



Child participation in South African primary schools: How useful is the Lundy model?



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Background: The concept of 'learner voice' has received global attention in recent years, frequently credited to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC recognises that children have (1) the right to express a view and (2) the right to have the view given due weight. However, in many countries, including South Africa, despite legislation that recognises child rights, there is a relative absence of learner voice and participation in school-level decision-making.

Setting: The setting of this continuing professional development (CPD) initiative is GADRA Education, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), in Makhanda Eastern Cape.

Method: A consultative participation approach was adopted with Grades 2–4 learners, under the auspices of GADRA Education. Eight child participation consultations were held, followed by a further eight feedback sessions 5 months later. All were audio-recorded.

Results: The results of the CPD initiative suggest that the model provides a useful framework for increasing child participation in primary schools. However, further deliberation is necessary 'with' learners around choices related to space, audience, and the alternative 'hat' of the facilitating teacher.

Conclusion: Building on our learning, we aim to develop these ideas further through a more sustained research project, involving not only consultative participation but also collaborative participation and child-led participation.

Contribution: Insight into the extent to which the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy 2007) can be used as a framework to guide researchers and practitioners in assisting primary school learners to develop their voice and exert influence in matters concerning them.

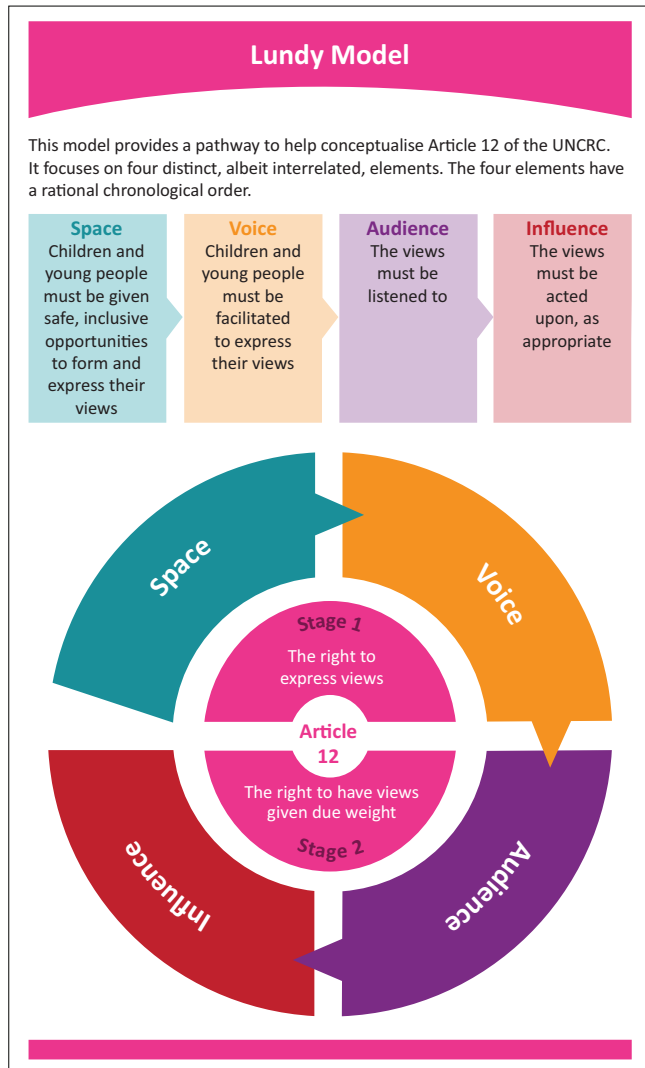
Keywords: child participation; rights of the child; Lundy model; primary education; voice; space; audience; influence.

Introduction

The legal right of children and young people to express their views and have those views acted upon in decision-making processes, which affect their lives has been formalised in Article 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). Many researchers and organisations working with children and young people have engaged in developing mechanisms to ensure that the intentions of Article 12 are meaningfully realised. Ground breaking research in this field has been led by Laura Lundy, a co-director of the Centre for Children's Rights, Professor of Children's Rights at Queen's University, Belfast, and Professor of Law at University College Cork. The Lundy model of child participation, first published in the global North in 2007, sought to provide a framework to guide researchers and practitioners in assisting child participants to realise their right to express their views and their right to have their views given due weight in the research process (Lundy 2007, 2018; Lundy & McEvoy 2012).

The Lundy model (Figure 1) is developed around four interlinking components for meaningful child participation. (1) 'Space': children must be given the opportunity to express a view in a safe and inclusive space, (2) 'Voice': children must be facilitated to express their views, (3) 'Audience': the view must be listened to, and (4) 'Influence': the view must be acted upon, as appropriate (Kennan, Brady & Forkan 2007; Lundy 2007, 2018).

The Lundy model has been adopted by the South African Department of Social Development in the National Child Participation Framework (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2018). Child participation, in this framework document, is defined as 'the active involvement of children in the



Source: Lundy, L., 2007, 'Voice is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', *British Educational Research Journal* 33(6), 927–942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033>

UNCRC, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

FIGURE 1: Lundy model of child participation.

decisions, processes, programmes and policies that affect their lives' (RSA 2018:4). Significant to the context of this opinion piece, the document makes provision for the rights of younger children; they too need to be heard and participate in educational decisions that affect them (RSA 2018:31). While the importance of child participation is acknowledged in this document across a range of settings, including schools, reviews of the status of child participation in South Africa indicate a gap between the intent and actual implementation of the legal framework (Grant 2015; Grant & Kajee 2020; RSA 2018).

The literature denotes the relative absence of student voice in schools (Grant 2015; Gunter & Thomson 2007; Kalimbo 2018) and a 'shrinking of opportunities for students to have a democratic voice in the educational process' (Mitra & Gross 2009:525). Particularly in the global South, children's ability to develop their voice and participate in decision-making processes is often constrained by 'cultural norms and family customs' (Duramy & Gal 2020:2).

Against this backdrop, and cognisant of the gap between policy and practice, we were interested to find out whether the Lundy model of child participation could be used as a framework to guide researchers and practitioners in assisting primary school learners to develop their voice and exert influence in matters concerning them in the context of the global South.

Methods

GADRA-Education, a Makhanda based non-governmental organisation (NGO), in the Eastern Cape, provided the study site. The stimulus for this continuing professional development (CPD) initiative was the pressure on GADRA to develop its strategic plan for the next 5-year period. At around the same time, we came across the Lundy model of child participation (Lundy 2007) and thought it might be a useful framework in ensuring that the voices of the young GADRA learners were heard and acted upon in the context of the strategic planning process.

The CPD initiative was designed as a small consultative participation process in which young children were invited to express their views on a one-time basis and for a specific issue (International Bureau for Children's Rights [IBCR] 2018).

A total of 87 young learners (in the age range of 7–10 years) were asked to talk about their learning experiences at GADRA and were invited to share their opinions, concerns and suggestions with the facilitating GADRA teacher. Eight child participation consultations of between 25–35 min were held in June 2022. Children were organised into grade groups of no more than 12 per group. Five questions were posed. Questions were purposefully designed to scaffold from concrete to abstract thinking. Initially, the children were prompted to share their own understanding of the goals and intentions of GADRA. Subsequently, they were tasked to look around the classroom and identify all of the resources available. Following this, the children were encouraged to consider additional resources that they believed could or should be incorporated into the classrooms to enrich their learning experience. The children were then prompted to reflect on activities they engage in at GADRA. Finally, they were invited to share their thoughts on activities they would like to see added to the programme.

In line with the consultative participation process, learners' views were listened to, but they did not participate in the development, planning or management of the strategic planning process (IBCR 2018). Eight feedback sessions were held with the same groups 4 months later following the adoption of GADRA's new strategic plan by their Board. Learners were informed of the decisions taken, which reflected their opinions, concerns and suggestions. All 16 sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. Fieldnotes were also taken.

To ensure all ethical considerations were adhered to throughout the CPD initiative and the subsequent publication

of the findings, a Memorandum of Understanding between GADRA Education and the two authors was signed. Permission was obtained to use the name of the NGO, but the names of learner-participants were anonymised.

Discussion

The usefulness of Lundy's child participation model as a framework

Our experience of the CPD initiative suggests that the Lundy model provides a useful framework for increasing child participation in primary schools, but with caveats.

According to the Lundy model, the first essential component to meaningful child participation is ensuring that a safe space is created where children feel confident and comfortable. It is when a safe, accepting space is successfully created that the children and young people will express their authentic views (Lundy 2007). Space can be created in many different forms from one-on-one interviews, through to surveys and group consultations (Kennan et al. 2018). In the GADRA CPD initiative, space was created through a small group consultative participation process. Discussions were held in the children's classrooms and in their regular groups. Thus, the space was familiar and the participants known and therefore, we assumed, at ease.

However, on reflection, we recognise that traditional South African classrooms are hierarchical spaces with power and authority vested in the teacher. In contrast, the model envisages a heterarchical space (Woods & Gronn 2009) with democratic ways of working. Thus, it may be prudent to invite learners to have a say in the choice of venue and the process adopted. Another consideration is finding an appropriate time; either within the basic education curriculum or after school.

The second component in the Lundy model is that of voice. Here it is up to the facilitating adult to ensure that children and young people are able to form and express their views in response to the issue at hand. Integral to this step is providing relevant information at age-appropriate levels, which builds their capacity and helps them to fully understand and engage with the topic of discussion. To facilitate voice in the CPD initiative in relation to GADRA's strategic planning process, the facilitating teacher provided an explanation of the goals of the process and why their voice and participation were valued:

'So, what I need help with, it's what we are doing now with GADRA School. We are starting to talk about what we do over the next five years. What is our plan? What are we going to do? So, I'll tell you what I want from you is to find out what you think. Mm-hmm. So that what you think can maybe make us change our minds about things or do things differently.'
(T1, female, Teacher)

During consultations, the age-appropriate questions described here were posed to the children. Some learners lacked the confidence to speak. One child, in response to the teacher's

request for help, said 'I won't talk' (P13, Female, Grade 2). The teacher's response was; 'No? You won't talk? I need you to talk. That's the help that I need. I need you to talk and tell me things. Okay?' (T1, Female, Teacher). A number of learners voiced their opinions in response to the questions, albeit in brief; (1) 'Reading with writing and helping each other. And helping each other. And learning, I think' (P27, Male, Grade 3), (2) 'Library books. The library books. I like to read' (P51, Female, Grade 4) and (3) 'When it's boring. I like to play bingo' (P5, Male, Grade 2). On reflection, and in order to increase voice in young children, we need to consider strategies such as translanguaging and code switching (ed. MacSwan 2022) as well as small group discussion and group leader feedback (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75TzOIU5Tto>). Over time, we also need to consider which learners speak and which are silent and why (Hanna 2021).

The third component to consider when following the Lundy model is audience. This concept of audience is complex as it requires consideration not only of who is listening but also how the listener facilitates discussion, builds the capacity of the participants and, the extent to which the listener is appropriately positioned to act upon views effectively and meaningfully (Lundy 2018). In the CPD initiative, the facilitating teacher was the immediate audience; she listened to and gathered the learner views and suggestions and then communicated these to the GADRA strategic planning committee, the remote audience. On reflection, we realise the importance of learners being able to distinguish between the different hats the teacher wears; in the familiar 'class teacher' role versus in the new 'facilitating teacher' role during the consultative process. For primary school learners, it may well help for this distinction to be concrete and visual with the teacher dressing informally and wearing a party hat or cap to represent this alternative persona. An artefact may well be used to represent the remote audience; a photograph of the committee members or a previous strategic planning document.

The final component in the Lundy model is that of influence. Lundy (2007) argues for child participation that goes beyond merely hearing young people's views; for her 'voice is not enough'. She contends that once children have been given the space and audience for their voices to be expressed and heard, their views should be acted upon appropriately. Furthermore, the resultant decisions and actions should be communicated back to participants, ensuring that they are aware that their views have not only been heard but also have been taken seriously. In the GADRA CPD initiative, learner-related decisions taken by the strategic planning committee under the auspices of the GADRA board were communicated to the children in eight feedback sessions.

Some of the learner ideas and suggestions were incorporated into the strategic plan and, where appropriate, curriculum changes were made. For example, a number of Grade 2 and 3 learners expressed interest in learning about dinosaurs,

going on outings, building more creative arts into the programme and suggested a class picnic might be fun. As a direct result, the topic of dinosaurs was brought in as the theme for term 3 in the Grade 2 and 3 classes. Once the learning theme was completed the children were taken to visit the local museum where experts on dinosaurs took them through the local exhibit and the visit was finished off with a picnic in the museum grounds.

The following extract with a group of Grade 3 learners captures the tone of the feedback sessions:

Teacher: 'So, of those things that you guys thought you might like to do, what have we done already?'

Participant 25 (female): 'We learned about dinosaurs.'

Teacher: 'We learned about dinosaurs. What did we do after we finished learning about the dinosaurs? Where did you go?'

Participants: 'General confusion and chatter'

Teacher: 'We went to the museum. Have you forgotten already?'

Participants: 'General chatter remembering the event.'

Participant 32 (male): 'Yeah. Hey, wasn't that a really fun day?'

Participant 35 (female): 'Yes, it was.'

Teacher: 'So, we went to the museum, we learned about dinosaurs, and then we went and we saw the South African dinosaur. What was his name? The South African dinosaur.'

Participants: 'Nqwebasaurus.'

Teacher: 'Well done. Okay. We went and saw Nqwebasaurus. Then the other thing is actually Learner 1 asked, she said she'd like to go on a picnic or, go camping somewhere, and I said, I don't think I can take you camping. But, we did have a sort of a picnic after our museum visit, didn't we?'

Participants: 'All in agreement'

The Grade 4 learners also had influence on the curriculum as a consequence of the consultations. This is illustrated in the excerpt, which follows:

Teacher: 'A few grade fours also said that they'd love to be able to learn about chemistry or do experiments. OK, so now because of those ideas that the children have had, the school is starting a whole new program from next year. Because of you guys and we are going to start something called the *Savvy Scientists* program..... What do you think that?'

Participants: 'General positive, excited reaction.'

Teacher: 'Quite exciting and it's quite nice to know that you guys have made a difference and have influenced the decisions that we've made about how we're going to spend our money. You should feel very proud of yourselves, do you?'

Participant 54 (male): 'Yes, very proud.'

Conclusion

Utilising the Lundy model of child participation most definitely enabled collaborative participation of the children in this GADRA CPD initiative. However, we acknowledge the limitations of the initiative and argue that it can be considered no more than a pilot study. This is because it involved a small project with children expressing their views on a one-time basis and for a specific purpose, rather than a consultative process on a continuous basis, 'enabling children

to have a greater influence on decisions made and project outcomes' (IBCR 2018:21). Further deliberation around choices related to space, audience and the alternative 'hat' of the facilitating teacher is also necessary.

This opinion piece therefore surfaces the demand for sustained research projects, which are framed by the Lundy model of child participation. This pilot study also highlights a call for longer term initiatives that draw not only on consultative participation but which also experiment with collaborative participation and child-led participation (IBCR 2018). Recently, the model has been adopted as a framework for a collaborative research programme investigating how leadership can be developed in primary school learners. The research programme forms part of a Rhodes University Honours degree. Adult initiated, this interventionist programme experiments with collaborative learner participation, involving increased child participation and the establishment of partnerships 'based on closer collaboration and active, recurring child participation' (IBCR 2018:22).

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

Authors' contributions

K.A.L. contributed with conceptualisation, investigation, writing-original draft, visualisation, project administration, data curation, writing-review and editing. C.C.G. contributed with methodology, formal analysis, visualisation, project administration, writing-review and editing.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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