



IMPLEMENTATION OF RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION AT SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which was adopted by the United Nations in 1989 has a worldwide influence on the advancement of children's rights (Burr, 2004; Millei & Imre, 2009). According to (Franklin, 2002; Burr, 2004; Alderson, 2008) the UNCRC identifies three broad types of rights: protection rights, provision rights, and participation rights (Penn, 2009). The participation right includes the right of children to participate in decisions affecting them (Article 12), the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), and the right for young disabled people to participate in their community (Article 23) (Penn, 2009). Literature shows that Article 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 23, 31, and 40 of UNCRC (1989) give the child the right to participation by expressing views and opinions orally, in writing or through other media.

The term participation at its simplest means to become actively involved in something. Davies et al. (2006) more specifically referred it as involvement in a collective decision-making process with a recognisable social and or educational outcome. Hart (1992) defines participation as a process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. Te One (2009) has found that in a parent-led service, the implication of this Convention was limited among teachers and parents due to their low-level awareness of UNCRC.

The purposes of children's participation were variously identified by a number of researchers. Matthews (2003) explains three alternative arguments based on the purposes of children's participation: (1) education for citizenship, (2) fitting young people into society, and (3) strengthening young people's status in relation to adults. In each purpose, he suggests that participation is an essential and moral ingredient of any democratic society for enhancing quality of life enabling empowerment, encouraging psycho-social wellbeing, and providing a sense of inclusiveness.

According to Kirby and Bryson (2002) specific conditions act as cynicism about being listened to by adults among those who refuse to participate; lack of feedback following participation, meaning that young people cannot assess the impact of their input; structural barriers, such as time constraints, output requirements, formality, complexity and bureaucracy within the participatory project itself, as well as within organisations concerned with decision-making; and the attitudes and communication styles of adults (including parents) that can discourage as well as encourage young people's participation.

The purpose of the present study was to assess whether the students' right to participation as specified in the UNCRC is implemented in the selected senior secondary school settings.

METHODOLOGY

A survey design was used employing the selected stratified school sample from three districts: Colombo (Western) Anuradhapura (North-Central), and Nuwara-Eliya (Central). The overall sample included 18 schools from which 692 students (354 Grade 10 and 338 of Grade 11),



thirty-six class teachers, and eighteen principals. The data collected through questionnaires were triangulated with the qualitative data gathered through structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis techniques such as frequencies, sampling adequacy, Cronbach's alpha (0.902). All descriptive statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS Version 20. Thematic analysis was used for the analysis of qualitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Senior secondary students pointed out that the right to express an opinion (Article 12), and freedom of thought (Article 14), were not adequately implemented in the classroom while freedom of expression was moderately implemented in the teaching-learning process (Article 13). In addition, as illustrated in Table 1, the right to freedom of association (Article 15) was poorly promoted by the teachers and the right to protection of privacy (Article 16) was satisfactory in the classroom environment. This may be due to the impact of values of Sri Lankan culture which were nourished by the teachers who represent the adult population. The unsatisfactory levels on the right to express opinion and freedom of thought can be justified since the students had a very limited level of awareness on the right to participate. Based on the teachers' point of view, freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought (Article 14) and access to information (Article 17) were moderately implemented.

Table 1: Ratings for Implementation of the Right to Participation in the Teaching Learning Process (N=692)

UNCRC Article No.	Item
Students Ratings (N = 692)	
Article 12 (The right to express an opinion)	Teachers do not respond to students' questions while teaching (79.0%)
Article 13 (The right to freedom of expression)	Teachers do not provide opportunities for students to express ideas while they teach (57.9%) Teachers do not give students an opportunity to express their creative ideas through arts, dramas, poems etc. (62.0%)
Article 14 (The right to freedom of thought, conscience & religion)	Teachers do not give students an opportunity to discuss ideas in the class (75.0%) Teachers do not appreciate students' ideas (83.5%)
Article 15 (The right to freedom of association)	Teachers promote students' participation in school development activities (29.5%)
Article 16 (The right to protection of privacy)	Teachers never ridicule or let down students (32.1%) Teachers motivate students about their achievements (51.6%) Physical punishments are given (20.7%)
Article 17 (The right to access to appropriate information)	Gives students health tips to lead a healthy life (41.9%)
Teachers Ratings (N = 36)	
Article 13 (The right to freedom of expression)	Students were given opportunities to express ideas during the teaching learning process (63.9%) Allow the students to display their creative abilities through art/ drama/ poems etc. (55.6%)



Article 14 (The right to freedom of thought, conscience & religion)	Appreciate students' ideas during the teaching process (66.7%)
Article 17 (The right to access to appropriate information)	Provide information for students' social, intellectual, mental, physical and ethical development. (52.8%)

According to the principals, both teachers and students are eager to complete the syllabus and students are weak in expressing their opinions and decisions in the teaching-learning process. Further, principals suggested that eliciting questions from students is needed to ensure the right to participation in the classroom. Literature suggests that student participation in decision making has yielded immense benefits to the individual students, the school and eventually, the community (Patmor & McIntyre, 1999; Wallin, 2003; Whitty & Wisby, 2009) even though it is not implemented in the present study.

In relation to the students' responses under the right to participation in co-curricular activities, the majority of students had not directly participated in societal activities such as holding positions like President, Secretary, and Treasurer and Committee members. The majority (53.2%) of students had participated in sports and games. Further, the majority of students had the opinion that it facilitates the development of their ability to tolerate success and failure. According to Darling et al. (2005), participation in co-curricular activities is associated with a stronger sense of school affiliation and belonging, improved academic achievement, higher academic goals, and less risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug use or dropping out from school. Additionally, they have discovered that students who did not participate in any co-curricular activity performed at minimum levels in terms of grade, attitude toward school, and academic goals.

Based on the teachers' responses related to the implementation of the right to participation in the co-curricular activities, it could be revealed that respect for the views presented by the child (Article 12) was not sufficiently implemented, freedom of expression (Article 13) was implemented to some extent, freedom of association (Article 15) and right to privacy (Article 16) were satisfactorily implemented. Furthermore, the principals stated that as the student density is high in type 1AB schools, everybody cannot participate in the society activities and there is no follow up of the 2016 curriculum. In parallel to the current study Matthew's Typology (2003) also highlighted that participation is an essential and moral component of any democratic society, as it improves quality of life, empowers citizens, promotes psychosocial well-being, and fosters a sense of belonging (Table 2).

Table 2: Responses on Implementation of the Right to Participation in the Co-curricular Activities

UNCRC Article No	Item
Student's Responses (N = 692)	
Article 12 (The right to express an opinion)	Students' ideas are accepted in co-curricular activities (33.7%)
Article 15 (The right to freedom of association)	Students are motivated to participate in societies in school (27.6%) Teachers encourage students to participate in co-curricular activities (33.7%)
Teachers' Responses (N = 36)	



Article 12 (The right to express an opinion)	Permit students to activate their decisions during co-curricular activities (44.4%)
Article 13 (The right to freedom of expression)	Allow students to express ideas during co-curricular activities (55.6%)
Article 15 (The right to freedom of association)	Appreciate participation in societal activities (69.4%) Give advice for students' societal activities (50.0%) Help students in societal activities (44.4%)

Article 16 (The right to protection of privacy) Motivate students on their achievements (80.6%)

In this research it was found that senior secondary students were not involved in the decision-making process in the school administration. Nearly 32.1. % of the respondents indicated that teachers listen to students' ideas in school administration. The responses received for the item on getting students' assistance in school administration was 36.0% and the students' responses to the item "Students' ideas are considered in school administration" (33.1%) were in a relatively low range. On the other hand, in relation to the item 'Listening to the students' requests in school administration', most teachers (50%) responded that they were listening to students' requests. Similarly, 47.2% of the teachers' responded positively to the item 'Accept students' correct decisions in school administration'. The principals also stated that the school administration does not take the children's opinions into account. Overall, the students, teachers as well as principals in this study were of the opinion that school administration is a responsibility of the principal, deputy principal, sectional heads and grade heads. According to the facts revealed through the above results it is apparent that the participation of senior secondary students in school administration remains at a very low level in the selected schools.

Based on the observations and focus group discussions, it was evident that students' participation in the decision-making process regarding matters affecting them was not assured. Principals and teachers, on the other hand, indicated that students were involved in the decision-making process in the school and that they encourage students to make suggestions. Furthermore, it could be claimed that children's participation in administration and school-level planning was either minimal or non-existent.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data, it can be concluded that in the teaching-learning process of the selected schools, the students, teachers, and principals acted without being aware of the participation rights of children. The senior secondary students from this selected sample were given average opportunities from schools to express ideas and actuate their decisions in co-curricular activities. Further, most of the schools included in this study were not giving enough opportunities for students to make decisions and express ideas in school administration. Further, it can be concluded that participation of senior secondary students in school administration remains at a very low level.

The study recommends the organisation of the teaching-learning process in the classroom putting the students at the centre, preparing teachers' guides to allow students to express their ideas, and updating the current teaching-learning process to allow students to express their ideas. In addition, it recommends reducing the workload of Grade 10 and 11 subjects and re-structuring the present curriculum for students to gain not only theoretical knowledge but also practical experience.



The other recommendations were making principals and teachers aware of the benefits of encouraging and facilitating student engagement in co-curricular activities, following up the Circular 2016 [ED/09/01/01/13/126 (2016.02.16)] which mentions that students should compulsorily engage in two sports, providing more opportunities for senior secondary students to express their opinions and ideas on school administration and empowering student parliaments in every school so that the students can express their opinions on school issues, administration, and solutions.

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