

Modes of Participation and Conceptions of Children in South African Education

NAZIR CARRIM

University of the Western Cape

For school-aged children, schools comprise a major space of participation. Formally, it is a participatory space constituted and regulated by the laws and policies that govern schooling; informally, it is a participatory space whose affordances and patterns of inclusion/exclusion are shaped by children's diverse lives and experiences. This article examines modes of participation in relation to conceptions of children in the South African Schools Act of 1996 and South African curriculum policy, with particular attention to the images of children, their participatory opportunities and their implied participatory agency in the domains of school governance and pedagogy. Policy and related discourse in both domains, it is argued, implicitly homogenise children by portraying them as "learners". At the same time, there is an inconsistency between the images of children and their participatory agency at the level of school governance and at the levels of curriculum and pedagogy. Drawing on empirical data that indicates the significant impact of social conditions on children's participation in pedagogical spaces and their schooling more generally, the article makes a case for recognising difference. Furthermore, the article contributes to a growing critical literature on children's participation by examining connections and disconnections between official constructions of participatory space and the diverse life-worlds of children in South Africa.

Keywords: children's participation, representation, school governing structures, accountability and representation, participation and school policy, pedagogy and participation.

Introduction

Schools are among the primary formal spaces for children's participation. Educational legislation and policy play a major part in defining and regulating these participatory spaces and in defining children as participants in, and subjects of, education. The South African Schools Act of 1996 (hereafter SASA) and the national curriculum provide two of the formal spaces within which children's participation is recognised educationally, namely the spaces of school governance and pedagogy. In both, children are recognised as "learners". This view of children as "learners" provides for specific modes of participation in schools. As I will argue, the tendency in educational laws and policies and related discourses is to treat children in homogenised and yet inconsistent ways. The notion of "learner", as well as an assumed age and stage model of children's capacities in legislation and policy, obscures differences among children such as "race", class, gender, and family circumstances and so treats them as a homogenous group. At the same time, there are inconsistencies in the ways in which children are viewed within and across educational legislation and policies. For example, in SASA, children are given limited participation possibilities, whereas in curriculum terms children as learners are viewed as being more active and participative. Whether this is a problematic inconsistency or simply a consequence of logically distinct categories of participation¹ is a matter to be addressed.

Educational legislation and policies do not capture the myriad ways in which children live their lives or experience schooling in reality. An emphasis on categorical differences between adults and children underplays differences within the population of children (Wyness, 2009). Yet, the way in which children live their lives and participate in various informal spaces are pertinent to the way in which they experience pedagogy as well as to the way in which they respond to putative opportunities to participate in school governing structures. Within schools children participate in various activities in various spaces, which range from activities they engage in with each other – including bullying, playing and teasing,

to making and being friends – to engagements with various adults at the school and en route there; and which occur in and outside of classroom, to and from school, in toilets, playgrounds and corridors. This article draws on prevailing data to capture some aspects of the way in which children live their lives and to indicate how this impacts on their participatory experiences at the levels of school governance and pedagogy. In so doing, the article contributes to a growing critical literature on children’s participation (see, for example, Tisdall, Davis, Hill & Prout, 2006; Wyness, 2009; Bray & Moses, 2011) by examining connections and disconnections between modes of participation, the participatory spaces of pedagogy and school governance, and the interests and life-worlds of different groups of children in South Africa.

The article has four main parts. The first draws on my earlier work with Yusuf Sayed (Carrim & Sayed, 1997; 1998) in order to consider the ways in which representation and participation are conceptualised in South African national education legislation, particularly as these concepts pertain to school governance. In this domain, possibilities for participation flow from and are thus constrained by modes of representation. The critical issue in this regard is who participates and who speaks for whom in a school’s representative structures. The second part considers the construction of participation, and participatory agency, in the official curriculum. Here a central issue is the mismatch between the rhetoric of “learners” as independent critical thinkers and problem-solvers, on the one hand, and their severely curtailed opportunities for participation in school governance, on the other hand. Children’s lived experiences have a significant impact on their schooling and life opportunities. This is a matter I pursue in the third part, which draws on empirical data to portray some of the diversity of children’s lives in South Africa, with a focus on children living in especially difficult circumstances. The purpose is to demonstrate why it is important not to homogenise children. If part of the rationale for including children in school governance structures is to allow for the representation of their interests, then ways need to be found to take account of the diversity of interests. Finally, and very briefly, I consider some of the ways in which children’s diverse circumstances are taken into account in major legislation outside of education, notably the comprehensive Children’s Act, and argue for greater consistency across the different domains of policy for children.

Modes of participation and representation in South African educational legislation

Four modes of representation and participation are recognised in post-apartheid South African educational legislation, namely “community”, “stakeholder” (which subsumes “interest-based” modes), “regulated” and “weighted” (Carrim & Sayed, 1997; 1998). In each, the criteria for representation delimit the field for participation.

The notion of “community” participation and representation in South African educational legislation, especially in the SASA (NDoE, 1996), suggests that the community within which a school is located has a direct role to play in determining the way in which the school in their community ought to be governed. In keeping with South Africa’s constitutional commitment to participatory democracy, community participation and representation allow for decentralised forms of governance and, at the same time, for processes of democracy to be brought to a local level. Sound though the democratic principle may be, the notion of community in this legislation is problematic on two counts. First, it homogenises the “community”; differences among the various people that make up the “community” are ignored. Thus, for example, “race”, class, gender, political affiliations and different religions in communities are not taken into account. Second, the legislation does not make explicit how the notion of community is to be understood. It appears to be used in geographical terms, where a community is simply the area, or district, within which a school is located. Other conceptions – such as those that view a community as being constituted by shared interests, a shared language, or shared belief systems and cultural practices – are not engaged with at all.

Both the SASA and the National Educational Policy Act (NEPA) (NDoE 1996) conceive of school governance as constituted by specific actors who are directly involved in schools, namely parents, teachers, students (i.e., “learners”),² non-academic staff (gardeners, cleaning staff, security staff and administrative staff) and the school principal, who is *ipso facto* a member of school governance structures. These

categories of people are regarded as “stakeholders” in schools on the grounds that they are assumed to have a direct interest in schools and schooling. What is more, “stakeholders” are assumed to have the same and uniform interests and to exist as a bloc. “Stakeholders” is thus also a homogenised category. Even so, the SASA projects a hierarchy of stakeholders, with parents assumed as having the most “stake” in education and the most “interest” in schooling, and hence are “weighted” more favourably than the other “stakeholders”.

Students are regarded as “stakeholders” only in secondary schools, as “learners”. Students in primary schools are not regarded as “stakeholders” and, by implication, are assumed either as not having an “interest” in primary schooling or not being competent to act in their educational interests. Age, together with associated conceptions of development, appears to be the main criterion for learners’ inclusion as eligible participants on School Governing Boards (SGBs). As Wyness (2009:543) points out with respect to school councils in the United Kingdom, “age is a dominant differentiating factor” within schools and a key principle in the “regulation of pupils” and, consequently, little or no importance is attached to the voices of younger pupils. Although the SASA sets no explicit age criterion for participation, school attainment level operates as a proxy for age in determining the eligibility of students to participate as representatives.

“Weighted” representation refers to a mode of representation which gives some people more voting power in decision making and greater numbers on decision-making structures. Clearly, weighted representation has direct consequences not only for the numbers of students who are included as participants in school governance, but also for the weighting of their participation *within* SGBs. In the SASA “parents” or guardians are expected to be a 51% majority on SGBs. As a consequence they have more voting power on SGBs and, because of their greater numbers, more extensive opportunities for influencing participatory decision making. “Regulated” participation acknowledges some of the problems with “community” and “stakeholder” forms of participation and attempts to regulate such participation by prescribing and “weighting” some representative categories more than others. As such, “regulated” representation and participation is linked to “weighted” representation and participation.

Three features emerge from the ways in which modes of representation and participation are portrayed in South African educational legislation. First, modes of representation are directly linked to and determine modes of participation; second, there is an overall tendency to homogenise people’s identities in the categories of description that are used; third, the modes of representation and participation that the legislation allows for do not acknowledge problems related to the “politics of representation” (Ellsworth, 1989) wherein the “representative” does not, in fact, “represent the represented”. The first two features are implicated in the third, as discussed below.

Where modes of representation directly determine modes of participation, it is taken for granted that people elect representatives who participate in decision making on their behalf. Representatives are assumed authentically to represent the group they are supposed to be representing. In this sense, people give up “their own voices” and their representatives are assumed to speak on their behalf. The assumption rests on shaky grounds, as an extensive critical literature on the politics of representation testifies (see, for example, Ellsworth, 1989; Young, 2000). In practice, representatives may “speak in their own voices” rather on behalf of those they represent, in a mandated, accountable and responsible way. The possible gap between the representative and the represented is ignored in the policies that regulate SGBs in South African schools. Yet, the problem of representation is real, not only for children but for adult stakeholders, too. In practice, authoritarian attitudes within SGBs and dissatisfaction at tokenistic membership impede the realisation of the democratic intent of the SASA (see Bentley, 2011: this issue; Bray & Moses, 2011: this issue).

Data gathered from the workings of SGBs in South African schools show that all categories of “stakeholders”, including “learners”, consistently and repeatedly complain about their representatives not representing them adequately or accurately – representatives are seen to “speak in their own voices” and not as the spokespersons of the represented (see Sayed, Subrahmanian, Soudien & Carrim, 2007; Carrim & Sayed, 1997). Whether one is viewing representation and participation in the terms of “community”,

“stakeholders”, “regulated” or “weighted” modes, the homogenising of people in the terms of these categories is clear. Differences in terms of “race”, class, gender and other variables are flattened and ignored (Carrim, 2006, 2006a, Carrim, 2009; Moletsane, 1999; Sayed *et al.*, 2007). Failures to recognise these differences have led to feelings of disempowerment, marginalisation and silencing among those who are of different “races”, classes and gender (see also Weber, Nkomo & Amsterdam, 2009). Women, parents and teachers on SGBs complain of not being given effective roles to play in SGBs and of their issues and experiences rarely being taken into account in the deliberations and workings of SGBs, even by their “representatives”. Working class parents complain about being silenced and marginalised on SGBs. Educators complain about their “representatives” being lackeys of the principal rather than authentically representing their views; and so on. Not surprisingly, this was also found to be the case with students. Children’s representatives also do not “speak in the voice” of the represented, but in “their own voices”. At secondary school level, girl children and working class children or children of “other races” complain that they do not have their experiences taken into account by their “representatives”. This is, in part, a consequence of the homogenisation of children in the category of “learner”. Children in primary schools have no representation and no participation possibilities; instead they must rely on adults to speak on their behalf and in their interests.

Critical issues emerge from the above data. Where significant sociological differences among people are ignored in the formally recognised categories, and practices of representation fail to represent, people’s diverse issues and concerns are ignored and, at points, “misrecognised” (Taylor, 1994). In the case of SGBs in South Africa, what was meant to promote participatory democracy turns out to be an exercise in marginalisation and silencing. In a recent article on school and youth councils in the United Kingdom, Wyness (2009:549) reaches a similar conclusion about student representation on school councils: “these formal structures can have the effect of silencing groups of young people already marginalised within society”.

Representation and participation in the “new” curriculum

The curriculum constitutes a very different kind of participatory space for children. At the level of policy, the South African curriculum has undergone a number of revisions since the advent of democracy in South Africa and the introduction of a new curriculum framework. Yet, the overall principles of the “new curriculum” have been kept intact officially. Informed by notions of active learning and learner-centred pedagogy, the curriculum proposes more direct forms of participation of students in their own learning (NDoE, 1997; 2000; 2003; Carrim, Pendlebury & Enslin, 2000). Especially in earlier versions (NDoE 1997; 2003), the national curriculum views children as active participants in their own learning, able to make decisions and undertake tasks independently and critically, even in primary schools. Yet, this view of children as relatively autonomous, capable, rational and critical human beings contrasts sharply with the SASA’s exclusion of primary school children on SGBs and severely limited scope for secondary school students to participate as representatives on their SGBs. This ambivalence in the ways children are formally viewed in South African education does not go by unnoticed by children. They cannot understand why they are not allowed to participate in or have representation in primary schools or why their roles are so circumscribed and titular in secondary schools (cf. Sayed *et al.*, 2007; Carrim, 2006). The following extract from an interview with Grade 9 learners captures these sentiments:

White Boy Learner 12: *You see the rules and regulations of the school do not take our interests for real, they don’t take our views seriously. They don’t really consult us about what we think and want, and they don’t understand us.*

African Boy Learner 11: *Ja, they don’t know what it is like to be a teenager today, and a lot of the rules are not what we want.*

Interviewer: *Are you saying that you were not consulted when the rules were drawn up?*

White Boy Learner 12: *They did consult us, but everything we asked for they didn’t take.*

African Boy Learner 11: *They treat us like children and don't take us seriously*

(Group Interview with Learners, 1997; in Carrim, 2006).

As the extract indicates, children have an expectation that their views should be “seriously” taken into account. This is understandable given that the main drive of the curriculum is for learners to be active, engaged and critical participants in the affairs of their lives and schools.

Participation in pedagogical spaces is, of course, not the same as participation in school governance. Pedagogical participation is aimed primarily at enabling and enhancing learning, whereas participation on levels of school governance covers a wider and deeper range of issues and requires knowledge and competencies that may not always be prevalent among children. The point at issue is that the ways in which children are imagined in pedagogy is not the ways in which they are portrayed at school governance levels, either on the level of official imaginings of children or the ways in which children seem to experience these. As the above interview extract indicates, children find this confusing. While they can be active citizens, it seems, in the pedagogical encounters of the classroom, they are prevented from enacting their citizenship capacities in the governing of (their own) schools, which incidentally is a skill that they are supposed to be developing in what they are taught.

Schools comprise a major space of participation for school-aged children. Formally, as I have shown, it is a participatory space constituted and regulated by the laws and policies that govern schooling and the curriculum. Informally, it is a participatory space whose affordances and patterns of inclusion/exclusion are shaped by children’s diverse lives and experiences. In the following section I draw on empirical research which indicates the realities that some children deal with in their daily lives and the ways in which they actually participate actively in their own worlds to cope with the conditions that confront them, how these impact on their schooling, and why it is important not to homogenise children.

Lived experiences of children

Empirical research on schooling in South Africa has demonstrated the various and varying ways in which children’s participation in schooling is influenced. Whether children go to school, stay at school, drop out of school, return to school or not, and whether they pass, fail or repeat grades are significantly influenced by variables such as “race”, class and gender. In this section I draw on empirical research that identifies child-headed households, domestic violence, “initiation ceremonies” and pregnancy as some of the circumstances that significantly affect children’s schooling and their life opportunities. I do so in order to reinforce the point that not all children are the same. Homogenising children as a category of persons belies the heterogeneity of childhoods and the factors that support or impede children’s participatory agency. The risk of the approach I take in this brief section is that categories such as “children in child-headed households” are themselves homogenising.

For the data and arguments in this section I draw on two major research projects in which I was a co-researcher. The first is CREATE (see Motala, S; Dieltiens, V; Carrim, N; Kgobe, P; Moyo, G & Rembe, S, 2007); the second is the India-South Africa Project on Educational Exclusion and Inclusion (see Sayed, Y; Subrahmanian, R; Soudien, C & Carrim, N, 2007). CREATE (Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity) focused primarily on the factors that exclude learners from schools, including dropping out of school and failing. The India-South Africa Project examined the factors that contribute to educational exclusion and the ways in which inclusion happens in India and South Africa. Both projects used multiple research techniques, with both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

The South African data from both projects pointed to four particular kinds of experiences among children which have profound effects on their schooling lives and life opportunities, namely child-headed households; domestic violence; “initiation ceremonies”; and pregnancy.

Both South African studies found that for children in households affected by HIV/AIDS, the demands of care were a common reason for not attending school or dropping out altogether. They were needed to either care for their younger siblings in cases where their parents had died or care for parents and

other family members who are suffering from AIDS or are HIV positive and who did not have access to antiretroviral medication (cf. Carrim, 2006a; Motala *et al.*, 2007).

Data from both South African studies also pointed to domestic violence and sexual abuse as an impediment to educational participation. On the basis of the data gathered, the perpetrators of the violence ranged from parents to older siblings and relatives who frequented their homes. Unlike children who headed households or took on major care responsibilities within a household, such children did not drop out of school but would come back once their “wounds” have healed and they were able to return (cf. Carrim, 2006, 2006a; Motala *et al.*, 2007). In these instances, children failed to attend school and, although they would return to schools within the given school year, their performances were affected and they would need to repeat a year.

In relation to “initiation ceremonies”, it was found that, in the selected Eastern Cape schools that formed part of the India-South Africa project, schooling was disrupted because of children having to go to “the mountains” and, more interestingly, when they came back from “the mountains” they did not see themselves as children but as adult men, and expected to be treated as such by all in the school, students and teachers alike. In some instances such “men” did not think it was appropriate for them to be in school because they were now “adults” and needed to do “adult things” because schooling is what children do. In these cases, boys returning from “initiation ceremonies” either dropped out of school or returned to school to experience more fractured relations with other school-based actors, but they came back to schools. The study considered children in the age-range of 12-15 years old. Older boys and young men did not form part of the study. The data only indicated “initiation ceremonies” for boys. Although girls may also have had a similar “rite of passage”, such girls did not leave schools for a period of time or drop out of schools (cf. Sayed *et al.*, 2007; Motala *et al.*, 2007).

Both the CREATE and India-South Africa research projects showed that pregnancy was a cause for girls dropping out of school. Although there is the possibility for pregnant girls to return to school after giving birth, the findings of both studies suggested that they rarely do so, partly because they do not want to and would prefer to be with their babies and partly because as “mothers” they are not made to feel “included” in schools (Motala *et al.*, 2007). By contrast, the data indicated that young fathers, if they are at school, continue with their schooling in uninterrupted ways or after a short period of absence.

As these and many other research findings show, school-aged children come from different backgrounds and have very different experiences and responsibilities. For some, although they are legally defined as children, the burdens of care and the experiences of initiation or motherhood permeate the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. The homogenising sociological category of “learners” is especially problematic where it is assumed that “learner representatives” on school governance structures actually represent such learners. There are also questions about the extent to which pedagogical encounters take into account the experiences of such children.

I have argued that education legislation and policy are blind to crucial differences in the life-worlds and experiences of children and that this, together with age differentiation and a particular construction of representation in school governance, is problematic for children’s participation on SGBs. Beyond the domain of education, some of the key legislation for children is more sensitive to the variety of circumstances that shape children’s lives and experiences. In the next section I briefly discuss the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 (as amended by the Children’s Amendment Act 41 of 2007) (NDS, 2008) in order to compare its conceptions of children with the prevailing conceptions in educational legislation and policy.

Children in other social policy: The Children’s Act

Schools are not isolated environments but are linked inextricably to the society of which they are a part. In this regard, another level of policy inconsistency is discernable. Unlike the education legislation and policy considered earlier, the recently adopted comprehensive Children’s Act (i.e., the Children’s Act 38 of 2005, as amended by the Children’s Amendment Act 41 of 2007) recognises some of the lived experiences of children who head households, become pregnant and are subjected to domestic violence and sexual abuse. For example, the Children’s Amendment Act of 2007 provides for children from the age of 12 years

old to have access to HIV testing and contraceptives. The age of majority in this Act is 18 years, and it recognises the age of consent to be 16 years (except for those who are married already and who have been emancipated by a court order). So, at least on the face of it, there is inconsistency within the Act. Be that as it may, the concern in this case is to point to inconsistency between the provisions of the Children's Amendment Act of 2007 and what exists officially and in practice in South African schools.

An example illustrates the point. In 2009 the national Minister of Education at the time, Naledi Pandor, announced that contraceptives would not be allowed to be given to students in schools. Her concern was that such an action may be seen as conveying "the wrong message" and might be construed as "encouraging school students to engage in sex" (*Science Daily*, Jan. 20, 2009). So, while that Children's Act allows children access to contraceptives and HIV tests from the age of 12 years old, they may not obtain contraceptives in or from schools. Inconsistency in the different approaches by the Social Development sector and the Education sector results in confusion about who children are and what they can and cannot do, and where.

Children's participatory rights also appear to be more explicit and more extensive in the Children's Act than in some of the education legislation. The Children's Act follows international instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in specifying an express right of participation for children (see Mahery, Jamieson & Scott, 2011). Section 10 states: "Every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration." In the Children's Act, children's right to participation extends to collective decision making, policy making and planning. This includes participation in decisions about the operation of child and youth care centres, whose management boards are obliged to establish a children's participatory forum for resident children (Mahery *et al.*, 2011). How effective such participatory spaces will be in practice remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Despite well-intentioned legislation – such as the South African Schools Act – for democratic school governance, officially sanctioned modes of representation not only constrain democratic participation (for adult stakeholders and even more so for children) but also lead to various forms of marginalisation (and thus non-participation). Children's participation in school governance is titular at best, and restricted to secondary school students. A homogenising tendency in the conception of categories of representative fails to take account of the ways in which "race", class and gender shape people's experience and concerns. I have argued for recognising the differences among children, especially as it affects their schooling, but also because the recognition of differences is one way of guarding against misrepresentation and marginalisation in the representative structures of school governance. I have also pointed to inconsistencies in the ways in which children and their participatory agency are imagined in official texts, both within education and social legislation such as the Children's Act. Although curriculum provision also homogenises children as "learners", the modes of participation that are expected of them in the pedagogical space suggest an active, independent, autonomous person capable of critical and relational thinking – qualities that are at odds with the participatory scope granted to them on SGBs. In short, the realisation of participatory democracy, then, at the local levels of schools in South Africa is still far from where it could be.

There are three direct implications of the discussion in this article: 1) acknowledging difference; 2) consistency in legislation and policies; and, 3) accountability. It is to these that I now turn by way of concluding.

Differences among children affect their schooling and life opportunities. As discussed in this article, "race", gender and class predominate as the variables which influence children's schooling. For example, experiences of child-headed households, domestic violence, "initiation ceremonies" and pregnancy intersect with the variables of "race", gender and class. Recognition of difference in official texts would open up the possibility for formal processes to acknowledge the experiences that emerge from such differences and work with them. However, if such differences were taken into account in legislation and

policies, it would also be important to ensure a degree of consistency across such legislation and policy, within the domain of education and beyond.

Finally, taking the “politics of representation” seriously would entail developing better ways to ensure that “representatives” do, in fact, represent the “voices” of those they represent. In the first instance, such representatives would need to note the differences of those among the groups which they represent and, in the second instance, mechanisms to ensure that such representatives report back to the represented need to be addressed. Given that modes of participation are tied to modes of representation within educational legislation and policy, the “authenticity” (cf. Taylor, 1994) of the “voice” that the representative carries into dialogue on behalf of the represented is crucial for the participation of the represented, and accountability of the representative is thus of critical importance. More open deliberative forums in which elected representatives engage with their “constituents” may offer an appropriate space both for accountability and for wider participation.

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(Endnotes)

1. An anonymous reviewer drew my attention to this point.
2. I am using the words "teachers" and "students" in this paper because these are in general use internationally. In South African education and its policy and legislative framework "teachers" are called "educators" and "students" or "pupils" are called "learners". In this paper I also use the term "student" to refer to both "pupils" and "students" who are distinguished generally from each other by the level of educational institution they occupy.