

Exploring children's experiences of agency and participation in school decision-making:

A case study

Master's thesis

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to explore elementary school children's experiences of agency and participation in decision-making at school to add to the discourse surrounding children's participation rights in Canada. This study explores how children in grades 4 to 6 may want to participate in decisions at school and how they may want to be involved in decision-making processes that affect them. During the 30th anniversary of the U.N. children's rights convention, it remains unclear how children are allotted opportunities for participation in decision-making in Canadian schools (Bala & Houston, 2015). A qualitative case study was created using a participative and emergent design to learn from students' (grades 4 to 6) lived experiences of agency and participation at school. Nine children from a multicultural, low socioeconomic status community in Nova Scotia participated in three workshops and subsequent interviews. Participants were actively involved in the development of interview questions and conducting the interviews. Thematic analysis revealed an overall theme of how children understand their participation as a combination of stable and changing opportunities. Four main themes reflected their conceptualization of the involvement in school: positive perceptions of participation, types of participation, free time = agency, and they want to be involved. The impact parental socialization patterns can have on children's ability to exercise their rights is discussed. This project adds to the dialogue surrounding children's school participation in Canada. It can help inform adult decision-makers in ways that promote the participation of more children in decisions about their lives.

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Exploring children's agency and participation in school decision-making: A case study

As the world celebrates the 30th anniversary of the Children's Rights Convention, Canada is undergoing a review of its 5th and 6th implementation report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Canadian Coalition for Children's Rights (2018)¹ states that Canada could do better: "Children in Canada are not well-served by this report" (para.7). They suggest that implementation in our country has been weak, and the government's initial report was not comprehensive and did little to address the previous concerns by the UN.

In 2016, Canadian Prime Minister and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs and Youth (2015-2018) Justin Trudeau formed the country's first youth council, and in 2018, the Canadian Government launched a campaign for the development of the country's first youth policy. The Prime Minister was seeking input from youth aged 15-34 from across the country into the policy's development. He stated the following:

Youth issues are Canada's issues, and Canada's issues are youth issues. Young people care deeply about their country and its future, and we need them at the table if we want to build a stronger and more inclusive society. I thank every young person who shared their perspectives on what actions we can and should take to solve the complex challenges we face. Their drive, creativity, and determination will make a difference, to the benefit of all Canadians (Government of Canada, 2018).

More recently, our Prime Minister had a meeting with young climate change activist Greta Thunberg concerning the measures that Canada has taken to combat climate change. In a news conference following their conversation (as cited by Harris, 2019), he stated that "She is a voice of a generation of young people who are calling on their leaders to do more and to do better, and I'm listening" (para. 8). These opportunities for youth to participate in political

¹ The Canadian Coalition for Children's Rights is an organization that is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Children's Rights Convention in Canada

decision-making reflect changing ideas about the value of children and youth in Canada. Partial attribution for these changing views is to the development of the paradigm of the sociology of childhood over several decades and pressure from the United Nations to fulfill our country's obligation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child through its reporting system and children's rights advocacy groups, such as the Canadian Coalition for the Rights of the Child.

One area where the UN committee consistently urges Canada to make improvements is in educating the public, both adults and children, about the Children's Rights Convention and its 54 articles and optional protocols. According to a discussion report on Children's Rights and Education, "No province offers a program that would meet the recommendation to integrate the knowledge and exercise of children's rights into curricula, policies, and practices in school" (Canadian Coalition for the Rights of Children, 2017, p.3). In an essay reflecting on the past 30 years of children's rights in Canada, experts Covell and Howe (2019) highlighted education about the Convention as an area of disappointment. However, they remain hopeful that in the future comprehensive children's rights education will become established. They stated, "Since social change tends to be generational in scope, we believe that children's rights –consistent schools and children's rights education at the post-secondary level are critical" (p.3). They continued by quoting Nelson Mandela saying, "education is the most powerful weapon to change the world" (p.3). In addition to a lack of widespread education about the Convention, in Canada, it also remains unclear how children are allotted opportunities for participation in decision-making at school (Bala and Houston, 2015).

Participation is significant under the Convention. Not only is it a category of rights, but it's also one of four guiding principles that one should consider when making all decisions

regarding children. One of the main issues adults have for providing for participation rights is associated with a historical tendency to view children as immature, incompetent, and as future citizens in need of protection and guidance.

Historically there have been conflicting views about the role children play in society. Traditionally, children were not viewed as social actors but as future adults (Uprichard, 2008). The sociology of childhood seeks to eliminate this position and urges society to accept children as full social actors now. This paradigm views children as competent social actors who make meaningful contributions to their worlds (James & Prout, 1997; Corsaro, 2015; Chen, Raby & Albanese, 2017). Developments in the sociology of childhood have provided promise for supporting the implementation of children's rights, especially their participation rights (Mayall, 2000; 2003). Research about citizenship education has also provided support for the importance of viewing children as social agents now and providing participation rights in school (Howe & Covell, 2007; Albanese, 2016). Over the years, student voice research has focused on a shifting of power from adults to children. Wyness (2006, 2012) suggested the need to bring adults back into the equation and move away from dichotomous power relations.

The current study explores the experience of agency and participation for school-aged children in decision-making at school so that we can better understand the social condition of childhood in Canada. The sociology of childhood paradigm and the framework of children's rights address the importance of exploring children as social actors who may benefit from opportunities for exercising their agency in school. Children have been regarded historically as non-political and, in some sense needing protection from the political world (Wyness, 2006).

In Canada, provincial and territorial governments are responsible for their education systems. Nova Scotia is one province that includes children's rights education as part of their

social studies curriculum; however, it is not clear what this education involves. Nova Scotia is in the process of reforming its education system. The Education Reform (2018) Act states the following:

The purpose of this act is to provide for a publicly funded school system whose primary mandate is to provide education programs and services for students to enable them to develop their potential and acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy (p.12).

This act refers to students' participation in terms of their duty to participate in their classroom learning, and it allows for students participation in decisions affecting their schools through participation on councils or committees based on their regional centre's policies. Teachers have the responsibility to respect the rights of their students under the act. However, it is not clear what rights they are referring to. If they referred to the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child, this would include their participation rights. However, it is likely, given they do not mention this Convention that they are referring to the rights provided only by this act. The duty of principals and vice-principals provides for the development of advisory councils, and to encourage students to participate in school decision-making through these councils and other committees. However, these opportunities for decision-making participation appear to be left to the centre's of education and school administration's discretion.

A review of the curriculum suggests that decision-making participation is an outcome for the social studies curriculum, highlighting the value our adult world places on the involvement of our young for their development as future citizens.

Before the dissolution of the Nova Scotia School Board Association on May 31, 2018, they partnered with the Heartwood Center for Community Youth Development in 2014 to form a youth advisory group to inform the Minister's Panel on Education about their youth engagement strategy. One topic that emerged during these discussions across Nova Scotia was that youth

wanted to be more involved in decision-making at school (Heartwood Centre for Community Youth Development, 2015).

Some provinces (such as Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland) across Canada have developed youth councils at the ministerial level to inform the government on matters affecting youth. The Nova Scotia office of Ombudsman has also developed a youth council to provide insight into how they can better serve youth throughout the province. However, there has not yet been a youth advisory committee developed to advise the ministers and premier in our province. One result of the education reform in our province has been the development of a provincial advisory board (N.S. Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2018). However, this board has no representation from students themselves. In Nova Scotia, youth councils are being developed or reintroduced at the municipal level. For example, the Cape Breton Regional Municipality is re-establishing their youth council to help inform local government about issues that are relevant to their youth (Jala, 2020).

Children and young people's participation in school decisions about their lives is not a new topic. It arose from the paradigm of the sociology of childhood and the framework of children's rights. Much of this research has occurred internationally. Chen, Raby, and Albanese (2017) suggest that it is important to capture the lived experiences of children and youth from across Canada. There has been a focus on studying children and young people's voices and experiences of participation in schools, their homes, and the community to provide children and youth their participation rights. Many studies involve children as the researchers, some focus on the benefits participation can have for children, and focus on increasing opportunities for it. We know less about the significance of participation for young people.

This study explores why children in grades four to six may want to participate in decisions about their lives in school, and in what ways these students may wish to be involved in

decision-making processes at schools. The information gained will add to the Canadian dialogue shedding light on children and young people's everyday experiences of participation in Canada (Chen, Raby, Albanese, 2017). This research is relevant because it can help us to understand the generational issues of power and how young people mobilize to action. For example, Greta Thunberg has been holding policymakers around the world accountable for taking action to address the issue of climate change. Similarly, the Parkland kids in Florida acted by placing responsibility for a tragic mass shooting at their high school indirectly on the adults in power over their lives, and they have been demanding stronger gun laws. These young people organized a march to highlight the issue of gun laws in the United States of America. Former president President Obama, and his wife Michelle addressed these young activists in a letter stating "Not only have you supported and comforted each other, but you've helped awaken the conscience of the nation. Throughout our history, young people like you have led the way in making America better and challenged decision-makers to make the safety of our children the country's top priority" (Carr, 2018).

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

The paradigm of agency

Mayall (2000) explained the importance of the sociology of childhood. She suggested that "We need a sociology of childhood to provide a better account of how the social order works, and to use this knowledge as a basis for righting children's wrongs" (p.246). Mayall continued to suggest that, "The proper study of the social order has to include the social condition of childhood and the contributions of children to it" (p.247).

Traditional theories of childhood have portrayed children as inferior to adults and in need of protection. Instead of being viewed as contributing members of society, they were considered future citizens in need of guidance. Regardless of the position, childhood was and, in many cases, still is considered a passive stage in life where children are the objects of adult inquiry and socialization. Children become members of society by absorbing the culture and societal values of adult worlds (Corsaro, 2015; Chen, Raby & Albanese, 2017). Influenced by the framework of developmental psychology, these traditional views focused on theories of development, universality, and what is natural (James & Prout, 1997). This dominant discourse framed much of the research about children and tends to view them as being at risk. Adults are the ones responsible for protecting them based on adult notions of what is best for their young to develop to their full potential (James & Prout, 1997; Alanen, 2011; Woodhead, 2011). Childhood, then, is socially constructed by adult perspectives of what childhood should look like, which is based mainly on expert opinion (Mayall, 2000).

Woodhead (1997) provided a discussion about various theories of children's needs and determined that this rhetoric is based primarily on adult perspectives of childhood. Adult views about children's inferiority, immaturity, and their best interests prevailed.

A major problem identified with conversations about children's needs is the universal language surrounding childhood. This needs-based language suggests that the appropriate development of all children, according to the values of Western society, requires these specific needs, which are prescribed onto them by adult worlds, without ever considering consulting children themselves. Coincidentally, this same research serves to reinforce more traditional Eurocentric views of childhood. It makes it difficult for adults to rethink childhood as a social phenomenon (Mayall, 2000; Freeman, 2000).

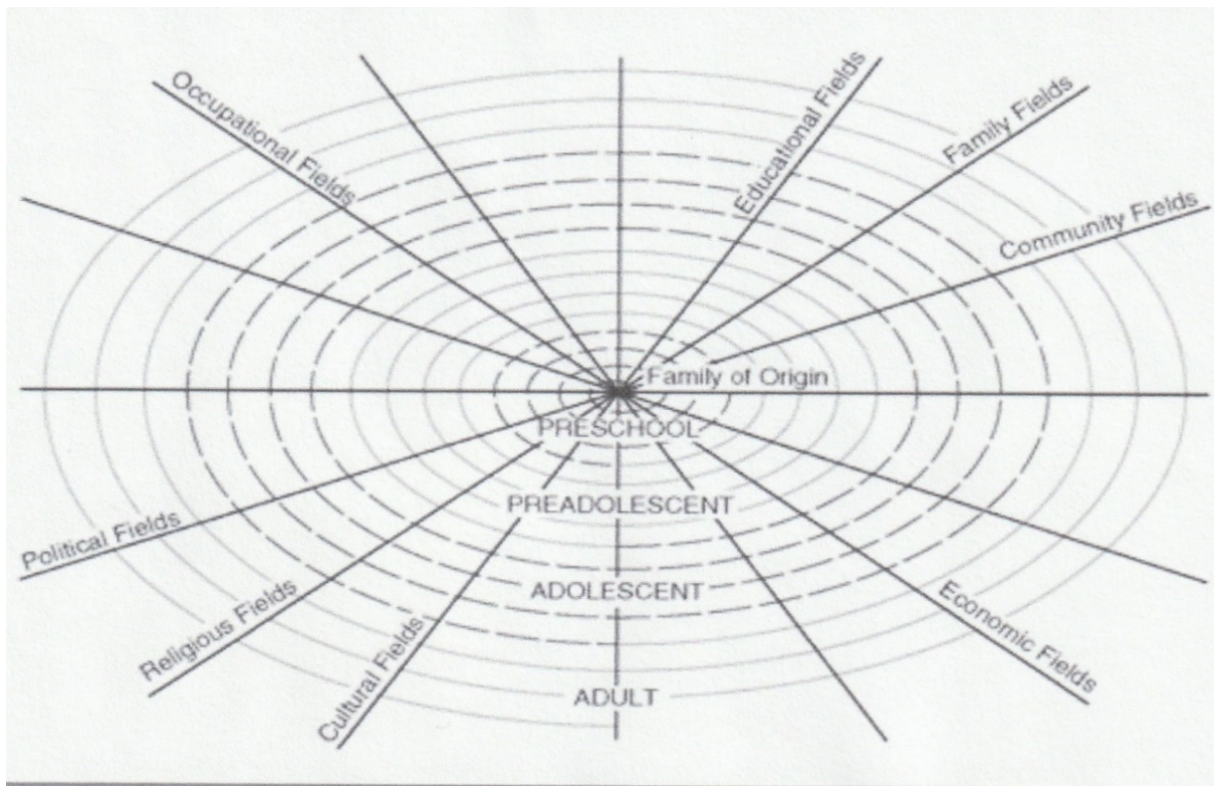
The construction of the sociology of childhood paradigm has challenged these previous notions. This paradigm views children as being socially active in constructing their own lives. It promotes the importance of children being viewed as social agents now and not only in the future. Children are socially competent, they have both agency and voice, and they are worthy of study as a social phenomenon apart from adult perspectives (James, 2011; Prout, 2011; Wyness, 2012; Corsaro, 2015; Albanese, 2016; Chen, Raby & Albanese, 2017). Corsaro (2015) suggested that children contribute to the world through a process of interpretive reproduction. Instead of passively absorbing information from adult worlds, children actively recreate their societies. Corsaro stated, "Children creatively appropriate information from the adult world to produce their own unique peer cultures" (p. 42). As they participate in both their peer cultures and the adult world, children begin to make sense of, reproduce, and change the societies in which they live.

Childhood does not exist in isolation; it is subject to many different relationships, just as adulthood. Using the Orb Web Model (Figure 1), Corsaro (2015) illustrated how children reproduce their societies and create peer cultures through interpretive reproduction. The spokes represent the social institutions, and the area between the spokes represent where social

interactions occur. As Corsaro (2015) stated, "It is important to note that these institutional fields (the radii of the web) exist as stable but changing structures on which children weave their webs. Cultural information flows to all parts of the web along these radii" (p.28). These act as a framework in which children spin webs while they create peer cultures in preschools, preadolescence, adolescence, and adults.

Figure 1

Orb Web Model of Interpretive Reproduction



Corsaro, W. A (2011), *The Sociology of Childhood*. 3rd Ed. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press. Reprinted with permission from SAGE publishing.

A vital feature of this paradigm is the focus on the importance of children's agency and voice. For this study, the term voice refers to the idea that children have their own ideas, beliefs, expectations and opinions about their lives and the larger society in general. Agency refers to the ability of children to be able to express these views and to be active in constructing their

lives and contributing to the societies in which they live (Mayall, 2000; 2002; Wyness, 2006; Smith, 2007; Corsaro, 2015; Chen, Raby & Albanese, 2017). It is through this perspective of children possessing both agency and voice that studies in the sociology of childhood can provide support for the implementation of children's rights, particularly children's rights to participation (Mayall, 2000; 2003).

In many ways, our current belief in children as competent social actors is another societal construction reflecting the views of our Western society today (Prout, 2011). Childhood is a social and cultural construct that is affected by other social factors as well. The context of their lives affects them, as it does adults. Socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability, gender, and family life are some of the examples of social factors that impact a child's life. For this reason, we cannot speak of a universal childhood or a child's voice or agency (Berman & MacNevin, 2017). We must consider children's social lives, including their participation in terms of their relationships with others, including adults (Wyness, 2012).

Concerted Cultivation and Accomplishment of Natural Growth

In her book, *Unequal childhoods: race, class and families*, Lareau discussed that starting at an early age, children born into either middle-class or working-class families differ in how they experience childhood. One example given was differing child-rearing practices. She exemplifies this by eliciting child-rearing practices.

In Lareau's study, middle-class parents focused on enrolling their children in many extracurricular activities, which were of interest to their children and which they viewed as serving some form of developmental function for their children. These children did not have very much free time and thus most of their friendships occurred within their activities which were separated by age groups. These children also had little contact with their extended families because of their busy schedules. Their parents, however, were very encouraging and urged their children to ask questions when they did not understand something or were curious (Lareau, 2002; 2011).

Lareau described middle-class parent's child-rearing beliefs as "concerted cultivation". She suggested that, "From this a robust sense of entitlement takes root in children. This sense of entitlement plays an especially important role in institutional settings, where middle-class children to question adults and address them as relative equals (p.2)." She mentioned that through these experiences they appear to learn how to navigate social institutions and gain an understanding of how to get their needs met within these structures. According to Lareau (2011), "the school was designed around a system of concerted cultivation, and teachers expected parents to take a leadership role (p.163)."

Lareau discussed the working and lower-class families' child rearing practices as different from those of the middle-class families in her study. These parents allowed their children a large amount of free time where they formed social relationships with children from various age groups. These children spent much of their time with extended family members, and often family members were part of their peer cultures. They tended to be involved in fewer organized activities that were supervised by their parents and thus had the freedom to participate in activities that interested them (if there were no financial boundaries). However, these parents were often unsure of themselves and did not like to question authority figures such as doctors and teachers (Lareau, 2002; 2011). She reasoned that from these experience the children were more distant and less trusting within institutions. Lareau (2011) termed these parental rearing beliefs "the accomplishment of natural growth." She explained the following:

For them, the crucial responsibilities of parenthood do not lie in eliciting their children's feelings, opinions, and thoughts. Instead, they see a clear boundary between adults and children. Parents tend to use directives: they tell their children what to do rather than persuading them with reasoning (p.3).

Childhood is not universal and is not a stationary place in time. It is continuously changing so that children are current citizens and future citizens (Uprichard, 2008).

when children's agency is recognized, and participation granted (meaningful participation requires agency), it is still adults who are in control of this. Adult worlds decide when and how children will be allowed to participate with little, if any, consultation from children themselves (Layland, 2010). As Mayall (2008) stated, "Children's daily lives and thus childhood as an institution are structured by adult views of how those lives should be lived and of what childhood is" (p.109).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is an international treaty that recognizes all children up to the age of 18 as human beings with fundamental rights. In 1989, the UN General Assembly unanimously accepted it. To date, all countries except for the United States of America have ratified this convention.

Canada signed the CRC in 1989 and ratified it in 1991. Through ratification, Canada (and all ratifying countries) made an international commitment to implement and provide for the rights of the child outlined in its 54 articles. The articles in the CRC fall into three categories often referred to as the three P's: provision, protection, and participation rights. The provision rights include those referring to health, education, and economic welfare. The protection rights include those protecting children from violence, abuse, and exploitation. Participation rights refer to those that provide a voice for children and youth. Due to the broad language used in the Convention, there are four articles identified to be the guiding principles when interpreting the CRC and making all decisions regarding children. The guiding principles include non-discrimination (article 2), the best interest of the child (article 3), child participation (article 12), and the survival and development of the child (article 6)(Covell & Howe, 2001).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was the first international document to state that children, as citizens and human beings, have the right to participate (Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007). The Convention contains 12 articles that are related to

children's participation rights specifically (Canadian Heritage, 1991).

Table 1

Relevant articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNCRC Article	Description
Article 2	Non-discrimination
Article 3	The best interest of the child
Article 5	Parental guidance
Article 6	Survival and development
Article 12	The rights to participate in decisions that affect them and have their views given due weight.
Article 13	Freedom of expression and access to information
Article 14	Freedom of thought, conscience and religion
Article 15	Freedom of association
Article 16	Right to privacy
Article 17	Access to information and the media in language they can understand
Article 23	Special care and support for children with disabilities
Article 29	The goals of education
Article 42	Making the knowledge about these rights known to adults and children

Articles 12-17 are the chief articles related to the participation rights of the child. Article 12 assures children the right to age-appropriate involvement, article 13 gives children the right to freedom of expression, and to obtain information from others, articles 14-16 enforce children's right to freedom of expression, conscience, religion, peaceful assembly and privacy within

reasonable limits. Finally, article 17 provides children the right to obtain information that is important for their well-being. Children also have the right to freedom from discrimination (article 2), and article 23 protects children with special needs. The CRC places responsibility on parents and school officials to educate and promote the practice of rights by children (articles 5 and 42). According to the Convention, the primary purposes of education involve promoting a child's development so they may become good democratic citizens (Article 29). The last article relating to children's participation rights is the best interest of the child (article 3). It is clear then that participation is essential under the framework of the CRC. Not only is it a category of rights, but also one of the guiding principles.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Definition and types of participation

Merriam-Webster (2018) defined participation as "to take part in something or to be a part or share in something." In their literature review, designed to study the effects of participation in daily decision-making at school, Austrian researchers Mager and Nowak (2012) identified various ways in which students aged 5-19 can participate in group decision-making at school. They identified these types of participation in five categories: in councils, temporary workgroups, in class decision-making, in school decision-making, and in multiple types of decision-making environments. To participate meaningfully in school decision-making requires students to have both voice and agency (Lundy, 2007). For this study, Adam Fletcher's (2005) definition of meaningful student involvement defined meaningful participation: "Meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community, and democracy" (p. 5).

Participation in school decision-making is a relational process and, as such, would involve a negotiation between children and adults (Lundy, 2007). According to Cairns (2001), meaningful participation involves the sharing of the power relationship between children and adults. Children should not only be asked their opinions but also given responsibilities. Children and adults would then be involved in a reciprocal relationship in which they consult one another and respect one another. Although this would be ideal for supporting the participation rights of children, this reciprocal relationship cannot always remain. For example, when conducting doctoral research, Harwood (2010) allowed children to be both researchers and participants within the study. Unfortunately, due to the time constraints of her study, she was unable to

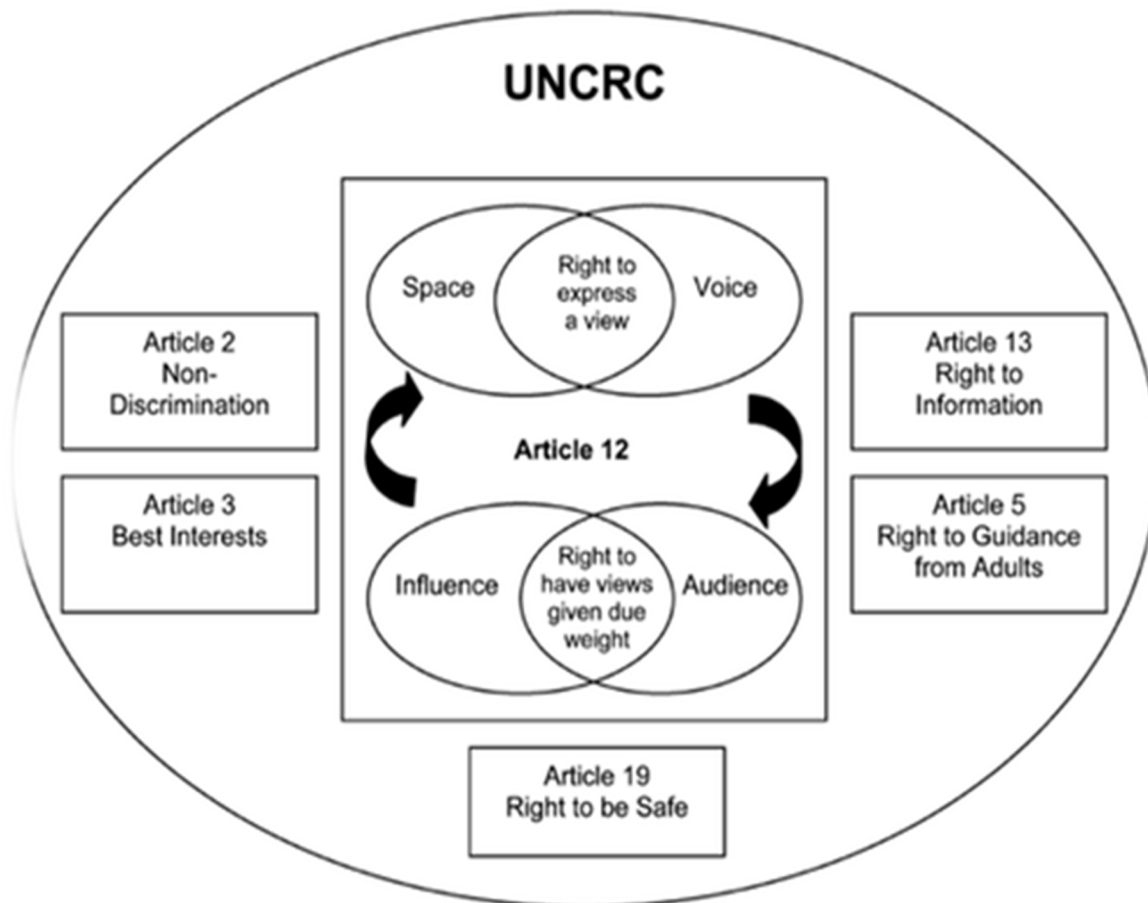
maintain a completely reciprocal relationship with the children holding an equal position.

Eventually, the researcher's interests took precedence over the participants.

Models of participation

Shier (2001) proposed five levels of participation based on the amount of power shared between children and adults. These include: children are listened to, children have support expressing their views, there is consideration for children's views, children are involved in decision-making processes, and children share power and responsibility for decision-making. These levels of participation are arranged in order of how meaningful it is for children. According to this model, listening to children would be considered the lowest standard for meaningful participation. While sharing power and responsibility for decisions with children is considered the highest standard for participation.

For this study, meaningful participation is defined as meaningful student involvement, and informed based on the participation rights of the child, and Lundy's (2007) model of participation. According to Lundy, article 12 does not guarantee a child meaningful participation in decision making. According to her model (figure 2), meaningful participation would require that children and young people have space, voice, audience, and influence.

Figure 2*Lundy's Model of Participation*

Lundy (2007) 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualizing article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (p. 932). Reprinted with permission from Taylor & Francis.

In figure 2, we see that space and voice require a space for children to share their views and facilitation in voicing their opinions. Influence and audience are related to agency, in which children have people who listen to them and act on their views, showing their influence. This model does not give children and youth full decision-making power, but it is a relational process in which they are working together with other children and adults. When decisions do not reflect children's views, explanations for the final decision are given (Howe & Covell, 2013).

The value of participation

"We cannot expect our children to become well functioning productive contributors to society without experience and training in decision-making through participation in family, school, and community" (Covell & Howe, p.177, 2001).

Outside of the home, the school is a significant area where early socialization occurs. The school would be an appropriate place then for children to practice their rights (Schneider, 2017). It provides a safe environment where teachers could facilitate and act as mediators for negotiations that occur through discussion (Campbell & Rose- Krasnor, 2007). In a review of school participation literature, Mager and Nowak (2012) found children's participation in school to be associated with increased positive self-perception, self-efficacy, self-esteem, social responsibility, and positive, sound decision-making. It also predicted more positive school experiences, increased engagement, as well as a decrease in early school leaving. According to Howe and Covell (2007), as citizens, children must learn to contribute to a democratic society. One way to do this is to provide them with age-appropriate participation within the classroom and school. Not only do children learn to contribute positively to society and respect others, but they also have the right to participate under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Howe & Covell 2007, 2013).

While the Convention contains many articles regarding the right to participation, there is still much work to do for children to realize these rights. A review of the most recent Canadian education legislation suggests that the country has made some progress in this area. Most provinces require student councils, to allow students to express their views through a class representative (Canadian Legal Information Institute, 2009). However, this only allows for the

participation of particular students and generally for older children, which means that younger children may not have the opportunity for participation in decisions affecting their lives.

As mentioned earlier, in Nova Scotia, principals and vice-principals are now responsible (according to the Education Reform Act, 2018) to encourage students, parents, and school staff to participate in school decision-making through school councils and committees. They are also encouraged to form councils and committees according to guidelines set by their regional centres. This process does not ensure that students' views will be taken seriously. It may just reflect other tokenistic instances of participation (Mayall, 2000; Campbell & Rose-Krasnor, 2007; Horgan et al., 2015). One major issue for this is the difficulty that adults have taking children seriously (Mayall, 2003). Another issue is the wording of article 12, which does not necessarily view all children as competent. It gives adults the power to decide if a child can participate in the decision. It is one thing for schools to say, yes, we have these structures in place and another to value and allow children to practice using their voice and to promote their agency through meaningful participation. Children must be viewed as valued citizens for this to occur (Howe & Covell, 2007).

Mannion (2003) also suggested that this participation is important for teaching children social inclusion because they are gaining experience in valuing themselves as current citizens. By denying children their participation rights, due to disbelief in their agency and competence, we also deny them their citizenship (Howe & Covell, 2005; Tisdall et al., 2006).

Even when studying young people's experiences with decision-making in their lives, we must ask ourselves, as adults and researchers, why we are doing this. Although we may be trying to capture the lived experiences of our children and youth, the value we place on that participation is a social construction and may be based on desired developmental outcomes. For

this reason, Spyrou (2011) argues "that a critical, reflexive approach to child voice research needs to take into account the actual research contexts in which children's voices are produced and the power imbalances that shape them" (p. 152). Therefore, it is necessary to consider the influence that the researcher's views can have on their participants and their interpretation of the data. Studies about childhood voice and agency have looked at various ways that children experience participation in their lives. How and which children and youth (difference between and among childhoods) value participation in decision-making remain unclear.

The paradigm and children's participation rights

The main problem adults have had in promoting children's participation rights is their inability to recognize that children have agency and are social actors that can contribute to their societies (Covell & Howe, 2001; Campbell and Rose-Krasnor, 2007; Smith, 2007). The most common criticism by adults is that children's participation rights would devalue adult authority. They also criticize that children are not capable of making decisions due to their immaturity and that children would abuse these rights by demanding them to be the number one determining factor in their lives (Alderson, 2000; Mayall, 2000). These views from adults are evident in the controversy surrounding the idea of lowering the voting age in Canada from 18 to 16 (Harris, 2018). Critics argue youth this young are not knowledgeable and are unable to make informed decisions. This criticism is also evident in the backlash received by students in Parkland, Florida. After standing up against gun violence following a mass shooting at their school, critics questioned their competence, suggesting that the students were actors set out to fulfill a political mission. Similarly, climate activist Greta Thunberg has been mocked by certain right-wing groups that argue the reality of the threat of climate change.

The paradigm of the sociology of childhood could assist in assuring that these rights are recognized, valued, and implemented. The adult world and society, in general, would have to challenge and change their beliefs about childhood, based on traditional Western developmental theories. They would have to come to understand that children contribute to society, they are citizens, and they construct their own worlds (Corsaro, 2015). They must also come to value childhood itself and not believe it to be inferior to adulthood.

Mayall (2000) suggested "For, in order to honour children's participation rights, we must establish the conditions in which they can be honoured" (p.248). Adults largely control the lives of children. Thus, they must provide children the opportunities to exercise their rights. However, this cannot occur unless the rights are valued by adults themselves. "The problem then lies in the control elements inherent in protection and provision. For if children are socially controlled, then their ability to participate may be limited" (Mayall, 2000, p.249). If children are to exercise their participation rights with meaning, then adults must share control in children's lives (Brooker, 2005). For example, adults could consult with children about matters that affect them. Smith (2007) suggested the following:

Theoretical frameworks of children's rights and the sociology of childhood are integrally related. Both paradigms recognize that children construct their social worlds; that they have agency; that they are participants in social processes; that they are persons, not property; that they constitute multiple voices rather than a collective and undifferentiated class; and that childhood should be given as high (if not higher) priority as adulthood (p. 151).

While I agree that they are related because both strive for children to be allotted agency and given a voice, I do have concerns with the language used in the United Nations Convention on

the Rights of the Child. Other researchers have criticized the Convention for referring to children in more of a future sense (James & Prout, 1997; Woodhead, 1997; Qvortrup, 1997; Freeman, 2000; Mayall, 2000; Wyness, 2006; Corsaro, 2015), which the new sociology of childhood has criticized as reductionist. There was no consultation with children and youth when developing the Convention (Freeman, 2000); although the developers likely had the best interest of children at heart, it represents another example of how adults are prescribing control over childhood and granting them human rights that were described by adults alone (Palaiologou, 2014).

In addition, article 12 of the Convention (The children's right to have their opinions heard in matters affecting them) (Canadian Heritage, 1991) does not guarantee the consideration for the views of all children concerning decisions affecting their lives. This concern has also been addressed by Wyness (2006) who felt that this article was stated in conditional terms. He suggested that "Parents and teachers are to make judgment on a child's abilities before the child can make any claims" (p. 213). In this sense, article 12 relies on value-based assumptions of what childhood should look like (Woodhead, 1997). As mentioned earlier, Lundy (2007) also suggested that focusing on the term voice will not ensure children's participation rights are realized.

According to Palaiologou (2014), "typically adults are the ones who pose what is and what should be for children, they are the decision-makers and the planners in the eyes of children and, as adults, hold different levels of power (p. 699)." Berman and MacNevin (2017) remind us of the following:

It is also important to emphasize that children (like adults) are not a monolithic group, and there is no such thing as the child. Children vary by social class, ability/disability,

gender and gender identity, ethnicity, immigration status, "race," and, of course, age (p. 28).

Power imbalances exist between children just as they do between children and adults. Wyness (2012) suggested that it is not a simple two-category struggle between childhood and adulthood. Many factors and relationships are significant, primarily since children do still rely on adult worlds. Kenneally (2017) suggested that children's rights, including their participation rights, could be better realized if we considered them as tools for developing relationships, rather than legally binding entitlements.

The purpose of the current study was to explore elementary school children's experiences of agency and participation in decision making at school. Based on the theory of interpretive reproduction in the sociology of childhood and the framework of children's rights, children and youth are worthy of study as beings now and not just for what they will become.

Studies have focused on children and young people's voices and experiences of participation in schools, their homes, and the community to provide them with their participation rights. Many studies involved children as the researchers, some focused on the benefits of participation for children and focused on increasing opportunities for it. We know less about the significance of participation for young people themselves.

For this reason, I have developed a case study focused on learning from elementary school children at a local youth club about their knowledge of their agency and participation in decision-making at school. This study aims to add to the dialogue about elementary school students' experiences exercising their agency and participation rights in Canada, to help provide a better picture of the social condition of childhood.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Design

This research focused on learning from children about their experiences of agency and participation with decision-making at school. The participants' lived experiences were captured using qualitative methodology. According to Hammarberg et al. (2016), “Qualitative methods are used to answer questions about experience, meaning and perspective, most often from the standpoint of the participant (p.499)”. In addition, Simone (2009) suggested that in a qualitative case study, “The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic (as in a thesis), programme, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action” (p. 21).

A case study strategy was employed utilizing a participatory approach with an emergent design to explore my two research questions:

1. Why may students in grades four to six want to participate in decisions about their lives in school?
2. How may students in grades four to six want to be involved in decision-making at school?

Yin (2003) suggested that there are three factors to consider when choosing a research strategy, such as a case study: the research question, your control over the behaviour, and whether it is a contemporary issue. A case study approach to my research appeared to be advantageous because “a “how” or “why” question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2003, p.9). I used an emergent design to allow the participants’ input into the development of the interview questions, as well as to allow them to explore areas that may have emerged during our semi-structured interviews. This design was essential to allow their participation in the research, and to respect their participation rights.

Mayall (2008) argues, "that through conversing with children we can learn about what they know, and to, some extent how they lean (p.109)." She believes that generation is key to understanding the social condition of childhood, and it is also important with the context of research. In a discussion about research conversations with children, Mayall (2008) described two approaches to research with children as follows:

The first approach to research accepts the generational order; it assumes the superiority of adult knowledge, and the relevance of documenting childhood in the light of that knowledge. The second questions the generational order; good information about childhood must start from children's experience. In order to get good data children must be taught by the researcher that power issues between children and adults can be diluted or diffused to the point where children accept the adult as one themselves. But according to my information from children, they think otherwise: a central characteristic of adults is that they have power over children (p.110).

For this reason, Mayall positions herself in research conversations with children as a familiar adult wanting to learn from children about their childhoods because it has been a long time since she was their age, and things have likely changed. This stance falls in between research on and research with children.

The primary source of data for the current project came from semi-structured interviews conducted with nine participants. These interviews occurred individually and in pairs depending on the children's level of comfort. Corsaro (2015) discussed the benefits of using formal and informal interviews when studying children's experiences. He stated the following:

These methods have great potential because they do not focus so much on how children become adults (which is the goal of most traditional research on socialization) but rather on what children can teach us about their shared life experiences and their struggles to gain some control over more powerful adults and adult rules (p.52).

The sociology of childhood paradigm supports the idea that children are experts in their own lives.

Participants and Setting

Ten children aged nine to twelve (grades four to six) participated in this research project. However, one participant dropped out because they did not want to be interviewed. Recruitment took place at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Cape Breton: Whitney Pier Youth Club in Sydney, Nova Scotia. This club provides services to over 100 children and youth in the Sydney, N.S area. During the school year, the club offers an after school and evening program, and during the summer months, they offer an eight-week summer program. They also have a lunch program and various special events and outings throughout the year. This location was chosen to reach our population and was not the focus of our research. Therefore, the case was instrumental as we were interested in exploring the views of children's participation and agency in school decision-making and not the club itself. Our participants represented a specific set of youth, and thus generalizations were not possible. During data collection, six of the participants were in grade five, two were in grade six, and one was in grade four. The average age of the participants was 10.2 years.

Procedure

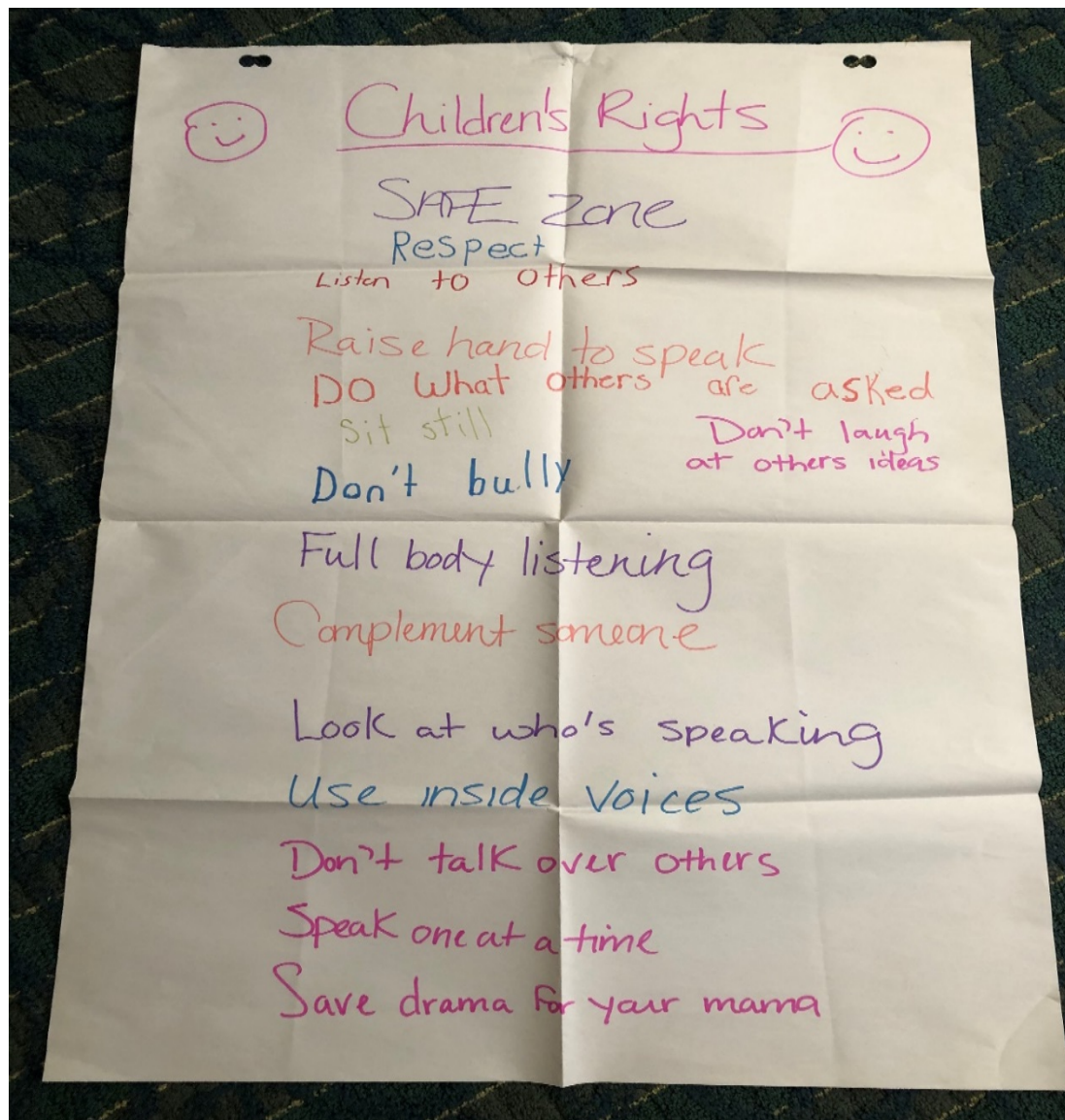
The Boys and Girls Clubs of Cape Breton: Whitney Pier Youth Club learned about this study through a phone conversation with their executive director regarding my interest in becoming a volunteer with the organization. I began volunteering at the club in February 2018 and was later hired to join their team for their summer program and 2018/ 2019 after- school program. While volunteering at the club, I completed the Tri- Council Policy Core training (Appendix A), and successfully presented a research proposal to complete this project (Appendix B).

The proposal for this research study was discussed with the program coordinator for the youth club, who, in return, wrote a letter of support for the project (Appendix C). After receiving ethics clearance from the Mount Saint Vincent University Research Ethics Board, I discussed the study with youth in grades four to six at the club to see if any of them would be interested in participating. Letters of informed consent were sent home with the youth aged nine to twelve (Appendix D).

Once consent forms were signed and collected from the first ten youth, I gathered the potential participants to see if they would like to participate in the study. The study was explained in detail using the participant consent form (Appendix E), and the participants who wanted to participate signed the form. The participants decided when they wanted the project activities to take place. They decided to meet after-school on Fridays, so they would not miss out on the other programs they usually enjoyed at the club. Friday afternoon was Youth Spirit Day at the club, and all youth participated in the same activity.

This study included four 1 ½ hour sessions that ran the same length as the other programs at the club. Each session began with an introduction where participants received information about the study, were reminded they could stop participating at any time, discussed confidentiality, and gave their verbal consent. A video recorder captured participant interactions during the first two sessions, and the interview sessions were audio-recorded to capture the experiences of participants in their own words.

During our first session, participants were invited to a workshop about their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Appendix F). This workshop began with an explanation of the study and questioned participants about their knowledge of the Children's Rights Convention. Only one out of the ten participants knew that the Convention existed. Next, we discussed ground rules for the meetings, so that everyone in our group could feel comfortable sharing their ideas. The youth came up with several rules, such as referring to our group as a "safe zone," raising your hand to speak, and being respectful to others (Figure 3).

Figure 3*Group Rules* (Photo by Jillian Polegato)

During our first activity, we watched a short video describing what children's rights are by the Discovery Learning Alliance (March 2018). After the video, the participants chose a partner, and received a child-friendly copy of the Children's Rights Convention (Appendix F.1), a set of rights and wants cards (Appendix F.2), and pencils to each group. With their partners, the children divided the picture cards into what they thought were rights, and those they thought

were wants. We reviewed them as a group and discussed how rights were things that we needed to survive. For our second activity, the group learned that the Convention contains three categories (provision, participation, and protection rights), often called the three P's. Each group received an envelope with rights and a Convention sorting chart (Appendix F.3). The participants had to decide if each right was a provision, protection, or participation right and place it in the correct column. We reviewed our answers as a group.

Our last activity for the Children's Rights Workshop focused on rights and responsibilities. I began by explaining because we all have rights, we also all have the responsibility to ensure that everyone else gets to enjoy their rights. In pairs, the participants were given two rights and asked to write or illustrate on a blank card the responsibility that would correspond to the right. When they completed the task, the participants exchanged their right cards with their neighbours. They went around the room to find the responsibility that went with their right, and we reviewed our answers as a group.

We ended this workshop by discussing what we learned, and the participants learned that the club requested we plan an event for National Children's Day at the club. This event was not related to the study, and it was completely voluntary. They were all quite excited to get to teach the other members at the club what they learned. We discussed as a group what information would be important to cover, they reviewed different resources with activities, and they decided the activity and age group they would lead. For example, the youth leading the activity with the younger children decided to read them the Children's Rights colouring book, and then lead an activity with a ball of yarn showing how all the rights in the Convention are connected.

Our second session (Appendix G) focused on teaching the participants about their participation rights in school. It began by welcoming the participants to the session and thanking them for their help. Next, we had a brief review of our Children's Rights Workshop and our outline for their session. We reviewed the rules that the children made in their last session, and

then we began.

First, we discussed that we all make many decisions every day. We went around the group sharing one decision we each had made that day. Next, I read UNICEF's You Have Rights information sheet to the participants (Appendix G.1), and we brainstormed areas and ways children can participate in school (Appendix G.2) and wrote them down as a group. The participants had the choice to draw or write a story about their own experiences (or how they would like to participate) with decision-making in school. All participants chose to draw pictures (Appendix G.3), and I recorded them as they described their pictures to me in their own words. The data made with the children during this stage helped inform the interview guide.

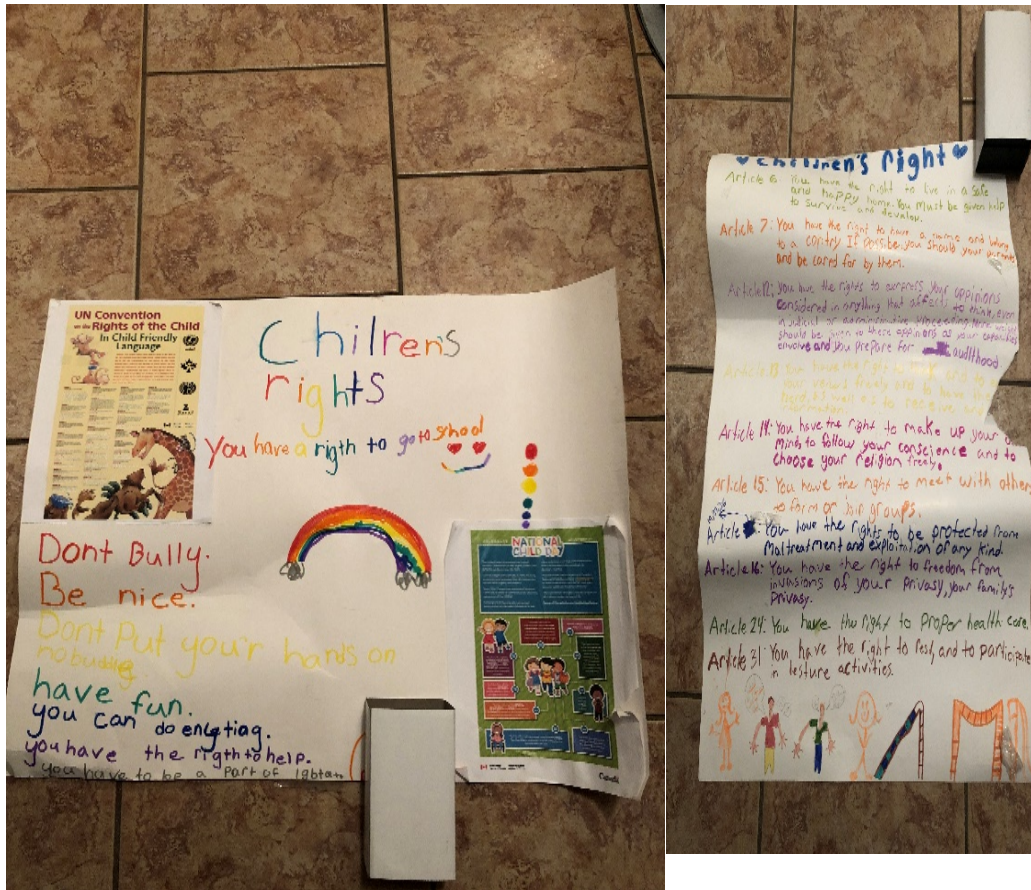
The following week, we met a third time so that the children could learn to use the audio recorder, and to practice interviewing one another. The third session (Appendix H) began with a recap from our last two sessions and an overview of the day. Participants received assurance that their participation was voluntary, and they were asked if they wanted to continue. Participants learned that they would be interviewing one another, and they were asked about their prior knowledge regarding interviewing. They received an explanation about the roles of the interviewer and the interviewee, and that there were no right or wrong answers. They would practice interviewing one another, and over the next week, they would conduct interviews with

For this session's activity, the participants practiced using the audio-recorder, and then they each wrote down on index cards two-three practice questions relating to the information we discussed over our last few meetings. The participants took turns asking their partners themselves. We finished this meeting by going over the questions for our interview guide to see if they understood what they meant and choosing any other questions they wanted to add. Participants decided if they wanted to be interviewed with a partner or on their own. They were also informed they could change their minds at any time.

Over the next two and a half weeks, the participants took part in interviews because

some were absent the first week. Interviewing while working at this fast-paced youth club proved challenging. Interviews began using the semi-structured interview guide (Appendix I) and ended up being modified, for language, after my second interview. After these interviews it appeared that even though the group agreed they understood the questions, they were having difficulty reading them, so I changed the font and the wording to make it easier to read. Interviews varied from 13 to 30 minutes long. Nine participants took part in the interview sessions. I played the role of interviewer for two interviews that occurred in pairs. One group interviewed each other, three participated in individual interviews, and one participant requested to withdraw.

Our fourth session included a pizza party to thank the participants. This session was designated to review interviews and decide how participants wanted to share the information gained with the club or their schools. Apart from teaching the club about Children's Rights for National Children's Day, they did not want to make anything about their interviews. They made posters to decorate the club for National Children's day (figure 4) between project sessions, and a few decided that they wanted to make a map of their school during this session to show spaces where they participate.

Figure 4*Children's Rights Posters (Photo by Jillian Polegato)***Data Analysis**

After interviewing participants, the audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. These transcriptions were later uploaded into MAXQDA data analysis software. Being relatively novice to qualitative analysis, I found myself initially labelling everything in my interview data, which left over 300 coded segments. I looked for similarities between these to combine them into common codes. Next, I examined to see how many crossed most of the interviews, deciding that due to the nature of the topic and research question, it would serve the data best to use a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis

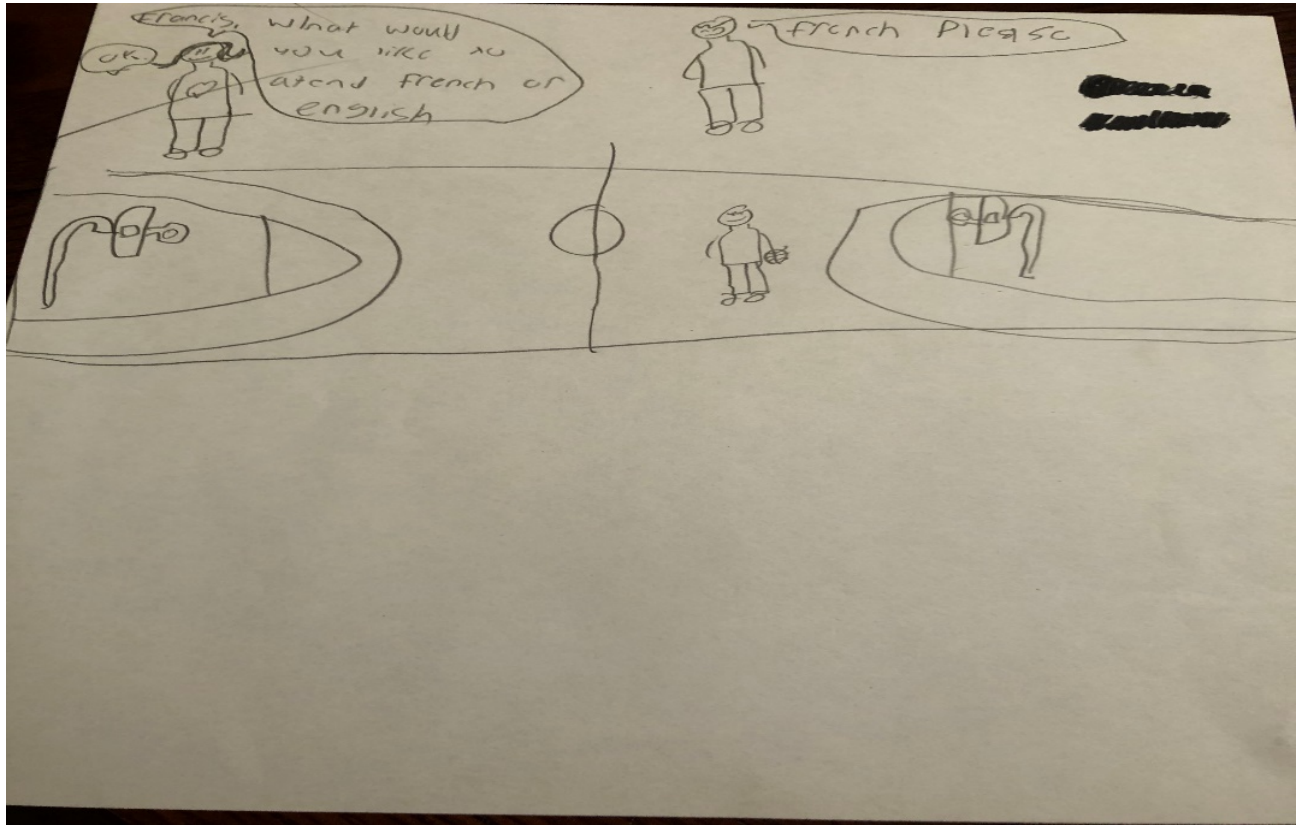
beginning with the main research questions. The initial coding strategy was too descriptive. Using thematic analysis allowed me to move farther into the data to see what it revealed.

The interview data was triangulated by data collected during the workshops. For example, during the workshop on participation rights in school, the children drew pictures of their realities in school, which did not include anything I told them about their participation rights in decision making. Their pictures portrayed children playing basketball and games with their friends.

Figure 5 depicts a middle school child's illustration of themselves playing basketball and choosing between French or English instruction classes. These were also mentioned during interview sessions when asked about participation and the types of decisions they get to make in school.

Figure 5

Middle school illustration for participation (Photo by Jillian Polegato)



Thematic analysis is a widely used method of analysis for qualitative research (Swain, 2018). According to Braun and Clark (2012, p. 57), “Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set, TA allows the researcher to see and make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences.” It involves the researcher questioning how their data meaningfully answer their research question (Scharp & Sanders, 2018). As a novice, this provided a flexible and accessible means to move farther into the data and see what it was revealing.

The thematic analysis involved six phases that include: becoming familiar with the data, developing initial codes, finding themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and creating the report. This section will discuss the steps taken during data analysis and the resulting themes that

emerged. It is important to note that these phases did not proceed as steps, but instead, they were all part of a reoccurring process that went back and forth between reading, coding, thinking about the code and the relationship with other codes, and what this meant for the research questions.

Getting to know the data

The first step in the thematic analysis was to familiarize myself with the data. Verbatim transcription of the data involved listening to the recordings of the interviews and typing precisely what the interviewees had said into Microsoft Word. I removed all identifying information from the interviews and pseudonyms were given to protect the identities of the participants.

After completing transcriptions, the data was uploaded into MAXQDA to begin the analysis. I began reading the interviews a few times to try and get a sense of what the participants were reporting about their experiences with agency and participation in decision-making at school. During this initial stage, I noticed that even though I had provided the participants with workshops about children's rights, and their right to participate specifically, their understanding of participation was different from my own. My knowledge of the topic is based on an understanding for it to be desirable, to our society, for children to participate in decision-making processes, so they can learn to make decisions, gain a sense of belonging, and to become socially responsible. For this reason, I use Adam Fletcher's (2005) definition for meaningful student involvement. However, it is also informed by the framework of children's rights and the sociology of childhood because I believe that children are social actors and have rights. As Corsaro has taught us, children are competent social agents that create their own worlds by participating in adult and peer cultures. I asked questions expecting to hear about collective opportunities for participation in decision making, such as student councils. The participants, however, discussed participation in decision-making as doing their schoolwork,

playing sports and choosing games, helping around the school, and deciding what to do during their free time. It is possible that despite their participation in the research workshops, this is not the reality they know, and thus they do not report on it.

Given the relational nature of participation and that adults largely control children's lives, it is possible that the adults in their school do not share my knowledge of meaningful participation, or that they hold more traditional views of childhood. However, this can not be addressed by this study. According to Corsaro's (2015) theory of interpretive reproduction, the school would be one social institution where children participate in peer and adult cultures outside of the home. Based on interpretive reproduction their participation in these cultures at school, among other social institutions, contribute to how they understand, reproduce, and change their societies. Although this is a very complex process, the information being provided through interactions at their school may serve to reinforce more traditional views of children being valued for their futures as adults.

Initial Codes

During the initial coding phase, I reviewed the data line by line looking for meaning in the interviews. The initial analysis left me with codes that proved to be very descriptive. They reflected organizing the information in my interviews into topics. They were categorized based on answers to interview questions, such as things that are important to students, which highlighted all segments with answers relating to things they found important, such as all their classwork. This resulted in over 300 coded segments of data. Next, I began examining these initial codes to see if they were codes or if they were connected to something else. I also looked at these codes while thinking about my own information on the topic and looked to find a deeper meaning within the codes I had made. First, it was evident that some things did not cover most of the interviews, so I deleted them. I was able to reduce the codes into other topics. For example, opportunities to

participate, adult appointed participation, and adult controlled decisions became adult gatekeepers for participation. After coding and recoding I ended up with 10 main codes.

Searching for themes

The third step in my analysis involved searching through the coded data to construct themes. Braun and Clark (2012) discussed themes as patterns in the data that provide meaningful information regarding the research questions. During this phase, the coded data was reviewed looking for connections to see what the children's experiences were really saying about the research questions. I began by reviewing the segments within the codes to determine if the coded labels accurately captured what laid within the segments. Next, I examined how the codes were related to one another.

This resulted in some rearrangement, where some segments were better served by another code. For example, when asked what types of choices they get in school, the participants answered "*Like, [interruption 1:26] mostly math related. Like on our math test we get two circles and a question, and you get to choose what one.*" I had initially coded this as participation supported by adult gatekeepers/choices but realized that this participant is referring to their duty to participate. And so, I moved this segment to the duty to participate.

Reviewing themes

This phase involved reviewing all the segments of coded data to ensure that the themes created were represented by the data, as opposed to trying to fit the data into the themes (Braun and Clark, 2012). When the interviews were separated based on age it became clear that the responses given for how they participate in decision making changed. All students reported wanting to be involved in decisions and they referred to changes that affect the entire school. For

example, grade 5 students mentioned food choices for the cafeteria and snacks, while the younger student mentioned making 'what counts' for the school (rules), the grade six students discussed being involved in how the school was going to change a little bit. The second stage of this phase involved reviewing all interviews to see if the themes fit. Braun and Clark (2012) described the purpose of this phase as, "What you are aiming for is a set of themes that capture the most important and relevant elements of your data, and the overall tone of the data, in relation to your research question (pp. 65-66)."

Several themes developed as a result of this investigation into the two main research questions. The children reported: positive perceptions of participation, two types of participation (their duty and opportunities granted by their gatekeepers), free time = agency, and they like being involved.

Defining Themes

Braun and Clark (2012) provided a discussion for defining themes as follows:

When defining your themes, you need to be able to clearly state what is unique and specific about each theme—whether you can sum up the essence of each theme in a few sentences is a good test of this. Good themes address your research questions with a specific purpose that provides that story of your data (p.66).

Positionality

Through reflective thought about my work at the club, my values, and actions, I have tried to serve this project well. I positioned myself similarly to Mayall (2008) in her research conversations with children, as being a familiar adult wanting to learn more about childhood from children. I continued to remind the participants throughout the process that there were no right or wrong answers. I wanted them to teach me what it was like in their school. This study fell somewhere between research on and research with children. Although I wanted the children to

take part in this project as much as I could, due to time constraints they were not completely involved in its design.

I held an interpretive constructionist stance to this research, where I believed that my own understanding of the world has as much of an input on the study as my participants. For this reason, it was important for me to acknowledge my beliefs and think reflexively throughout the research process.

I write from the perspective of a female research student who is novice to qualitative research methods. I hold an undergraduate degree in psychology, have taken courses about children's rights at the undergraduate level from a developmental and political science perspective. I have worked as a research assistant in a research centre focused on studying children's rights education. More recently, I have gained experiences working with the youth as a youth worker at the youth centre where this research has taken place, and I am working as a substitute teacher in a Montessori school.

I disclose this information because although I have tried to remain reflexive throughout my approach, these views have informed my interest in the development of this project, the way I interact with my participants, and my interpretation of the data created with the participants.

Rubin & Rubin (2005) stated the following:

Interpretive constructionist researchers work to figure out what the shared meanings are in some particular group, recognizing that though each person interprets the events he or she encounters in a somewhat distinct manner, he or she is likely, at the same time, to bring to bear the understandings held by peers, family, friends, coreligionists, or members of other groups to which he or she belongs (p.29).

The sociology of childhood has informed my beliefs that children are competent social actors and experts in giving insight into their own experiences and what this means in their lives. However, I also believe that children and adults are still developing and value children for what they will become. As a result, I follow Uprichard (2008) in valuing children

now and in the future. I am passionate about supporting children's rights, especially their participation rights and value participation in decision-making. My understanding of the world has been created over time through my experiences participating in my cultures as Corsaro illustrated through his orb web. Although they are experts in their own lives, the information that leads to their understanding of the world is influenced by information gained from adults worlds as well because participation is relational (Cairns, 2001; Wyness, 2012).

My experience working with youth has allowed for my appreciation of understanding how difficult it can be balancing generational power relationships. Even within this study, I have struggled with questioning my values and how I put them into practice.

Throughout this project I would catch myself checking my adult power during workshops and interviews. I had to keep stopping myself from trying to control the situation to complete all my activities. Instead I adapted to the environment over time and completed what we could in our time frame. During a group interview, I feared not having enough data, and found myself occasionally asking a question to get more information and kicking myself a second later for not thinking that it may have steered the conversation. I realized the struggles I was having with my interviews. I appreciated how my participants understood things differently than myself, and I worked very hard to keep my own knowledge out and to hear only what the participants were saying.

For example, while analysing data and reading through transcripts, one participant reported helping in school by reading the announcements. I replied by asking "Do they get to write the announcements?", but they said "No." I labelled this a tokenistic opportunity to participate in decision-making, which based on my knowledge and beliefs about children's rights, it very well may have been. However, although this was my belief, it does not mean that it is not meaningful for this student. They spoke about these opportunities very joyfully and all participants in the elementary school seemed to look forward to them.

Chapter 5: Results

The purpose of this research study was to explore elementary school children's experiences of agency and participation in decision making at school to better understand the social condition of childhood in Canada. Based on the theory of interpretive reproduction in the sociology of childhood and the framework of children's rights, children and youth are worthy of study as beings now and not just for what they will become.

On the 30th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in Canada, it remains unclear how children are allotted opportunities for participation in decision-making at school (Bala & Houston, 2015). Many studies about student voice and participation in decision-making have occurred internationally. To provide children and youth their participation rights, there has been a focus on studying children and young people's voices and experiences regarding participation in schools, their homes, and the community. Many involve children as the researchers, while others concentrate on the benefits of participation for children and focus on increasing opportunities for it. Participation's significance to the young remains unclear.

This study focused on two main research questions to add to the Canadian literature shedding light on children and young people's everyday experiences of participation in Canada (Chen, Raby, Albanese, 2017).

1. Why may students in grades four to six want to participate in decisions about their lives in school?
2. How may students in grades four to six want to be involved in decision-making at school?

Participants attended three group workshop sessions about children's rights and subsequent semi-structured interviews about their experiences with agency and decision-making at school. It is important to note that consistent with the concerns raised by the U.N. Committee,

experts Covell and Howe (2019), and the Canadian Coalition for Children's Rights (2017), only one out of the ten participants had reported hearing or knowing about the U.N. Children's Rights Convention during our Children's Rights workshop. A combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis revealed an overall theme reflecting children's understanding of stable and changing experiences with participation depending on their grade. Stable experiences are characterized as those that all children reported such as free time, joining teams/clubs and duty to participate in course work. Changing experiences reflect those that differed between the participants based on their grade. For example, the grade five participants in the study reported being the school helpers, while the grade four student discussed showing a new student around the school and making 'what counts' statements for their classroom rules. The grade six students reported participating in changes that would affect the structural appearance of the school, like paint colours and where to put their lockers. They also discussed their advisory classroom where they participated in group work. Five themes emerged from our analysis that are all related to how children conceptualize their experiences of participation in school.

Positive perceptions of agency and participation

This theme refers to the idea that children report their experiences of participation in school positively. Although their understanding of participation does not reflect how I, as an adult, understand meaningful participation, their reflections of how they participate in school appear to be meaningful for them. They seem to enjoy the opportunities they receive. This positive tone is evident across the grade levels, even when the children are unsure of how to answer the interview questions.

For example, when asked about their ability to participate in decision making, one grade six student, Daniel, stated, "We get a lot of decision making."

Grade five students, Ben and Katie, discussed their role as helpers in the school very positively.

B: *"We get to do the announcements in the morning, and we moni—we get to mon... we get to mentor the grade primary/ one side.*

K: *...and we got the privilege to do the announcement in the morning.*

Me: *Cool. Do you guys get to pick what goes in the announcements or what types of things you do during mentoring?*

B: *Oh no, we get a script everyday script."*

Similarly, Darlene, a grade four participant, stated:

D: *"Like you know how like they make what counts in the hallways, what counts in the classroom..."*

Me: *Mm-hmm.*

D: *...what happens in the cafeteria?*

Me: *Yeah.*

D: *We must do those, and everybody like in the class has to think of something."*

We also hear this positive tone from grade five student Holly, in a discussion we had with Mary regarding sharing their ideas in school.

H: *"And so, (the principal) said, "We might –can like do your ideas what you want to do, like go swimming, or skating again.*

Me: *Okay. Awesome.*

H: *He said that once.*

Me: *Oh nice, for like extracurricular?*

H: *Yeah.*

Me: *Okay, awesome. Okay, so we can take a short break now before we continue with the rest of*

our questions okay?

M: Okay.

H: Okay.”

This finding suggested that even though these children did not report opportunities for student government or councils to affect school policies, they seem to enjoy the experiences they have for participation.

Types of participation

This theme refers to the idea that students report two different types of participation, which are divided into two subthemes: “It wouldn’t be school if you didn’t have to do it,” and evolving opportunities for participation by gatekeepers. “It wouldn’t be school if you didn’t have to do it” refers to their duty to participate in required courses and how this is important for their futures, while the second refers to reports of participation in everyday activities at the school. ***Subtheme 1: Duty to participate: “It wouldn’t be school if you didn’t have to do it.”***

This theme reflects the traditional notions of childhood and the role of students in school. They are required to participate in their classrooms at school, and they identify this as being important for their futures. This theme is summed up nicely by one grade six student, John, who stated:

J: “I do what I have to do.

Me: That’s good. And, why do you think you have to do it?

J: It wouldn’t be a school if you didn’t have to do it.”

This theme reflects data coded under participation defined by schoolwork (frequency = 100%) and preparing for the future (frequency 85.71%). Table 2 presents frequencies for all codes across the interviews.

Table 2

Frequency of codes across interviews

	Frequency	Percentage	Percentage (valid)
Participation defined by schoolwork	7	100.00	100.00
Choices	7	100.00	100.00
Reasons they want to be consulted	6	85.71	85.71
Ability to join groups/ teams	6	85.71	85.71
Preparing for the future	6	85.71	85.71
"Enjoy free time" = Agency	6	85.71	85.71
Changes affecting the school	5	71.43	71.43
Encouraging all students to participate	5	71.43	71.43
Decisions to be involved in	4	57.14	57.14
Grade 5 helpers	4	57.14	57.14
DOCUMENTS with code(s)	7	100.00	100.00
DOCUMENTS without code(s)	0	0.00	-
ANALYZED DOCUMENTS	7	100.00	-

When asked to “Describe some things that are important to you in school” Grade five student Jackson stated:

J: “Um, math, social studies, um, all the work we do really.

Me: Are there things other than work that are important to you in school?

J: Like getting outside and playing soccer.

Me: Do you know why—like why you think that’s important to you?

J: Because you need to get active and exercise.”

Grade 4 student Darlene stated, *“Almost everything I do, cause it’s kind of educational.”*

Grade 5 student Mary stated:

M: “Um, my homework.

Me: Your homework?

M: I don’t really like to do my homework, but it’s important because you get a grade on your homework.

Me: Why is the grade important?

M: So, you get a good education.

Me: Okay, what will that get you?

M: That will get you a good job.

Me: Is there anything else that’s important to you at school?”

Grade 6 student Daniel stated *“Just like all the different classes. Like most kids really like gym class.”*

when asked why they thought some kids didn't want to participate, grade five student Katie stated:

K: "Because they don't want to do work.

Me: Because they don't want to what?

K: Work.

Me: Work? What do you mean by work? There's lots of...

K: Like school work, like they don't want to do their math.

Me: Mm-hm. But...

K: and decision-making. Er—do—er use their brain.”

Katie and Ben together reported:

B: “Um... reading.

Me: Reading, yeah, why is that important to you?

B: Cause I can learn more words.

K: Oh, reading yeah like if you were an adult and you worked at like—at like Sobeys and you had to read—and you had to read something then you wouldn't be able to do it...

Me: Cool.

K: ...and then you'd be in big trouble. [pause]”

When asked what they think about when I say school participation, grade 5 student Holly stated:

H: “Like what do you mean school participation? Like I think...

Me: Yeah, so what types of things?

H: Um, [pause] math,

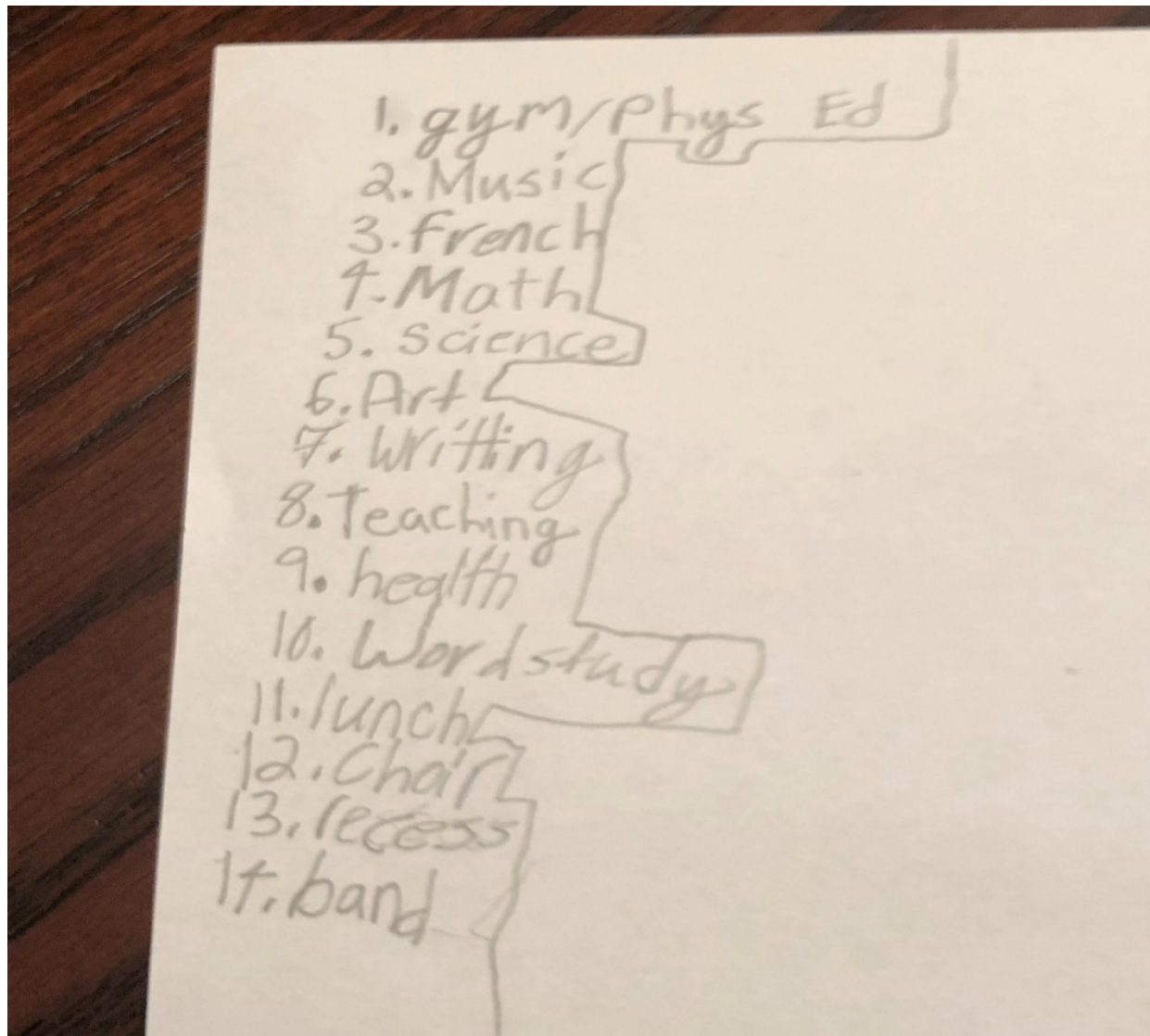
Me: Mm-hm.

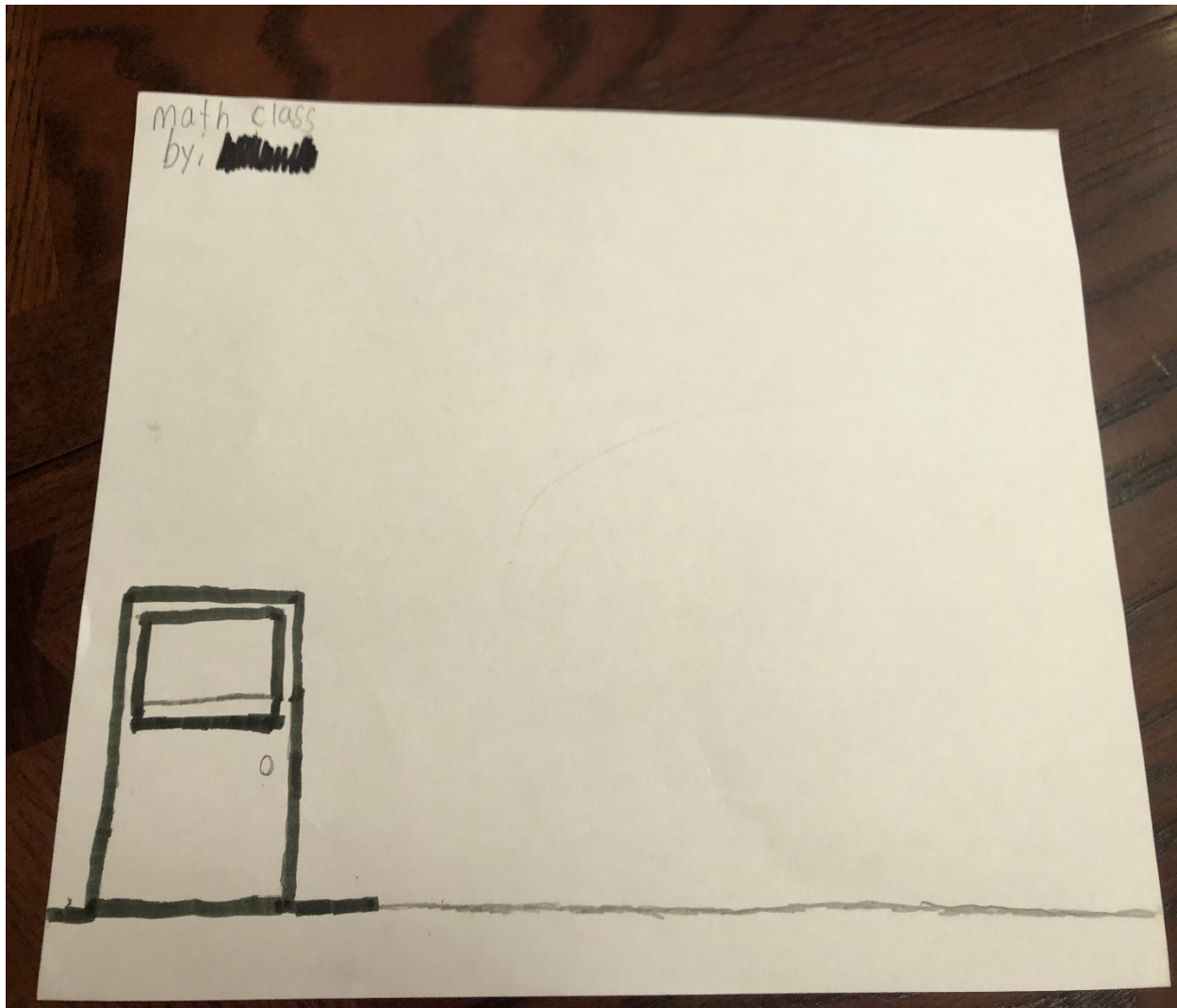
H: Um, L.A.”

This finding was also evident during the workshop on children's participation rights. Most of the participants depicted pictures that involved participating in their class work when asked to write or draw how they participate in school. For example, figure 6 illustrates one written work and one illustration created by the children during our participation workshop. The first picture is a list of all the places they can participate in school, and the second is a drawing of math class.

Figure 6

Locations for Participation (Photo by Jillian Polegato)





There is also obligatory language used throughout the interviews when speaking about classroom participation and the choices they have. For example, grade four student Darlene stated:

D: "Like when we're in class we do—like you know how we—I said we do like a group project?"

Me: Yes.

D: Were—we were working on one of those—we just finished today actually.

Me: Oh, okay.

D: Um, and we all had to put an input in it, so, I was with one of my best friends an...

Me: Awesome. Did you get to pick who your partner was going to be for your project?

D: Yeah

Me: And what your project was going to be about?

D: Um, yeah. Um, we had to do it on African Heritage month, because there's like ya know those things that you do in school, and you can win like \$3000.00 for a college scholarship?"

Having a responsibility to participate is highlighted throughout the interviews, and it appears that adults in this school value children's participation as strategies for behaviour management and building positive relationships. Like traditional ideas, they are providing opportunities to participate for their future. Perhaps the school is attempting to aid the child's development, not based on their rights but based on the idea that children require these opportunities to succeed in the future. The children then begin to view participation as being part of their role as children and students.

Subtheme 2: Evolving experiences for participation by gatekeepers

This subtheme highlights that the participants did not refer to formal structures for participation in their school, such as student councils. However, they do report having other opportunities to participate in that change by their grade. This theme includes the coded segments in Table 2 that refer to being given choices (frequency= 100%), the ability to join groups and teams (frequency = 85.71), and to be involved in changes that affect the school (frequency= 85.71); such as paint colours.

When asked, "Are there places or committees in your school where students can share their ideas about things or help make decisions? Like student councils?" The participants either reported no or mentioned the guidance counsellor. For those who mentioned the guidance office, they refer to it as a space to go to talk to someone about things that bother you. For example, grade six student John stated:

Me: "Are their places or committees in your school where students can share their ideas about things, or help make decisions?"

J: Um, we have the guidance...

Me: Mm-hm.

J: ... room which is lovely. It's very--it took them like seven lunches, six breaks, and like 10 after schools to do it. It's very beautiful. It's nice.

Me: Wow.

J: But—um—yeah, if you ever have like anything on your mind you can just go down there and just talk to the guidance counsellor. Um, committees? Um, we have this thing going on it's been announced on the P.A for about a week now it's like something from grades six to eight, something that you want to like start a business...

Me: Okay.

J: ... and they'll help you with it—people will help you with it, and the prize is \$1000.00."

Across the interviews, adults provided students with opportunities to participate in the school. As Palaiologou discussed (2014) "typically adults are the ones who pose what is and what should be for children, they are the decision-makers and the planners in the eyes of children and, as adults, hold different levels of power (p. 699)." This idea was illustrated nicely by grade five student Mary. When asked how decisions are made in the school, she stated:

M: "Um, well the important decisions mostly go with the adults, like the adults will do all that, all the teachers.

Me: Mm-hm.

M: And sometimes they—they'll talk about, "Do you want to start doing this with the kids, do you want to start doing that with the kids? And if people don't agree on it you vote."

Here she is referring to the teachers and administration at the school. In this way, the adults act as gatekeepers for children's opportunities to participate in the school.

While some opportunities are stable across interviews, such as choosing to join teams, and duty to participate, others reported opportunities changed depending on the participant's grade. For example, grade four student Darlene looks forward to becoming a grade five:

D: "Um, well the grade five's, um, I'm going to be one next year, but the grade fives do this like go girls' program..."

Me: Mm-hm.

D: ... where a lady comes in and she talks about some things with them."

She also gets to participate in behavior management strategies by helping to make 'what counts' statements in her class at the beginning of the year. However, she forgot them.

D: "Like you know how like they make what counts in the hallways, what counts in the classroom..."

Me: Mm-hmm.

D: ...what happens in the cafeteria?

Me: Yeah.

D: We have to do those, and everybody like in the class has to think of something."

The grade five students discussed being helpers in their school. Katie discusses being called down to sell tickets for a fundraiser.

K: "We sell—we sell tickets for the- for the gaming chair that was a fundraiser. It's (another student) mom brang [sic]² it in."

² [sic] is used for participant verbatim statements and not a grammatical error

Me: Cool. Who made that—were um, do any of you guys get to decide that you want to do fundraising for things or do adults...

K: Yeah.

Me: ...do it, or who—what do you do?

K: Well sometimes they volunteer they call—like when I was doing the tickets for the gaming chair, they—um—they— (a teacher) called—called me, (three other students) on—downstairs and we thought we were in trouble, but actually we found out we'd be selling the tickets for a fundraiser.

Me: Cool, they asked you if you wanted to? [Shakes head no] No? They told you were going to.

K: Yeah.”

Mary and Holly discuss being mentors and reading the announcements as well, but they also refer to other helping duties:

Me: “So, what can you—sorry—can you describe what you think of when I say, “School participation?”

M: I think what you mean by that is like [interruption- 56:47]

Me: It's okay you can keep going.

M: Um, [pause] Oh, I think when you say that you mean like how we help out around our school.

Me: Cool. And in what ways do you help out around your school—or do you—you don't—do you think everyone wants to help out around their school?

M: Not everyone, but some people, and whenever—most of the times when we're helping out around the school, sometimes they'll call girls from (a certain grade) down, and sometimes they'll call boys from (a certain grade) down in the two different classes...

Me: Okay.

M: ...and sometimes we sort out papers, sometimes we help out around the gym like if there's stuff hanging up, if we're having a dinner.

Me: Okay, so like by hanging up do you mean like cleaning up and stuff or?

M: Well yeah and around the dinner with the boys will help out with the tables like setting them up, and then the girls will put the sheets on them, or stuff like that."

The grade six students discussed opportunities to help make changes that affect the school's appearance. For example, Darlene reported:

D: "Well, we have an idea that we're gonna um put the pit where all the lockers are into a seating area for more sit—um—seats, and then we're gonna put all of our lockers upstairs by our classrooms, because um, we're always going down to the pit during class, and it's a pretty long walk from most of our classes.

Me: Mm-hm.

D: So, people go wandering around the halls, and everything, and it takes like five—ten minutes just to get back to your class. So, we're gonna try to put them outside the classrooms...

Me: Mm-hm

D: So, people aren't like wandering around the school, so it'll be easier to find your lockers and everything.

Me: Yeah.

D: Yeah.

Me: Was that an issue that the administration like ...?

D: Yeah, during like cla—like home room classes, and advisory classes people were leaving to go do that, but most of them would go and take the long way back, so that they'd skip class a little bit more.

Me: Mm-hm.

D: But, if we put the lockers right in front of our classrooms, then they just have to go outside and get their stuff, and come back in.

Me: So, can you tell me about the ways that adults listen to students in your school?

D: Hm. Well, if we have like ideas for like all the different clubs, or like just anything, we can go to the principal's office. It's always open and we can go in her office or we can see the vice principal like we can talk to any of our teachers at any time, and we can talk to our advisory teachers about pretty much everything.

Me: So, they're very open and welcoming.

D: Um, I feel like most people will because everybody wants to feel like respected in my school, and not all changes people—like younger kids or the older kids will respect, so most of the decisions they make, they talk it over with us first before they make the change.

Me: Yeah. So, how do you find out about opportunities to share your ideas in your school?

D: Mostly from like our teachers or our principals. They'll usually like—if they have a chance to, they'll usually tell us about most of the decisions they're making ...

Me: Mm-hm.

D: ... and they're really good for telling us about ev—everything.

Me: That's good, and is it just all about like student life or the structure of the school, or fundraisers, or?...

D: Mostly like fundraisers, or like how they're going to change up the school, and like, um where they're going to put the lockers.

Me: Okay."

Different opportunities to participate also were illustrated during our participation workshop. Figure 7 reflects how during our participation workshop students discussed their participation as joining the basketball team. During our last meeting together, some children also drew a map of their school to show places where they participate (figure 8). In this picture they highlighted the gym, their classroom, and the pit area where they spend their break. The children also illustrated Head Strong, which is a mental health program, band, a clothing drive (figure 9), and the dress code at the school (figure 10).

Figure 7

Grade 5 student's illustration of Participation (Photo by Jillian Polegato)

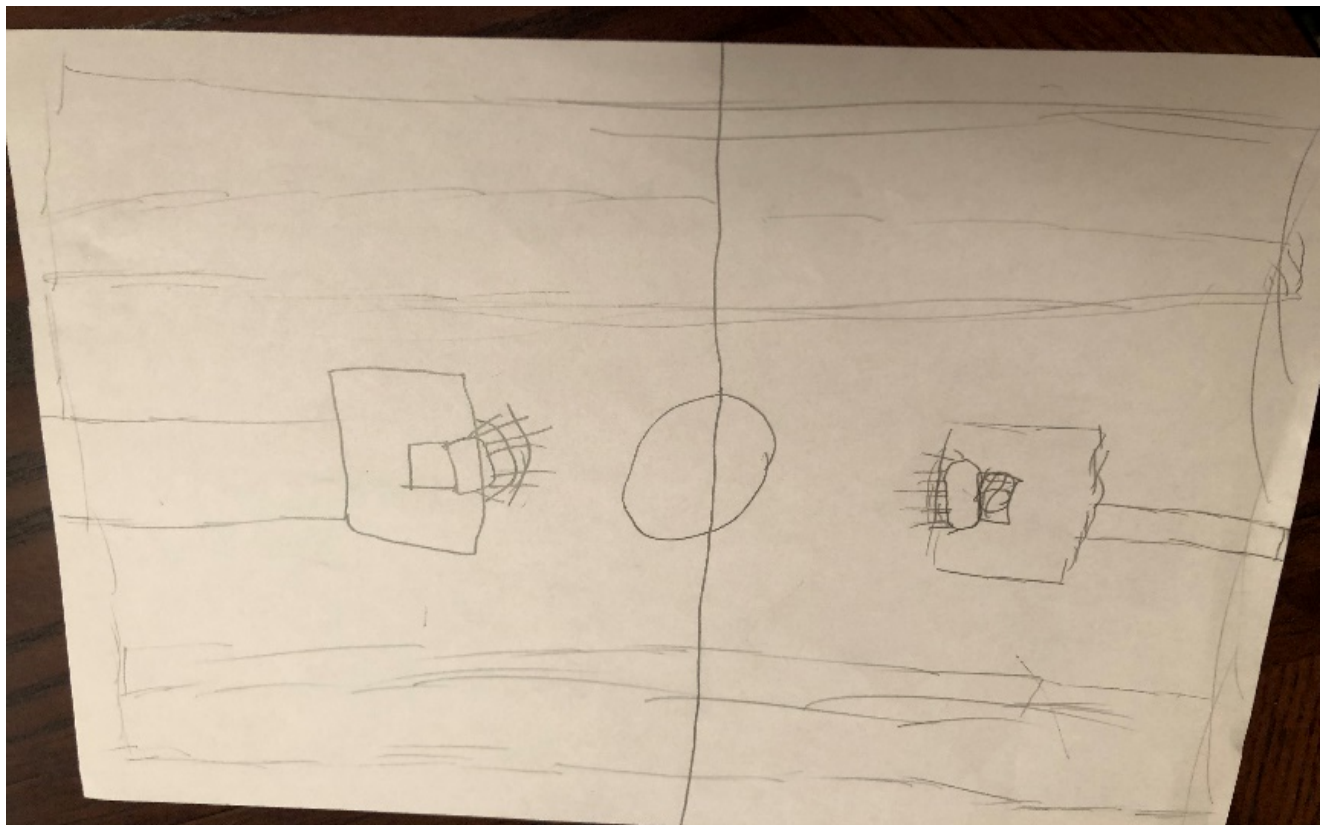


Figure 8

Map of School (Photo by Jillian Polegato)



Figure 9

Grade 6 student brainstorm of locations for participation (Photo by Jillian Polegato)

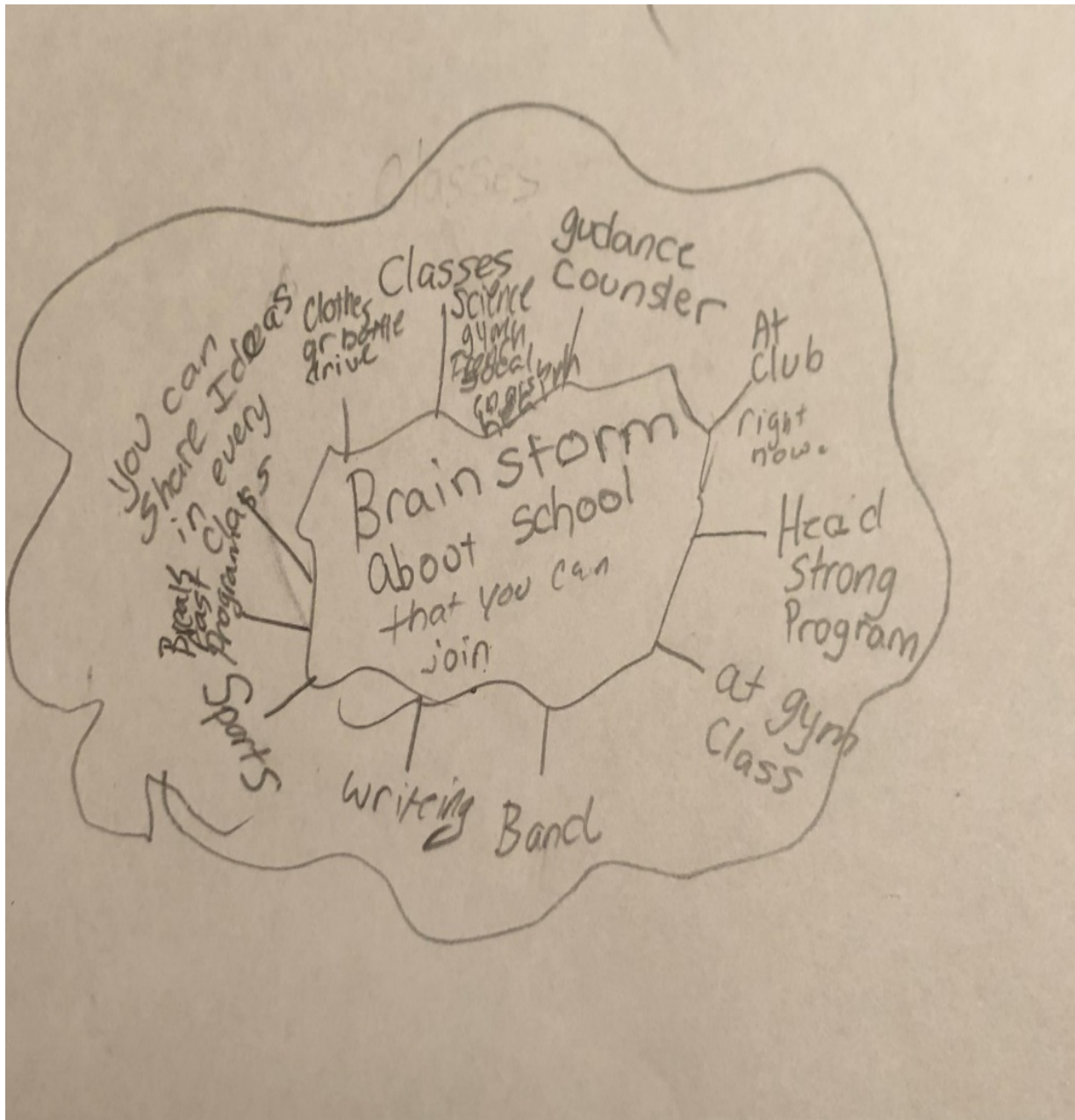
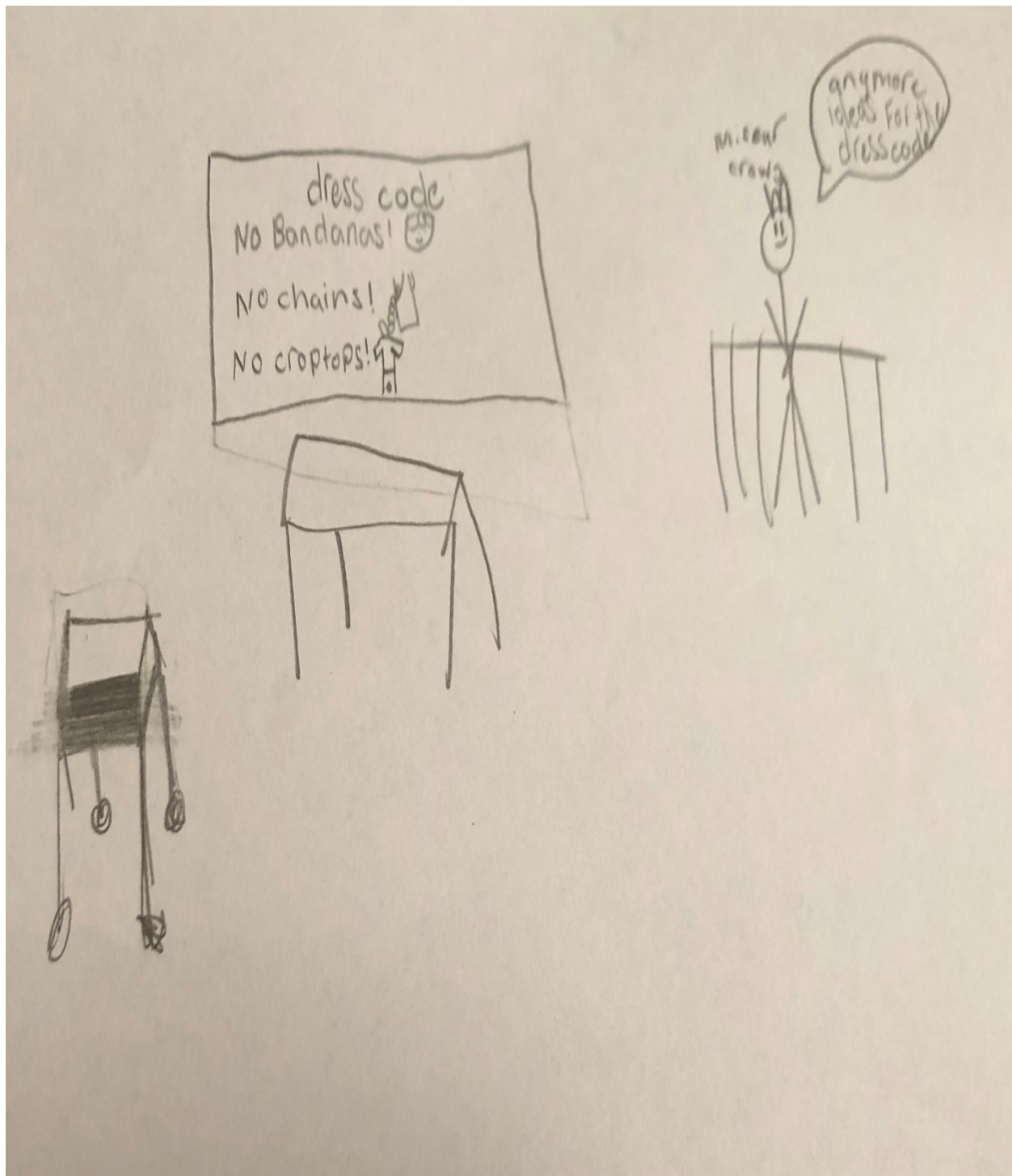


Figure 10

Students help with rules (Photo by Jillian Polegato)



“Free time” = agency

This theme highlights that when asked about when they make decisions in school, 85.71% (Table 2) of the interviews reported during their “Free time.” For example, recess, lunch, when the teacher’s done, if we finish our work. When asked if they would change anything, they all referred to more free time, in the form of recess/ break or gym. Recess or breaktime was reported by all children as a time to make decisions and do what they want. For example, grade five student Jackson reported *“Um, usually I’ll talk to my friends about hockey.”* Mary stated, *“Like sometimes if our teacher don’t know what she—she we should do, we’ll give her an idea and she might take the idea.”* While John discusses enjoying breaktime as follows:
J: “Um, it gives us a little ten-minute break from everything...

Me: Mm-hm.

J: ...to socialize and grab a snack...

Me: Yes.

J: ...or get a drink. Yes

Me: To refresh.

J: Yes. To be you for a little bit.”

In French Sociology the term *métier d’élève* refers to the student’s occupation. Bélanger and Farmer (2004) have translated Perrenaud's (1996) definition as "The child’s ability to play the part required at school, to do what is expected by the system, and also on the child’s interactions with the family, at school and with peers" (p. 45). John’s statement "getting to be you for a little bit" suggests that he views himself in the role of student like an occupation, where he must do his work. His idea of breaktime appears to signify a break from this role. This is the children’s time to do what they want within the limits of the school rules.

The importance of free play has been well documented in the literature for being

important for children 's cognitive and social development. They learn social conventions, conversation skills, how to solve conflicts, they problem solve, role play and create real life situations (Engel, 2015). Corsaro (2015) also discussed that during play in their peer cultures children appropriate information from their adult worlds to create their own unique peer cultures that contribute to the creation of their understand of the worlds in which they live.

Want to be involved in decisions

This theme reflects the idea that participants believe that they should be involved in decisions because they affect them and would like to be involved more in “fun” decisions that affect them at school. For example, Katie suggests snacks “*Like get to decide what kind of chips they’re gonna to sell.*” John discusses fundraisers as follows:

J: “Um, I don’t know say they needed some money, and you gave some ideas for some fundraisers...

Me: Okay.

J: ...and possibly your idea got chosen. And—like, they picked it personally...

Me: Do you guys get to do that stuff?

J: Not—not yet, but I feel like it’s definitely something to do in the future...

Me: Okay.

J: ... cause I’ll be there for like the next two years, so.”

Daniel suggested structural changes to the appearance of the school in the following:

D: Um, well, think they want to be more involved like—in like how the school is going to change a little bit, so like, if—like we’re supposed to be getting a cafeteria, but some kids don’t want it cause they come here for lunch, or they go out for lunch, and they said it might be a bad thing to change because then all the stores downtown won’t get a—as much money as they’re making and there won’t be as much people coming here for lunch, so the students got to talk about that

to them, and they were pretty respectful for our thing, but they might still have a cafeteria put into the school.”

They also feel that people should be encouraged to participate because, when asked, they state that some students are shy, and some may not be interested.

Although they seem content in their form of participation, the younger students look forward to gaining the experiences of the older students next year. They value getting older, and they appear to associate it with having a higher status. Grade five student Holly highlighted this value student when she stated:

H: “Well, yes, but like (the principal) said we might do that, cause (our grade) are really like important—actually, everybody’s important, but like I mean like—we’re like the older ones.

Me: Mm-hm.

H: And so, (the principal) said, “We might –can like do your ideas what you want to do, like go swimming, or skating again.”

Chapter 6: Discussion

The data collected during this project provided insight into how and why students, from this study, in grades four to six may want to participate in decisions about their lives in school. Based on the participants' reported experiences, they want to participate because it is important for their futures. They see participation as part of their schoolwork and their role as students. They also discuss some forms of decision-making as being fun: fundraisers, food choices, and games to play. They report that they believe decisions affect them, and that they may have more experience than adults with some things. According to them, school perceives them as "helpers" rather than actors in their own right. Their understanding of decision-making changes based on their grades. In grades four to five, it is defined by their schoolwork, the daily choices they get to make, helping adults, and how they will spend their free time with peers. Once they reach grade six, in addition to these, they report being consulted about changes that would affect the school.

When referring to decision-making, grade six student John stated "*The administrative [sic] usually take care of the most part, but when they feel like they need to get the students involved then that's what they do.*" It is important to note that the grade six students in this study attend a different school, so this difference could also be explained by differences in how the school administrations value childhood and participation in decision-making. This is not clear from the study, but due to the relational nature of participation (Wyness, 2012; Palaiologou, 2014; Berman & MacNevin, 2017, and Kenneally, 2017) it would be interesting to explore the beliefs for child participation among school administration and other adults in these children's lives.

Patterns of socialization and children's participation in decision-making at school

“Children are not required to participate, but they must be given the opportunity to choose whether to engage or not. Just as children and young people have the right not to participate, they may also choose not to assert their agency” (Horgan et al., p. 18, 2015).

I would argue that parental child-rearing practices can influence how children experience agency, voice, and participation in school. We learned from Lareau (2002; 2011) that children from middle-class families had spent most of their lives engaged in structured activities that are of interest to their children and also serve a developmental function. However, this style of parenting could also be viewed as denying children their agency because of the structured schedules created for them based on a desire to cultivate their development. As Palaiologou (2014) discussed, “typically adults are the ones who pose what is and what should be for children, they are the decision-makers and the planners in the eyes of children and, as adults, hold different levels of power(p.699).”

Ben highlights in his interview “*Mostly the adults make the important decisions, but sometimes they need our help.*” Despite this control, the middle-class parents in Lareau's study also encouraged their children to ask questions and express their opinions, which would be considered a more meaningful level of participation according to Shier's (2001) levels of participation, as well as Lundy's model for participation (2007). Thus, children reared according to concerted cultivation beliefs may be learning through their family experiences with social institutions, and the development of conversation and reasoning skills, how to navigate social institutions, exercise their agency, and to have their rights met in school.

On the other hand, the working and lower class families in Lareau's study, engaged in little meaningful conversation with parents and their parents did not encourage inquiry. For these children, they may feel less equipped to ask questions and participate in discussions in school because they have learned through watching their parents with professionals that this is not

desirable. They may then appropriate this information into their own cultures and not understand that it is their right to express their views and to ask questions when in doubt. Lareau also suggested that these children may be more restricted or constrained in institutional settings. Thus these children may also be less likely to want to exercise their agency and participation rights because they have had little experience in meaningful participation in adult worlds. They're conversations with adults have been based largely on directives.

I do not intend to pose that one child-rearing pattern is better than the other. It is possible that these early life experiences contribute to their understanding of their social world. However, some children may be better equipped to exercise their agency in schools because of a sense of entitlement and conversational skills developed through their experiences in their families. It appears then that participation in decision-making involves skills that children learn through their interpretive reproduction of their worlds. It is also important to note that this is only one social influence affecting the experience of childhood, and this class influence does not exist isolated from other factors nor the individual.

Berman and MacNevin (2017) remind us in the following:

It is also important to emphasize that children (like adults) are not a monolithic group, and there is no such thing as the child. Children vary by social class, ability/disability, gender and gender identity, ethnicity, immigration status, "race," and, of course, age (p. 28).

Power imbalances exist between children just as they do between children and adults. Wyness (2012) suggested that it is not a simple two category struggle between childhood and adulthood. Various factors and relationships are very significant especially since children do still rely on adult worlds.

It became evident during the data collection phase for this study, through observation and the analysis of interview transcripts, that there was a difference within the group of children

in how they reported their experiences. Some of the children were more confident and more eager to share their ideas and exercise their agency than others. For example, Darlene appeared uncertain about the decisions that may interest children. She stated *"I'm sorry I'm taking so long."* Even after being told there are no right and wrong answers, she apologised again for not answering.

Similarly, grade five student Holly was not as comfortable as Mary during their interview. She tended to allow Mary to lead the interview and often just repeated what Mary had said. Grade six student Daniel stated *"I'm really bad at answering questions"*. The same was the case with the interview between Ben and Katie, where Katie dominated most of the interview and Ben stated *"I am struggling again."* Often, he would begin to answer a question and then stop and change his mind. At the same time, specific participants were very active in the conversations.

In addition to these differences during the interviews and workshops, I also had the opportunity to get to know the children, their families, and some staff at the school during my time at the club. Although these children come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, they are supported and provided different opportunities through their families. For example, Katie comes from a traditional two-parent home, and she is involved in many extracurricular activities, such as soccer, outside of the school and the youth club. Ben suggests that Mary gets to help the most with fundraising because her mother is involved with the school. He stated *"Cause like Mary is mostly like the—mostly like the person that actually like—her mom donated a (donation)."* During our final session together he also said *"It's easier to participate in school when your parents are (participating)."* This comment highlights the relational nature of participation and how adults hold power over how children can participate. According to the model for interpretive reproduction, the information gained from these experiences with adult and peer cultures at school, along with other social institutions, are appropriated into their understanding

of their own society (Corsaro, 2015).

Mayo and Siraj (2015) examined parental involvement with the school for working-class families with children who perform above expectations and those below. They reported differences in socialization patterns that represented a combination of both concerted cultivation and the accomplishment of natural growth. They called this Active Cultivation. They found that parents of the children who were achieving higher than expected, in addition to accomplishment of natural growth, exhibited the following:

They explicitly expressed and aimed for an additional goal of upwards social mobility. Education was believed to be instrumental in achieving this particular goal and therefore regarded as something that was not just necessary but also valuable. It appeared that this goal orientation stimulated parents to become and to stay actively involved with their child's learning within the family context and at school (p.61).

The desire for upward mobility is also evident in our interview data. The participants defined participation in terms of their duty to participate for their futures. I labelled this theme "It wouldn't be school if you didn't have to do it". This theme refers to segments of data suggesting they are required to participate in their classrooms at school, and they associate this as being important for their futures too. This theme is summed up by one grade six student, John, who stated:

J: "I do what I have to do."

Me: "That's good. And, why do you think you have to do it?"

J: "It wouldn't be a school if you didn't have to do it."

In a discussion regarding what's important to students, Mary stated:

M: "Um, my homework."

Me: Your homework?

M: I don't really like to do my homework, but it's important because you get a grade

Me: Why is the grade important?

M: So, you get a good education.

Me: Okay, what will that get you?

M: That will get you a good job”

Similarly, when asked why some students may not participate Katie suggested: K: “Because they don’t want to do work.

Me: Because they don’t want to do what?

K: Work.

Me: Work? What do you mean by work? There lots of...

K: Like school work, like they don’t want to do their math.

Me: Mm-hm. But...

K: and decision-making. Er—do—er use their brain.”

Evolving experiences for participation by adult gatekeepers

This subtheme highlights that the participants did not refer to formal structures for participation in their school, such as student councils. However, they did report other opportunities for participation that changed by their grade level.

According to Bennett et al. (2012) “Schools act as an equalizing institution by offering low-cost activities” for students. In their study, they also identified that the parents differed in parenting beliefs for participation; they stated that “middle-class parents are concerned with *customizing* children’s involvement in activities, while working-class parents are concerned with *ensuring* safety and social mobility for children through participation” (p.131). They also reported that other community organizations can offer the same types of opportunities. The participants in this study were all Boys and Girls Club members, and they were transported to the club from their school every day for an after-school program. This program provided the

youth with many different activities and experiences that some of their families would not be able to afford on their own.

For this reason, the youth club can provide support for child development to their members. By enrolling their children in this club, the parents are receiving affordable childcare, and based on Lareau's concerted cultivation, they could also be cultivating their youth with organized programs based on their development. However, this thought is only speculation. The limits of this study do not allow us to address reasons that our participants 'parents enroll them at the club. I am merely inferring that it is a specific population of youth, and it could be possible that the difference unveiled by Bennett et al. (2012) may be illustrated here as well.

In terms of children's rights, it appears that the school does not explicitly teach it. Only one child had heard of it during our workshop, and that was through other sources. In this case, the participants may be learning to reproduce a value for traditional notions of childhood that is focused on their futures as adults. This value is evident through daily conversations I encountered at the club, where the children seemed to be immersed in discussions or arguments about how old they were compared to their peers. This was also highlighted by grade four student Darlene who appeared to be looking forward to the following year at school:

D: "Um, well the grade five's, um, I'm going to be one next year, but the grade fives do this like go girls' program..."

Me: Mm-hm.

D: ... where a lady comes in and she talks about some things with them".

The participants in this study reported a lack of knowledge about the Convention during our children's rights workshop. They also reported no opportunities to take part in formal decision-making processes such as student councils. Instead they reported "no councils." For these reasons, it appears that the educators provided opportunities so that students could develop

a feeling of belonging within the school, instead of promoting their rights. For example, Ben stated *"Mostly the adults make the important decisions, but sometimes they need our help."* In this case, "help" doesn't refer to consultation but rather selling tickets, setting up for an activity, or helping to make rules in class.

According to Woodhead (1997), adult views about physical immaturity, inferiority of children to adults, and value-based judgments about what is in the best interest of a child prevail over recognizing their agency.

Positive perceptions of agency and participation

This theme refers to the idea that children report their experiences for participation in school positively. It is important to note that although their understanding of participation did not match my understanding for meaningful participation, their reflections on how they participate in school appear to be meaningful for them.

There are multiple definitions and types of participation. I was interested in participation in decision-making, and it appears that based on this study these children are provided minimal opportunities based on their development and not their rights. However, the children in this study appeared to be content with their participation based on the theme of positive perceptions of agency and participation. For example, grade six student Daniel: *"We get a lot of decision making"* The children in the earlier grades report about their experiences enthusiastically. This positive tone is evident across the grade levels, even when the children are unsure of how to answer the interview questions.

This is consistent with other research that shows that regardless of the types of participation, children enjoy opportunities to be involved. For example, in a study revisiting the idea of tokenism in child participation research, Lundy (2018) revisited the argument that tokenism was not meaningful to children, and was considered non-participation. She believes that this argument has led to the idea that it is better to do nothing than to allow children to

participate in fear of their participation being tokenistic. Based on her experiences researching children's and adult's experiences of collective participation, she has found that most children report enjoying their opportunities for participation.

As mentioned earlier Palaiologou (2014) noted "typically adults are the ones who pose what is and what should be for children, they are the decision-makers and the planners in the eyes of children and, as adults, hold different levels of power (p. 699)." Given the relational nature of participation, and that children do still rely on adults for many things. It is also possible that they report the experiences as positive because these are the responsibilities they were granted from the adults in their lives. Even though they began learning about what their participation rights in schools could look like, their reports are based on their lived experiences with their school cultures. For example, Mary mentions the difficulty for teachers to involve children in their schoolwork because that planning must be done when the children are not there. Provisions to exercise their agency and be provide meaningful participation in decision-making can only become part of childhood realities if adults value them as social actors with rights. Then children could appropriate this information with their peers to change traditional notions of childhood.

Implications and limitations for the study

As mentioned earlier, Nova Scotia is in the process of reforming the education system. The information gained from this research will provide insight into the value children place on their participation in decision-making at school and inform future studies. It may also be used to inform the development of a student advisory council at ministerial level and promote the inclusion of students on their school advisory councils. This research adds to the Canadian dialogue about child and youth participation. It will also help to identify ways to get children and youth more involved in decision-making and help to build more positive relationships in the school between students and staff by considering everyone citizens with fundamental

human rights.

Case study methodology is intended for in-depth analysis of particular case, and as such, generalizations are not possible from our findings. The results of this study represent the views of a specific group of children who are growing up in the same community, with majority attending the same school. I examined this data inspired by the theory of interpretive reproduction and the framework of children's rights. It is important to not that while I focused on participation and agency in decision-making at school, and discussed patterns of socialization within families, these are but two of the many societal structures that children will engage in as they participate in intricate, relationships with adults and their peers. How children come to make sense of, reproduce and change their societies is an active and complex process (Corsaro, 2015). As mentioned earlier, this is not a monolithic group and differences exist within these participants' lives (birthing order, family structure, ability/disability, culture,race, and religion to name a few) as well. I have worked with these children at the youth club for over a year and have gotten to know the children and their family situations well. I maintained a reflexive thought process throughout this research and am aware of how my presence and role in their lives may have affected their responses. This study represents the views of only the students that participated in this study. Given the relational nature of participation, it may have provided a better picture to include the views of others involved in the process, such as the adults in their lives or to observe the student's everyday interactions and experiences at their school via ethnography. These are possibilities for the future.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study adds to the Canadian dialogue about children's participation in decision-making at school and sheds some light on supporting children's participation in school decision-making. Based on the results of this study, it appears that the conceptions of our

student's participation in decision-making can be influenced by the opportunities that schools and parental socialization patterns provide them. Without being taught how to participate and exercise their agency, some children may be unable to access their right to participate. Schneider (2017) noted that, outside of the home, the school is a major area where early socialization occurs. The school would be an appropriate place then for children to practice their rights.

Based on this study, more work is needed to realize children's participation rights in Canada. Recent child participation research in Ireland by Forde et al. (2018) suggested that "Effective participation in schools requires policy, practical and cultural change" (p.489). Children's knowledge and understanding of their agency and participation can not change unless we, the adults in their lives, learn to value children as social actors with fundamental rights. The Canadian Coalition on the rights of children (2019) released a report outlining systematic changes that needed to occur for children to realize their rights. Education and creating a rights-respecting culture were at the top of this list. This information is important because if we are to take children's rights seriously, we must ensure we take steps to create environments where all children can feel safe based on their social positions.

In addition to exploring the views of school administration and other adults in these children's lives, future studies could focus on facilitating projects that allow children and the adults in their lives to work together to develop and implement participatory decision-making strategies. These studies would focus on educating all stakeholders involved, building positive relationships, and address the power dynamics that exist within the group. It may also be interesting to have youth councils developed by youth- for youth. Finally they could implement and evaluate best practices for participation, such as systematic children's rights education (Howe & Covell, 2013; Schneider 2017).

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Appendices

PANEL ON
RESEARCH ETHICS
Navigating the ethics of human research

TCPS 2: CORE

Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Jillian Polegato

*has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)*

Date of Issue: **10 May, 2018**



Office of Graduate Studies
Thesis Proposal Presentation Report
(see Policy on reverse)

Student Name: Jillian Polegato Student ID: [REDACTED]

Degree Program: Master of Arts, Educational Foundations

Thesis Title: Exploring children's agency and participation in school decision-making: A case study

Date of Presentation: Friday, May 25, 2018

Outcome of Presentation:

- Proposal approved subject to minor revisions. [If the thesis is approved subject to minor revisions, the thesis supervisor will sign and forward the report once the revisions are completed.]
- Proposal approved
- Proposal not approved. Student required to resubmit the proposal for presentation. [Supervisor to submit report of reasons for decision and changes required attached to this form.]
- Proposal resubmission not approved - grade of "F" to be assigned and copied to the Registrar.

Ethics Clearance Required:

- Yes [The proposed research may not start until the student receives the Certificate of Ethics Clearance from the University Research Ethics Board. The Certificate will be required to be attached to the thesis defence notification form submitted to the Dean of Graduate Studies.]
- No

Signatures:

Thesis Supervisor:
Dr. Cornelia Schneider
Name

[REDACTED SIGNATURE]

May 25, 2018
Date

Thesis Committee Members:
Dr. Valda Leighteizer
Name

[REDACTED SIGNATURE]

May 25, 2018
Date

Name

Signature

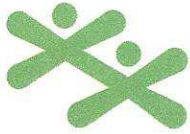
Date

Student:
Jillian Polegato
Name

[REDACTED SIGNATURE]

June 19, 2018
Date

The completed form will be copied by the Thesis Supervisor to:
Dean of Graduate Studies - Student - Graduate Program Coordinator (to be placed in the student's file)
Grades of "F" will be copied to the Registrar.



Boys & Girls Clubs
of Cape Breton

WHITNEY PIER YOUTH CLUB

July 24th, 2018

Attention: Brenda Gagne Research Ethics Coordinator

Mount St. Vincent University
University Research Ethics Board
166 Bedford Highway
Halifax, NS
B3M2J6

I am writing this letter on behalf of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Cape Breton – Whitney Pier Youth Club to confirm that we are in support of Jillian Polegato’s research project to complete her MA in Educational Foundations.

Our club and programs are directed by youth for youth and this study will help us to better understand the process youth engage in when making decisions. We look forward to her findings and how they will help us moving forward to improve communication between youth and staff as well as youth and their families.

Jillian has proven through her volunteer work and employment with our organization that she makes every effort to ensure the safety and well-being of children and youth. She is a very hard worker and critical thinker which makes her an ideal and reliable researcher for topics related to children and youth.

If you require additional information please do not hesitate to contact me at the phone number or email listed below.

Respectfully submitted,

[Redacted signature]

Program Coordinator
Boys & Girls Clubs of Cape Breton – WPYC

[Redacted contact information]

Appendix D

Date: _____

Dear parent/guardian,

My name is Jillian Polegato and I began working at the Whitney Pier Youth Club this past summer. I am currently completing my Master of Arts in Education (Educational Foundations) through Mount Saint Vincent University, and am required to complete a thesis research project as part of my graduation requirements. I am interested in examining children's experiences with participation in school decision-making and would like to invite children in grades 3 to 6 to participate in my research study at the Whitney Pier Youth Club. We will meet once a week for four weeks at the club during club hours. I have completed criminal record and child abuse registry back ground checks, and with your permission, I would like to invite your child to participate in a number of activities exploring how and why they participate in various aspects of their school and in what ways they would like to in the future. During our first session, I will discuss confidentiality with participants and the importance of respecting other participants' ideas. They will learn about the U.N Convention on the Rights of the Child, participation and decision- making, how to use an audio recorder and interview one another in pairs. They will also have the opportunity help interpret the data and discuss ways to get more children involved in their schools. Participation in this study is voluntary, and all information provided during our sessions will be kept confidential. Our sessions will be recorded using video and audio recorders and will be used so that I can capture the exact views of the participants. The recordings will only be viewed and listened to by myself, the participants and my thesis advisor, Dr. Cornelia Schneider. Participants will have the opportunity to review their recordings. The data collected during this study will be kept for five years, and will be used to write my final thesis paper and for possible future publications. After this time all data will be deleted. If you have any questions or comments, feel free at any time to contact the researchers below.

If you choose to allow your child to participate in this study please sign below.

I have read and understand the above information and I agree to allow my child to participate in this research study at the Whitney Pier Youth Club.

Child's name _____ **Age** _____ **Grade** _____

Guardian's Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Note: You may keep the bottom portion of this page in case you have any questions or concerns for the researchers.

Jillian Polegato- MA Education (Educational Foundations) candidate
Sydney, NS.

██████████
Jillian.Polegato@msvu.ca

Dr. Cornelia Schneider (Thesis Supervisor)
Associate Professor
Mount Saint Vincent University

██████████
Cornelia.Schneider@msvu.ca

Appendix E

Sydney, _____

Dear _____:

My name is Jillian Polegato, and I began working at the Whitney Pier Youth Club this past summer, and will be working part-time at the club during their after-school program this year. I am a student at Mount Saint Vincent University, and am doing research for my studies. I am interested in your experiences with participation in school decision-making and would like to invite you and others attending the club to participate in my study.

What you need to do:

You will be asked to sign up for my activities at the club. We will meet once a week during club hours to take part in some fun activities about school participation. You will get to help me with my research by playing games, drawing pictures, writing stories and interviewing each other with recorders.

What might happen?

I believe that you will have fun taking part in this project. You will help me learn about the way children get to take part in decisions at your school. We will learn about children's rights and ways we can share our thoughts in school. We will do this by taking part in activities over the next few weeks. You will get to interview your friends and you can also decide if and how you want to create something else to share the information we learned. You will be video and audio recorded, however, this will only be used so that I can capture your exact words, and so I don't miss anybody's ideas. My teacher and I will be the only ones to view and listen to the recordings.

However, in case you feel uncomfortable, we want you to know that:

- Your participation is voluntary, and that you can withdraw from our study at any time without any consequences.
- Your name, school name and any other information that could identify you will be replaced, so that nobody can recognize you or your family in the study, unless you and your guardian want your name included.
- We will keep all information locked in password-protected folders on our computer and in locked filing cabinets.

Everything we gather during the workshop will be used for my thesis project to complete my MA Education studies, and possible publication. If you wish, we can let you know what we found out during the study. Once we are finished, then I will destroy all information and data that we

gathered.

If you have any questions about this study, you can contact Jillian Polegato or Dr. Cornelia Schneider (See contact information below). This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact the University Research Ethics Board, by phone at 902-457-6350 or by e-mail at research@msvu.ca.

If you are willing to participate in my research project under these conditions please read the statement below carefully, sign your name in the space provided.

Thank you very much for participating,

Sincerely,

Jillian Polegato
MSVU - Student researcher
[REDACTED]
Jillian.Polegato@msvu.ca

Cornelia Schneider
MSVU - Faculty of Education
[REDACTED]
Cornelia.Schneider@msvu.ca

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the study and that you agree to participate.

Participant's signature

Date

Appendix F

1.5-hour children's rights workshop

Materials

- Video camera
- Flip chart
- Children's rights child friendly language handout
- UNCRC sorting chart
- Five sets of rights and wants cards
- Blank cards
- pencils

Procedure:

Introduction:

- Introduce yourself
- Discuss why they are there, your role as the adult, confidentiality, and how there are no right or wrong answers
- Obtain verbal consent to participate from children
- Discuss the outline for today's session

Warm up activity: Introductions

- Go around the circle starting with myself and have everyone say their name, grade and their favorite activity
- Decide with the children rules for our group (Use the clubs as a starting point)
- Have the children pick a partner.

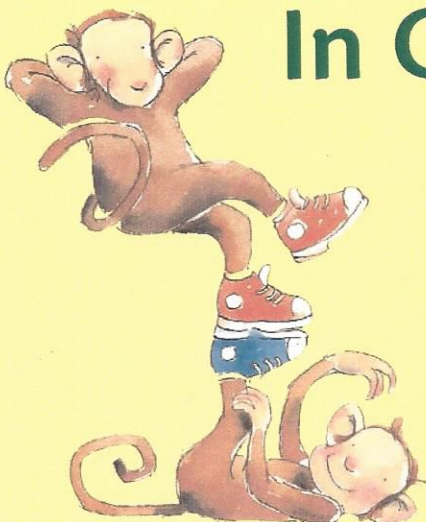
Activities: Distribute a child friendly version of the UN Convention (Appendix F.1), a set of rights and wants cards (Appendix F.2) and pencils to each group.

1. The right to what? (UNICEF Activity)
 - a. Discuss the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (What rights are, who has them, why they are important)
 - b. Divide the Rights and Wants cards into rights and wants
 - c. In pairs the group brainstorms rights they think children should have
 - d. Compare their list with the convention
2. Divide Convention in to Provisions
 - a. Discuss how the convention is divided into provisions
 - b. Using the child friendly copy of the UN Convention on the Rights of the child and the UNCRC sorting chart (Appendix F.3) have children sort the articles into their provisions with their partner.
3. Rights and responsibilities
 - a. Explain how everyone has rights and these come with responsibilities
 - b. Divide rights so that each pair has a set to work with
 - c. Have the children write and illustrate on blank card a responsibility that may go with each right.
 - d. Place the cards around the room and have the children match the responsibility to the right.

Summary of what we learned/ Does anyone have any questions?

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

In Child Friendly Language



"Rights" are things every child should have or be able to do. All children have the same rights. These rights are listed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Almost every country has agreed to these rights. All the rights are connected to each other, and all are equally important. Sometimes, we have to think about rights in terms of what is the best for children in a situation, and what is critical to life and protection from harm. As you grow, you have more responsibility to make choices and exercise your rights.

Article 1
Everyone under 18 has these rights.

Article 2
All children have these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what their parents do, what language they speak, what their religion is, whether they are a boy or girl, what their culture is, whether they have a disability, whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis.

Article 3
All adults should do what is best for you. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children.

Article 4
The government has a responsibility to make sure your rights are protected. They must help your family to protect your rights and create an environment where you can grow and reach your potential.

Article 5
Your family has the responsibility to help you learn to exercise your rights, and to ensure that your rights are protected.

Article 6
You have the right to be alive.

Article 7
You have the right to a name, and this should be officially recognized by the government. You have the right to a nationality (to belong to a country).

Article 8
You have the right to an identity – an official record of who you are. No one should take this away from you.

Article 9
You have the right to live with your parent(s), unless it is bad for you. You have the right to live with a family who cares for you.

Article 10
If you live in a different country than your parents do, you have the right to be together in the same place.

Article 11
You have the right to be protected from kidnaping.

Article 12
You have the right to give your opinion, and for adults to listen and take it seriously.

Article 13
You have the right to find out things and share what you think with others, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms or offends other people.

Article 14
You have the right to choose your own religion and beliefs. Your parents should help you decide what is right and wrong, and what is best for you.

Article 15
You have the right to choose your own friends and join or set up groups, as long as it isn't harmful to others.

Article 16
You have the right to privacy.

Article 17
You have the right to get information that is important to your well-being, from radio, news papers, books, computers and other sources. Adults should make sure that the information you are getting is not harmful, and help you find and understand the information you need.

Article 18
You have the right to be raised by your parent(s) if possible.

Article 19
You have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, in body or mind.

Article 20
You have the right to special care and help if you cannot live with your parents.

Article 21
You have the right to care and protection if you are adopted or in foster care.

Article 22
You have the right to special protection and help if you are a refugee (if you have been forced to leave your home and live in another country), as well as all the rights in this Convention.

Article 23
You have the right to special education and care if you have a disability, as well as all the rights in this Convention, so that you can live a full life.

Article 24
You have the right to the best health care possible, safe water to drink, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help you stay well.

Article 25
If you live in care or in other situations away from home, you have the right to have these living arrangements looked at regularly to see if they are the most appropriate.

Article 26
You have the right to help from the government if you are poor or in need.

Article 27
You have the right to food, clothing, a safe place to live and to have your basic needs met. You should not be disadvantaged so that you can't do many of the things other kids can do.

Article 28
You have the right to a good quality education. You should be encouraged to go to school to the highest level you can.

Article 29
Your education should help you use and develop your talents and abilities. It should also help you learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people.

Article 30
You have the right to practice your own culture, language and religion - or any you choose. Minority and indigenous groups need special protection of this right.

Article 31
You have the right to play and rest.

Article 32
You have the right to protection from work that harms you, and is bad for your health and education. If you work, you have the right to be safe and paid fairly.

Article 33
You have the right to protection from harmful drugs and from the drug trade.

Article 34
You have the right to be free from sexual abuse. Article 35 No one is allowed to kidnap or sell you.

Article 36
You have the right to protection from any kind of exploitation (being taken advantage of).

Article 37
No one is allowed to punish you in a cruel or harmful way.

Article 38
You have the right to protection and freedom from war. Children under 15 cannot be forced to go into the army or take part in war.

Article 39
You have the right to help if you've been hurt, neglected or badly treated.

Article 40
You have the right to legal help and fair treatment in the justice system that respects your rights.

Article 41
If the laws of your country provide better protection of your rights than the articles in this Convention, those laws should apply.

Article 42
You have the right to know your rights! Adults should know about these rights and help you learn about them, too.

Articles 43 to 54
These articles explain how governments and international organizations like UNICEF will work to ensure children are protected with their rights.



unicef



QUEEN
ALEXANDRA
FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN



Canadian
Heritage

Patrimoine
canadien



Rights, Wants & Needs cards

Each of the 20 cards can be classified in one of two categories:

NEEDS (protected as RIGHTS in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, indicated by the corresponding article number in the chart below)

WANTS (not protected as rights since they *generally* are not necessary for a child's survival, growth and development)*

NEEDS/RIGHTS

- Decent shelter (article 27)
- Nutritious food (article 24)
- Protection from abuse and neglect (article 19)
- Education (articles 28, 29)
- Health care (article 24)
- Fair treatment and non-discrimination (article 2)
- Clean air (article 24)
- Opportunities to share opinions (article 12)
- Playgrounds and recreation (article 30)
- Clean water (article 24)
- Opportunities to practise your own culture, language and religion (article 31)

WANTS

- Clothes in the latest style
- A bicycle
- Holiday trips
- Your own bedroom
- A personal computer
- A television set
- A personal stereo
- Money to spend as you like
- Fast food

* Some items classified as "wants" may be needs in certain circumstances. For example, access to television or a computer may be an important source of information gathering or sharing conducive to the protection of rights to healthy development and protection from violence and abuse.



Health care



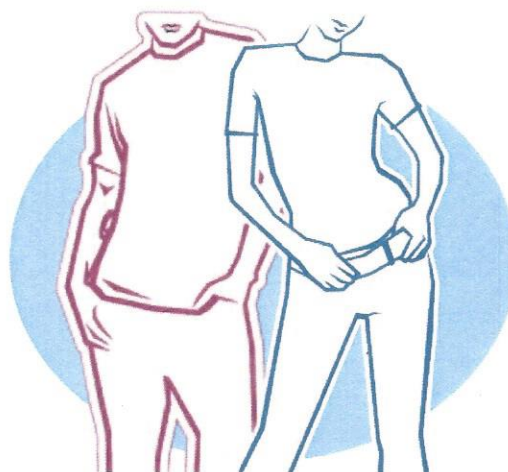
A bicycle



RIGHTS, WANTS & NEEDS CARDS



Decent shelter



Clothes in the latest style



Holiday trips



Nutritious food



Protection from abuse and neglect



Education



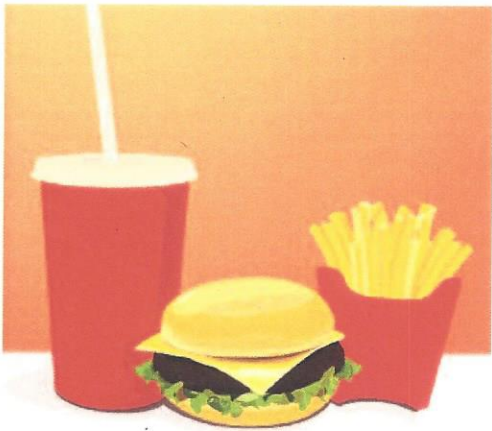
RIGHTS, WANTS & NEEDS CARDS



Clean air



A personal stereo



Fast food



Playgrounds and recreation



A television set



Opportunities to practise your own culture, language and religion



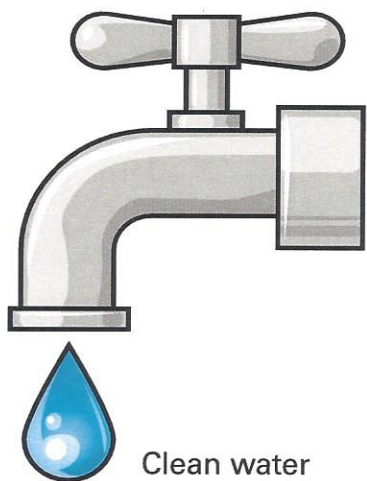
RIGHTS, WANTS & NEEDS CARDS



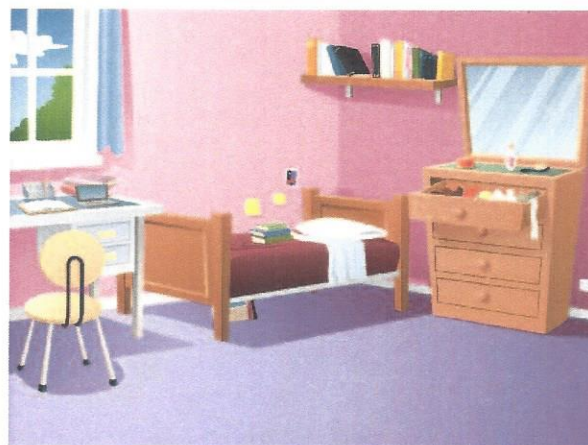
Opportunities to share opinions



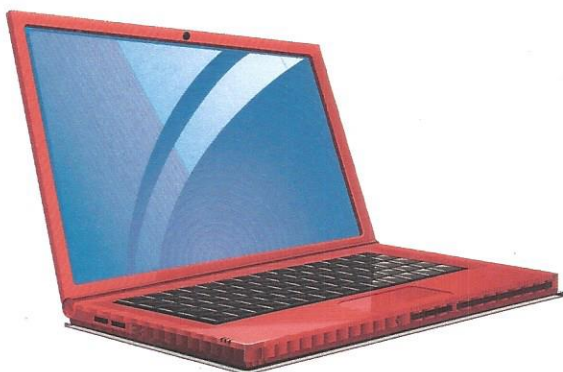
Money to spend as you like



Clean water



Your own bedroom



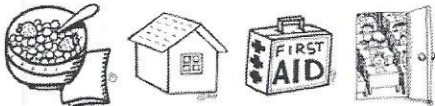


A personal computer



Fair treatment and non-discrimination



"United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child" Sorting Chart

Provision Rights (give children their basic needs)	Protection Rights (keep children out of harm)	Participation Rights (give children opportunities to share their ideas)
		

Appendix G

1.5-hour workshop on participation rights in school

Materials

- Video camera
- Audio recorder
- Flip chart
- Copy of You Have Rights from UNICEF (Appendix G.1)
- Blank paper
- Art supplies (Pencils, crayons, coloring pencils)
- Color it rights pictures from coloring book

Procedure:Introduction:

- Welcome and thank everyone for helping you with your research
- Recap about children's rights from last week
- Discuss that this week we will complete activities about our participation rights in schools.
- Remind them that their participation is voluntary, and these activities are just for fun. The objective is to teach me about what they think about participation in school.
- Gain verbal consent
- Go over rules created last session
- Have children pick a partner

Questions: Check to see if anyone has any questions so far.

Warm up activity: Short activity about decision-making

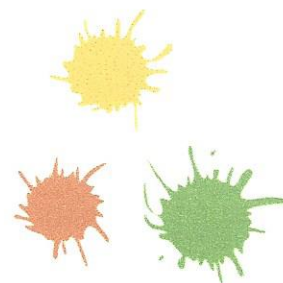
- Sit in a circle and go around asking each child to name a time they had to make a decision.

Activities:

1. Participation and Voice
 - a. I will read the UNICEF's "You Have Rights" information sheet to participants
 - b. With their partner have children brainstorm places children can participate in their school and report back to the group.
 - c. Brainstorm in what ways schools can support children's participation rights in decision-making? Report back to group
2. Write a story or draw a picture of how you participate in school
3. Write a story or draw a picture about a way you or someone else your age may want to help in your school

I will then have each pair tell me about their picture or story as they finish and record their descriptions using a tape recorder so that I capture their exact views.

Questions/ Summary of what we learned



YOU HAVE RIGHTS

Every person has certain basic rights simply because they are human. Your rights are the things you are allowed to be, to do or to have in order for you to have the best start in life. For young people under the age of 18, these rights are listed in the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**.

All rights are equally important and are connected to each other. You are born with these rights, and no one can take them away. When your rights are upheld you will have the food, education, protection, healthcare, nurturing and opportunities you need to lead a happy and healthy life.

Article 42 – You Have the Right to Know Your Rights

Many of us are aware of at least some of our rights. Did you know that knowing all of your rights is actually **one** of your rights?

Who is Responsible?

All adults have the responsibility to do what is best for you. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect you. The government has a responsibility to make sure your rights are protected. They must help your family protect your rights and create an environment where you can grow and reach your potential.

When it comes to your rights, you have a role to play too. When you exercise your rights, you should ensure that you do so in a way that respects and protects your own rights and the rights of others. It's called being 'rights respecting'. For example, to protect and respect the right to protection from harm and abuse, you can be kind to others and ensure you don't harm or mistreat anyone.

You Have the Right to Participate

The Convention is very clear about your rights to participate in all matters that affect you. You have the right to have an opinion and for it to be taken seriously, listened to and respected. You have the right to join groups, and choose your own friends and religion. You have the right to share your ideas freely, so long as you respect the rights of others while you do so. And you have the right to be an important part of any decisions that ultimately affect you.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child

A convention is an agreement between countries to obey the same laws. Canada ratified (agreed to obey) the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** in 1991. By doing so, Canada made a promise to make sure all Canadian children and youths get their rights met.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child has 54 parts, called articles. All young people, under the age of 18, have these rights, no matter who they are, where they live, what their parents do, what language they speak, what their religion is, whether they are a boy or girl, what their culture is, whether they have a disability, whether they are rich or poor.

The different types of rights in the Convention fit into four categories:



Survival Rights: Right to life and to have your most basic needs met (for example: shelter, medical treatment).



Development Rights: Rights that allow you to reach your fullest potential (for example: education, play and leisure).



Participation Rights: Rights that allow you to be active in your community (for example: freedom to express opinions).



Protection Rights: Rights that protect you from abuse, neglect and exploitation (for example: protection against child labour).



What Does Meaningful Student Participation Look Like in Schools?

In schools where student participation is seen as important, all members of the school community regularly put the needs of students at the heart of all school activities. These schools teach every student their rights and encourage them to know, understand and exercise their rights on a daily basis. The rights of all children to voice their opinions, participate and associate is a big part of the school culture.

Meaningful student participation can look like:

- Students giving their opinions about school policies (like dress or behaviour codes) and then making decisions about how they are put into practice.
- An active student council that is democratically elected.
- Students being consulted about what they are learning and how they are graded.
- Each classroom using a fair and democratic process for creating a classroom charter.
- Challenges to student participation being regularly identified and then solutions being sought out.
- Every student having an equal opportunity to participate.
- Students taking initiative to organize student groups.



Meaningful Youth Participation in Schools

Rights Respecting Schools

In elementary schools all across the country, UNICEF Canada has put into practice a program that makes children's rights and student participation the heart of the school philosophy. This exciting program is called the **Rights Respecting Schools initiative** and it is gaining momentum.

Teachers, students and parents alike are learning that schools with a rights-based culture are inclusive, participatory and respectful. The Rights Respecting Schools initiative recognizes that in order for students to want to achieve they need to feel included, that they belong and that their ideas matter.

Putting the Convention at the centre of the school community means that all members of the community learn about and develop a deep understanding of how our actions affect the rights and lives of others. It means that the daily tasks of teaching curriculum, resolving issues and challenges, making decisions and providing meaningful opportunities for students to participate can all be done with children's rights in mind.

Appendix H

Learn to use audio recorder and interview guide

Materials

- One audio recorder for each group
- Blank cards
- Interview guide

Procedure:

Introduction

- Recap from last session
- Reminder of posted group rules made during session one
- Obtain verbal consent
- Discuss outline for today

Questions: Check to see if anyone has any questions so far.

- Discuss what interviews are and your interest in learning from them about their experiences
- Discuss how today we will practice interviewing one another. Over the next week we will conduct interviews with our partners (or by yourself if you prefer) about their experiences with school participation. I will take you one pair at a time, and we will take turns asking and answering each others' questions that I will have written down for you.

Activities

1. Teaching kids to use audio recorder
 - a. Show kids the audio recorder and what the buttons do and how it works
 - b. Allow children with their partner to play around with the recorders until they get the hang of it.
2. Have each child think of one question about school participation in their school and have them write it on a blank card.
3. Next have the children take turns recording their partners answer to their question for practice.
4. Ask children if they would like to make posters or drawings about what they learned in the project and get them to write on a card how they would like to share the information learned. (This information will be used for session 4)

Questions/summary of we have learned

Note: I will later listen to the interviews and may go back to individual children or pairs to see if they can elaborate further another day in the week.

Appendix I

Semi- structured interview guide for 30-45-minute interviews (individual or paired)

The following questions will guide the conversations with participants. However, questions may be added depending on the interactions and information gained in the previous sessions

Introduction

- Welcome and thank children for joining you
- Explain what you will be doing (ask each other questions)
- Explain how this activity is for fun and all information will be kept private and I will remove all information that could identify you. Remind them that participation is voluntary, and they do not have to participate.
- Gain verbal consent

Semi- structured interview (potential questions)

- Describe a typical day at your school.
- How can schools let kids practice their rights to participation?
- Why do you think children want to participate in decisions at school?
- What types of decisions would they want to be involved in?
- In what ways would kids want to take part in decisions at school?
- Why do think some kids don't want to participate?
- Describe some things that are important to you in school?
- What types of things do you think other kids care about?
- Is there anything that you would change about your school?
- What do people ask you about in school?
- Are there places for kids to discuss things in school?
- What types of things do kids talk about in school?
- Do you think it matters if kids are asked about changes in your school?
- Schools all over Nova Scotia are changing how do you think this affects you at school?
- Describe the relationship between children and adults in your school.
- What are some things you can control in school?
- How are you listened to in school?
- How do adults listen to kids in your school?
- Do all kids get to help make your school better?
- Do kids get to help make changes in your school?
- What kinds of choices do you make in school?
- Does your school have a student council or some group that lets kids make decisions?
- How are adults similar or different to those at the club?
- Explain how kids' ideas are used in your school?
- What types of things do adults ask your ideas about in school?
- How can more kids take part in decisions at school?

Thank you and Questions