choice. While doing this we inadvertently 'construct' the children's voice, which may / may not be a true representation of what they want to convey to us. On a critical note, constructing children's voices may appear to be misrepresenting their voices, but while doing so we also construct ourselves as teachers (because the construction is shaped by our own cultural values and beliefs). This construction/ reconstruction of 'self' can lead to introspection, which Dahlberg et al (2006) believe is self-reflexivity, a process through which self- definition is constructed.

Being reflexive can also involve challenging our pre conceived ideas and behaviours and whilst doing so we give ourselves the opportunity to find methods to resist some of the dominant pedagogical discourses, some of which may not act in the best interest of children. Challenging our own socially constructed/ preconceived ideas is not an easy task and requires a lot of experimenting and interpretive work. It may require the teacher to have dialogues with other colleagues, opening up multiple perspectives, each of which could be discussed and confronted (Dahlberg et al, 2006). In this way, reflexivity can lead to problematizing one's own understandings, leading a way to the development of and engagement with higher thinking and meta-cognitive activities.

Therefore, analysis and interpretation can lead not only to understanding children's perspectives but also a critical introspection of one's own practice,

behaviours and attitudes. It is because of this reflexive practice that alternative pedagogies can evolve, offering more opportunities for children's empowerment and the creation of a more interesting and responsive learning environment.

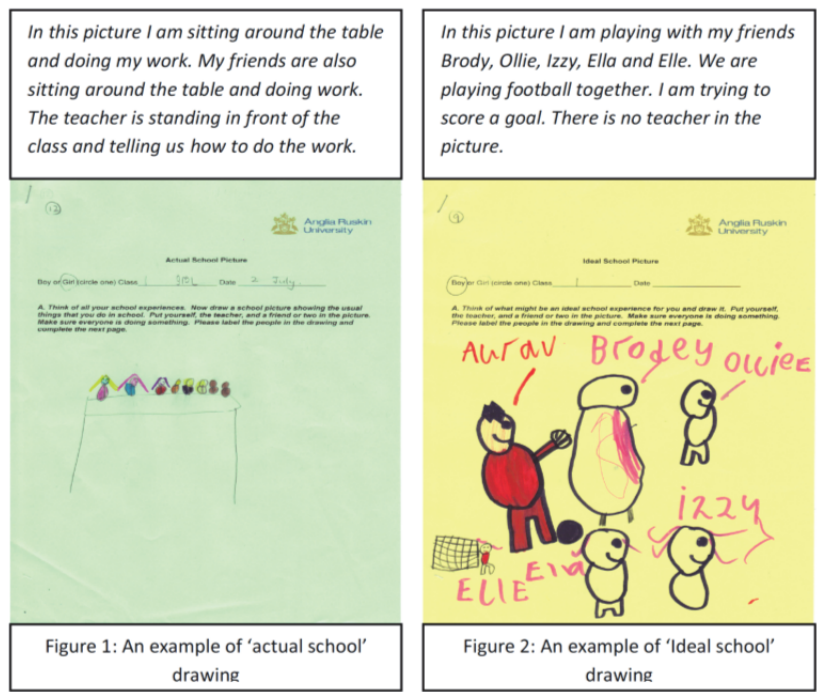
2.1. Analysing Children's drawings

2.1.1. Actual school experience drawing

Children's drawings of 'actual school experience' (example figure 1) show a majority of them being engaged in doing class work, mainly, literacy and numeracy. The experience analysed from the actual school drawings is academic driven and represents a traditional view of classroom, where the teacher takes the authority position and children attend to the instructions (Lodge, 2007 and Weber and Mitchell 1995).

2.1.2. Ideal school experience drawing

Children's ideal school drawings (example figure 2) clearly demonstrate the creative use of their imagination as they created drawings that filled their gap between the 'actual' and 'ideal' school. They managed to fill in their imagination with reality choices, as they all view themselves playing outside in the playground (in the absence/ presence of a teacher). These imaginary representations remind us that children as young as six have knowledge of the symbolic relation of drawings to reality (O'Connor et al., 1981).



To summarise the methodological application of children's drawings, children were quite comprehensive and confident in narrating their drawings to the researcher. They managed to draw contrasting differences between their actual and ideal school experience. This draws us to the conclusion that drawings can be used as an effective tool to promote dialogue between young people and their teachers (Lodge, 2007). Drawings therefore can be seen as rendering themselves to a form of text which can be 'read' and understood (Weber and Mitchell, 1996, in Lodge, 2007). They can act as a powerful pedagogic tool to understand children's perceptions of their learning environment and also as a means to informing curriculum planning and delivery.

2.2. Analysing Children's interviews

The questions asked during children's interviews were analysed by categorising their responses in the form of a table as shown below:

Interview question	Categories of description
Why do you come to school	<i>Self-gratifying</i> : to meet teacher and friends
	<i>Practical</i> : to take part in certain activities such as colouring
	<i>Play</i> : to play
	<i>Educational</i> : to learn things
	<i>Better future</i> : it will be good for our future
What do you like about your school/class	<i>Symbolic</i> : activities such as puppet, home corner
	<i>Sensory-motor activities</i> : activities involving the use of materials such as colour, paint, etc
	<i>Gross-motor</i> : running, playing football
	<i>Educational</i> : activities such as reading/writing or other educational and group work, like making a display, ICT
	<i>Extra curricular</i> - activities that involve use of space, like stage
If there is anything at all that you do not like about your school/class	<i>Activities</i> : for example, maths, physical education, assembly
	<i>Aggression (mild)</i> : aggressive acts (like pushing) committed by other children
	<i>Discomfort</i> : do not like sitting on the carpet as it makes us hot
	<i>Structure</i> : more snack time during the day
	<i>Satisfied</i> : there is nothing that we do not like.

Table 1: Children's interview response

On the basis of the interviews (as evident in Table 1), children's perceptions of why they attend school ranged from adult-imposed reasons (better future, parents' wish) to the reasons which might be of benefit to themselves (self-gratifying, practical, educational).

When making a response concerning what they like about their school experience, all the children mentioned particular activities (like, doing work inside, assembly, playing football, the home corner and puppets). Interestingly, when talking about their dislikes, comparatively few mentioned specific activities, instead they were 'satisfied' (liked everything or could not think of anything they disliked), or mentioned factors which might cause them physical or emotional harm (mild aggression and discomfort). These findings concur with those from Evans and Fuller's (1998) research with 4-5 year old nursery children.

2.3. *Analysing photographic and video evidence*

To analyse children's photographs and video evidence, they were clubbed into broad categories of the learning environment. The following areas appeared repeatedly in their photographs and video recordings, arranged below in the form of a table (not represented in any particular order):

After categorising photographs into the above areas, children were then asked whether they liked /disliked that area or if they were not sure. A majority of the children liked all these areas in the classroom and the outside space with a few not being sure of some displays: as 'they were old', the white board: as 'it may involve reading', peg area: as 'it is boring', phonics area: as 'it involves sounding out letters', puppet area: as 'it is boring', book area: as 'it involves

reading' and work table: as 'it involves studying'. However, there was no resounding dislike for any of the areas. Children's perceptions of why they like these areas was a general like towards activities that underpin the working of these areas, like, colouring, making a display, reading interesting books, playing football and doing art and craft work. Similar response was seen from the video clippings, reaffirming their general like towards all the areas.

S.NO.	CLASS/SCHOOL AREA
1	The white board
2	The book area
3	Phonics area
4	Outside (playground)
5	(Various) class displays
6	Work table
7	Colouring time/ area
8	Craft area
9	Computer area
10	Puppet area
11	Coat peg area

Table 2: Classroom/school areas as photographed or videoed by children

3. Summarising research findings from children's drawings, interviews and photographs and video recordings

To summarise, children's perception of their school experience, based on their drawings, interviews and photographs and video commentaries, is a positive one. They like coming to school and enjoy doing a range of activities with their teacher(s) and friends. They however, want to spend more time outside. It is clear from this research that children's multiple voices (as expressed through drawings, interviews and photographs and video clippings) can effectively be used to facilitate an interactive dialogue between the teacher and children, which clearly has the capacity to inform pedagogy. The interactive dialogue paves way for collective interpretation, enabling the development of a shared understanding between the children and the teacher. This gradually can lead to empowering children, giving them a sense of shared understanding of the usefulness of their learning environment. The methods described above not only lend themselves to be used as a reflective tool but can also give teachers an opportunity to celebrate good practice (as evident from the research findings).

Referring back to reflexive practice, these methods can also render themselves to be offering critical insight into a teacher's role and attitudes that influence his/ her behaviour with children and other colleagues in an education setting. These methods can offer opportunities to challenge some of the preconceived ideas of being a 'teacher', especially the notions attached with the traditional role of a teacher, such as, sitting in an authority position, confining learning experiences mostly to indoor environment, etc. These are the aspects of practice which often go unnoticed and reflected upon. Therefore the teacher may use these tools not only to inform planning and delivery of the curriculum but also as a tool to

understanding his/ her own idea of 'teaching' and pedagogy.

4. Developing a culture of participation

Participation being a subjective concept can be associated with multiple meanings depending upon the contexts it is being applied to. Referring to this from a pedagogical position, participation and its nature and degree of application will vary based on teacher's own attitudes and beliefs, which are further influenced by its wider cultural framework. This can be theorised using Vygotsky's (1986) socio-cultural theory according to which children's social and cultural knowledge evolves when they actively engage with their environments. The role of the teacher is to affirm these ideas by allowing children to participate in collaborative tools with (more competent) peers and adults around them, within a given safe environment, which in this case is their classroom environment. Here opportunities need to be given for the freedom of expression, where both, the teacher and children take part as active participants (Bae, 2009), sharing knowledge and developing a common understanding of shared experiences. It is thus paramount to give spaces and opportunities for the (gradual) development of participatory skills among children, who, as future adults, will be more likely to be supportive of a truly democratic society, valuing and respecting each other's contribution.

The biggest challenge, however, that teachers might face is attending to children's multiple voices. Bae (2009) stresses this as one of the pitfalls. She states that while giving too much emphasis on views of children as autonomous and competent beings, we may underestimate their vulnerable sides. From a pedagogic position, these practices might stimulate too much self-determination and individual choice,

making it difficult for the teacher to attend to multiple voices at one given time (ibid). Therefore she asserts Moss's (2007) view that the concept of choice can be used in connection with collective decision-making as against the individual choices. This can be researched using the 'collective (participatory) methods' which aim to facilitate a group with shared meanings, interests or experiences to analyse or access those experiences (Veale, 2005). However, collective methods can hide inequitable participation and may lead to the generation of false consensus (ibid). This especially needs to be considered while working with bigger group sizes.

Whilst referring to socio- cultural theory, it is equally important to refer to the development of a culture of participation (within education context), giving opportunity not only to children to participate and express their views but also the adults who work in that education institution. Being a good role model will encourage not only the children to replicate these means of communication but also open the opportunity for adults to evolve a truly participative environment where all stakeholders' views are duly respected and attended. It is vital to share common values, attitudes and purposes among different stakeholders, including children, and this potentially can help in the development of a culture of participation. There may be challenges associated with this due to power differentials and the level of influence different stakeholders can have on the running of a school, such as the teachers, other adults, managers, policy makers, etc. Children usually come at the bottom rung in the ladder of hierarchy, but as evidenced earlier in the chapter, they are capable of offering unique insights into their perspectives as important stakeholders of the education system. An interaction and alignment of these values and attitudes of stakeholders involved in

education can hence determine the success or failure of an education institution.

Therefore, as a proponent of the movement of children's rights (especially children's right to participation), I would strongly recommend professionals working with children to encourage child participation in all matters affecting them. The same implies to various services that work in different capacities for/ with children so that a coherent approach can be cultivated, contributing positively in the development of a culture of participation.

Conclusion

The findings from the research demonstrate how children as young as 5-6 years old are able to express their views on the learning environment using participatory instruments. The methods have the potential to be used as a pedagogical and an empowering tool to encourage participation from children. The aim is to develop a culture of participation where there is an opportunity to develop shared understanding and co-construction of meaning making between adults and children.

For future research, a further exploration of children's perceptions in a larger sample of classes may reveal more categories of description and/or different patterns. Similarly, children's perceptions in different types of education provision (e.g., state and private school) would give a broad understanding of the influence of education structures and policies on everyday experiences of children.

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