

WHY ADULT VIEWS MATTER: SCHOOL PERSONNEL PERSPECTIVES ABOUT CHILD SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

LAS VISIONES DE LOS ADULTOS IMPORTAN: PERSPECTIVAS DEL PERSONAL ESCOLAR SOBRE LA PARTICIPACIÓN DEL NIÑO EN LA ESCUELA

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ABSTRACT

Community-Based Participatory Research promotes the inclusion of diverse voices in the research process and in decision-making processes. However, there are very few research studies that collaborate with children, especially within the context of schools. Promoting child participation has benefits both for children as well as for schools. Nonetheless, this may depend on how adults react to such participation. The present study is part of a broader study on school violence prevention. Our objective is to explore school personnel's concept of childhood and how it relates to their opinions about child school participation. We conducted a discussion group with nineteen (19) faculty and non-faculty members of a public school to ask them questions about the topic. We categorized participants' answers and analyzed relationships among them. Results suggest that participants' concept of childhood is linked to socio-cultural and historical factors and that it impacts their opinions about child participation. Also, school personnel recognize that child participation has benefits for children, the school and the wider society. This contrasts with deficiencies on how to articulate this participation beyond traditional classroom strategies. We discuss the implications of these results for pedagogical practice and for participatory research as promoters of children voices in context.

KEY WORDS: Children participation, Decision Making, Community-Based Participatory Research, Schools.

RESUMEN

La Investigación Participativa Basada en la Comunidad promueve la inclusión de diversas voces en el proceso de investigación y en los procesos de toma de decisiones. Sin embargo, hay pocos proyectos de investigación que colaboran con los niños, especialmente en el contexto de las escuelas. La promoción de la participación infantil tiene beneficios tanto para los niños, así como para las escuelas. No obstante, esto puede depender de cómo los adultos reaccionan a esa participación. El presente estudio es parte de un estudio más amplio sobre la prevención de la violencia escolar. Nuestro objetivo es explorar el concepto de la infancia y cómo se relaciona con sus opiniones sobre la participación de la escuela infantil de personal de la escuela. Llevamos a cabo un grupo de discusión con diecinueve (19) personas del equipo docente y no docente de una escuela pública para indagar acerca de este tema. Se categorizaron las respuestas de los participantes y se analizaron las relaciones entre ellos. Los resultados sugieren que el concepto de la infancia de los participantes está vinculado a factores socio-culturales e históricos y esto a su vez, tiene impacto en sus opiniones sobre la participación infantil. El personal escolar reconoce que la participación infantil tiene beneficios para los niños, la escuela y la sociedad en general. Esto contrasta con las deficiencias en la forma de articular esta participación más allá de las estrategias tradicionales de aula. Se discuten las implicaciones de estos resultados para la práctica pedagógica y para la investigación participativa como promotores de las voces de los niños en este contexto.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Participación de la niñez, Toma de decisiones, Investigación participativa basada en la comunidad, Escuelas.

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Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is an approach that fosters the integration of the community into the research process. Although there are multiple CBPR definitions we chose for this article the one offered by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2001). They define CBPR as “a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community and has the aim of combining knowledge with action and achieving social change to improve [...] outcomes and eliminate [...] disparities” (p. 2). Recently, this research approach has been recognized as a key aspect in reducing health disparities. This has led to countless research studies with adult communities that address topics such as asthma reduction, HIV prevention, environmental justice, and cancer care, among other topics (Rhodes, et al., 2011; Rhodes et al., 2010; Beck, Young, Ahmed & Wolff, 2007; Corburn, 2002; Shepard, Northridge, Prakash & Stover, 2002).

Despite the fact that CBPR studies with adults have proliferated, the inclusion of children and young people in the research process has been limited. This presents several challenges when exploring children’s needs, given that their voices are not adequately represented in research or decision-making processes. Their inclusion is relevant because children are the experts on their own experience. Although it is true that adults had the experience of being children, we have to consider that childhood, as a process immersed in a socio-cultural and historical context, varies accordingly across time. Therefore, it is important to generate and implement strategies that foster children’s participation in research and decision-making processes because it takes into account the present social and historical contexts in which they develop. This includes the school, which is one of the most relevant contexts in a child’s daily life.

The purpose of this article is to explore how adults’ conceptualize childhood and how their views are linked children’s participation in school decisions. This project was part of a long-term collaboration between a private university in Carolina, Puerto Rico and public schools in the same geographic area. The goal of this CBPR collaboration was to generate violence prevention initiatives that promote youth participation.

In the following sections, we will discuss the concept of child participation and its manifestations at the international level and within school contexts. Furthermore, we will discuss the historical and socio-cultural factors that enable or impede this participation. Then, we will break down the results of the discussion group and consider their implications for: (a) the pedagogical practice, (b) child empowerment, and (c) the active participation of children in school decisions.

Child Participation in Society

Child participation is a complex topic; one that is difficult to define. In general terms, participation refers to involving children in the decisions that affect their lives, their communities, and society in general (Brady, 2007). According to *The State of the World’s Children* by UNICEF (2003), childhood participation entails encouraging, respecting, and listening to children’s opinions in all decisions that affect them. These factors contribute to children’s freedom to express and assume their own points of view when making decisions. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) establishes that children have the right to express their opinion freely and to be considered in all matters that affect them. To this end, every child should be heard by way of a representative or an appropriate organization. Articles 13, 14, and 15 of said document also establish that every child’s right to the freedom of expression includes access to information, freedom of beliefs, and freedom of association (UN, 1989).

The establishment of this treaty was fundamental in the paradigm shift regarding our views of childhood (Davis & Edwards, 2004; Liegghio, Nelson & Evans, 2010), from passive recipients to social actors and agents of change. This paradigm shift defies the dominant traditional discourse that perpetuates the view of children as deprived of knowledge or competencies considered necessary for participating in decision-making within society.

Participation in social processes helps children become active members of their communities and understand their rights and responsibilities. Children cannot find their own voice and identity as citizens if the space, support, and opportunities are not available for them to develop their own point of view in collaboration with others (Smith, 2010). Providing children with opportunities to participate and coordinate actions lends greater force to their claims, grants them greater access to information, and instills a greater sense of self-confidence.

Listening to children and encouraging their participation is important for many reasons. According to Pascal and Bertram (2009), from the viewpoint of some educators, participation trains children as apprentices and enables them to make decisions and develop positive thinking about themselves. Other authors point out how society benefits from said participation in the development and formation of more capable and committed citizens. However, even though we may endorse this assertion, we must be very careful when viewing children as future adult citizens because it could be at the expense of not taking them into consideration in their present status as children. The aforementioned perspective is valued only if children are considered active citizens in the here and now, and allowed to participate in a democratic life in which they have rights and responsibilities (Pascal & Bertram, 2009).

At present, significant changes have occurred, promoting benefits and progress towards the inclusion of children and their voice in diverse settings. On the international level, in 2003, *The State of the World's Children* by UNICEF devoted its report entirely to child participation, indicating the growing attention given to this topic by various organizations, as well as government and non-government leaders. The report presents examples of different initiatives from all over the world that encourage child participation (UNICEF, 2003). Some examples of participatory projects with children and young people have also been identified by Lansdown (2001), including initiatives that are currently being carried out in countries such as: Nicaragua, Colombia, Pakistan, Jamaica, England, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. Likewise, there is an increase in the number of organizations that promote social change led by children and young people. Another example is the Freechild Project, whose mission is to promote, inform, and celebrate social change led by children and youth from around the world, especially those who have been historically denied the right to participate (Freechild Project, 2008).

Despite the growing international effort, aimed at fostering child participation, it is worth pointing out that in many countries children are not listened to. This depends, to a great extent, on the cultural values linked to child participation. Alternatively, it is important to analyze the socio-political climate and historical context of many countries, where oftentimes there are few opportunities for the participation of civil society. In these cases, children have been the most excluded (The Canadian International Development Agency, Child Protection Unit, 2004).

This is of particular concern in settings (e.g. schools, health system, religious communities) where children interact and receive services. The absence of their participation affects program development

and effectiveness, child engagement and satisfaction and child civic identity. Hence, it is paramount that we investigate the barriers to participation in these settings and address them through policy and local action.

Child Participation in School Decisions

Schools are an ideal setting for promoting child social engagement. Research shows that schools that promote student participation and introduce more democratic structures enjoy better relationships among all members of the community and become more efficient learning environments. There are also multiple benefits for the child. Children who feel valued and considered in the decision-making process develop a sense of belonging, responsibility, and commitment toward their school environment (Landsdown, 2001).

However, schools greatly differ in their views about child participation. To understand these differences we need to consider the norms, beliefs, and values that underlie the ideologies held by adults in the school community (teachers, administrators, support personnel). According to Kohfeldt, Chhun, and Langhout (2011), the scientific literature has demonstrated the tendency of teachers (particularly in elementary school) to harbor certain paternalistic beliefs with regard to children and to practice the role of caretaker or guardian. The norms and values of adults in the school community are deep-rooted elements of the school as a system, which in turn are reinforced and reproduced by way of patterns of interaction among students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the community that supports the stability of these types of structures.

Oftentimes, the school itself is the most exact representation of the predominant traditional view that conceptualizes children as lacking the skills that allow them to make decisions, participate orderly in consultative processes, and take action regarding matters that affect them directly. There is also a

broad array of cultural values that may solidify, within a socio-historical context, a view of deficiency, silence, and submission with regard to children. This is why it is imperative to analyze the context and work with adults prior to or while developing any type of initiative that promotes child and youth participation. Our educational system should provide a space that allows for each and every one of our students the possibility to strengthen his or her critical thinking, organization, and planning abilities in pursuit of true inclusion in decision-making processes. This is a relevant step if we wish to transform our educational system into one that is genuinely pertinent and effective for our students.

This study is one of several initiatives that seek to encourage child participation within school contexts. We describe a discussion group held with personnel from a school in Carolina, Puerto Rico to explore their concept of childhood and how this is related to the opportunities for participation that children have at their school. We conclude the article by discussing the implications of these results for the school context and we provide recommendations for fostering child participation within classrooms and schools.

METHOD

Design

To collect the data for this study, we used an exploratory qualitative design. This type of design permits the examination a research topic or problem that has been scarcely studied or that has not been addressed previously (Creswell, 2013). A qualitative approach also allows for an in-depth exploration of the topic.

Participants

Nineteen (19) faculty members (e.g., teachers, school principal) and non-faculty (e.g., school police, administrative personnel, and janitorial employees) participated of the discussion. The activity was held during work

hours as part of their professional development day. The activity was carried out off school grounds. It is worth pointing out that all of the adults who work at the school were present at this meeting. The distribution by sex of this group was 16 females and 3 males.

Procedure

This study is part of major NIH-funded research project with school communities in Carolina, Puerto Rico. This segment of the study involved collecting preliminary data for establishing strategies to promote child participation. The major study has Institutional Review Board approval of the Sistema Universitario Ana G. Méndez committee.

Participants were asked to answer a total of six open-ended questions regarding their views of childhood and children's role in school decision-making. Each question was written on a 25" x 30" easel pad that were hanged on the room walls. Participants were asked to answer each one of the questions individually or as a group. A maximum of 25 minutes was allotted for answering each question. Once that process was completed, the researchers led the discussion of each question by reading the written answers aloud and encouraging the discussion of their answers. The questions were the following:

- What does being a child mean to you?
- What characteristics should a relationship between a child and an adult have?
- What bearing should children have on the decisions that are made in the classroom and at the school?
- What benefits does child participation have for children and the school community?

- What challenges does child participation entail in the classroom and at the school?
- How can I encourage child participation?

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data collected from easel pads during the discussion group was photograph and transcribed into a word processing program, respecting the original construction of the participants' phrases and sentences. NVivo 10 software was utilized for importing and analyzing the data.

Two members of the research team, who did not participate in the discussion group, performed the analysis. This strategy ensures that only the content produced by the participants' is considered and that the experience as facilitators of the activity does not interfere in assigning the text to the categories of analysis (Gilbert, 2002). For the first part of the analysis, we used the comparison strategy as proposed by Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2011). Their approach includes seven steps which covers from how to use *a priori* and *a posteriori* nodes to the evaluation of a tree node generated from the initial analysis.

Initially, the analysts generated four *a priori* analysis dimensions based on the objectives of the discussion group: (a) conceptualization of children, (b) children's participation in decisions, (c) benefits of child participation in decision making and (d) characteristics of child-adult relationships. Other dimensions, with a greater level of specificity (*a posteriori* categories) were generated afterwards and included in the analysis. A summary of the description of the categories appears in Table 1, along with the total statements assign to each. Each analyst conducted a second review of the data to confirm that the text was categorized in the newly generated categories.

TABLE 1.
Categories of Analysis and Categorized Statements Summary.

Category	Definition	Categorized Statements (n)
1. Conceptualization of Child	Define what it means to them to be a child.	7
1.1 Adjectives	Describe the concept of childhood through adjectives.	4
1.2 Verbs	Describe the concept of childhood through verbs.	4
1.3 Developmental Processes	Describe the child through developmental processes.	1
1.4 Notion of Being	Describe the child as a being.	4
1.5 Emotions	Describe the concept of childhood using emotions.	1
2. Decision-making Process at the School	Importance of children's bearing on the decisions that are made in the classroom and at school.	12
2.1 Challenges of the Decision-making Process	Challenges for achieving child participation in the decisions that in classroom and at school.	2
3. Benefits of Child Participation in Decisions	Positive aspects of child participation in decision-making.	4
3.1 Benefits for the Child	Benefits of participation for the child on an individual level.	4
3.2 Benefits for the School	Benefits of child participation for the school.	1
3.3 Benefits for Society	Benefits of child participation for society.	1
4. Description of the School Environment	Aspects of the school context that allow for understanding what the school is like.	1
5. Child-Adult Relationship	Characteristics that the relationship between a child and an adult should have.	11
6. Recommendations for Encouraging Participation	Adults indicate what they can do to encourage child participation at the school.	8

We added the categorizations from each analyst to the program NVivo 10 to estimate the degree of agreement among raters; concordance rates ranged from 75.81% to 98.07%. The analysis of text content within categories indicates that participants generated more expressions relating to: (a) the decision-making process at the school (n=12), (b) characteristics of the child-adult relationship (n=11), (c) recommendations for encouraging participation (n= 8), and (d) childhood conceptualization (n= 7).

We then proceeded to evaluate the relationships between the categories through domain analysis (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). We performed this analysis by identifying the text in which participants made reference to more than one of the categories of analysis when answering one question. Since the unit of analysis was the whole answer to a question, as written by each participant, reference to more than one category was possible. We found three main relationships: (a) conceptualization of child and benefits of child participation in decision-making; (b) conceptualization of child and decision-making process at the school; and (c) decision-making process at the school and benefits of child participation in decision-

making. The percentage of reliability for the domain analysis was between 96.21% and 99.53% (See Figure 1).

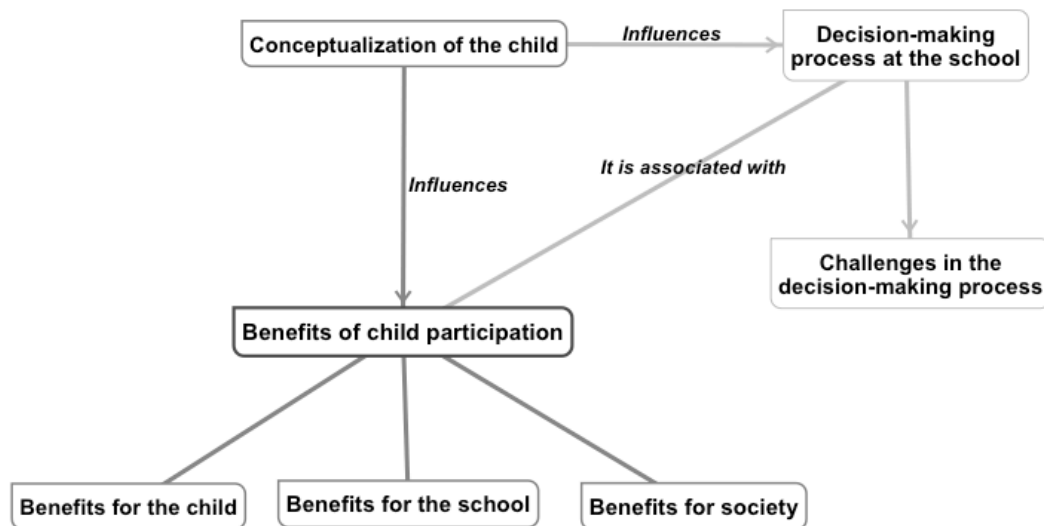
Lastly, we generated a relationship model using NVivo 10, by performing a query within the categories of analysis. We included all the identified categories and relationships. The model that we present in Figure 1 allows for visualizing relationships and how they are interconnected. We can observe that the category 'conceptualization of child' is identified as the main influence on (1) the decision-making process at the school and (2) benefits derived from child participation. Additionally, the decision-making process is linked to the benefits of participation. For the decision-making process category, we can say that participants make a connection between the benefits of child participation and the conceptualization of child, but from their statements we cannot determine directionality.

We could not establish if the category 'conceptualization of child' was more linked to any one of the areas that we included in the benefits category (child, school, or society). However, the total number of statements in the benefits category for child

(n= 4) was greater than the number of statements categorized under benefits for school (n= 1) and society (n= 2). Taking these differences into account we can infer

that there is an inclination to think that the child, at an individual level, is the entity that benefits the most from this participatory process.

FIGURE 1.
Relationship model generated through constant comparative analysis.



DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore adults' concept of childhood and how it relates with the inclusion of children in a school's decision-making processes. Data was obtained from a group of faculty and non-faculty personnel (grades K-9) from a public school in Puerto Rico.

Results revealed that school personnel have varying definitions for 'child participation'. This may depend on their professional training (particularly for teachers) individual experiences, socio-cultural values, and their view of childhood and corresponding skills and capabilities.

Participants' concept of childhood was tied to individual childhood experiences and their relationships with their fathers, mothers, or guardians. These experiences varied significantly from person to person. The group agreed that during their upbringing the

existing cultural values imposed limitations on children participation both at school and the family context. Phrases such as "children speak when pigs fly" (In Puerto Rico: "children speak when chicken pee") and "children are to be seen and not heard" are ingrained in the collective childhood memories of the participants. However, despite these experiences, participants recognized the importance of providing children with opportunities for participating in school decisions, although they could not mention specific strategies to achieve this goal.

Results also suggest important relationships among the different categories of analysis. We found that the school personnel understand that there are positive implications from integrating children in school decision-making processes. These implications are not only for the children but also for the school and society as a whole. This finding is consistent with other studies

that demonstrate the positive effects of providing children and youth with opportunities for participation. These studies indicate that child participation empowers children and youth and strengthens their commitment to school initiatives and interventions. It also promotes the development of civic competencies, and strengthens leadership skills (Landsdown, 2001; Langhout & Thomas, 2010; Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Smith, 2010).

Nevertheless, it must be noted that participants reported that children benefit most from being able to participate. The benefits for the school and society were identified as secondary. This contrasts markedly with the literature, which establishes that including children's voices results in greater program effectiveness and the development of public policies that address their needs (Langhout & Thomas, 2010). There are many examples of societies that promote child participation both in and outside of schools. For example, several countries have led initiatives to establish child parliaments. Others, such as the United Kingdom, acknowledge in their educational policies the importance of including children in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of services, interventions, and initiatives (The Canadian International Development Agency, Child Protection Unit, 2004). This view is based on Article 12 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which was signed by all of the member states of the United Nations, except for the United States and Somalia (UN, 1989).

The fact that the school personnel did not conceive child participation as important for the school seems contradictory, given that the focus of the school is precisely the children. They are the ones who receive educational services and other services within the school context, but in turn, they are the ones who are denied a voice in the planning and evaluation processes of those same services. Transformative action in the school is generally limited to adults, who are

perceived as individuals with greater experience and expertise to perform these tasks. This view disregards the skills, capacities, and experiences of children and how they can significantly strengthen the school environment and the design of services for this population.

The contradiction is even greater when we observe that the data suggests that the school's personnel recognizes that child participation has a positive impact in the school's decision-making process, but their awareness does not translate into action. Upon exploring this apparent contradiction we believe that in spite the fact that the school personnel has a conceptual understanding of the benefit of child participation in school's decisions, they have little or no training on how to include their voice at the systemic level.

Recommendations

Being that many of the barriers for child participation are culturally embedded and affect systemic practices, policy transformations are needed. Initiatives at the school level need to be supported by policy transformations that make child and youth participation a priority. Hence, the Department of Education has the responsibility of leading the development of culturally appropriate strategies to empower children in their school communities and provide teachers and administrators with knowledge and skills to facilitate this process.

One model that could be employed is the one suggested by UNICEF. Although this plan is focused on the National level, it provides a roadmap for child engagement in the school environment. The plan consists of two main components: 1) develop a clear agenda and 2) develop support processes that involve children. This final suggestion stresses the importance of creating child-led groups (UNICEF, 2005). UNICEF's proposed approach emphasizes on systemic changes and supports for children and teachers that

results in the necessary cultural change for child participation. They also delineate five support strategies, which include: 1) Raising awareness and developing understanding about children's views, their rights and participation in society; 2) Developing capacities of children and adults in child participation; 3) Establishing standards for ethical and meaningful participation; 4) Building structures and mechanisms for child participation, and; 5) Allocating resources: financial, materials, tools, people. We strongly believe that partnering with academic institutions, particularly with researchers with CBPR experience may enhance the establishment and success of these strategies. Continuous summative and formative evaluations are also necessary to document effectiveness and make appropriate adjustments.

This study points to the need of training school personnel to provide them with a repertoire of strategies for encouraging child participation and generating spaces where children's voices can be heard. These strategies need to be integrated into university curriculums so that teachers and school administrators can develop skills early on. Furthermore, school support personnel should also be trained, including school police, administrative personnel, and cafeteria employees. The systemic training of all personnel will lay the groundwork towards developing a school culture that validates the voice of students and includes them in decisions within this context.

It is paramount that interventions deal with the sociocultural beliefs and values that limit child participation. These beliefs oftentimes equate respect with silence and generate social structures that perpetuate oppressive practices (Dworski-Riggs & Langhout, 2010). Social structures, such as schools, are upheld by operational policies that regulate the voice of children and other members of the community; thereby generating situations in which children who wish to participate are labeled as

challenging, confrontational and experiencing behavioral problems. We borrow from Freire and the feminist perspective to point out that this reality generates an oppressive situation in which those in power impede or regulate the voice of the oppressed (Freire, 2005; Riger, 1992; Stephens, 2012). Therefore, just as Serrano-García (1990) and Dworski-Riggs & Langhout (2010) establish, it is necessary to create structures within these settings that facilitate the participation of the oppressed, in this case children.

Study Limitations

We frame the results of this study within a series of limitations. The work presented here is the product of a discussion group held with school personnel. The opinions and suggestions written out on the pieces of paper were part of a group activity. This may have resulted in some people having felt uneasy with participating or stating certain opinions that were divergent from the rest of the group. Future studies should investigate this topic using other approaches such as in-depth interviews.

In spite of these limitations, this study presents valuable data for understanding and promoting child participation in school settings. If we want to promote children's voices, key adults in their context have to become allies in their social action. In order to do so, interventions to transform adults' sociocultural views of childhood, as well as activities for empowering children will be required. We need to acknowledge that children's point of views, abilities, and experiences enrich decision-making processes and result in more committed students, and future active citizens who promote social change.

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