Child participation in school governance: The case of prefects at a primary school in Lesotho

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This paper draws on literature that has theorised child participation within the sociology of childhood framework to examine how children participate in governance within school spaces. Four children aged between 13 and 17 (in grades six and seven) who serve as prefects at a primary school in Lesotho were participants in this study. Data was collected through a focus group interview and individual semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study indicate that authentic participation of children is limited in the school context. One of the key barriers to participation seems to be a hierarchical and authoritarian school management style. The ethos of control, discipline and authority stifles the process of child participation at the school. The main role of the prefects appears to be 'policing' and 'reporting' to the school hierarchy. Children's pursuit of authentic participation denotes that they construct themselves as active social agents, deserving meaningful participation in school governance. The conclusion points to the need to raise critical consciousness for teachers and school management to interrogate their own ideologies about children and childhood, and to challenge the authoritarian hierarchy of school management which impedes children's meaningful participation.

Keywords: child participation, Lesotho, children's voice and agency, school governance

Introduction

In recent years, three important trends converged to give impetus on the rights of the child in society. Firstly, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on 20 November 1989 (UNICEF, 1989). It came into force on September 2nd in 1990 and has been ratified by all but two countries of the 193 UN member states (those two being Somalia and the USA) throughout the early 1990s. This new focus within the UNCRC led to a paradigm shift within the sociology of childhood in thinking about children, young people and childhood. Children are now seen as competent social actors and agents of their own lives, entitled to have a voice, and to take part in public forums and in decisions affecting their lives (Mayall, 2002; Wyness, 1999). Davis & Edwards (2004) explain that this shift challenges the dominant discourse that constructs children and young people as having inadequate knowledge or competence to be participants in decision-making in society.

Secondly, it has been widely acknowledged that the UNCRC has served as a catalyst organisation for the focus on child participation in all matters affecting the child and in a range of social and cultural contexts and institutions (for example, McNeish & Gill, 2006). Pufall & Unsworth (2004) explain that the UNCRC represents children as full human beings with an identity of their own and as individuals who should be respected as independent citizens. Article 12 of the Convention states that in order for children to be able to express their views, it is necessary for adults to create the opportunities for them to do so.

Thirdly, as Skelton (2007) explains, the UNCRC introduced the right to 'participation' as the third P, alongside 'provision' and 'protection' as key rights of children. Since then, child participation has been a subject of much debate among professionals and organisations working with children. A large body of theoretical and practice-based literature has emerged to support and develop children's participation in organisations and institutions (for example, Arnott, 2008; Hart, 2008). Many international and national

children's organisations and initiatives have incorporated the concept of child participation in their objectives and policy documents (Lesotho NGO Coalition, 2000; UNICEF, 2006). Since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 'child participation' has been the subject of numerous development projects and academic research initiatives (Lansdown, 2001). In the next section, we examine in some depth the concept 'child participation', drawing on recent literature.

Conceptualising child participation

A review of literature on the aspect of 'child participation' suggests that theorising 'participation' has proved to be a complex task. Rampal (2008) asserts that the concept 'child participation' has held diverse connotations. However, there is agreement that child participation is one of the fundamental rights of children embedded in the in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2006). Brady (2007) explains that broadly child participation means engaging children in decisions that affect their lives, their community and the larger society. It involves supporting children to develop their own views, to think for themselves and to express their views effectively.

Voice and agency are two key concepts embedded in the new sociology of childhood framework (Mayall, 2002). These two principles enhance children's capability of contributing to society as active citizens. Voice refers to "that cluster of intentions, hopes, grievances, and expectations that children guard as their own" (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004: 8), and agency suggests that children are capable of independent thinking and are self-determining actors who can contribute to enhancing their lives. To put it simply, agency is how children articulate their voice. Smith (2007) explains that if one considers children to have participation rights, then the concept of children as agents and social actors has to be embraced.

There have been diverse perspectives on the goals of children's participation. Sinclair (2004) has suggested the following: to protect children's rights; to adhere to legal responsibilities; to improve services; to enhance decision-making; to promote the protection of children; to empower, which means building their self-esteem and skills to enable active citizenship. Matthews (2003) provides three alternative arguments based on education for citizenship, on fitting young people into society, and on strengthening young people's status in relation to adults. Consequently, the goal to achieve transformation of children's lives seems to be a critically important one. This relates to granting children experience of participation so that they can learn new skills, acquire confidence and build networks and relationships (O'Kane, 2007).

Thomas (2007) also differentiates between participation in collective decision-making and participation in decisions about children's individual lives. Arnott (2008) contends that there is a need to consider participation in terms of individual rights and collective rights. She suggests that if the goal of participation is development then it should focus on the child's individual rights. Hinton (2008), however cautions that if participation is tokenistic, it can reduce collective action. Arnott (2008) stresses that engagement between children and the public always involves power, and there is a need to examine the links between power and participation. She also argues that unequal relations between adults and children will impact on the quality of decision-making and involvement. In addition, Arnott draws a distinction between 'full participation' where every individual has equal power to shape decisions, and 'partial participation' where individuals may have an influence but the decision rests with others.

Various factors have been cited as impacting the authentic participation of children, including adult conceptions of childhood, for example, views about children's competence, concerns that children have to be protected from too much responsibility, institutional cultures and structures that are not child friendly, and a lack of skills on the part of adults for interacting with children (Moses, 2008; Wyness, 2005). Such factors limit children's meaningful participation in society's structures especially schools. Many scholars and researchers are now recognising that it is a child's intrinsic right to participate and that this participation should not be regarded as tokenism.

Literature suggests that many organisations and initiatives face challenges in moving from principled policy-based support for children's participation to embedding that commitment in everyday practice. There are not only structural barriers but also biases that emanate that result from dominant understandings of childhood (Hinton, 2008). Often 'adult agendas' prevail, in that children are not accorded power in

decision- making, due to the tendency of a top-down and adult-orientated approach to children's matters. Sinclair (2004) notes that in practice participation is often used simply to mean being listened to or consulted, rather than being given the opportunity to engage in active participation. Pavlovic (2001) has criticised the Children's Parliaments in Slovenia on the basis that they tend to be representative rather than participatory. In addition, children produce socially expected responses, adult messages are dominant, and there is a lack of effective feedback mechanisms. Begg (2004) explains that children's councils in Norway are criticised for not operating on children's terms. There is lack of recognition of children and young people as democratic agents, who have the potential to have an impact on governance structures.

An interesting theme that emerges in literature may be referred to as the protection versus participation debate. The discourse of protection implies the construction of children as dependent on adults and in need of care. In this debate the argument is that children's need for protection (by adults, from adults) would be compromised if they gain more access to social, economic and political resources (Hinton, 2008). In response to this, scholars argue that protection and the promotion of participation are supposed to be interactive and interrelated concepts, not opposite and irreconcilable categories. The challenge is to balance protection and participation. Furthermore, participation and autonomy are not the result of children's individual, isolated actions but they are social processes in which both adults and children are engaged. A network of relationships may empower children to gain in decision-making skills and self-expression (Hinton, 2008).

In light of the above discussion on child participation, we undertook a study on child participation in governance within school spaces. There is a paucity of empirical research emanating from the African context that examines ways in which children are participating in public forums and structures. It is hoped that this article will contribute to theoretical and practice-focused debates on children's participation more generally. The aim of the study was to examine child participation as it played out in the 'school prefects' governance structure at a primary school in Lesotho. Specifically, we sought to explore the following research questions:

What form has child participation taken at the primary school?

What has it meant to children involved, and for the school as an institution?

Research method and design

A qualitative research design was employed to examine the participation of school prefects in school governance at a primary school in Lesotho.

Context of the study and participants

The study was conducted in Lesotho. Lesotho is a country whose population stands at 2,130,819, 34% of whom are children between ages 0-**14 years** (Index Mundi, 2010). Children's rights are protected by law in Lesotho. The Government of Lesotho has ratified a number of international instruments which protect the rights of children, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 138 on the minimum age for employment, and ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour. Lesotho is also a signatory to the Millennium Declaration, which was adopted by all 189 UN member states in September 2000. The Lesotho Child Protection and Welfare Bill is highly commended in many countries as the legislation that covers all issues and challenges that pertain to children better than any other child legislation bill in Africa (Staff Member, Afrol, 2008).

By definition Lesotho recognises anyone below the age of 18 as a child. According to the Lesotho Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (LCN, 2009) child participation in Lesotho is limited. It has been argued that this may be because Lesotho is a cultural state and that it upholds its cultural values. Certain of these values prohibit the participation of children in important matters in the country (Lesotho Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (LCN, 2009).

The research site was a primary school selected through convenience sampling. The authors (of this article) had over the years developed a good relationship with the school through previous interactions with the principal and one of the teachers.

Four children (grade six and seven) who serve as prefects at this primary school participated. Internationally, it is evident that prefects work with and for the school community to ensure that the school is a well run organisation. School prefects play an important role in the day-to-day running of the school. They are role models for the school and are generally selected jointly by teachers and learners. Their roles may include: monitoring learners' behaviour during school breaks, assisting with school functions, ensuring that learners are adhering to school rules, and assisting in school safety programmes. A prefect is also expected to support and advise their peers, ensure that discipline codes are adhered to, and liaise with school staff on an ongoing basis (see Oduro, 2007).

Data collection process

Data was collected through one focus group interview as well as individual semi-structured interviews with four school prefects. The interviews were conducted in Sesotho. These interviews were designed to prompt the prefects to discuss aspects of their lives related to the nature of participation in the school governance, their experiences of participation, as well as possibilities for and barriers to participation within the school context.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent to conduct the study was obtained from the school principal, and the four prefects who participated. Informed consent was also sought from the parents of the four participating prefects. The school and students were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Students were given a detailed explanation about the underlying intentions of the research. Children were told that their participation was voluntary and that they had the power to end participation at any time during the research.

Data analysis

Data was transcribed and translated into English. Coding involved identifying broad categories that described the nature of child participation. Both emic and etic categories were defined. Emic categories represented insider's views such as terms, actions, and explanations that were distinctively related to child participation. The aim was to represent the situation from the participants' perspective. Etic categories represented the researchers' interpretations, concepts, and explanations drawn from our review of the literature or our personal research experiences (Ramsuran & Lurwengu, 2008). The second phase of data analysis involved theorising the coded data in search of themes that would exemplify the situated nature of child participation in the context of the school.

The findings of the study

Overall, the study revealed various limits and tensions within child participation processes related to the prefect structure at the school. Three key themes that emerged are discussed below.

Child participation: on whose terms?

The study revealed that the school has an authoritarian and hierarchical ethos and a culture of control and regulation which without doubt impacts on the day-to-day experiences of the school prefects. Harber (2002) asserts that owing to the origins of mass schooling as a form of social control, the predominant form of schooling internationally tends to be authoritarian with learners having little control or power over the school curriculum or school organisation. The main characteristic of authoritarian relationships is the perceived right of teachers to punish, control and maintain order in the traditional school setting. Comments by students in the study suggest that the hierarchical culture at the school shapes the attitudes

held by teachers and school management towards children. The prefects are not accorded power in final decision-making as reflected in the responses of the prefects interviewed:

> *We do not meet. We take directives about what they have to do from the office, and from the teachers. There is no time when we gather together to discuss.*

> *The work of the prefects is to see that they help teachers with school work such as see that sports is done – and inform the office about things that learners are not happy about, also to organise entertainment in the school… to see to it that learners do not complain about teachers. The complaints must go to the office through the prefects.*

> *Prefects are nominated from all classes and the names appointed are given to the teachers who select those who have to be prefects.*

> *The rules for learners are set by us and we show the teachers what we wrote, the teacher takes them to the principal to edit them.*

Child participation appears to be adult led with the prefects playing a limited part in decision-making. They have no idea what happens when information is passed on to the next authority figure in the hierarchy. There are no channels for feedback to prefects. This raises questions about the ideologies and conceptions of childhood held by school management and teachers. It does appear that the adults have normative conceptions of children. Thus, children are not perceived to be social actors who have the competence to make a meaningful contribution to school governance.

The prefects' responses suggest there is an over-emphasis on the end products of participation, for example, on submitting documents and complaints to teachers or to the 'office'. Thomas (2007) points out that in child participation initiatives, there is often a tension related to whether the importance of 'participation' lies in the processes involved or in its outcomes. In this particular school context, findings suggest that examining the processes may help participants focus on the power relations involved.

In pursuit of authentic participation, learners voiced their unhappiness with the quality of participation they experienced in the school as prefects. They understood that they are a part of school governance and yet are excluded from decision-making and their opinions are not valued. They clearly have views and opinions about issues that concern them. Their responses also suggest that they do have agency and that they want to be acknowledged and have their voices heard:

> *We would want teachers to not hold back learners in class during play time as a punishment. They should remember that as children we like to utilise that time.*

> *Apart from that, we need autonomy to fully run the prefect organisation, meet and plan our work and what we need to do, deal with learners' issues by ourselves. If we need help we will then ask from teachers and the principal. Also the teachers must make follow up on our work because other prefects after being selected no longer do their duties. If there could be a suggestion box, the principal and teacher will understand what we want and what other learners would like to see change.*

> *The other thing is that we do not meet as prefects to discuss and decide on learners' problems. Always when they have problems we forward those to the teachers or principal without discussing them as prefects or even attempting to solve them. Teachers decide for us, if we had power to conclude on matters that arise and give to the teachers what we had decided on; that will make our work easier.*

> *Also we need some incentives for we compromise our studies for prefect duties. We think this will motivate us. Things like certificates … so that wherever you go, you will be known to have the leadership skills.*

In the above excerpts it becomes evident that the children are actively claiming spaces for fuller participation. Shier (2001) suggests the following levels of authentic participation: children's voices are heard, they are given space to make their views known and they are a part of decision-making processes. Children should also be allowed to share power and responsibility for decision-making. Moses (2008) argues that children are competent and that they have always participated in the home, in families, in

school, and in communities. However, there is limited acknowledgement of such participation by the adults in this school context. One of the reasons for this may be related to how those in power construct children and childhood.

Pressures on children's participation

In the study, the data revealed tensions experienced by the children in their engagement with teachers and school management, and with their peers. Children's comments in both the focus group and individual interviews suggested that there were occasions when they felt pressured and constrained in their work. They at times also felt intimidated and manipulated. The critical incident related below illustrates this:

> *There was a time when grade seven learners were not happy with their teachers claiming that they are behind and requesting teachers to teach them during winter holidays. The teachers wanted the children to pay them extra money for that work. The learners argued that teachers are the one who did not keep up the pace so they should teach them for free. This nearly caused a strike. As prefects we had to intervene. The learners wrote their concerns and we handed them to the principal.*

It was evident that children did not have the capacity to deal with the student-teacher crisis in question which in reality was an issue for school management to handle rather than the school prefects alone.

The study also found that children experience tensions when carrying out certain roles assigned to them by teachers. The prefects face challenges especially when their collective interests as students at the school are at stake. Certain children alluded to the fact that their safety was in jeopardy. At the school, prefects are expected to engage in acts of 'policing' for teachers. One of their roles is to write down the names of children who speak Sesotho at school. This is in contravention of a school rule which states that English is the only language to be spoken on the school premises. If the rule is violated, students are punished.

> *When we have to write down learners who speak Sesotho, the older children beat us.*

O'Toole (2008) points out that participation cannot be genuine if children do not understand the consequences of their involvement in institutional structures. He stresses that there are complex ethical issues that need to be considered in the participation process. The most important issue relates to the protection of the child – a key right in the UNCRC. Ackerman et al. (2003) explain that protection requires a focus on the issue of power relations between children and children, and adults and children. This suggests that child participation initiatives need to include careful monitoring and evaluation elements, and these have to be tested against the rights embedded in the UNCRC. The question to ask is: Is the children's participation in their best interests and are their rights protected?   Children should not be pressured or made to feel manipulated within school structures.

Furthermore, in the critical incident recounted above, children were not involved in the resolution of the crisis. Dhakal (2009) asserts that often child participation is adult- centric. Children are manipulated and given roles to play while adults hold complete authority. A process of dialogue, transparency and accountability needs to be built into child participation initiatives so children can develop further knowledge and skills to be active participants. They need to learn various skills, for example, understanding why specific options are followed, or why particular decisions are made.

Conclusion

The study highlights that involving children in school governance is a complex task. A key issue that emerges is the importance of raising awareness and a critical consciousness amongst teachers and school management around the dynamics of child participation. First and foremost, there is a critical need for adults to interrogate their own ideologies about children and childhood. Clacherty and Donald (2007) explain that it may be a challenge for adults to understand and support processes to empower children when they are not aware of what participation entails. They would need to understand that child participation often involves challenging children's traditional ideologies about children and childhood, and examining the relationships of power between adults and children.

Many scholars have drawn attention to a greater need for micro-level, situated understandings of participation initiatives structures and spaces (Hinton, 2008; Bray & Moses, 2011; Sonn, Santens & Ravau, 2011). Questions to ask are: What dominant discourses of children and childhood influence participation practices and processes? Is children's agency a central focus? Is the participation of children active and visible? What are the barriers to child participation? What factors support child participation? Are children's voices truly heard and listened to? Is there a need for organisational change to ensure authentic participation? Are there effective feedback, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place? Are children being empowered through their participation? These questions are crucial to transformation in the school context as researched in this study.

Acknowledgements

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