



Featured Article

Children's rights and school psychology: Children's right to participation ☆

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ABSTRACT

The Convention on the Rights of the Child detailed an international imperative to fulfilling, protecting, and respecting the rights of every child. In particular, the Convention set out a clear mandate for guaranteeing opportunities for children to be heard on all matters of concern to them. The attainment of these goals involves respecting and valuing children as active participants in the educational process. If fully implemented, the right of children to express views and have them taken seriously, throughout the school environment, would represent one of the most profound transformations in moving towards a culture of respect for children's rights, for their dignity and citizenship, and for their capacities to contribute significantly towards their own well-being. These values and principles are consistent with those of the school psychology profession, thus, school psychologists are encouraged to be at the Center of the process advocating and actualizing the Convention in schools throughout the world.

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1. Introduction

I don't know about my rights, but you don't know about my life.

[~6 year old boy from Bangladesh (United Nations Children's Fund, 2003).]

"If you had a problem in the Black community, and you brought in a group of White people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously. In fact, there'd probably be a public outcry. It would be the same for women's issues or gay issues. But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us."

[~Jason, 17 years old, from Bronx, NY (Lansdown, 2011a).]

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"It was my first experience of hearing a document based on the voices of children including my own voice. After listening to it, I thought, 'Children can change the world if they are given a chance. We have to fight for that chance.'"

[~Jehanzeb, 12 years old, from Pakistan (Lansdown, 2011a).]

Everyone has a stake in education – parents, teachers, employers, the state, and of course, children themselves. The interests of all are affected by the quality, nature, and outcomes of education systems. However, the rights and needs of children within the system can easily get forgotten. It is rare for governments, for example, to enlist the perspectives of children when discussing education legislation, policy, or delivery. Of course, in many respects the agenda for education is the same for all the stakeholders. Everyone would subscribe to the need for high standards, served by well-qualified teachers, an appropriate curriculum, and adequate resourcing. But education needs to go beyond academic attainment. The [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(1989; hereinafter referred to as the Convention\)](#), which was established by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 44/25 of November 1989 and entered into force in September 1990, is now virtually universally ratified. The Convention demands a broad vision of education. In particular, Article 29 elaborates the aims of education in terms of promoting the fullest possible development of each child and helping each child acquire the values, skills, and confidence necessary to contribute to democratic life.

The attainment of these goals involves respecting and valuing children as active players in the educational process (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010). If fully implemented, the right of children to express views and have them taken seriously, throughout the school environment, would represent one of the most profound transformations in moving towards a culture of respect for children's rights, for their dignity and citizenship, and for their capacities to contribute significantly towards their own well-being. Indeed, respect for participation rights within education is fundamental to the realisation of the right to education. As such the Convention has significant implications for the school psychology profession. Unfortunately, a culture of engagement of children either in the classroom or the wider school environment remains relatively rare across the world. Authoritarianism, discrimination, and violence continue to characterise schooling in many countries. Such environments are conducive to neither the expression of children's views, nor to those views being taken seriously. Indeed, many children fail or drop out of school because of a pedagogical environment that ignores their views and denies them opportunities for participation. It is of critical importance, therefore, to strengthen understanding of the meaning of participation and its application to the school environment.

The purpose of this article is to provide information to school psychologists around the world regarding the Convention's emphasis on children's right to participation and explore implications for practice aimed at actualizing the goals of the Convention. The first section describes the concept of participation as related to the Convention, with particular emphasis on Article 12, linkages with other provisions in the Convention, and the application to students of all ages. The second section discusses potential contributions of recognising and respecting children's participation rights, including promoting and protecting individual development, enhancing processes and outcomes, and promoting citizenship and respect for others. The third section explores opportunities for participation within education, such as involving children in decision affecting their education, participatory child-centred learning, democratic learning environments, and participation in developing education policy and national student organisations. The fourth section highlights the opportunities for school psychologists in respecting children's participation in their professional practice, including systems level advocacy, policy development, student involvement in developing individualized education plans, and leadership in measuring and evaluating children's participation. The final section identifies future directions towards understanding and actualizing children's participation, emphasising the importance of further scholarship to understand the process and outcomes associated with numerous child participation initiatives throughout the world. As discussed more thoroughly below, given the roles of school psychologists around the world (Jimerson, Oakland, & Farrell, 2007; Jimerson, Skokut, Cardenas, Malone, & Stewart, 2008), school psychologists can play a major role in contributing to the realisation of children's participation rights at all levels of the education system – within their individual practice and within the systems, institutions, and agencies in which they work.

2. The concept of participation

Article 12 of the Convention states that each child is capable of forming views and has the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting them, and that one's views must be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. It is a unique provision in human rights law. It recognises that, although for children, unlike adults, there is no automatic presumption in favour of autonomy or independent decision-making; they are, nevertheless, entitled to respect as human beings, with rights to be involved in decisions that affect them. As such, it provides a balance between, on the one hand, the engagement of children as active agents in their own lives, and on the other, their entitlement to additional protection during the period of childhood.

2.1. Understanding Article 12 of the Convention

It is important to be clear about what Article 12 does and does not mean. Article 12 does not give children the right to complete autonomy. It does not give them the right to take control of all decisions affecting them. It does not give them the right to act in ways that ride roughshod over the rights of others – whether those others are students, teachers, parents, or administrative staff. However, it does mean that children should be involved when decisions about them are being made, that they should be afforded space to articulate issues that matter to them, and that adults should give weight to what children say in

accordance with their age and maturity. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter referred to as the Committee), the international body charged with responsibility for monitoring the progress of governments in fulfilling their obligations under the Convention, has provided detailed guidance to governments on how they are expected to interpret and implement Article 12 (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

2.1.1. Application to children of all ages

First, Article 12 must be understood to apply to children of all ages (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, paragraphs 20, 21). The Committee stressed that very young children have views and are able to communicate them. Thus, the onus rests with adults to create the necessary time and space to learn to listen to children's different forms of expression whether that is through, for example, nonverbal communication, body language, play, drawing, or painting. Second, Article 12 applies both to children as individuals as well as to children as a group or constituency (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, paragraph 9). Thus, the right to be heard is relevant both to an individual child who is being bullied at school and also to the entire student body who want to be involved in the establishing or refining a school policy addressing appropriate student conduct, bullying, and victimization. The Committee argued that the obligations to ensure that children are able to express themselves on "all matters affecting the child" (p. 4, Article 12) means that the scope of Article 12 must be drawn very widely. It extends to many aspects of policy and decisions impacting children beyond the more obvious issues of education, health, child welfare, and play, and recreation (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, paragraphs 26, 27). Article 12 specifies the right of children to be heard in any proceeding affecting them (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, paragraphs 32–34). This right extends to criminal and civil proceedings as well as any administrative proceedings that are making decisions that are likely to impact their lives. An administrative proceeding might include, for example, proceedings concerning a school placement, suspension, or exclusion from school or an assessment relating to the provision of additional educational support.

2.1.2. Giving youth serious consideration

The Committee made it very clear that it is not enough simply to listen to children. Their views must also be given serious consideration in accordance with age and maturity (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, paragraphs 28–31). For instance, young people in Canada argued at a conference on political power, "The right to speak is the right to be listened to; in practice there is a gap between speaking and being listened to." (The Landon Pearson Resource Centre for the Study of Childhood and Children's Rights, 2007, p. 5). The views of children, whether in individual or more collective matters, must be given due weight. Thus, where it is not possible to reflect those views in any decision or subsequent actions, efforts should be made to communicate to children the reasons why the decision was made as it was and how their views were considered.

The Convention acknowledged the important role played by parents and others with responsibility for children, including teachers, in providing children with direction and guidance. However, Article 12 also includes recognition of children's evolving capacities, a principle through which to interpret the realisation of rights. Clearly, the capacity of a preschool child to be involved in decisions is clearly different from that of a 17-year-old. It therefore requires that any direction or guidance is afforded in ways that recognise developmental considerations, such that, as children grow older, they become more capable of taking responsibility for themselves. In other words, children should be given every opportunity to be involved in matters of concern to them, and as they acquire the understanding and maturity necessary to take decisions for themselves, they should be enabled to do so. Obviously, the extent to which children are able to begin to take responsibility for decisions will depend both on the level of competence of the child, the type of decision involved, and its implications for themselves and others.

2.1.3. Links with other provisions in the Convention

The Convention also embodies rights to freedom of expression, religion, thought and conscience, and association and as well as to information and privacy – thus recognising children as individuals entitled to their own views and choices. For instance, Article 3 demands that the best interests of children must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them. The Committee emphasised that when determining children's best interests, it is essential to take account of their views in accordance with age and maturity. Indeed, it argues that there can be "no correct application of Article 3 if the components of Article 12 are not respected" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, paragraphs 70–74).

Finally, in relation to the aims of education, outlined in Article 29, the Committee made clear the importance that it attaches to participation:

Children do not lose their human rights by virtue of passing through the school gates. Thus, for example, education must be provided in a way that respects the inherent dignity of the child and enables the child to express their views freely in accordance with Article 12 (1) and to participate in school life. ... The participation of children in school life, the creation of school communities and student councils, peer education and peer counselling, and the involvement of children in school disciplinary proceedings should be promoted as part of the process of learning and experiencing the realization of rights. [(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2001, p. 9)]

Together, all these rights, which recognise children as active agents or citizens in their own lives, have been conceptualised as "participation" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009). Of course, children have always participated in many ways within societies – for example, at the community level, through play and the arts, and in their economic contribution to

their families. In the context of the Convention, however, the term participation has evolved and is now very widely used as short-hand to describe the process of children expressing their views and having them taken seriously. Participation can be defined as an ongoing process of children's expression and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them. It requires information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect as well as assurance that full consideration of children's views is given, taking into account the child's age and maturity (Lansdown, 2011a).

2.2. Contributions of recognising and respecting children's participation rights

There are widely held views that children lack capacity to make informed contributions to decision-making, that doing so may place them at risk, and that their participation will have adverse effects on family and school life. However, the experience of child participation around the world over the past 20 years provides information and insights revealing not only that these concerns are unfounded but also that participation has the potential to yield a widespread positive impact. The same positive impact can be found in schools in both developed and developing countries as revealed in initiatives from countries as broad-ranging as Sierra Leone, Ghana, Egypt, Nicaragua, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Denmark (Lansdown, 2011a; United Nations Children's Fund, 2006). Whereas an extensive review of each of these initiatives and associated outcomes is beyond the scope of this brief article, Lansdown (2011a) provides a more detailed analysis. Also, the United Nations Children's Fund (2006) *Child and Youth Participation Resource Guide* provides a youth participation guide with information and links to numerous initiatives throughout the world. The *Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation* (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010) includes a more detailed discussion of many initiatives in countries around the world. In addition, Checkoway (2011) examines contemporary knowledge about youth participation, including general propositions that are substantiated by research or practice. Indeed, recognising the right of the child to express views and to participate in various activities, according to her or his evolving capacities, has been reported to be beneficial for the child; for the family; for the community, the school, the state; and for democracy (Lansdown, 2011a; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010).

2.2.1. Promoting personal development

The realisation of the right to be heard and have views given due weight serves to promote the capacities of children. There is a growing body of evidence that routinely taking children's views and experiences into account – within the family, at school and in other settings – helps develop children's self-esteem, cognitive abilities, social skills, and respect for others (Covell & Howe, 2005; Kirby & Bryson, 2002; Kränzl-Nagl & Zartler, 2010). It thereby contributes directly to the aims of education embodied in the Convention. Through participation, children acquire skills, build competencies, extend aspirations, and gain confidence. A virtuous circle is created. The more children participate, the more effective their contributions, and the greater the impact on their development. Children acquire competence in direct relation to the scope available to them to exercise agency over their own lives. Indeed, the most effective preparation for building self-confidence is to achieve a goal for oneself and not merely to observe someone else achieving that goal (Chawla & Heft, 2002).

Evidence of how much more children can achieve through a democratic and socially relevant education can be seen in the *Escuela Nueva* "New Schools" programme in Colombia (Hart, 1997). Through this programme, participating schools have introduced a flexible curriculum with mixed-age classrooms that allow children to learn individually and in groups, with the teacher functioning as a facilitator. Participating schools have also developed structures that enable children to function as a democratic community. For example, one participating school developed a forest conservation project in which the children were seeking to save the mountain slope by planting native species of trees. Part of the challenge was for the children to educate local villagers about the problem of using wood for firewood and for sale. The children collected seeds from existing trees to establish a nursery, which would ultimately result in replanting all the slopes with native trees in close collaboration with the adults of the community. The strength of the programme lay in the wide-range of competencies children acquire, backed up the opportunity to learn through practice. Beyond the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, they learned environmental science, development and sustainability, processes of democracy and decision-making, how to formulate and present arguments, and skills of negotiation. A key element of the educational process was that children learned by being respected to take responsibility for the project, with the support of committed adults.

2.2.2. Enhancing decision-making and outcomes

Adults do not always have sufficient insight into children's lives to be able to make informed and effective decisions on the legislation, policies, and programmes designed for children. Many rights can only be effectively fulfilled respected and protected with children's active participation. Creating opportunities for individual children to be heard is vital to ensure that appropriate decisions are made in respect of the child's perspective, for example, school placement, custody in divorce and separation cases, adoption, placement in care, juvenile justice, health care, or monitoring standards of care in institutions. Children have unique bodies of knowledge about their lives, needs, and concerns – together with ideas and views that derive from their direct experiences. Consideration of children's perspectives needs to inform all decision-making processes affecting their lives. Decisions that are fully informed by children's own perspectives will be more relevant, more effective, and more sustainable.

There is emerging evidence that participation can produce enhanced outcomes (Lansdown, 2011a; United Nations Children's Fund, 2006). For instance, a pilot study for the United Kingdom Government found a positive association between participation (e.g., student participation in school governance and policies) and exam attainment at 16 years, when comparing secondary schools that prioritise student participatory activities with other similar secondary schools that did not prioritise such participatory activities

(Hannam, 2001). Additionally, although in the early stages of development, research in Norway has shown that there are clear positive relations between the general well-being of students, their involvement in learning, academic self-esteem, and achievement in some subjects (Hannam, 2003). Research examining the HighScope early childhood programmes has found that more participatory settings – nurseries in which teachers respond to children's self-initiated play in a loosely structured but supportive environment and the High/Scope approach in which children “plan, do, and review” their own activities – are associated with more positive long-term outcomes than nursery settings in which teachers focus more narrowly on academic knowledge (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield and Nores, 2005; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997). Longitudinal data over several decades revealed that these positive outcomes in participatory settings included a significantly lower percentage needing treatment for emotional impairment or disturbance during schooling, a higher percentage planning to go to university, increased numbers doing voluntary work, and a reduced risk of offending. Teachers explained that they feel listening to children improves their teaching practice. Recent research into students as researchers in school settings demonstrates that this type of participatory activity can give less experienced teachers confidence and renew the enthusiasm of more experienced teachers (Bragg & Fielding, 2003). Bragg and Fielding (2003) discuss assorted research documenting other benefits, such as improved relationships within a learning environment, greater respect for teachers, increased commitment from students and enhanced attitudes to learning, resulting in improved attendance, and completion of homework.

A school programme (for school years 7, 8, and 9) emphasising respect of children's rights (Rights Respecting Schools) that was developed by UNICEF in the United Kingdom, has revealed similar outcomes to those early childhood programmes discussed by Bragg and Fielding (2003). This programme teaches and supports schools to model and respect rights in all relationships, including those between teachers and students and those between students (Rights Respecting Schools, 2012). An independent evaluation comparing students over time, across over 30 schools fully introducing the programme found improvements in social relationships, behaviour, and achievement among students of all age groups (Sebba & Robinson, 2010). Students in schools using this programme were more respectful and helpful to others and less aggressive and disruptive. They showed greater respect for the school environment; were more careful with books, desks, and school equipment; participated more in the classroom and in extracurricular activities such as clubs and school councils; and showed enhanced academic engagement and achievement than those students in schools not employing this programme. The students also improved critical thinking skills, showed more confidence in tackling new tasks, increased test scores, and demonstrated increased self-regulatory capacity and awareness that the responsibilities they have learned are the concomitants of their rights. The teachers in schools employing this programme reported overall positive effect of the rights respecting schools programme on their teaching and relationships within the school. They also reported fewer feelings of exhaustion as a direct result of their work, felt more energized when dealing with students, experienced less frustration with teaching, and reported an increase in a sense of personal achievement over the years of implementation. A particularly important finding was that, over the years examined, the implementation of the rights-respecting schools approach became self-perpetuating through its positive outcomes on students and teachers (Sebba & Robinson, 2010).

2.2.3. Protecting children

The right to express views and have them taken seriously is a powerful tool through which to challenge situations of violence, abuse, threat, injustice, or discrimination. The self-esteem and confidence acquired through participation empowers children to challenge abuses of their rights. Furthermore, adults can only act to protect children if they are informed about what is happening in children's lives – and often, it is only the children who can provide that information.

Children have, traditionally, been denied both the knowledge that they are entitled to protection from violence, abuse, and injustice, and also the mechanisms through which to challenge these ills. The consequent silencing of children and the abuse they experience has, throughout history, had the impact of protecting abusers rather than children. This pattern is vividly reflected in the series of Commissions of Inquiry set up in the United Kingdom during the 1990s to investigate child abuse in institutional care (e.g., Kirkwood, 1993; Levy & Kahan, 1991). It has been further demonstrated by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse established by the Irish Government in 2000. Its report, published in 2009, exposed horrifying levels of severe and persistent physical and sexual abuse of children that were able to continue unchallenged for many years, with the children concerned powerless to protect themselves (Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009). Research evidence of the disproportionate sexual and physical violence against children with disabilities reveals the same pattern (United Nations Children's Fund, 2013). Each of these reports provides eloquent testimony to the damaging impact of cultures where children are denied a voice, where no mechanisms are in place through which they can report or seek help, and where there are prevailing assumptions that children do not tell the truth. By contrast, where children are encouraged to articulate what is happening to them and provided with the necessary procedures through which they can raise concerns, violations of rights are far more easily exposed (Willow, 2010). Violence against children in families, schools, and juvenile detention centres, or exploitative child labour will be tackled more effectively if children themselves are enabled to tell their stories to those people with the authority to take appropriate action.

2.2.4. Promoting citizenship, tolerance, and respect for others

Respecting children and providing them with opportunities to participate in matters of concern to them is one way of encouraging them to believe in themselves, to gain confidence, and to learn how to negotiate decision making with other people. Children's involvement in school councils, groups, clubs, committees, nongovernmental organisations, boards, unions, and other forms of organisation offers opportunities for strengthening civil society, learning how to contribute towards community development, and recognising that it is possible to make a positive difference. Participation also offers opportunities for children from diverse backgrounds to build a sense of belonging, solidarity, justice, responsibility, caring, and sensitivity.

Democracy requires a citizenry with the understanding, skills, and commitment to build and support its institutions. It is through participation that children can develop those capacities – starting with negotiations over decision-making within the family and through to resolving conflicts in school and contributing to policy developments at the local or national level. Participation can equip children to learn to respect differences, resolve conflicts peacefully, and strengthen their capacities to arrive at win–win solutions. Democracy requires both direct and indirect participation. Children can either participate directly, representing themselves as individuals, or have representatives who participate on their behalf. Such representatives must have a clear mandate from the group they represent and an equally clear accountability to that group. Supporting a child's right to be heard in the early years is integral to nurturing citizenship over the long term. In this way, the values of democracy are embedded in the child's approach to life – a far more effective grounding for democracy than a sudden transfer of power at the age of 18 years. Through experience of active participation, children also learn that human rights involve reciprocity and mutual respect and are not a route to fulfilling individual needs and potentials.

An initiative in Karnataka, India illustrates the benefits of participation (Lolichen, 2006). Concerned for Working Children (2004), a children's nongovernmental organisation, was asked to support a localised planning process to assess community needs and develop a 5-year plan, with the active involvement of its constituencies, including children. The children (ages 6–18 years) involved in the initiative worked on the development of comprehensive plans, involving statistics and data, accurate and informative maps, records of the history of their villages, and evidence of degradation of resources. Education and school-related issues arose in all the children's plans including concerns relating to compound walls, libraries, high school inaccessibility, school playgrounds, drinking water, toilets, midday meals, and teachers. The involvement of children made a major difference to the planning process. It was widely recognised that their plans were a significant improvement on those of the adults, and their involvement rejuvenated the village councils, with officials and elected representatives gaining a deeper understanding of village needs and concerns. It also strengthened participatory processes, with children's enthusiasm and compassion leading to a greater sense of ownership of the plans by the whole community. Furthermore, it is anticipated that those children who have had a positive experience of participation in governance, will carry that with them into adulthood, and will likely continue to participate in their community governance.

3. Opportunities for participation within education

Creating the opportunity for children's right to be heard within education requires a significant cultural change at all levels of the system. It necessitates not only organisational or procedural adaptation but differences in the fundamental relationships between adults and children. The following includes a discussion of opportunities for further involving children in their education.

3.1. Involvement of children in individual decisions affecting their education

When decisions are made about a child's education, such as a change of school, a proposal to hold the child back for a year, or placement in a particular setting, or to exclude from school, efforts should be made to enable the child to express their perspectives on the issue before any decision is made. The right to be heard also requires that systems are in place for children to challenge or complain about decisions or actions that they consider to be unjust, discriminatory, or abusive. In some countries, the right of children to be involved in such processes is embodied in legislation. For example, in Norway, the law provides that children have full autonomy on all education issues from the age of 15 years, and in Denmark, schools are required to draw up complaints procedures for all students. However, even where no such mandatory right to be heard exists, policies can be developed to introduce and establish the principle as a matter of standard practice.

3.2. Participatory child-centred learning

Schools in many parts of the world continue to conceptualise education as a one way process of disseminating information. The Convention, however, challenged this approach, emphasising the right of children to be recognised as active contributors to their own learning, rather than passive recipients. Accordingly, educational environments, including early-years provision, should enable and encourage children to take an active role in the process of their own learning, through interactive learning methodologies that create stimulating and participatory learning environments (United Nations Children's Fund/United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2007). The role of teachers and others involved in creating or strengthening learning opportunities is to facilitate self-directed learning rather than simply transmitting knowledge. Through active participation, children can be helped to acquire skills in thinking, analysing, investigating, creating, and applying knowledge to achieve their optimum potential.

3.3. Democratic school environments

Beyond the actual pedagogy of the classroom, it is important that children are acknowledged as democratic participants throughout the school environment. Many governments have proposed or established a legal framework obligating every school to facilitate the establishment of democratic procedures through which children can express their views (Lansdown, 2011a). However, where such provision does not exist, schools themselves can promote environments in which children are engaged as active participants at all levels. Opportunities can be created for children to be involved in decision-making processes in the

school for example, through class councils, school councils, and student representation on school boards and committees, where they will have the opportunity to express their views on the development and implementation of school policies. In addition, children can be involved in peer education and in providing mentorship for younger children; advising on issues such as design of schools and playgrounds; developing and providing feedback and evaluation on teaching methods and the curriculum; serving as mediators to resolve conflicts; recruitment and appraisal of teachers; providing guidance on strategies to eliminate discrimination, bullying, or corporal punishment in schools (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Student participation can also contribute to making the curriculum more relevant to children's reality; "circle time," a process some schools employ whereby at the end of each day children come together in a circle to discuss issues of concern to them, identify problems and explore solutions; and, establishing the indicators to monitor the extent to which a school is respecting the rights of all its members and taking part in a process of regular evaluation of compliance with those indicators. Children can then share in the responsibility of developing strategies for improving practices.

3.4. Participation in education policy

Children can be involved at the local and national levels commenting on all aspects of education policy, including the development of school curricula, teaching methods, school structures, standards, budgeting and resources, and child protection systems. Support and encouragement can be given to the development of independent children's organisations, which can play a role in monitoring and evaluating the quality of education provided in schools and respect for children's rights in the education system. In Sweden, for example, the National Agency for Education, which is responsible for a programme of national evaluation, regularly consults with students to find out what they think about school (Davies & Kirkpatrick, 2000). Children are asked for information on how their experience in schools respects and promotes rights and obligations, social development, and the development of knowledge and competence.

3.5. Participation in national student organisations

Some countries have supported the establishment of national student organisations or unions that can provide a forum for children. For instance, the Asian Youth Council, the Arab Youth Union, the African Youth Network, the Caribbean Federation of Youth, the European Youth Forum, the Latin American Youth Forum, the Pacific Youth Council, the Pan-African Youth Movement, are examples of infrastructures established to provide representation and participation of youth in matters of local and regional importance (see Wittkamper, 2002, for a comprehensive listing of youth unions and organisations around the world). Not only do such organisations provide an invaluable opportunity for students to gain experience of democratic engagement, but also they offer a space where they can share and develop ideas about how to strengthen the education system, provide feedback to government on the impact of education legislation and policies, advocate and promote the right to education for all children, share ideas for including marginalised children in school, and organise social and cultural activities both nationally and within local communities to promote awareness of the role of schools and the education they are providing. In these ways, student organisations can serve as a positive force within society and provide governments with an invaluable source of information and expertise to inform policy making. However, these organisations must be autonomous and independent of government and free of political control or manipulation.

3.6. The role of school psychologists in respecting children's participation

Clearly, school psychologists can play a major role in contributing to the realisation of children's participation rights at all levels of the education system—within their individual practice and within the systems, institutions, and agencies in which they work. Furthermore, they can utilise their direct experience of children's voices to influence the wider public policy field that impacts on children's lives. For example, within their organisation's position statement on child rights, the United States National Association of School Psychologists (National Association of School Psychologists, 2012) "recognizes that school psychologists play a pivotal role in promoting respect for and the realisation of child rights and that their contributions are best made in partnership with parents, educators, schools, and their communities" (p. 3). Furthermore, school psychologists are well positioned to operationalize the Convention in their professional practice and to serve as advocates who promote child rights at systemic and policy levels, as articulated by the International School Psychology Association (ISPA) & Child Rights Education for Professionals, 2010. In addition, in 2008 the Division 16 (school psychology) of the American Psychological Association established a social justice and child rights working group to facilitate the professional development of school psychologists in the promotion of social justice and child rights, including contributions to a child's rights curriculum for school psychologists (Division 16 (School Psychology) Social Justice and Child Rights Working Group, 2013). The following describes several ways in which school psychologists may contribute to actualizing the Convention.

3.7. Professional practice

School psychologists provide a range of services (e.g., consultation, prevention, intervention, and assessment) in multiple settings, with services directed at individuals (e.g., students, parents, and educators) and systems (e.g., family, classrooms, schools, school systems, and community organisations). Child rights should be central to the work in each of these contexts and school psychologists should continue to evaluate their own services and the incorporation of child rights into individual practices. For example,

relationships with children need to be rooted in a commitment to listening to and valuing their perspectives. In order to ensure that children are provided with meaningful opportunities to be heard, it is important that they have access to appropriate information in forms that are consistent with their level of understanding. It is also important that sufficient time and space is made available and that they are offered privacy and confidentiality consistent with their right to protection. Furthermore, it is essential that they are informed about both how decisions are to be made, and how their views will influence any decisions made about them. When working with other professionals or family members, it also is important to encourage awareness of the necessity of respecting children's rights to participate in matters of concern to them.

3.8. System-level advocacy

School psychologists must identify and understand how the rights established by the Convention can be used positively to influence mental health (i.e., psychological) services and policies within classrooms and other school venues, schools, school systems, and other child-serving agencies. They have the responsibility to examine services in these settings and facilitate changes to policies and procedures that ensure the protection and promotion of child rights. Achieving this goal may involve the introduction of more child-friendly environments, collaboration with colleagues to raise awareness of children's rights, and development of systems of monitoring and evaluating, including with children, to measure the extent to which the right to be heard is being respected throughout the services provided.

3.9. Public policy

School psychologists are an important link in translating research into policy and practice at local, national, and international levels. Governments, through both action and inaction, contribute to the protection or disregard for child rights. Instead of focusing only on ameliorating violations of child rights, school psychologists, through individual and collective advocacy, can help to promote and protect child rights, and thereby help to ensure optimal development, well-being, learning, and safety of all children. In respect of the right of children to be heard, potential concerns might include lack of democracy in schools, failure of systems to enable children to report abuse, inadequate representation in the courts, or failure to hear the views of children with disabilities. School psychologists are in a position to utilise evidence of child rights violations, through individual and collective advocacy, to promote and protect such child rights, and thereby help to ensure the optimal development, well-being, learning, and safety of all children. The engagement of children themselves in such advocacy work is also important. NASP-approved training programmes in the United States, for example, strive to emphasise the importance of understanding, appreciating, and advocating for child rights within their respective curriculums. They seek to develop practitioners who understand child rights, promote child participation and protection in the school setting and incorporate child rights into individual practice and system-level and public policy advocacy.

3.10. Student involvement in developing individualized education plans

One of the critical domains in which school psychologists can advocate for children's rights is the referral process for special education services. In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 (Public Law 105-17) mandated that children and youth with disabilities ages 14 and over must be invited to participate in individualized education programmes (IEPs) meetings focused on the student's transition services needs or needed transition services under Sec. 300.347(b)(1) or (2) and the decisions consider the students' interests and preferences (34C.F.R. 300.344 (b) (1) and 300.29). In other circumstances, the student may attend the IEP meeting "if appropriate" (Sec. 300.344(a)(7)). Generally, the student should attend the IEP meeting if the parent determines that it is appropriate for the child to do so. Children becoming active participants in their educational planning within the IEP process have been strongly encouraged by individuals with disabilities, advocates, researchers, and teachers (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Johnson & Emanuel, 2000; Martin & Williams-Diehm, 2013; National Council on Disability, 2000). A review of the research from the past two decades by Mason, Field, and Sawilowsky (2004) suggests that children who have this increased involvement in their educational planning are more likely to experience multiple positive outcomes, such as increases in academic, advocacy and communication skills that are conducive to a better quality of life. However, Mason and colleagues also found that despite the importance of increasing child participation, the majority of polled educational professionals were unsatisfied with the level of student involvement in IEPs, suggesting that there was much work to be done in this area in the United States.

3.11. Assessment, measurement, and evaluation of children's participation

Given their professional preparation in assessment and measurement, school psychologists are also well-positioned to provide leadership in measuring and evaluating (a) the extent to which children are able to express their views and have them taken seriously as well as (b) the nature of that experience and the outcomes associated with the realisation of that right. Lansdown (2011b) offered a conceptual framework, articulated standards, and detailed matrices for monitoring and evaluating child participation in school settings. Leadership of school psychologists in this area will be valuable to map the extent to which participation is institutionalised in schools and help to determine priorities for building a culture of respect for children's right to express views and be taken seriously, determine the nature of participation at the outset of a project or programme, establish goals for participation and help monitor the extent to which those goals are realised, and monitor and evaluate the scope, quality, and change associated with participation at the

end of a project or programme. The leadership of school psychologists in assessment and measurement of children's participation will be important in further advancing knowledge, understanding, and accountability of local and global child participation initiatives throughout the world.

4. Future directions towards understanding and actualizing children's participation

Whereas, there have been numerous national, regional, and local evaluations of programs emphasising the children's participation, there is a paucity of systematic research investigating the processes and outcomes of child initiatives. Following the information and imperatives delineated in the Convention in 1989, there have been extensive reports generated and disseminated under the auspices of UNICEF and UNESCO (Feinstein & O'Kane, 2008; Lansdown, 2011a; United Nations Children's Fund, 2003, 2006). Typically these reports include much valuable information describing the particular initiatives, relevant process information regarding children's participation, and often both qualitative and quantitative data regarding outcomes associated with the particular initiative(s). If children's participation is to be sustained, replicated, resourced and institutionalised in communities throughout the world, it is necessary to begin to construct methods of measuring what is being done and how it is impacting on children's lives.

During the past decade, there has been an increasing emphasis on the need to develop better indicators to monitor and measure process and outcomes in child participation initiatives. The initial version, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Children's Participation in Programming*, was produced in collaboration with partners of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in Brazil (Lansdown, 2004). Subsequent versions incorporating perspectives from local regions, as well as adding a dimension on measuring participation within the wider societal environment have also been developed, *A framework for measuring the participation of children and adolescents* (Lansdown, 2009). The most recent iteration is sponsored by Save the Children, together with UNICEF and World Vision, including a global inter-agency pilot of the framework (Lansdown, 2011b). The most recent framework is accompanied by a toolkit – a detailed set of methodological tools, providing guidance on how to collect, organise and analyse the data, together with suggested activities that can be undertaken with all relevant stakeholders to measure and evaluate participation programmes.

Future research is needed to further advance understanding or processes and outcomes associated with initiatives to promote children's participation throughout the world. For instance, there are no agreed upon indicators against which to measure child participation. There is a need to develop and establish universally applicable indicators in order to be able to compare outcomes associated with various initiatives. It will be important to reconcile both universal indicators with specific objectives and indicators against which to measure their attainment. Clearly, this is complex and particularly difficult in the context of widely disparate initiatives in diverse cultural, social and economic contexts. Mixed-methods designs will be invaluable, as the outcomes of participation are often qualitative not quantitative. Longitudinal studies will be important, as many of the desired outcomes of participation relate to sustainable long-term changes in children's lives that cannot be measured within a short time period. Finally, children themselves should play a role in determining the objectives of initiatives in which they are involved. If children's participation rights are to be realised, it is important to develop and establish standards and indicators against which to monitor and measure what has been achieved and how these achievements were accomplished.

5. Conclusion

The Convention brought a new international imperative to fulfilling, protecting, and respecting the rights of every child. In particular, Article 12, together with the other associated rights, set out a clear mandate for guaranteeing opportunities for children to be heard on all matters of concern to them. These values and principles are entirely consistent with those of the school psychology profession. Indeed, the International School Psychology Association as well as, for example, the National Association of School Psychologists and the Division of School Psychology of the American Psychological Association in the United States through their numerous advocacy and professional development efforts have affirmed their commitment to the Convention and, in so doing, have recognised the particular significance of Article 12 in the work of school psychologists. These school psychology associations acknowledge and promote the importance of promoting the participation of children in decisions affecting their learning, safety, education, and well-being, and accordingly require that school psychologists understand and are able to promote a child rights approach in their own practices and practice settings.

However, consistent application of the right of children to be heard at all levels of the education system will not happen without pro-active and systematic investment. Complete application requires the introduction of education on children's rights in both pre-service and inservice training of school psychologists. It requires clearly articulated and ongoing commitment across the responsible professional bodies. It will necessitate the introduction of benchmarks and standards for measuring implementation and a commitment to monitoring and evaluating practice. And finally, it will require dialogue with children themselves to explore how to strengthen their opportunities to express their views.

Respecting the wishes and feeling of children does inevitably challenge traditional beliefs and practices; the conviction that adults know best is a powerful cultural assumption across societies throughout the world. Nonetheless, the growing body of evidence of the positive outcomes associated with participation does lend force to the case for change. Indeed, the potential benefits of such change are exponential. It is not only in the interests of children themselves that their right to be heard is respected, but also in exercising these rights also offers strengths to the wider society. Enhanced development and self-esteem, greater protection from violence and abuse, better outcomes, and strengthened understanding of citizenship and democratic decision-making will all flow from the involvement of children in matters affecting them. School psychologists need to be at the centre of the process for making this happen.

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