Building opportunities for children to exercise their rights at school

Denys Serrano Arenas , Autonomous University Chapingo, México
Evaristo Arcos Miranda, Autonomous University Chapingo, México

Abstract
There is inconsistency in the relationship children have with regards to their rights at the school setting. Few teachers know about these rights, families do not apply them, and children ignore them. One of the most important social justice problem at schools is talking about such rights without creating any opportunities to exercise them. Improving social justice for school-aged children requires fostering a setting in which student participation is encouraged. In this paper, I outline the required factors to promote student rights at the school setting.
This research specifically looks at three groups of 25-30 students between the ages of 10 and 12 who attend marginalized primary schools in Mexico. Researched activities in which children had the opportunity to exercise their rights, included children's participation in actions that were socially beneficial. For example, they took care of younger children and were sensitized about their environment, which can be interpreted as promoting social justice. One of the main findings of this research is that children are the ones that look down upon the points of view of other children, and that actions to promote social justice can be considered as learning and teaching distractions. Nonetheless, student's participation claims a new organization of schools, and a new visualization of school-aged children by their families, classmates, and teachers.

Keywords: Social justice, Children´s participation, agency.

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Introduction

Children's participation is a substantial element for the construction of social justice at school. This affirmation is not new, but remains to be seen, even though it is a right, hardly there are opportunities and conditions for its exercise. Nevertheless, the participation is not only a right, if it is understood this way it can favor the exclusion from the participation practices in various settings, unlike the approach based on the participation as a system of action and the focus on children's agency. This is a starting point of the factors involved in children's participation.

This research develops the comprehension of the participation and agency concepts associated with fair schools. It was done with three groups of poor children between the ages of 10-12 in Mexico. The results provide an understanding of the complexity to generate opportunities and conditions at schools with traditional approaches and what is needed to create them, by contrasting the perspective of the studied groups with the theoretical framework for social justice and participation.

This article is structured in two parts: the first one presents the arguments and key concepts underlying the work plan and the second one describes the Mexican community, the work plan of the research and the applied methods and instruments for the interventions with children.

Children's participation at school.

Fair schools are related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in which it is stated child's protection on the basis of required conditions for a decent life, and it generates the adult's responsibilities with children. In article 12 it is mentioned the right of children to be heard and taken into account in all processes that affect them, that is, children exercise of their right to participate when the views of children are heard. "The child's right to express her views and being taken seriously in the school environment represents one of the most profound transformations in moving towards a culture of respect for children's rights, dignity and citizenship and their ability to contribute significantly towards their own welfare" (Lansdown, Jimerson , & Shahroozi, 2014, pág. 4). However, the exercise of her right to participate involves thinking about the meaning of childhood and participation from an intercultural perspective because people understand and interpret the world in accordance with the structures of their environment. Thus, apparently a similar phenomenon can be seen and valued very differently, according to the language and experiences of the people (Saandi & Liebel , 2012).

Participation refers to the process of decision making and to the way of being, relating, deciding and acting that characterizes the practice of everyday life. For that reason, it is considered that there is a value in understanding broader participation as a manifestation of individual action in a social context (Percy- Smith and Thomas, 2010).

Highlight the importance of taking into account the actual participation as practices for and with children which provide a contribution to the family and the community. They include involvement in activities identifying and responding to community problems in social relations. In this sense, participation is understood as a possibility

or opportunity to escape from a marginal position and to achieve social recognition (Saandi & Liebel , 2012).

Above mentioned authors conceive children's participation as an opportunity for action that allows to live and function in their environment as social actors, and therefore to have an influence on its transformation. Participation becomes a process of social transformation that recognizes childhood as a sector of society that contributes and influences the educational environment through their actions.

The speech of children's participation should be careful to mention rights without responsibilities and to mention rights to participation without taking into consideration the prospects of what it means to participate for children and adults in the community. The reason is that when a child is not allowed to exercise her rights and responsibilities, including the right to participate, it generates disinterest to get involved as actor of change in daily living problems, given that normally teachers, parents and mothers and/or authorities are those who resolve the problem.

In fact, many children drop out of school due to a learning environment that ignores their views and denies them opportunities for participation. They are excluded from important decisions ignoring a key fact: children are co-builders of the school environment and therefore of the social life of the environment. This argument is related to two important aspects of this work: 1) the need to promote children's participation in improving the school environment, to return childhood as a contingent category that affects their environment as a social actors and 2) change the way they are perceived by teachers and other adults, to dignify their role in school and thus bring together social justice in it. These two aspects are taken up from the exercise of participation contained in the CRC and the childhood's agency.

The agency and the participation of children at school.

This document states that the participation of children allows the transformation of schools, promotes social justice and dignifies its role in society, however, as the framework for action is determined by adults, it is necessary to identify the dominant visions about childhood. Adults usually see childhood as a time of fulfillment and joy, where there are few concerns and people meet their needs, this view minimizes the experience of children and therefore their opinions, triggering a trend to protection. Another perspective is the being-coming, in which childhood is a stage in which they are prepared for the future, although both views are correct, it ignores the involvement and decisions in the present. Other one, focus on childhood protectionism in which vulnerability and victimization of children stands out, beyond the possibility of facing a problem as actors in society. Finally, the last perspective sees children as active participants in society who modify and transform the environment.

The being-coming and protectionism are related to paternalism, the victimization and an incisive child's protection, (Danso, 2010). Children are reduced to nothing because its value in terms of contributions to their environment are not important in the present but in the future. This creates a vicious poverty circle in their capabilities, because they do not have the opportunity to exercise their agency. Therefore, they are children who want to become adults given de chance to be visible in the community.

When children are considered as social actors capable of transforming their environment, it is determined that children exercise their agency. Children are responsible and able to decide on their action and inaction. It is controversial to discuss the agency of children, since some authors argue that they do not have the maturity to decide and act for a good, whereas others state that childhood has proven to be able to dignify their role in society from exercising their agency.

Nussbaum holds that the capabilities of children are immature and free choice are likely to succumb to parental pressure to work or leave school for their economic dependence, then the State has the commitment to ensure the future capabilities (Nussbaum, 2012: 185).

Within this framework, it is justified to restrict the rights of children in particular the Article 12 about children´s participation, because adults have better judgement in deciding about children's welfare. This position is also very debatable, because age does not determine a better judgement, adults are also vulnerable and need protection under certain circumstances such as children do.

A fact that determines that children decide and act assertively is the experience they gain from the opportunity to act, that is, the exercising of their agency. Therefore, denying the exercise of rights and spaces for action is limiting opportunities for children to be able to decide, act and to contribute to improving their environment. In consequence, inequality is increased in areas such as schools, given unequal relationships between teachers and children in which paternalistic schemes often prevail.

As children grow up, the relationship with their parents changes according to the responsibilities and rights that they are allowed to exercise. However, in the educational structure, children keep more rigid relationships with school actors. There are not only factors related to the age and evolving capacities, but the prevailing inequality among teachers as having knowledge and children having less. In this unequal relations the spaces for expressions and participation are reduced, even though the children show a strong interest in doing so. In fact, children resent being excluded or marginalized from participation and responsibility. In consequence, children might not be incentivized to participate if they are not allowed to take responsibility for tasks and activities

In spaces of sociability such as school, children can learn different cultural aspects such as gender, they are also taught the meanings of being children and their boundaries from the adults' perspective. However, children do not inquire about their skills and abilities, they learn preconceptions. For this reason, it is common that they doubt or downplay the opinion of other children.

The importance of taking into consideration the actual participation allows children to create opportunities for socialization through partnerships in activities, identifying and responding to community problems (Saandi & Liebel , 2012), where children are enacted as citizens through their actions (Larkins, 2014). Nevertheless, many obstacles prevail in how children can participate and these are also linked to conceptual weaknesses or even blindness (Stoecklin, 2012).

Social justice at school

"Gross domestic product (GDP) growth has not translated into a parallel improvement in the life quality of people" (Nussbaum, 2012:19), making an analogy in education, an increase in school performance does not guarantee social justice and a fair treatment. It is necessary to detect the practices that are not congruent with a fair treatment at school, to implement alternatives that can allow children's participation, based on sociability and respect.

Although the school is one of the main places where principles of justice are taught and practiced with children, hardly teachers, school authorities and families think about the reason why a given practice is fair, and at the same time, there is a lack of literature about the concept of childhood social justice at school.

Social justice requires respect for human dignity, implies treating people as ends and not as means (Nussbaum, 2012), by eliminating arbitrary distinctions where there are competing claims within the structure (Rawls, 2002). For example, Rawls mentions the practice of fair play as a basic moral notion where there is a self-interest restriction. In this kind of practice people recognize the commitment, the responsibility, and accept the benefits of acting justly. Thus, justice can mean a sense of duty or for ethical reasons, the resistance to selfish impulses that harm others (Liebel, 2013).

Based on above mentioned authors, justice is based on the principles of freedom, dignity and respect. This is also related to human rights because both concepts share these principles. This is the reason why the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 meant a breakthrough in childhood social justice.

Thus, children's rights are the basic threshold that students must have at school as a minimum justice condition to provide equality and welfare to people. Inside schools, teachers and principals are the main generators of fair environments, Rawls assumes that the sense of justice is gradually acquired, he divides it into three: moral authority, where the person is unable to estimate the validity of the precepts; morality of association, in which cooperative virtues are distinguished such as loyalty, trust and integrity given in friendly relationships; and finally morality of principles in which an individual has already formed judgements and this allow her/him to improve the decision making processes (Rawls, A Theory of Justice, 1997).

Piaget conceives justice as the most rational of moral notions. This author divides justice into two kinds: the retributive and the distributive. In the first one, the notion of justice is inseparable from the penalty and is defined by the correlation between acts and their distribution, the second one involves the idea of equality. Thus, the author assumes that the sense of justice evolves into mutual respect as it progresses forward in cooperation between children and adults (View in Liebel, 2013).

Among the authors mentioned above there is a similarity in the construction of justice by prioritizing the authority of a third party with more experience. However, it is necessary to analyze the reasons why a child performs with justice, it could be either to avoid being punished or to believe that justice is a good in itself. If a child performs an act of justice just to not be sanctioned, the relationships are reduced to mutual benefit; the difference between the two is that in the first notion the benefit of not

being sanctioned is an end, whereas in the second one respects people as an end in itself. This nuance completely changes the purpose of acts of justice and therefore defines the purpose of the relations between children and adults at school.

Both authors emphasize the importance of people with authority over children to generate a sense of justice. Therefore, teachers are extremely important to safeguard the freedom, well-being, dignity and other children's rights.

Adults surrounding the child define, generate and promote how children participate. The concept of social justice at school where children's participation is subordinated by the margin of action that the adults allow them, based on the concept of childhood culturally constructed in the community, offer little opportunities for children to act and participate as individuals.

Participants in the research process.

Child participation is difficult to secure in countries undergoing a crisis of social justice (Gerison Lansdown, 2014). In Mexico, being a child is not easy, this social group represents 28% of the population and more than half lives are poverty. In addition, child's abuse is the main cause of death. The predominant vision of childhood is paternalism in which parents perceive children as private property, therefore there is a denial of their rights.

Children abuse is more common in marginalized groups of children, who tend to have more responsibility for their families and communities, sometimes as the main contributors to the family income (SEDESOL, 2010). All studied groups live in areas that experience significant levels of poverty. The selection process was based on the schools that have reported problems of participation and social organization. The two studied schools are located in the eastern part of the State of Mexico, one in the municipality of Texcoco in the community of San Jeronimo Amanalco and the other one in the municipality of La Paz in the town of La Magdalena Atlicpac. The study was conducted with children enrolled in their final elementary grade from both schools. In the first school participated a group of 26 children and in the second one two groups of 24 and 25 children.

The children were invited to participate and expressed their interest in doing so. They were provided with invitations to participate in established groups within the selected geographical areas, where the host organizations committed to support the fieldwork on behalf of the research objectives of children.

This research develops an understanding of social justice in elementary school: rights, duties/ responsibilities, participation and agency, with children aged between 10-12 years. The research sought an inclusive definition of participation for children in relation to the CRC. The literature about child participation' knowledge focuses on discussing the factors and concepts of childhood and participation but rarely depart from the concepts that children have. Projects are run by adults for the purpose of adults, even if you have good intentions, (Stokelin, 2012, Lansdown 2014; Gaitan & Liebel 2011; Malone, 2010).

Methodology and fieldwork

The process of the research used action-research (Stenhause,1989). The three groups generated qualitative data through participatory reflection and action, following the methodologies of Freire (2007). The groups had sessions about the subject of children's rights, participation and teamwork. Later they chose and worked on a problem that worries them at their school. Then they took part in the process of exploring their own experiences and meanings by projecting photos they took about the moments they considered most important in the development of initiatives or projects to improve their school. Finally, there was a process of reflection using the kaleidoscope experience strategy, (Stoecklin, 2012). After reflecting, the participants were asked to write daily activities, the specific people (relationships) with which they connected during these activities. Later, participants were asked to highlight those people that do not take into account their views in the process of making decisions that concern them. Finally, they were asked to think about the reasons why these people do not listen them, the feelings they have about themselves and what could be done (motivation) to change the situation. The sessions were performed in 2 to 3 hours for 3 months.

During the development of the project there were phases whose purposes were to promote children's participation in the transformation of the school through the knowledge of rights. In the first phase of the project, the children and the teacher raised the problems at the school that have not been solved. They asked their other classmates about issues that concern them at school, through ludic activities to encourage participation and semi-structured interviews about what it means to participate. Subsequently, in phase two each group took control over what to do to transform the school. In phase three children took actions to improve the school, then children collected photos of the moments that they considered important in implementing their initiatives, and some children took notes about their experience. After the implementation, children sought strategies for the project to continue operating even after their graduation. In the last stage the children, parents and teachers were interviewed about the process of student's participation, difficulties in their participation, and about how the visualize themselves as actors who make decisions to improve the environment.

For a more detailed analysis of the data, the information was classified into three categories: social justice, participation and children´s rights. Children reflected about the photographs taken for these categories, conceptualizing the meanings of participation for themselves. Finally, this information was contrasted with the concept of CDN.

Limitations of this study.

A limitation of this research is not considering all the actors of the school community. Since the impact of the project would lead to a radical change in how adults visualize childhood, including the youngest children in primary school (children aged 6 years) who have the ability to participate, express themselves and explore their ideas and talents, while teachers need to change their paternalistic ideas.

Findings

In order to understand the actions that emerged from the researched groups, it is described an overview of the key actions developed by the group to change the children's perspective, and their skills and abilities to influence their environment. It was analyzed the moments in which the children's participation changed part of their educational structure, so that they questioned the concepts of teachers, students, and school officials to rebalance the distribution of rights and responsibilities.

The children's main objective for the project was to leave a better school for their friends and family. At the beginning of the project the children took the activities as games in which they could say their points of view. When children were questioned about problems, they showed major concern for issues related to violence to younger children, environment, water conservation and to the improvement of playground areas during breaks. When they raised the main problems related to violence, children recognized that they are the ones who exclude the little ones for playing during breaks and that they are the ones who abuse others at school. Children were concerned with issues of pollution. They mentioned that they do not throw garbage in places but they burn the trash at their homes, that is, children identified themselves as part of the problem. At this stage of the project, the team interested in combating violence mentioned that aggression and disrespect were present during breaks due to the reduced spaces and therefore, people fight easily. In consequence, they decided to expand the library and to get more toys in order to have another space of fun at school. Other children from the same group decided to paint games on the floors so the younger children could also have a place to play without getting hurt.

During the problems' detection process, two things arose in common: the children's acknowledgment of themselves as part of the problem and their proposal of actions for a common good. When children assume responsibility of their actions, they take the opportunity to express willingness to change for the common good. In this action the children give up selfishness and the benefits of injustice, that is, one of the principles of justice, Rawls, Nussbaum, Sen. In addition, it is proved that although a child under 12 years is vulnerable and needs protection, they are also capable to protect and look after other people, then they can take responsibility, and thus exercise their agency.

In order to implement the transformational measures at school children performed the following:

Violence: They made a toy library, thereby improving the library and could provide recreational toys. For this, the children requested support from the entire school to donate toys and also asked people from their same community. To reinforce this activity a tour for them to see a playroom, and its operation so in that way they could get more ideas for their implementation. Other children worked on the school playground, games were painted on the floor for the smaller children.
Pollution: The members of the team spoke with the person in charge of cleaning the school to avoid burning garbage along with the principal of the school, then they pass each classroom to explain the proper way to separate the garbage and the benefits of doing so, then they painted and fitted out cans for sorting waste into organic and inorganic. some children went to City Hall to ask the president to send the garbage trucks more often.

In the process of developing their initiatives the children sometimes discredited the views of their peers and turned to teachers for answers, this caused some discomfort among members of the group because in between them there were children who were not listened to or allowed to comment on the actions to be perform.

Children expressed anger and desire to stop working with their group. In a way that they lived a wrong recognition… which is a form of oppression. Beyond the simple lack of respect, it can inflict a serious wound, that afflicts people with a discontent for themselves that disables them. Due recognition is not just a courtesy but a human need, (Honneth & Fraser, 2006).

In the final phase of the work the children invited their parents to show them the actions that they had worked on for the last three months. The children shared their experience of participation in school, the difficulties of organization and action, for it, they described the process of making an initiative in school.

One of the projects with the greatest impact in the families was the playroom. The parents expressed their pride and agreed to join the project with the finality that that school space would also become part of the community. When parents suggest to join they created a positive recognition for themselves as people who care and can do good things for their schools and community.

Children express the difficulty of performing an action and that every detail of their project involved a lot of work, a girl said "I never thought I could make a change, we are just children," another kid said: "I now believe that I am able to make a change in the world."

This statement show that children debuted in achieving to complete their improvement actions in their school, they also mentioned that changes can occur at home with their own actions, that is, they conceived themselves as actors to recognize the act and express their views in interactions in their daily lives, becoming a social actor with the capabilities that are built through reflexivity and interaction (Stonkelin, 2012).
The development of agency is not linear between interaction and the evolution of its dynamic capabilities and contexts in which they live, and this is actually a long life process, Stonkelin, 2012. Thus the participation is not based on activities, but in a position to daily life where children assume various forms, it is not intended to show that active participation is the best way to participate.

At the completion of the project an interview was applied in order to investigate the concept of child participation, where the expression of participation means: to be heard, to think, to do things, support, help, and pride. They consider that there is no participation on their part when they are not heard. People who decry their opinion are family members, mostly being felt ignored by their own peers. They consider not being heard because they are younger, they do not believe in them or because they are told they don't understand. About it a girl said: "Adults think that children can not do the same to them."

Children think that the way to change this in order to participate is: to give their ideas, working together, talking to people so they would listen to them and changing older people.

Discussion

This study shows the three principles on which participation can help build justice:
• 	The events produced that the actors become more responsible in front of their community.
• 	Acts of positive recognition by members of the school.
• 	Acts id reflexivity of children around their recognition as a person capable of transforming its environment.

The fieldwork also revealed that if children have the opportunity to review and take action to transform the school, to get to take responsibility and commitment to end its actions (Libel and Gaitán, 2013; Larkins, 2014).

In contrast to the hypothesis where the participation of children is a substantial activity for building social justice, there are some tensions that remain in this framework as the recognition of children as capable of deliberating fairly and as people who take their responsibilities to act, as the prevailing imagery of children as persons and people of the future developments in society. With the presented investigation is not to explain that children have a sense of justice well developed, rather, the extent that if the practice of the sense of justice, children practicing the social justice and they could be co-builders of fair schools. If children are isolated from these practices, their vulnerability is increased in the participation in their community.

Conclusion

While the mobile of education is installed on making productive people so they can have better wages, think about the future of children and not the present, intangible values such as participation in meaningless and difficult to generate changes to the order previously established.

Beyond to just expect schools to make changes for of children it's important to build schools to reflect the rights of others, so that children's participation ends up being one of the most important factors if we are to speak of justice in schools. Taking children as capable of transforming their environment dignifies them as individuals and gives them another position in their school and community.

The precepts that adults have on children, will teach children until they themselves doubt their own ability, therefore, the best way to change what you think childhood is, is by listening to them and allowing them to be part of actions to promote justice, thus the ideas that they have on their development will be challenged by their experience.

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