



Children's Rights and Participation in Schools: Exploring the Awareness Level and Views of Nigerian Primary School Children.

Michael U. C. Ejieh¹

Oluwatoyin B. Akinola

ABSTRACT. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which guarantees children certain rights including the right to be heard in matters that affect them was ratified by Nigeria in 1991. After the ratification and the submission of her initial progress report, the country has domesticated the Convention by passing a law on the rights of the child. This exploratory study was designed to find out the extent to which primary school pupils in Ile – Ife town were aware of their rights and to explore their views about the exercise of these rights. Data for the study were gathered by the means of semi-structured oral interviews held with 144 pupils in four primary schools in the town. Data analysis showed that the children had very limited awareness of their rights; about three quarters of the children were not willing to exercise their rights mainly because they felt that there was no need for children's rights and also because of the cultural norms of the Nigerian society. It was concluded that the objectives of the UN Convention on Children's Rights were yet to be achieved in the schools.

Key Words: Children's participatory rights; primary school children and decision making.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This international legal instrument identifies a specific body of rights for children in such areas as protection, provision, and participation (Jonyniene & Samuelsson, 1999). Article 12 of the Convention specifically states that children have a right to be heard in matters that affect them and to have their opinions taken into account according to their age and level of maturity. Elaborating on the implications of this article *UNICEF India* (n.d.) states that children and young people have the right to participate in family decisions, in school and class decisions, in faith communities and even in the UN, among other organizations and groups.

Part Two of the Convention describes ways of putting theory into practice and monitoring the progress made by the signatories to the Convention. Article 42, for instance, requires States Parties to publicise its principles and provisions to children, young people, parents and care givers, and every one working with children and young people, while Article 44.1 requires that the reports on the implementation of the principles of the Convention by the signatories to it be regularly submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child formed for that purpose.

The Convention has been ratified by 191 out of the 193 member states and, according to Tang (2003), no other human rights instrument has been found so quickly acceptable to almost the whole international community.

¹ Dr. Michael Ejieh and Mrs Oluwatoyin Akinola are Senior Lecturer and Assistant Lecturer respectively in the Department of Educational Administration of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile – Ife, Nigeria. Their research interests are in educational management. Contact Address: Michael U. C. Ejieh, Faculty of Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile – Ife, Nigeria. E-mail: mejieh@oauife.edu.ng

Children's Participatory Rights in Schools

The school is a major social institution responsible for socializing the young. In keeping with the provisions of the Convention on Child's Rights (CRC), children and young people who spend a great part of their time in schools should share power in matters that affect them. The realization of these participatory rights of school children is one of the most difficult challenges of the Convention (Howe & Covell, 2000). Meeting this challenge may not be difficult in some countries such as the United Kingdom where the school curricula for citizenship education emphasize the development of skills of participation and responsible action (Selwyn, 2003). In some of these countries it has been found that participation by young people not only contributes to building civil society and strengthening democracy but it also, in addition to other benefits, fosters learning and enables them to build life skills (Cook, Blanchet-Cohen, & Hart, 2004).

In some other countries especially those in which adults hold the liberal caretaking viewpoint (Archard, 1993), however, realizing child's rights may be a more difficult undertaking. The assumption among the adult members in these countries is that certain kinds of psychological maturation are necessary before a child is ready to attempt any behaviour which depends on it. In Nigeria, for instance, the administration of schools has been traditionally based on the liberal caretaking theory and important decisions on education are made by policy makers and top administrators for implementation in schools. Within the schools, head teachers of primary schools, principals of secondary schools and teachers do not usually share power with pupils or students especially in primary schools where it is believed that the latter are too young and immature to make rational decisions. Primary schools and even their generally older counterparts in the secondary schools are, for instance, not allowed to participate in making the rules and regulations which affect their lives in their schools. Consequently, the voices of children are never heard in regard to decisions that affect them in the school. Article 12 of the Convention specifically challenges this ideology and its associated practices and requires educational administrators and school staff, for instance, to empower school children, who are capable of forming their own views, to have the opportunity to express those views freely and have them taken into consideration in their schools especially in regard to those matters that affect them.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria ratified the UN Convention on the Child's Rights in 1991. This implies that thenceforth the country had committed itself to a code of binding obligations towards her children. Among these obligations are the raising of awareness and the involvement of the civil society, including children, in the realization of children's rights. Following the submission of her initial progress report, the Committee on children's Rights recommended, among other things, that the country should domesticate the Convention in order to facilitate its implementation under Nigerian law (Jacomy & Stevens, 2005). This culminated in the passing into law of the Child Rights Act in 2003. It is yet to be known whether these efforts aimed at protecting the rights of her children made by the country at both the international and domestic levels have started to have any impact on the children. Are Nigerian children now aware of their rights? What are their sources of information in this regard? What do they think about exercising their rights? These and other questions related to the implementation of children's participatory rights in the country are yet to be answered.

In the light of this problem, this exploratory study was designed to find out the extent to which some Nigerian primary school children were aware of their rights and their views regarding the realization of their participatory rights in their schools. Although this is a small-scale study with severe limitations with regard to generalization of the findings, it is nevertheless useful, as Melton

and Limber (1992) have pointed out, for designing structures and procedures for implementation of children's rights in a manner that is protective of children's dignity

METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was adopted in this study. Two public and two private primary schools in Ile-Ife, a university town in south – western part of Nigeria, were purposively selected for the study. The schools were almost of equal size with student populations of between 900 and 1100. The four schools were among the best in the town in terms of pupils' academic performance. Two of the schools – one public and one private –are situated on the university campus and enjoy the patronage of mainly middle class parents. The rationale for basing the selection on 'extreme instance' (Denscombe 1998) was to increase the probability of getting a sample of children that were aware of the subject of study and who would be able to articulate their views about participating in decision making in their schools. It is worth pointing out that in no part of Nigeria are children accorded more rights than in any other part of the country. The choice of the primary schools in Ile-Ife was just for exploratory purposes.

The participants in the study were pupils in classes (or grades) four to six or the senior classes of the primary school programme. This was based on the assumption that pupils in these classes, being more mature than those in the junior classes, would give more reliable responses than their junior counterparts. Twelve pupils from each of the three senior classes of the schools were selected by random sampling, giving a total number of 36 pupils in each school. The total sample size was 144 pupils consisting of 59 males and 85 females

The data for the study were gathered by the means of a semi-structured oral interview with each of the pupils. The interviews were conducted in either English language or in the local language depending on the pupil's preference or language competence with occasional probes to allow for clarification or details when necessary. After collecting some background information on each respondent, he/she was asked three questions namely: 1. Are you aware that you have any rights as a child? 2. How did you know that you have those rights? and, 3.. Will you like to take part in making decisions on any matter that affects you in this school?

In order to ensure that he/she understood the meaning of 'child's rights' the participant was asked to mention such rights. If the child showed an understanding of the term, he/she was asked the second question. If the child did not show an understanding of the term or had never heard of it, an explanation and implications of the term were offered by the investigators before the child was asked the second question. After responding to question 2, the child was asked to give reasons for his/her answer.

The investigators manually recorded the children's responses during each interview and compared notes afterwards to resolve possible differences. The final copy of the field records was subjected to emergent coding approach to content analysis Stemler (2001). Two people, including one of the researchers, independently categorized and coded a sample of the collected data with reference to the research questions. Following the preliminary coding and resolution of the differences between their results, a common checklist was adopted with which all the data were independently coded. The calculated Cohen's kappa statistic used to measure the proportion of agreement between the two raters was 0.74.

RESULTS

Awareness of Children's Rights

Nine out of the 144 pupils in the study (or less than one percent) showed that they were aware that they had some rights as children by mentioning some of those rights, such as right to life, right to education and right to play. Fifty six of them (or about 39%) claimed to be aware of their rights but had wrong notions of what rights are by mentioning these, among others as some of their rights: ‘right to respect from teachers’; ‘right to write notes in class’; ‘right to ask questions’; ‘right to do things in my own way’; ‘Right to separate children who are fighting’; and, ‘right to help my parents at home’. The rest of the pupils (or a little over 50%) stated that they had not heard of the term.

Seven out of the nine pupils that were aware of children’s rights were in the primaries five and six of the private school located in the university campus while the other two were in primary five of the private school located in the town. There was no relationship between type of school and the number of pupils who either had the wrong notions of the term ‘child’s rights’ or those who had never heard of it. There were also no relationship between sex and awareness of children’s rights.

Awareness Source

In response to the question on how they came about knowing that they had the rights mentioned by them, four of the pupils said they knew about their rights by watching television programmes. Two of them heard about children’s rights from their parents who in turn, heard about them while listening to radio programmes. One of the three other pupils said that he heard about it through a newspaper; one claimed to have heard about it from her teacher, while the third said that she heard about it when she was in Brazil.

Participating in Decision Making

After explaining or clarifying the meaning and implications of children’s rights to the participants and asking them whether they would like to take part in making those decisions that affect them in their respective schools, 39 of them (or 27%) said that they would like to take part while 105 (or 73%) of them stated that they would not like to do so. Relational analysis of the responses showed that willingness to participate or not to participate was not related to either to the pupils’ grade levels or sex. The reasons given by at least three of those who would like to exercise their participatory rights are presented in Table 1. It is worth pointing out that in both Tables 1 and 2 the total numbers of responses exceed the sample sizes as some of the children gave more than one reason.

Table 1: Children’s reasons for wishing to participate in making decisions (n=39)

S/N	Reasons	No.	%
1.	No particular reason	19	48.72
2.	Will just like to make decisions with teachers	3	7.69
3.	For effective discipline in the school	11	28.21
4.	To help maintain good sanitation	4	10.26
5.	To settle disputes among pupils	3	7.69
6.	To correct teachers	4	10.26
7.	For the progress of the school	6	15.38

The reasons given by three or more of the pupils for not liking to participate in making decisions on matters that affect them in their schools are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Pupils' Reasons for not wishing to Participate in Decision Making (n = 105)

S/N	Reasons	No.	%
1.	No reason for wishing to participate	12	11.43
2.	Not yet mature	10	9.52
3.	We are not teachers/ Teachers should be left to make decisions	14	13.33
4.	Afraid of teachers	9	8.57
5.	There is no need for children's participation	9	8.57
6.	We are here to learn	4	3.81
7.	Teachers' decisions/opinions are enough	13	12.38
8.	Elders cannot sit down with children/ It is culturally forbidden	15	14.29
9.	There is no need for children's rights	20	19.05
10.	We do not know what they (teachers) know	4	3.81
11.	Parents will frown at it	3	2.86
12.	Adults know what is good for us	7	6.67
13.	The head teacher has this role	3	3.81

Table 1 reveals that the greatest number of those who indicated their willingness to exercise their participatory rights did not have any reason for liking to participate in school decision making. About one third of them would like to do so in order to enhance the tone of discipline in their schools. About equal but small numbers of the pupils would like to participate for the other reasons shown on the table

Table 2 shows that a variety of reasons were advanced by the participants for not wishing to participate in decision making. The greatest number saw no need for children to exercise any rights. The second major reason for not being willing to exercise their rights was that they could not sit down with the elders to make decisions while the third was that teachers should be left to make decisions. An almost equal number of the pupils would not like to exercise their participatory rights because they were satisfied with the decisions made by their teachers.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that there was very limited awareness of children's rights among the pupils in these schools. This is surprising considering the types of schools selected for the study. Those that send their children and wards in such schools are, on the average, enlightened middle class people in whose homes one expects to find various information media through which their children or wards would become aware of children's rights. The implication of this finding is that inadequate efforts have been made by the relevant government agency to fulfil the government's obligation of raising awareness among children about their rights as required by the UN Convention. With the very limited awareness among pupils in the schools selected for this study one can only expect the situation to be worse in the other schools in the town and perhaps the state.

What is surprising in the results of this study is the very limited number of pupils who were aware of their rights. That their parents and guardians had access to the relevant information media is reflected in some of their responses in regard to how they became aware of children's rights. It is interesting to note that one of the nine pupils said that she heard about the term in Brazil during her two – month stay with her father who was on sabbatical leave in that country. Although it is wrong to conclude from a single case, but if a Nigerian child could hear about her rights during a very short stay in a foreign country and had not heard about in Nigeria, as she claimed, some doubt is cast on the amount of efforts put in by the Nigerian government in publicising children's rights compared to that country and , perhaps, other countries that are signatories to the Convention. It is also apparent from this study that none of the four schools played any role in

raising children's awareness of their rights. The child who said that she heard about it from her teacher might have heard it informally as no other child in her class or any other class heard about it from any teacher.

Table 1 reveals that many of the children would like to participate in making decisions in their schools for no particular reason. This may be explained by the fact that they had just heard about it from the investigators and were yet to comprehend its implications or its usefulness. The table also shows that the reason given by the majority of those who wished to participate in decision making had to do with enhancement of the tone of discipline in the school. Two of them, for instance, stated that pupil's participation would ensure "better compliance with school rules". Their reasons are in agreement with the research report cited by HeadUp (2004), namely, that pupil participation in school management leads to improvement in their general behaviour. Siar (2007: 1) also asserts in this regard that genuine progress has been seen in the reduction of pupil's challenging behaviour in the "...school which meets their needs, treats them with respect and involves them in decision making." The concern for discipline and orderly behaviour by the children in the present study also finds expression in their wishing to participate in decision making in order to "settle disputes among pupils" and to "maintain good sanitation"

A good number of the pupils would like to participate in decision making for the general progress of the school. This echoes Sheldon's (1935) assertion many decades ago that pupils' participation is an important tool in school development. This viewpoint is supported by Blanchet-Cohen, Cook and Hart (2004) who see participation as a means for fostering, learning and building life skills.

It is of interest to note in Table 2 that while a few of the pupils would like to participate in order just to sit down and make decisions with their teachers, a similar number would like to participate in order to correct their teachers. This is contrary to the views of their colleagues who would not like to do so either because "elders cannot sit down with children" or because they "are afraid of teachers". This unusual boldness was observed among some of the children in the private primary in the university campus who, probably through interaction with their enlightened parents, developed enough self confidence to relate with and even dare to correct their teachers when they make mistakes in class.

It can be seen from Table 2 that about 12% of the children gave no reason for not wishing to participate in school decision making. This could also be ascribed to their not yet being able to internalize the concept of child's rights. The table also reveals that the greatest number were not willing to participate in decision making because they did not see any need for children's rights. Some of the other reasons given by them as shown on the table seem to be justifications for either children having no rights or why they should not participate in decision making. Such reasons include among others that children 'are not yet mature'; 'teachers' decisions/opinions are enough'; 'teachers should be left to make decisions'; and, 'we are not teachers'.

The second largest number of children in this study stated that they would not like to participate in decision making because they believe that elders cannot sit with children to discuss anything. According to some of them, "the society does not allow children to discuss anything together with adults" Other categories of responses which reinforce this belief among them include 'parents will frown at it'; 'adults know what is good for us'; and, 'we do not know what they (teachers) know'. These viewpoints are reflective of the cultural norms of the Nigerian society in which adults share the opinions of the liberal caretakers who believe that children lack the cognitive abilities and experiences to engage in meaningful discussions (Johnny, 2005).

It should be noted that with apparently little or no efforts by the government or its relevant agencies in raising their awareness, about a quarter of the pupils in this study indicated their willingness to participate in school decision making even though some of them had no reason for wishing to do so. We ascribe this relatively high number of those willing to take up their

participatory rights to the brief explanation of the concept to the pupils by the investigators. We are of the opinion that if the level of awareness of child's rights is sufficiently raised among both the adults and children in Nigeria, some of the adults may begin to realize the need for them and more children may not only be willing to exercise their rights but they may also have reasons for doing so.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It is apparent from the results of this study that the participants had very limited awareness of their rights as children. It may not be wrong to infer that this was due to inadequate publicity given to the UN Convention on rights in the area of this study by relevant government agencies including the schools involved in this study. While a number of them were willing to exercise their participatory rights a majority of them were not willing to do so mainly as a result of the cultural influences and beliefs of the traditional Nigerian society where adults believe that children lack the relevant experiences to participate in making meaningful decisions and children are made to share the same belief.

There is a compelling need for adults in the Nigerian society to be made to change their belief system as the world in which children are growing up and attending school today is quite different from that in which they lived and attended school. School authorities need to be made to re-evaluate the hierarchical structure of the school in order to enable children take up their participatory rights. All these call for intensification of efforts by the government and its relevant agencies including schools to publicise the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on children's rights which, as suggested by the results of this study, are yet to make the desired impact in the locale of the study

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