

Pathway to Participation: The Dilemma in Early Years Education Learning Environments in Kenya

Odundo Paul Amolloh¹, Ganira Khavugwi Lilian¹

¹Department of Educational Communication, Technology and Pedagogical Studies, University of Nairobi, Kenya, P. O. Box 30197

*Corresponding Author: Odundo Paul Amolloh

Email: odundopaul@yahoo.com



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Abstract

Listening to what children say expand upon language, building vocabulary and background knowledge in social, political and economic world for effective communication. Article 12 of the CRC 1989 stresses the right to participation in decision-making processes, which influence choices taken by children for empowering sense of belonging and community cohesion. However, too often children are denied opportunities for participation in decision-making and to exercise responsibility resulting to under democracy situations. In addition, there is limited understanding of children's right to participate in matters affecting them in developing countries especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. The study sought to determine children's; perceptions, preferences, interests, views and feelings concerning participation in pre-primary school learning environments in Kenya. This was an exploratory case study, which relied on data sampled from pre-primary school children and teachers in selected schools in Kenya using probability and simple random sampling techniques. Anchored on recognition theory, the study determined that participation of children is scanty and in instances where it occurs, only at the implementation stage rather than the planning design. The study recommended the need for collaboration and sharing information among children, teachers, communities and government towards realization of children's perception to what they say and in decision making.

Introduction

The convention on the rights of the child recognizes participation as fundamental right in ensuring respect for children's views. Meaningful participation requires that children be allowed freedom to express opinions and to have a say in decision making for effective functioning in a democratic society. Children's right to participation as outlined in article 12 recognizes the potential of children to enrich decision-making processes, share perspectives and participate as citizens and as actors of change. More still, the constitution of Kenya 2010 recognises child participation as a basic platform for children's learning and holistic growth and development. Children are currently recognized by international bodies such as ACRWC, UNICEF, CRC, UDHR, OECD and UNHCR as active agents in development and creation of own lives and as individuals with rights to participate. Children's ability in articulating opinions and feelings as well as reporting on concerns of childhood experiences as documented by: Ganira, Odundo & Mwanda (2015); (Stafford-Brizard, 2016); (Turnaround for Children, 2016); (Tisdall, 2017) ;(Yip, 2018) and (Linda Darling-Hammond, Lisa, Channa, Brigid Barron & David, 2020) exposes vulnerability and disempowerments which impedes participation. Furthermore, adults underestimate children's capacities for informed and rational decision making in daily lives which may lead to under participation. A study on having a voice, having a choice by Can & İnalhan (2017) indicate that developmental psychology has

been inadequate in providing suitable regulatory standards for evaluating children's participation. This in turn reduces children's opportunities for developing capacities for emerging as autonomous which justifies exclusion from decision making since adults' views may not automatically reflect children's interests. In an effort to address this concern, Middel, et al. (2021) avert that the social environment should offer frameworks allowing children's participation as long as it perceives them as competent and accomplished contributors.

Participation has been conceptualized from perspective of diverse discussions and viewpoints on childhood which include; Contribution to decisions, (World Vision International, 2012); Speaking out (Wyness, 2018); Presenting views, (Cudjoe et al 2020) and Joint decision making, (Skauge, et al (2021). Drawing from these descriptions, participation involves mutual respect and dignity where individuals engage with others on matters concerning them either individually or collectively for a shared goal. As indicated by Lloyd & Emerson, (2017) children are competent individuals capable of comprehending and interpreting the surroundings as active contributors. This is based on the assertion that engaging participation rights assists children in bringing out realization of all rights and preparing for an active role in the society as responsible citizens. In supporting this argument, UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) related participation to freedom of expression and to the position of the child in diverse interactions, and in relation to consultation and empowerment. Hence children understand themselves as playing a valuable part in the society which requires adults to provide clear information and eliminate barriers to participation. Furthermore, Duncan (2019) suggested that exchange of information between adults and children should be based on mutual respect, considering development level and age of the child. Though participation is considered as a right, too often, children are perceived as passive members in society since they engage in activities already predetermined by adults who control them over influencing decisions in the environment. In supporting this position, Bouma, (2019) notes that children are not recognized as equal partners and in opinions are of little or no significance as a social group. Further, children may be perceived as simple to control an impression of participation which the child could not necessarily understand and position is limited only to consult the final decision with adults. Based on this position, the study examined position of the teacher in children's participation and challenges affecting right to participation in Kenya.

Aspects of Children's Participation

Listening to children's ideas allows adults to take a unique, new and divergent perspective, which has not been considered from adults' perception. In the view of Bouma et al (2018), listening is a reciprocal process with the position of the listener and the listened to continually exchanging inspiring interactions and dialogue. The dialogue state enables learning process as the child constructs knowledge, skills and values as informed citizens. This is in tandem with the assertion of Odundo & Ganira (2018) that reinforcing the child to be the authority on life is an enormous step towards a new understanding of childhood in the community seeking to participation. Furthermore, adoption of the UNCRC, 1989 improved benefits of children's participation rights given that effective participation increases children's confidence, decision making, self-esteem, responsibility and accountability in society. In a study on education for sustainable development pedagogy Ganira (2022) indicated that the right to participate has an impact on enhancement of the value of services extended to children's involvement in improving services such as education and health. As a result, children who understand rights are less prone to abuse and reject being used or manipulated, are cautious and aware of the risks and experiences greater protection in society. However, Ganira, et al (2019) study revealed that children are not always adequately informed as they are only asked for opinions when decisions have already been made. The child should be viewed as capable of expressing

self and as the holder of rights rather than as powerless, the vessel of developmentally conditioned inability to participation. This should be anchored on the opportunity to participate which allows children new competences, skills and ability to share responsibility as actors of change in a democratic world.

Children's Participation in Pre-Primary School

The UNCRC, 1989 provides children the right to access education and to participate in decision making as effective citizens. Article 12 of the UNCRC (Respect for the views of the child) states that “When adults make decisions that affect children, the children have the right to say what they think should happen and have opinions taken into account. The convention encourages adults to listen to opinions of children and involve them in decision-making - not giving children authority over adults. Expression includes the right to share information in any way children choose, including by talking, drawing, painting, modelling, or writing. In support, the Basic Education Curriculum Frame work adopts a new model of education which goes beyond passive transmission of information and knowledge from the teacher to learners, to active participation in knowledge creation (BECF, 2017). Further still, Ministry of education Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2019 is anchored on participation in education requiring adoption of theories related to the individualization of the child, whose views and opinions are valuable, and who is competent to express wishes, interests and moods, (MOE, 2019). In practice, Competency Based Curriculum, (CBC) encourages pre-primary school structures and its objectives to view the child as a person who has freedom to give opinions without limits, be allowed to get involved in active participation, express thoughts freely regardless of age and views taken to account. This opinion is supported by Ganira, et al (2020) who aver that the scope and quality of education should be designed to create active and responsible citizens capable of participating in decision.

As the initial educational institution of learning patterns of democracy, the pre-primary school should provide children with democratic experience by initiating processes of individuality and collectivism be seen as interrelated and interdependent. This involves a shift of focus, change of thinking on education and adaptation of the curriculum, which take in account needs and interests of the child. However, according to UNESCO (2016) in many instances participation it is still a desire to share power with children but their voices are excluded from decision-making. Since participation depends on the teachers who dwell with children, there is need to ensure realization of the rights of children and wellbeing in practice by promoting and encouraging view and preferences. Children have the agency and participation manifests itself through active use of skills and knowledge in relationships with peers and adults. Thus, Ganira, (2022) suggested that societies should remember the agency of adults who can include or exclude participation of children and it is for them to be final decision makers and support in the direction of taking into consideration rights of the child.

Teacher Position in Children's Participation

Participation is associated with social and cultural perspectives and teacher's support is critical for children's self-expression and decision making. The concept of child participation as indicated by Murray (2019) is anchored on hearing the child's voice which is in turn linked to listening. This is based on the view that listening is the starting point for consultation with the child which is the foundation for autonomous participation. Teachers play a vital a role in children's lives by enhancing experiences and promoting participation intentionally or unintentionally in various ways including dialogue. Through dialogue as means of participation, children's voice is likely to be heard, appreciated and included in decision making. This is why Dewey (1933) suggest that education is leading the child's urges in a way

to fit into the societal norms not through coercion but in an indirect way for construction of knowledge. In concurrence, Odundo & Ganira (2017) assert that when teachers implement constructivist view to teaching, advanced demands are made on children's cognitive, creative, imagination and language skills resulting in social engagement. The dialogue situation enables learning process as the child constructs knowledge, skill, values and attitudes as participating citizens. However, Sibe (2018) showed that teachers who adopted traditional approaches to teaching experienced constrained learner participation caused by inadequate opportunities to construct knowledge which occasioned to children's voices being ignored. Further still, Ganira & Odundo (2020) affirmed that children's participation in many instances fails to correspond with CRC and policy guidelines due to teacher's instructional approaches and type of environment where the child can participate and become sociable. The value of participation lies in the fact that children become independent and resilient as they participate to become active social beings. Hence, children need opportunities to share thoughts and ideas for increasing levels of active competence given that participation offers valuable opportunities to enhance social and communication skills.

Challenges of Children's Participation

The criticism and risks associated with introduction and adoption of children's participation rights relate to the notion of the child as less competent with less experience in decision making. Reference to this concept can be found in the power relations and the desire to control children who are considered to be immature. The child as indicated by Adawo et al. (2016) is thus, referred to socially control and participation is only artificial as it maintains the existing and dominant social structure. In the same vein, Seim, et al (2017) observe that children's participation is often recognized in education, work, support and harmful cultural practices, rather than as part of a society, politics and the economy. The child is considered as a partner in decision making rather than a person with self-determination and partnership. As a result, Murray & Cousens (2019) posit that adults focus on the welfare of children and best interests, but with inadequate engagement with children or giving them apparent power. Given that adults have authority over the child, which is associated with conceptualization of childhood and its position in the society, the child becomes part of colonization through under implementation of rights and the adoption of UNCRC.

The power held by adults being given to children may be in the form of domination and granting a new process of participation. Based on this premise, OECD (2018) points out that such approach is characterized by strengthening of existing standards and hierarchy prevailing in society, through implementation of participation, but it is only an illusion of equity. Participation may be seen as a kind of power; however, this approach is used to support it, not as it seems to decrease a disproportion existing in adults and children. If the adult does not respect the rights of the child, Murray (2019) contends that they are unlikely to treat them with respect. In turn, children may not respect the law and act to protect adults' rights.

As noted by Collins (2016), the concept of participation is complicated, inadequate in clarity and precision for pre-primary school teachers to implement it effectively due to mis-conceptualization. Further still, in the view of Wafa & Henry (2020), different understanding of the concept of participation tend to explain the gap between general participation and actual practice. Interpreting participation as providing the individual child's opportunities for choosing time in the daily basis might isolate play from participation Hence emphasis on individual choices might limit collective voices in pre-primary school and as results of democracy when teachers over value child's independence and restrict participation on its own way. On the other hand, Wyness, (2018) is concerned that if teachers conceptualize participation

as offering children alternatives to make own decisions as a routine procedure, participation might be restricted. Given that teachers' conceptualization of participation and perspectives on children determines level of influence. Diaz et al (2018) emphasize significance of professionalism in schools in order for practitioners to recognize children's diverse ways of self-expression and facilitate participation. In support, Skauge, et al (2021) suggests that constructing children as "powerful active learners" requires teachers' evaluation of pedagogical approaches taken into account to inform educational provisions on participation rights and achievements.

Statement of the Problem

Children's right to participation as outlined in article 12 recognizes the potential of children to enrich decision-making processes, share perspectives and participate as citizens and as actors of change. Engaging participation rights assists children in bringing out realization of all rights and prepares for an active role in the society. However, implementation of the convention remains weak in many countries including Kenya, (UNESCO 2016). Though many countries acknowledge children as having capacity to high levels of social and economic responsibility, right to negotiate those contributions and exercise autonomous decision making remain restricted. Further, children's voice has not been recognized as important in influencing decisions, expressing views, taking responsibility and in choice-making. Children are perceived as mere recipients of knowledge but as active contributors in the learning process. As a result, children are not continuously adequately informed but only asked for opinions when decisions have already been made. It is based on this backdrop that the study explored children's participation in pre-primary school, significance of the teacher in children's participation and challenges affecting right to participation among children in Kenya.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine children's perspectives regarding participation in the pre-primary school learning environment. The objective was to determine; children's participation in pre-primary school, the position of the teacher in children's participation and challenges influencing right to participation among children in Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws insights from the recognition theory (Honneth, 1995). According to this theory, identity is created in dialogue through joint acknowledgment, Fraser & Honneth, (2003), as such recognition entails both normative and psychological dimensions. (Honneth, 1995) argues that a struggle among individuals for the mutual recognition of identity generates inner-societal pressure towards practical, political establishment of institutions that would guarantee freedom. It is individuals claim to the inter-subjective recognition of identity which is built in social life from the very beginning as a moral tension, transcending the level of social progress institutionalized gradually leading via negative path of recurring stages of conflict-to a state of communicatively lived freedom. Therefore, individuals who experience inadequate recognition, i.e., those who are viewed by others or the societal standards negatively, will find it rather hard to embrace themselves and their projects as valuable. Therefore, according to (Taylor 1994), recognition is a "vital human need." This theory is therefore believed to shed light to psychosomatic mechanisms of social and political struggle since practices of misrecognition violates personality of individuals and may in turn motivate such personalities to resist and engage in a "struggle for recognition." This theory ultimately finds its application in the field of education and social sciences in addition to philosophical and social field,

(Lysaker, 2017). Therefore, children should be treated with justice and fairness for them to effectively participate in school systems as responsible citizens.

Conceptual Perspective

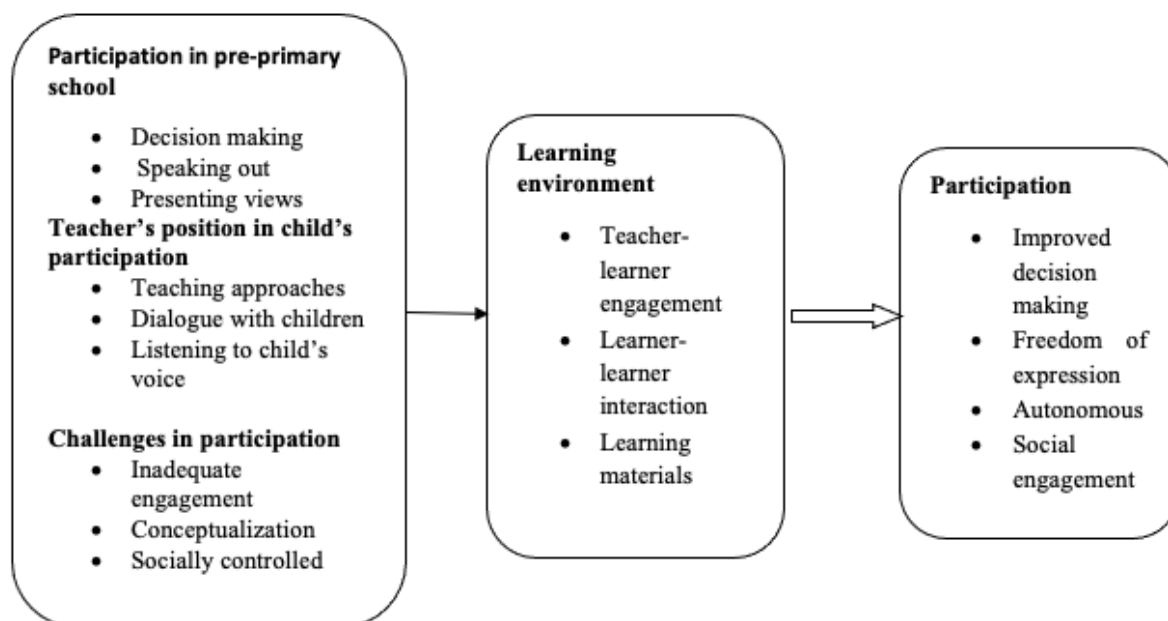


Figure 1. Perceived conceptual framework on children's participation

Methods

This was an exploratory case study which adopted descriptive survey design in examining children's perspectives to participation in the pre-primary school learning environment. The rationale for choosing this design was based on its ability to provide appropriate techniques for systematic collection of data from a large sample. The study population targeted pre-primary school children and teachers. Probability sampling technique was used where simple random sampling and systematic methods were used to collect data from pre-primary school children and parents. Interview schedules were used for pre-primary school teachers to gain insights on perspectives of participation of children. Focus group discussions were used on pre-primary school children on perspectives of what they say about concerning the learning environment. Open-ended questions were used to collect data from the focus groups of children. The data collected was scrutinized and analysed qualitatively.

Results and Discussion

Aspects of Children's Participation

From the discussions with both teachers and children, the results show that there exists a gap concerning children's participation. There is a mismatch between children's ideas and potentials due to inadequate partaking thus forcing them to yield to adults' power in the decision-making process. In reality involvement experience realises an educative understanding of learning in which adults cooperate with children in order to make their ideas become real. Listening to children as pointed out by one of the teachers affects the understanding children's needs and personality to adjust to their features:

"The most important thing is to listen to them, what they want to do, what is in their mind, what they feel, what personality they have, very important is well know the child since the moment he attends to the preschool, if we don't do it we do not know what

they think, what they want, so many different thinks to do with different children, the most important for me in my job to do.”

Children’s interests, perspectives and thoughts define the extent of their engagement in activities and pedagogy being provided. It is obvious that the participation of children is scanty and in cases where it does occur more, only at the implementation phase rather than at planning and design. Referring to the practice of involving children and decision-making looks quite different from one teacher to another. Some emphasized that there is need to involve children in compliance with child centred approach of teaching young children. However, as interpreted by the investigator, it seems that teachers are more confused and do not know how to deal with this issue because they do not have any guidelines and rules on the involvement of children and making decisions during the activities in an institution. Thus, it is more of their own initiative. There is a designated range; however, some of them believe that, despite the lack of a clear provision on the daily practice of listening to the children and what they want to do, teachers:

“It is quite a problematic issue because of the lack of regulations or guidelines,”

Participation as a right can pre-eminently be realized by involving children in decision making. Sadly, these rights are chained by prominent aspects like ignorance, culture and negative attitudes towards children. Adult-child relationship influence learning experiences. The power and authority of adults can be an important resource especially if it is used support children to unfold their ideas instead of restraining their imagination and creativity thereby for unlocking new understandings into children’s knowledge. From an educative perspective, the object of the discussion shifted from a rights-based discourse to the pedagogical experience the ongoing process of becoming matters more. The study does not in any way negate children’s participation rights but provides another dimension towards the UNCRC, 1989 as a social and political framework generating space for creating meaning between teachers and children along with societal context. Implementing all-inclusive and interpersonal knowledge of children’s participation rights in pre-primary school settings challenges teachers to analyse responsibilities and to interrogate thoughts which may be taken for granted.

Children’s Involvement in Pre-Primary School

According to UNESCO (2016), a sincere obstacle towards children’s participation in that research process is inadequate in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. In contrast, Davidson, et al (2017) contents that children can be given ownership of the research tools and some involvement in the analysis. From the outset of this study endeavour, children took ownership of the research. Children’s participation rights are recognized by teachers who participated in this study as central matter in holistic development as well as in the educational process. Teachers in sub-county have faith in the importance of the voice of children and the value of expressing opinions in the learning environment. In my opinion of most teachers (78%) the right of a child is significant and powerful:

“The pre-primary school Centre is the main area to learning it, then test out how it works, and us who are working here to try it out.” (T2)

“It’s very important, that children have their have voices, they have their say.” (T93)

“I think that every child should have the right to expressing an opinion, never mind what it would not be.”(T11).

“Children should learn as possible they own voice and opinions, at the later time, it will make their life easier and well, because as an adult, every day we find where need

to make decisions, and we cannot count that someone will do it for us, as it is quite important.”(T100)

“It teaches them courage, openness to the world and teaches expressing their own opinion and to protect it.”(T44)

Listening to children as pointed out by one of the teachers affects the understanding children’s needs and personality to adjust to their features:

“The most important thing is to listen to them, what they want to do, what is in their mind, what they feel, what personality they have, very important is well know the child since the moment he attends to the preschool, if we don’t do it, we do not know what they think, what they want, so many things to do with different children, the most important for me in my job to do.” (T111).

Freedom and Choice

It became apparent that the children had a great degree of freedom in relation to where, what and how they learned. This could firstly be seen from the children’s choices. When asked to show where they like to learn, the children pointed out places all over the pre-primary school; at the front and at the back, near the classroom buildings and further away among the rocks and trees. This was reinforced during the trek outside classes when children took turns to lead the group to different spots in the compound; some chose trees, playgrounds, sandpits, water points whereas others chose places high up in the hills. There were some intriguing comments from children when they asked about why they chose to play in particular spots. C4 in G17 and C6 in G19 both shared what they play in chosen places simply because they ‘want to’. For this study, this response implies that children understand that they are free to make decisions for themselves and just ‘wanting’ is enough of a justification, no other reason is needed. Children also enjoyed stepping in and out of classroom in a number of instances. More interestingly for this study, the teachers acknowledged and respected this decision made by the child to step out. By stepping out of classrooms for some time, the children were allowing themselves some space to take in what was going on around them, to assess different situations and perhaps to allow them to get a little bored, before deciding their next move.

Responsibility

Children made independent decisions and followed through with their plans, even though some of these ideas seemed somewhat risky in adults’ view; for example, climbing high on trees, standing and jumping on top of a high stack of crates, or cycling really fast. Time and time again children proved themselves as responsible young people. However, children responded very sensibly during the magic carpet experience when they were asked about off a bike. Here, the children showed that they were very much aware of consequences associated with falling off a bike, but fear would not stop them and they seemed willing to take the chance. The following vignette provides more details of the discussion:

“Researcher: ‘Do you ever think of what if you fell of the bike?’

C1: ‘When I cycle where there are many stones or holes then I may fall off.’

Researcher: ‘But we do not cycle where there are many big stones you know. But are you ever scared of falling off the bike’

All children together: ‘No’

Researcher: ‘But if you had fallen off the bike, what would have happened then?’

C1: *'We would get a bruise.'*

Researcher: *'Yes.'*

C4: *'Or blood'*

C5: *'Or bumps.'*

A1: *'Are you scared of that?'*

C3: *'Or die.'*

Researcher: *'Are you scared of falling of the bike?'*

All children together: *'No'*

C6: *'You don't become dead C3. You don't become dead.'*

Researcher: *'You probably won't die.'*

C2: *'The one you run over becomes dead.'*

This excerpt may seem a little dramatic for adult readers, but it succeeds in showing that children are aware of the possible consequences of their actions for themselves and for others.

Being a Child

Now that several relevant topics regarding child standpoint have been discussed, the ultimate conversation point presents the question- how does it feel to be a child?

The question was floated to children during FGDs sessions

"At times it's very difficult to be a child but that's how it is. For example writing all the capital letters is very hard I tried many times to write correctly although it is very difficult."(C1 in G41).

"Making adults happy is not easy because sometimes the teacher gets very angry when we make mistakes. Sometimes I didn't know it is not good. That makes it hard to be a child."(C6 in G54).

"I feel bad when I pee on the bed but it is hard to control it. Adults are better because they don't pee on the bed."(C5 in G38).

From the above statements, it is evidently clear from child's viewpoints that being a child can be very 'unpleasant' in several ways. They remind adults that some developmental indicators such as writing, social and physical competencies may be a very challenging experience and adult's expectations are rather huge for them to handle. They are yet to execute the tasks assigned by adults who are quite difficult or complex to master as (C1 in G41 and C6 in G54) insinuates children are forced to struggle to appease adults. It is therefore appropriate to note here that adults should acknowledge children's developmental challenges and support them.

Conclusion

If children's participation rights in pre-primary schools are to be fully realised in terms of pedagogy and curriculum then educators should develop positive attitudes towards knowledge, values and status. Schools provide treasured perceptions pertaining childhood from a stance that is under-scrutinized with inadequate information on level and effectiveness of participation. Children have demonstrated proficiency as research participants particularly know-how in the experience of being children which when explored by adults, it can lead to effective participation. Adults' role in engagement with children is very critical in designing

educational experiences- child's potentials initiates, the education process and to perpetuate such potentials by listening to children's voices. This study shows the richness of asymmetry, while the rights-based approach risks overlooking it. The capability of adults to perceive power from the educative perspective allows this power to be considered and designed for learning that involves children's participation. This study endeavour was traced in the conception of the UNCRC, 1989 focusing on children's participation rights enshrined in articles 12 and 13. Participation has been considered in the perspective of the child's position in the design of learning environment in pre-primary schools. The study of children's perspective was crucial in the understanding of views and experiences, and to compare the obtained information to discern similarities and differences. In conclusion, coping with power becomes a fundamental criterion for defining the quality of the educative relationship – especially in the construction of shared knowledge.

Recommendations

Participation requires that children are provided with adequate knowledge as articulated in UNCRC which should be explored to avoid stereotyped portrayal of children as inactive and vulnerable individuals with no voice. Hence, there is need for collaboration and sharing information among children, teachers, communities and government towards realization of children's perception to what they say and in decision making for effective cohesion in society. Given that monitoring and evaluation services are inadequate, the government should strengthen such services in implementing children's right to participation which should be anchored on UNCRC recommendations. Furthermore, there is need to balance inter-generational relationships to facilitate children's participation by providing clear information on participation rights. The government should encourage models of collaboration in decision making structures in pre-primary schools and home environments for enabling children to voice views and preferences in ways which contribute to own well-being as citizens in a democratic society for effective integration.

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