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Taking part in school life: views of children

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Abstract

Purpose

Child participation is increasingly a global phenomenon as stated by Article 12 of the UN convention on children's rights. This supports the first principle, Democracy, of the Health Promoting School movement. The purpose of this study was to facilitate a three-phase participatory research process (PRP) to document the views of children about participation in school.

Design/Methodology/Approach

A total of 248 primary school pupils aged 9-13 years participated. The first group of pupils answered two questions on individual coloured paper; the second group categorised these data separately, by question, assigning labels for each of the categories; the third group used the categories to develop schema. The analysis was inductive.

Findings

The most common categories for what made pupils feel a part of their school were school uniforms, sports, friends, teachers and their school/classroom environment. Increase in the number of school activities, encouraging friendship and equal participation were key indicators of how pupils would ensure that everybody felt a part of the school. The findings illustrate the views of children on interpersonal relationships and belonging as important for taking part in school life.

Originality/Value

This paper illustrates children's understanding of what taking part in school means to them. The PRP encouraged pupils to have full control of the three-phase research process, which

demonstrated the ability of children to work together in groups while having fun at the same time.

Keywords: children, participation, primary schools, health promoting schools, Ireland

Type of paper: Research paper

I. Introduction

The school has been identified as an important setting for promoting the health and well-being of children. The settings-based approach to health promotion is founded on the Ottawa Charter (WHO, 1986), and prioritises improving the health of the whole school rather than health at the individual level. One of the principles within the settings-based approach is that of participation, which recognises the importance of encouraging the development of the decision-making capacity in order to initiate appropriate action. An increased interest in child participation and the possibility of the positive impact it could have on, not only the child but also parents, families and broader society has been highlighted (Simovska and Jensen, 2009). Within school, the emphasis on a participatory approach to learning has demonstrated a potential for developing young people into active and responsible members of society, as well as ensuring the sustainability of health promotion programmes by encouraging ownership via participation (Jensen and Simovska, 2005).

The principles of the Health Promoting School (HPS) as outlined by the European Network of Health Promoting Schools (ENHPS), now known as the Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) Network, encourage schools across Europe to adopt a strategy that seeks to promote the health of the whole school environment, including the social and physical environment of

the school (Barnekow et al., 2006). Individual countries across the network, including Ireland, have developed the health promoting school model based on what is achievable in different countries (see Jensen and Simovska, 2002); the HPS model highlights pupil participation as one of its key values. This paper focuses on facilitating a three-phase participatory research process (PRP) to document the perspectives of children about school participation.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children and young people have the right to participate freely in matters that affect them (UN, 1989). In relation to the school setting von Wright (2006) demonstrated that the right of children to participate in their schools has been awarded some level of recognition. This supports the first principle, Democracy, of the Health Promoting School (HPS) movement, which views health in a holistic way, and encourages the involvement of young people in describing what health is (Jensen, 1997). Furthermore, various researchers and practitioners have contributed to the issue of child participation in the school setting; this in turn has evolved into various complementary school programmes and projects for children and young people. Many nations, in Europe and other parts of the globe, have enacted policies, made recommendations and developed programmes that enhance the facilitation of children and young people's participation in the school (Simovska and Jensen, 2009).

There are many definitions and terms (Barnekow et al., 2006) used to describe the concept of child participation in school, and various levels of child participation have been proposed (Hart, 1992; Hart, 1997; Simovska, 2004; Jensen and Simovska, 2005). Child participation has been defined as a process whereby children and young people collaborate with others, concerning matters that have to do with their collective well-being (Chawla, 2001). Pupil

participation has also been described as pupils expressing their views on different subjects in class, with the purpose of creating an environment to foster the development of their cognitive skills (Simovska, 2007). In addition, child participation in school has been defined as the practice of involving pupils in democratic or joint decision-making in the school setting or taking part in the decision processes within schools (Simovska, 2007; Mager and Novak, 2010; Griebler et al., 2012) or the process of engaging the interest of children in diverse programmes (Simovska, 2004).

Child participation in school has been described as ‘token’ or ‘genuine’ participation (Simovska, 2004); genuine participation refers to an environment in which children are free to demonstrate their potential actively in school, which at the same time produces an atmosphere of learning and a positive effect on the children (Simovska, 2004). In contrast, token participation pre-supposes that the condition of learning has been set out and children contribute; they do not have control over the activities but can gain some information from the experience. Genuine participation has been shown to have the potential to provide the opportunity for pupils to have a sense of ownership in the method of learning (Simovska, 2007). Encouraging children to be active collaborators can contribute both to their educational and personal development and could also empower them to be successful contributors to their society. Evidence suggests that participation can encourage the development of pupils’ self-confidence and self-esteem (Griebler et al., 2012). In addition, pupil participation has been identified as important in nurturing a favourable social and physical school environment (Griebler et al., 2012). It has been suggested that genuine participation is essential for the success of a health promoting school programme, which impacts both on the pupil and the school environment as a whole (Simovska, 2000; Simovska, 2004). Children’s participation in school has been associated with positive health

and wellbeing of (de Róiste et al., 2012; Simovska and Jensen, 2009), and its impact on pupils' positive views of their school has been highlighted (de Róiste et al., 2012).

An essential goal of child participation should be to achieve a common ground or consensus between how the child views their world and the way adults perceive the child's outlook (KjØrholt, 2001). There remains a need to define what participation in school means from a child's perspective. This paper aims to provide such a definition. The overall goal of this paper is to document Irish primary school children's perspective on what participation means to them and their views on how participation may work better within their schools.

II. Methods

Research design

This study used the Participatory Research Process (PRP). Participatory research varies from conventional research; focusing more on carrying out research with people, and less on carrying out research on people (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). The methods involved in carrying out participatory research centres on involving research participants in the research process, while at the same time building their research capacity (Krishnaswamy, 2004). Earls and Carlson (2001) advocated for the use of participatory methods in order to realise the potential of children to contribute to their own health and wellbeing. Participatory research processes can enhance the ability of children to analyse and provide suggestions on issues that affect them (Sixsmith et al., 2007). The PRP has been previously used with young children; it involves children in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006). PRP generates very large amounts of data at various levels, which can be challenging to manage, and is entirely a group based process and thus does not capture the views of individual participants. Nevertheless PRP was considered preferable to

other possible research techniques for the current study because the approach mirrors the topic being investigated (participation), it has potential to increase the capacity of research participants, and most importantly it removes the adult filter inherent in the analysis of most forms of qualitative data. The value of encouraging children's voice and the significance of including their views in policy discourse has been emphasised; participation of children in all aspects of research has been shown to be useful and also fun for children and researchers (Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2006; Nic Gabhainn et al., 2007).

This study employed a three-phase participative design; involved pupils actively in all phases of the research. The first phase involved a group of pupils who generated data on two questions asked by the researchers. A subsequent group categorised the data, while a third, analysed the data by creating schema to present their views. The three groups of pupils worked independently of each other.

Sampling technique

A list of National Primary Schools was obtained from the Irish Department of Education. First, three schools were randomly selected; information letters and introductory telephone calls were made to each school. An additional six extra schools were randomly selected in the event of any of the first three schools' unwillingness to participate. The first three schools who gave their consent to participate were selected for the study. Children aged 9-13 years in 4th, 5th and 6th class participated in the study.

Consent

Full ethical approval for this study was granted by the National University of Ireland Galway Research Ethics Committee. Active consent was obtained from the schools and pupils, and passive consent from parents. The pupils were informed that they were free to withdraw from

the study at any time; all pupils agreed to take part in the study and none of them withdrew at any stage of the research.

Pilot process and language

As demonstrated previously, there are different terms used to describe the concept of pupil participation - such as *'involvement'*, *'linked to the students'* and *'student-directed'* (Barnekow et al., 2006). A pilot study was conducted with four pupils aged 10 to 14 years to determine the appropriate language with which to describe the concept of pupil participation. A consensus was reached on the term *"feel a part of"* following feedback from these young people about how they understood the word participation in school.

Procedure for data collection and analysis

Introduction

Data were collected and analysed in three phases. Each phase was carried out with separate class groups in each of the three schools (see Table1). The school selected the class groups that participated at each phase of the research process; this was based on the availability of each class at the time allotted for each stage of the research process. Pupils were informed of the research aim and objectives and the confidentiality of their data was ensured. Pupils were given an opportunity to ask questions throughout the entire process. The group sessions were observed by researchers, but pupil decisions were not influenced.

Phase 1- data generation

In each of the three schools, the first group of pupils were asked to give their responses to the following two questions: *"What makes you feel a part of the school?"* and *"If it was your job to make sure everybody in your school felt a part of the school, what would you do?"* Pupils

were encouraged to provide as many responses as they wanted; each response on separate pieces of rectangular coloured paper-similar to index cards. One class group in each of the three schools participated in this phase.

Phase 2- data analysis

The analysis of the data was inductive. The second group of pupils took the responses given by the first group on pieces of coloured paper and categorised them by playing a version of the card game 'Snap'. All the individual responses were first dealt out to group members, so each had a pile of written responses to work with. The youngest pupil present placed the first piece of coloured paper (response) on the table, face up, for everybody to see. Others in the group looked through their own piles, and if they found a response that they perceived to be the same or similar to the one already on the table, they placed theirs on top to form a category. The game continued with similar responses being put together and different categories emerging until all the cards were used. Pupils then double-checked all developed categories to ensure they were satisfied with them. Descriptive labels were generated by the group for each category and the responses that made up the category with the label were stapled together. Group members were free to add responses and alter categories if they wished.

Phase 3- data presentation

The final group of pupils were given the labelled groups of categories as developed by the second group and asked to create a schematic presentation of the data. To aid in that process they were supplied with coloured paper (size A0), adhesive and coloured pens. The group members were free to add categories if they wished. The groups took the labelled categories and looked through the responses under each label to help them understand the meaning of each category. After reviewing the categories group members used adhesive to attach

category labels to the large sheets of coloured paper in the way that that they felt represented *'feeling a part of school'*. One of the groups also chose to write on the coloured paper.

III. Findings

Demographic Results/Introduction

A total of 248 boys and girls aged 9-13 years participated, from nine classes (4th, 5th and 6th) across three mixed-gender primary schools. Table 1 presents the mean age, class groups, number of participants and groups in each data collection phase across the three schools; the number of responses presented by pupils in phase 1, the number of categories developed by the sub-groups in phase 2 and the number of schema developed at phase 3.

Table 1. Features of research participants and responses from each school

	School I	School II	School III
Age: mean 11.01 (SD 1.07)	11.30	10.79	10.96
Phases			
1	6th class, <i>n</i> = 44	6th class, <i>n</i> = 24	5th class, <i>n</i> = 29
2	5th class, <i>n</i> = 24	5th class, <i>n</i> = 29	6th class, <i>n</i> = 25
3	5th class, <i>n</i> = 21	4th class, <i>n</i> = 28	4th/5th class, <i>n</i> = 24
What makes you feel part of this school?	98 responses 10 categories 1 schema	88 responses 17 categories 2 schema	91 responses 15 categories 2 schema
If it was your job to make sure everyone felt part of your school, what would you do?	85 responses 14 categories 2 schema	146 responses 27 categories 3 schema	123 responses 17 categories 2 schema

Phase 1

A total of 97 pupils across the three schools participated at this phase. Pupils were not divided into sub-groups; all pupils gave individual written answers to the two questions posed to them. Overall, 277 responses were generated for the first question “*what makes you feel a*

part of your school?”. The responses were grouped based on school; 98 responses from the first school (school I), 88 responses from the second school (school II) and 91 responses from the third school (school III) (see Table 1). Written responses to the first question revealed that there were almost similar numbers of written responses given by each of the three classes across the three schools despite the fact that the number of pupils from school I was larger than the other two groups from school II and III (see Table 1). Answers to the second question “*If it was your job to make sure everybody in your school felt a part of the school, what would you do?*” were a total of 354. There were 85 responses from school I, 146 responses from school II and 123 responses from school III. There were a larger number of written responses given by each of the class in school II and III despite the fact that the number of pupils in these classes was smaller than in school I (see Table 1).

There were both common and varied responses to the two questions across the three schools. Some of the written responses from each school are stated below:

First question “What makes you feel a part of your school?”

1. School I

A total of 44 pupils, which consisted of two 6th class merged together, gave written answers on small coloured papers to the first question. Examples of written answers given included: ‘*Uniform*’, ‘*sports*’, ‘*friends*’, ‘*going to school tours*’, ‘*teachers*’, ‘*going to school in the morning*’.

2. School II

A total of 24 pupils in the 6th class gave written answers to the first question. Some of the examples of pupils’ written answers were ‘*playing with friends*’, ‘*doing PE*’, ‘*being together and having fun*’, ‘*playing games*’, ‘*having a uniform*’, ‘*the teachers are nice*’.

3. School III

A total of 29 pupils in the 5th class gave responses on small coloured papers to the first question. Examples of written answers from pupils include *'wearing the uniform'*, *'break time'*, *'going on a tour'*, *'my friends'*, *'soccer at break'*, *'teachers help with hard work'*.

Having school uniform, having friends, playing sports, teachers, school, school work/education, school tours were the most common written answers given across the three schools. However, a couple of responses from school II on uniform varied from most other answers – *'I like how we don't have a uniform'*; *'no uniform'*. In addition, there were few responses from school III that were different from others - on bullying – *'Bullying is futile in this school'*; *'no bullying'*; on recycling - *'We have done a lot of recycling for the green flag'*; and on talent - *'I feel like I am part of the school when everyone appreciates my talents'*.

Second question "If it was your job to make sure everybody in your school felt a part of the school, what would you do?"

1. School I

A total of 44 pupils, which consisted of two 6th class merged together gave written answers to the second question. Examples of written answers given included: *'Have special events where everyone in the school takes part'*, *'Sports for everyone'*, *'Have everyone do a social activity such as drama, soccer etc.'*, *'More things everyone enjoys'*, *'Having friends'*, *'Playing together'*, *'No uniform'*, *'No homework'*.

2. School II

A total of 24 pupils in the 6th class gave written answers to the second question; 146 written responses were given by this group. Some of the examples of the pupils' answers were *'be very nice'*, *'make everyone feel special'*, *'treating everybody equally'*, *'No favourism'*, *'No*

homework, *'treat everyone equally'*, *'a school tour to Paris for the whole school'*, *'let them play sports for the school in competitions'*, *'by entering dramas and things like that together'*, *'do more sports!!'*.

3. School III

A total of 29 pupils in the 5th class gave responses on small coloured papers to the first question. Examples of written answers from pupils include, *'I would let all sports be played at break time'*, *'organise a big sport game'*, *'no homework'*, *'more time for PE'*, *'let everyone wear whatever they want'*, *'make sure that there is no groups in a class and that everybody can be friends; boys and girls mixed together'*, *'I would let the children do what they want for an hour every week'*, *'get everyone involved in sport'*, *'school tours'*.

Treating everyone equally, inclusion of everyone in school activities (e.g., sports, school tours, and drama), encouraging friendships, let everyone wear what they want, and no homework were examples of the more common written answers given across the three schools. However, a varied answer was written by a pupil in school C *'Have a homework club after school'*. Also, there were a couple of responses across the three schools that were different from most other written answers.

School I – *'Refurbish the PE hall'*; *'Stop bullies'*

School II – *'Don't be angry'*; *'Obedience'*

School III – *'Have a school cafeteria'*; *'No more bullying'*; *'Make sure they help the environment'*; *'Help out in recycling'*; *'I would put up a picture of everyone and write a little bit about them, then stick it on the wall where we can see it'*

Phase 2

For this phase, pupils were divided into sub-groups in each participating class. Two sub-groups from each of the three schools worked separately on the responses generated for the first question, and two sub-groups from each of schools I, II and III worked on the responses generated for the second question (see Table 2). The responses were divided between the groups so that each group had an equal pile.

For the first question, 10 categories emerged from the 98 responses in school I, 17 categories from the 88 responses in school II, and 15 categories from the 91 responses in school III (see Table 1).

For the second question, 14 categories emerged from the 85 responses in school I, 27 categories from the 146 responses in school II, and 17 categories from the 123 responses in school III.

There were both similar and diverse categories developed across the three schools. Some of the categories that emerged for the two questions from each school are presented below:

First question “What makes you feel a part of your school?”

1. School I

Some examples from the 5th class group comprising of 24 pupils, divided into two sub-groups included ‘*sports*’, ‘*work*’, ‘*go on trips to represent the school*’, ‘*friends*’, ‘*uniform*’, ‘*learning new things every day*’, ‘*I feel part of the school because the teachers, pupils and the Principal are nice to me*’.

2. School II

The 5th class comprising of 29 pupils were divided into two sub-groups; examples of category titles developed were ‘*playing with my friends*’, ‘*school*’, ‘*the work/doing subjects in class*’, ‘*acceptance*’, ‘*sports*’, ‘*uniforms*’, ‘*arts*’, ‘*doing drama*’, and ‘*teachers*’.

3. School III

Some examples of categories that were developed by the two sub-groups comprising of 25 pupils in the 6th class included ‘*school*’, ‘*sports*’, ‘*uniforms*’, ‘*teachers*’, ‘*school work*’, ‘*break*’, ‘*friends*’, ‘*sport teams*’, ‘*recycling*’, ‘*choir*’, ‘*bullying*’.

The most common category titles that emerged from the three schools were ‘*sports*’, ‘*friends*’, ‘*teachers*’, ‘*uniform*’, ‘*learning*’. However, there were a few category titles that varied from others across the three schools. They included;

School I – ‘*Being given responsibility to deliver notes to classes*’

School II – ‘*Acceptance*’, which included responses like ‘*I feel honoured to be here*’; ‘*Everybody is nice-most of the time*’

School III – ‘*Bullying*’ and ‘*Recycling*’

Second question “If it was your job to make sure everybody in your school felt a part of the school, what would you do?”

1. School I

The 5th class group comprising of 24 pupils were divided into two sub-groups; examples of the categories developed included ‘*no homework*’, ‘*sports*’, ‘*safety*’, ‘*nice*’, ‘*games*’, ‘*welcoming people*’, ‘*activities pile*’, ‘*classrooms*’, ‘*free expression*’, ‘*organised*’, ‘*no uniform*’.

2. School II

Some examples from categories developed by two sub-groups comprising of 29 pupils in the 5th class were ‘*give everyone an award for being in the school*’, ‘*make people feel better*’, ‘*do more school activities*’, ‘*more outdoor toys and games*’, ‘*I will go around the school and see*

what makes them feel part of the school, *'class pet'*, *'welcome new people'*, *'hold more sports day'*, *'designs'*, *'help them with their work'*, *'school tours'*.

3. School III

Examples of categories developed by 25 pupils in the 6th class, divided into two sub-groups, included *'sports'*, *'own clothes'*, *'friendship and talking'*, *'school subjects'*, *'activities'*, *'express themselves'*, *'school'*, *'tours'*, *'competitions'*, *'homework'*, *'break'*, *'bullying'*, *'hoodies'*, *'environment'*, *'cafeteria/eating'*.

The common category titles that emerged from at least two of the three schools were *'sports'*, *'welcome people'*, *'school tours'*, *'school activities'*, *'no homework'*. Also, there were a few category titles that varied from others across the three schools; they are stated below.

School I – *'Introducing pile'*, which included responses like *'learn everybody's name'*; *'greet everybody every morning at the front door'*

School II – *'Designs'* and *'Class pet'*

School III – *'Bullying'* and *'Hoodies'*

Phase 3

At this final stage of analysis, pupils were invited to present the data using schematic representations, based on the category titles developed during the second phase. Pupils were divided into sub-groups in each participating class. A total of 12 sub-groups across the three schools participated in this phase of the process (see Table 1).

In school I, the 5th class group took part in the third phase; one sub-group worked on the categories from the first question, and two other sub-groups worked on the categories from the second question (see Table 2). In school II, two sub-groups worked on the categories developed for question one while three separate sub-groups worked on question two categories (see Table 2). In school III, two sub-groups worked on categories developed for question one, and two separate sub-groups worked on categories developed for question two.

Table 2. Characteristics of the three-phase PRP process

<i>N</i> = 248	School I	School II	School III
Phase 1	6th class; <i>n</i> = 44 (2 class groups merged) No sub-groups All answered <i>Q1</i> (98 responses) All answered <i>Q2</i> (85 responses) Individual responses gathered together and brought to phase 2 classes	6th class; <i>n</i> = 24 No sub-groups All answered <i>Q1</i> (88 responses) All answered <i>Q2</i> (146 responses) brought to phase 2 classes	5th class; <i>n</i> = 29 No sub-groups All answered <i>Q1</i> (91 responses) All answered <i>Q2</i> (123 responses)
Phase 2	5th class; <i>n</i> = 24 4 sub-groups Subgroup A and B categorised the answers to <i>Q1</i> into 10 categories Subgroups C and D categorised the answers to <i>Q2</i> into 14 categories Categories gathered together and brought to phase 3 classes	5th class; <i>n</i> = 29 4 sub-groups Subgroup A and B categorised the answers to <i>Q1</i> into 17 categories Subgroups C and D categorised the answers to <i>Q2</i> into 27 categories	6th class; <i>n</i> = 25 4 sub-groups Subgroup A and B categorised the answers to <i>Q1</i> into 15 categories Subgroups C and D categorised the answers to <i>Q2</i> into 17 categories
Phase 3	5th class; <i>n</i> = 21 3 sub-groups Subgroup A examined and revised the original 10 categories developed from <i>Q1</i> answers and developed 1 schema to represent them; an additional schema was developed from new categories by the group Subgroups B and C examined and revised the original 14 categories developed from <i>Q2</i> answers and developed 2 schema to represent them	4th class; <i>n</i> = 28 5 sub-groups Subgroup A and B examined and revised the original 17 categories developed from <i>Q1</i> answers and developed 2 schema to represent them Subgroups C, D and E examined and revised the original 27 categories developed from <i>Q2</i> answers and developed 3 schema to represent them	4th and 5th class; <i>n</i> = 24 4 sub-groups Subgroup A and B examined and revised the original 15 categories developed from <i>Q1</i> answers and developed 2 schema to represent them Subgroups C and D examined and revised the original 17 categories developed from <i>Q2</i> answers and developed 2 schema to represent them

Five of the twelve sub-groups made up new categories for their schema. Thirteen (31%) of the original 42 categories developed for the first question were removed at the third stage of schema presentation; 9 new categories were added (now making 38 categories). In addition, 17 (29.3%) of the original 58 categories for question two were removed, and 29 new categories were added (now making 70 categories).

The outline of the schematic presentations developed by each sub-group was different from each other. Some of the sub-groups organised their presentations in order of importance; some structured their presentations to show order of importance, while others were without any particular design.

First question “What makes you feel a part of your school?”

One sub-group in the first school (5th class), two sub-groups in the second school (4th class) and two sub-groups in the third school (merged group of 4th and 5th class) worked on question one, each producing two schema each, making a total of 6 schema for the first question. The outline and content of the schema developed varied; two of the five sub-groups organised their schema into most important and least important, while some made drawings on their schema.

1. School I

Two schemas were developed by the sub-group from school I; one schema from the categories developed at the second phase, and an additional schema was produced by same sub-group from new category titles (concentrating, cooperation, team work, my uniform makes me feel like I’m in school, making friends and playing sports). The first schema was

grouped into most important and least important, and the second (additional) had no hierarchical order.

2. School II

Two schemas were developed by the two sub-groups from school II. The first schema had no particular design while the second schema was organised into most important and least important.

3. School III

Two schemas were developed by the two sub-groups from school III. The first schema was grouped into three groups representing friends, PE and arts; the second was not grouped into any particular layout.

The results highlight differences and similarities across all five sub-groups in the three schools. Three main categories emerged of what make pupils feel a part of their school across the five sub-groups: friends, sports, and teachers. Other more common categories that emerged across at least two of the sub-groups include wearing uniform, school/going to school every day/every morning, classroom/learning and school tours. Other less common categories represented in the six schemas across the three schools include: break time/being on the yard, responsibility, school activities (swimming, drama, music, choir, songs and arts), having fun, recycling, reading together and bullying is bad.

Three of the six schema developed in response to the first question are presented in Figures 1, 2 and 3. The schema from schools I (Figure 1) and II (Figure 2) were organised into most important and least important, while that from school III (Figure 3) had no distinct layout or

hierarchical order. In the schema of school I, teachers were placed in between the most important and least important categories, indicating that the pupils perceived teachers as neither most nor least important.

Figure 1. Schema of school 1(Q1)

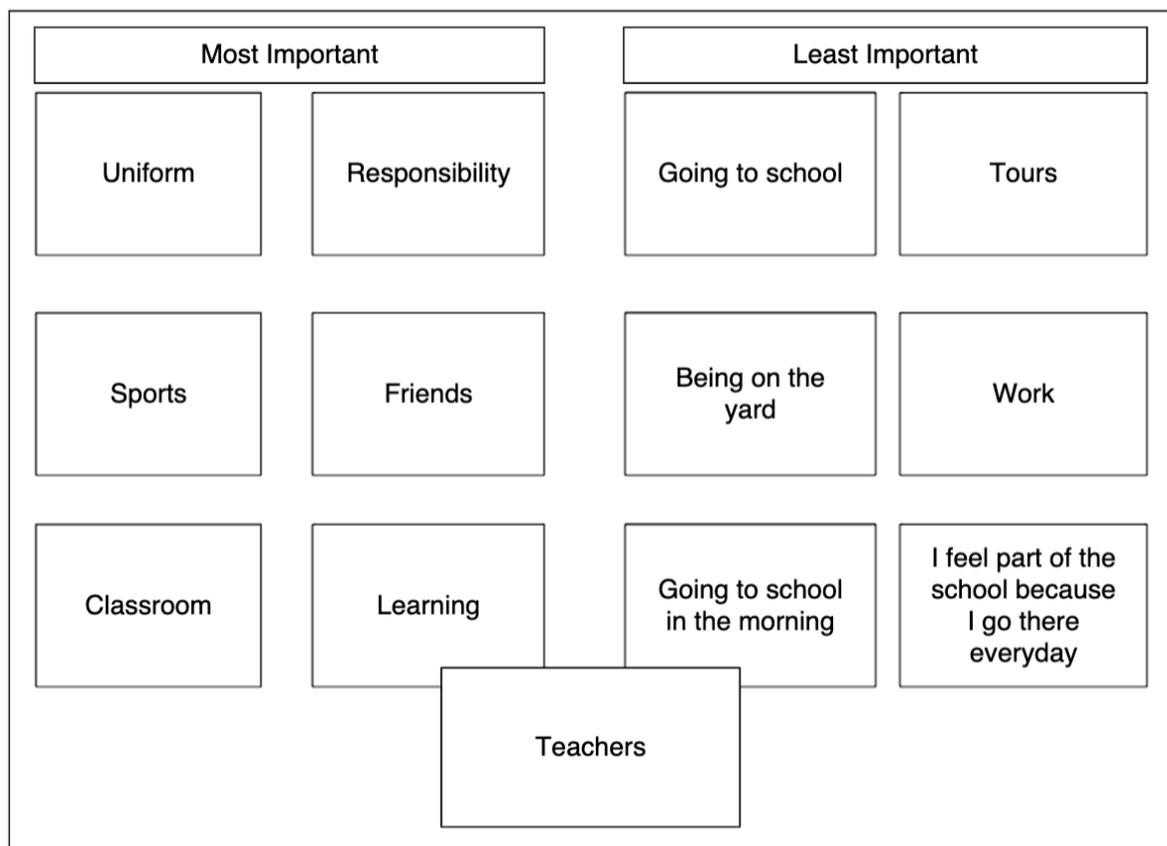


Figure 2. Schema of school 2 (Q1)

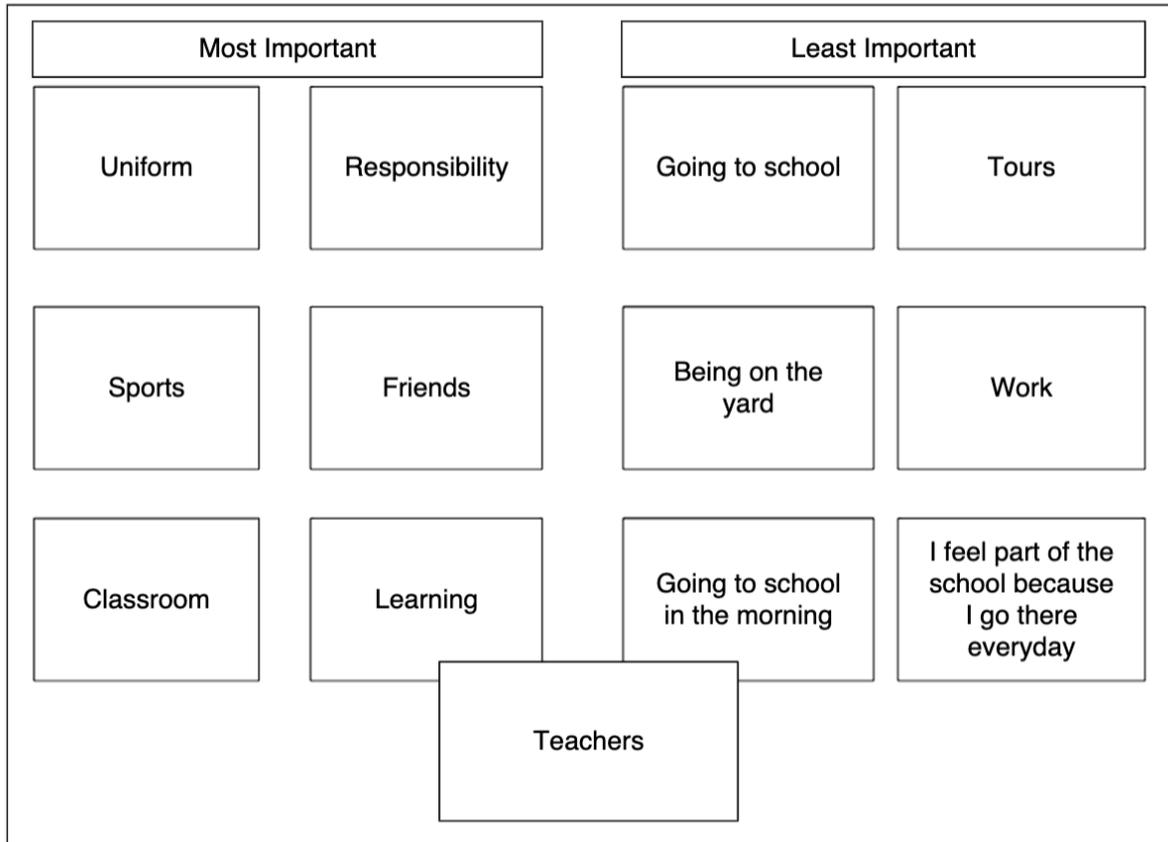
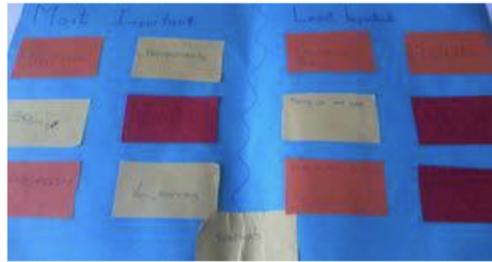


Figure 3. Schema of school 3 (Q1)



According to pupils, participation in sports makes them feel a part of school because they got to play and have fun. Examples of responses include;

‘We have lots of fun with all the activities in the PE and it is very fun’ (School III)

‘We do a lot of activities on sports day and we all love it and get along’ (School III)

'I feel a part of the school because I represent the soccer team' (School II)

The data also revealed that pupils considered having friends as an indication of what makes them feel a part of school, as identified in some of their responses.

'The thing that makes me comfortable in class are my friends around me, supporting me'

(School III)

'Being nice and never leave anybody out of fun and games' (School III)

'You need to be kind and caring to make friends' (School II)

One of the most common categories was 'Teachers'. A response from a pupil about teachers was:

'Teachers make me feel comfortable' (School III).

In addition, among the more common categories that emerged in the schema was wearing uniforms. Pupils' answers indicated that:

'Uniforms make me feel like I'm in school' (School I)

'I think uniforms are good because you know your students' (School II)

'Wearing the uniform shows that we are all part of one group/school' (School II)

On the contrary however, one of the category titles read:

'We don't have to wear a uniform' (School III)

Among the less common categories were arts. Pupils indicated that:

'You get to relax at art time' (School III)

'I love art; it makes me laugh when I get paint all over me' (School III)

Second question "If it was your job to make sure everybody in your school felt a part of the school, what would you do?"

At the third phase, seven sub-groups (School I = 2 sub-groups; School II = 3 sub-groups; School III = 2 sub-groups) across the three schools produced seven different schema; four of the seven sub-groups rephrased their category titles to develop their schema. Three of the seven sub-groups wrote on the large sheets of coloured paper, two numbered their schema to show order of importance while others were structured in no distinctive outline. The schematic presentations that were more clearly laid out were from the first (I) and second (II) schools.

1. School I

Two schema were developed by the two sub-groups from school I. One of the schema was numbered in order of importance. The second schema was structured like the sun, but in no hierarchical order.

2. School II

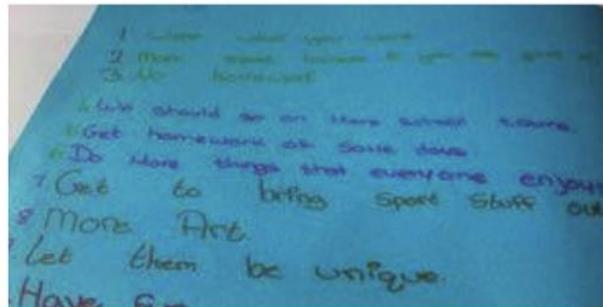
Three schema were developed by the three sub-groups from school II. The first schema was grouped into most important and least important; the second and third schemas had no particular layout.

3. School III

Two schema were developed by the two sub-groups from school III. The two schemas had no particular design.

Three of the schema developed for question two are presented in Figures 4, 5 and 6. Pupils from school I numbered their categories in order of importance (Figure 4), those from school II grouped their schema into most important and least important and each category title was numbered (Figure 5), while the schema from school III did not have a hierarchical order (Figure 6).

Figure 4. Schema of school 1 (Q2)



1. Wear what you want
2. More sport because if you are good at sport and not good at school work, then you will feel more welcome
3. No homework
4. We should go on more school tours
5. Get homework off some days
6. Do more things that everyone enjoys
7. Get to bring sport stuff out on yard
8. More art
9. Let them be unique
10. Have fun

Figure 5. Schema of school 2 (Q2)

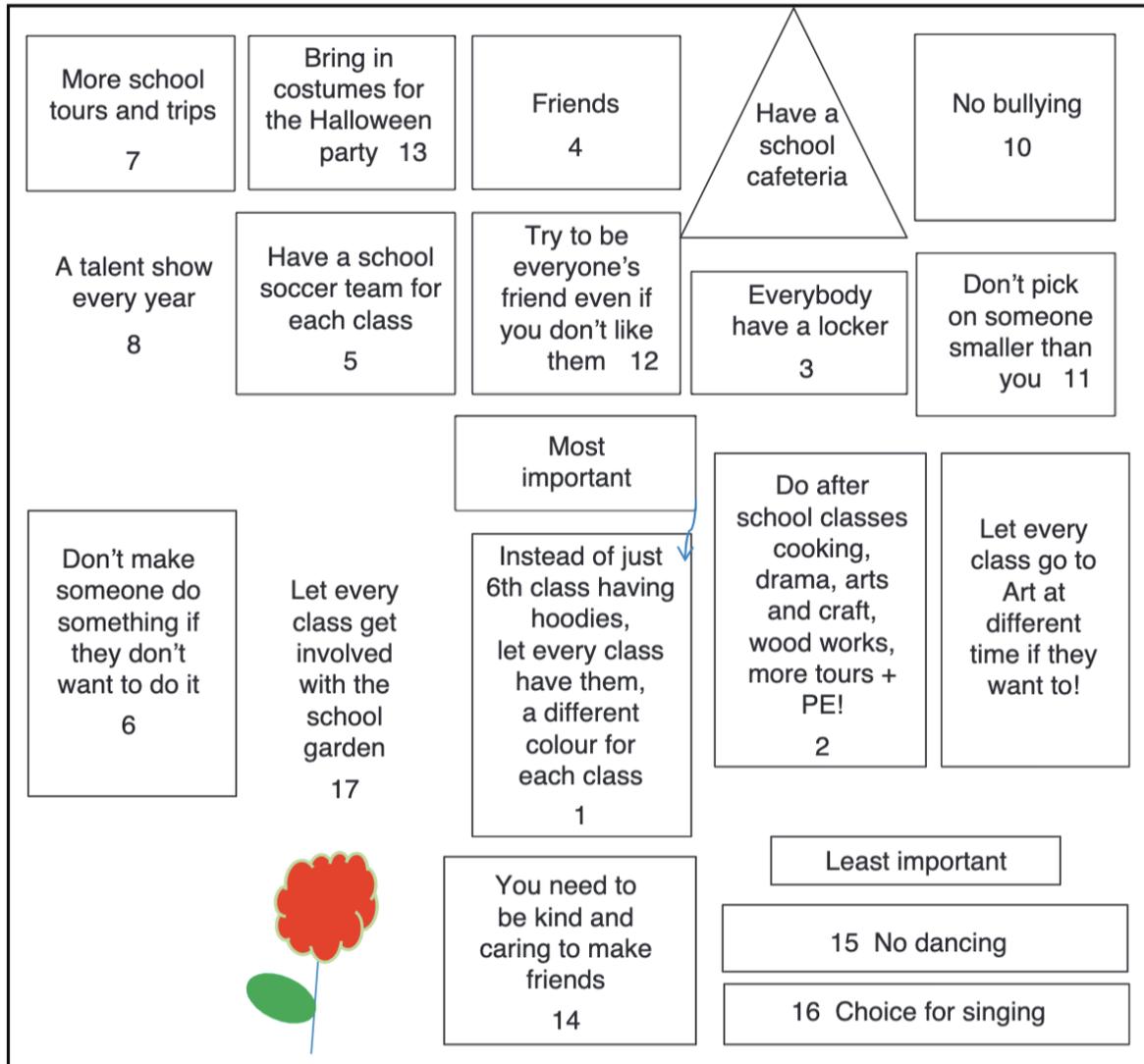
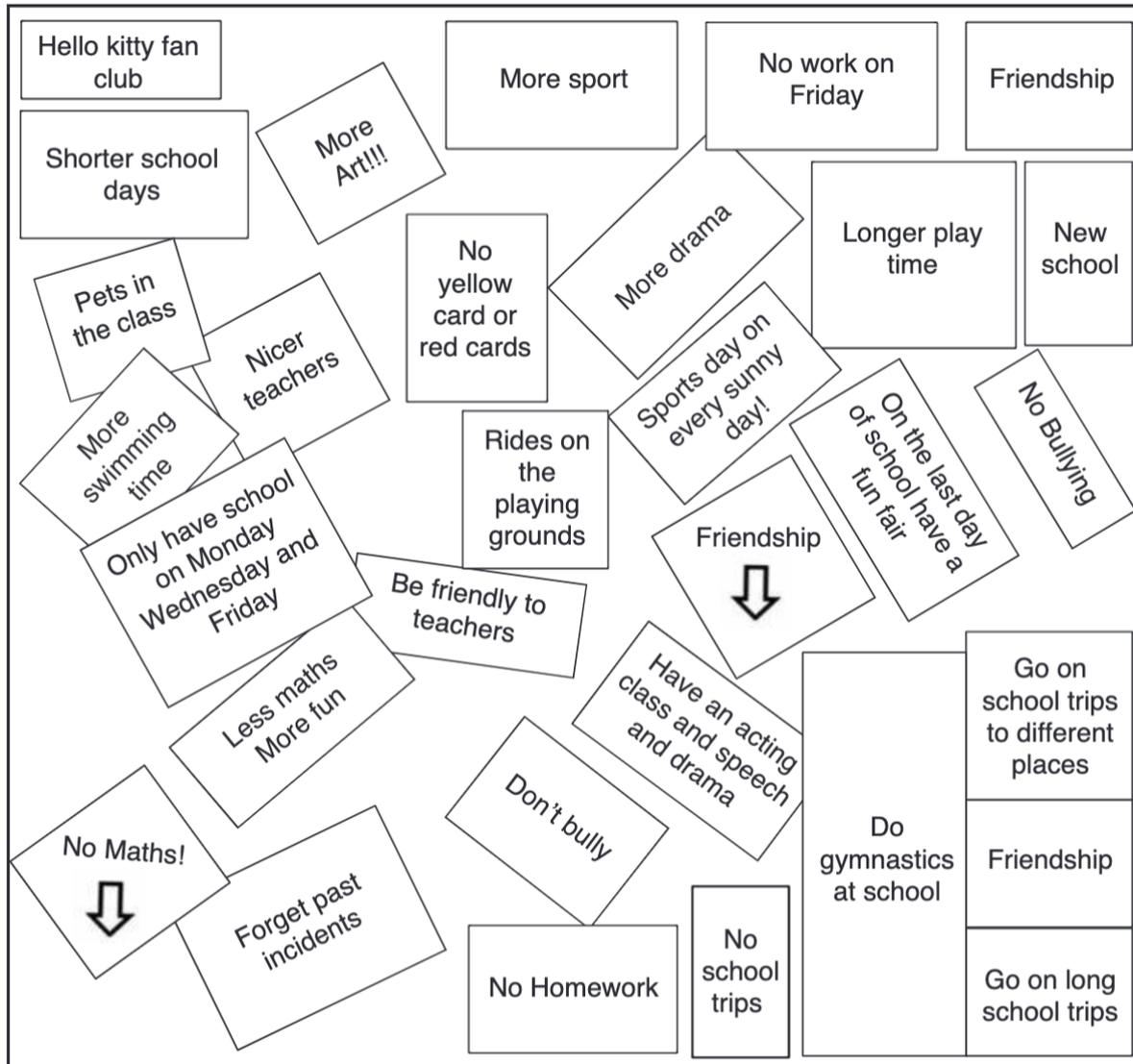


Figure 6. Schema of school 3 (Q2)



Taking part in school activities like sports, school tours/trips, drama, arts, school clubs and after school activities were among the most frequent categories that emerged from the pupils' schema in all the seven sub-groups.

Taking part in sports was the most common school activity that appeared in the schema.

Examples include;

‘More sport because if you are good at sport and not good at school work, then you will feel more welcome’ (School I)

‘Would let the children on yard play sport’ (School I)

‘Sports for everyone’ (School I)

‘More sport for younger classes; I think it would make me feel more involved’ (School III)

‘Sports day on every sunny day’ (School III)

Other common school activities that emerged from the schema include social activities like drama, school competitions and after school classes. Pupils’ indicated that organising social activities in school could encourage more people to take part in school life:

‘Have special events where everyone in the school takes part’ (School I)

‘Do after school classes cooking, drama, arts and craft, wood works, more tours + PE’
(School II)

‘Have a free open day once a year with- free candy floss; Soccer tournament; Cake sale; fortune teller’ (School II)

‘By entering dramas and things like that together’ (School II)

Other equally important categories that emerged from the schema were encouraging friendship, ensuring everyone participates and have equal privileges. Pupils were of the opinion that having friends and being friendly could encourage taking part in school, and also create fun. These views were represented in pupils’ responses;

'Introduce new people to friends' (School I)

'Open up more sports/clubs so children can make friends' (School I)

'Try to be everyone's friend even if you don't like them' (School II)

'Make sure that there is no groups in a class and that everybody can be friends; boys and girls mixed together' (School III)

'I would let every child meet up in the morning and talk to each other' (School III)

'I would make sure every nation of children get along together' (School III)

Pupils also considered the inclusion of everyone equally, in school, as having the potential to improve school participation. Examples include:

'Do not leave anybody out' (School I)

'Do more things that everyone enjoys' (School I)

'Let every student wear and have the same thing' (School II)

'Let them play in the same yard; let everyone play' (School II)

'A pitch where everybody could play together at break; I think would make me feel more involved' (School III)

In addition, other common categories that emerged from the schema include equal privileges for everyone. According to pupils, having equal privileged was considered as:

'Treat everyone equally' (School II)

'Instead of just 6th class having hoodies, let every class have them, a different colour for each class' (School II)

'Everyone treated the same' (School III)

Other ideas were more focused on voluntary aspects of school participation; these include:

'Don't make someone do something if they don't want to do it' (School II)

'Let children stay in if they want' (School II).

There were contradictory views on wearing school uniform indicated in some schema. These included:

'Wear what you want' (School I)

'Go in school without uniforms/Let them wear anything they want to wear' (School II)

'I would let each pupil wear their own clothes' (School III)

Time was another aspect, pupils argued that ensuring more time slots for periods like lunch break, play time and school holidays could encourage more pupils to take part in school more.

'More time to play outside' (School II)

'More computer time' (School II)

'Let children have three lunch breaks' (School II)

'Go to the hall more; have longer play time' (School III)

IV. Discussion

In this study, primary school pupils were given an opportunity to describe what participation in school meant to them. Findings from the study were drawn from responses to the two key questions posed. Responses to the first question *'What makes you feel a part of the school?'* authenticated the notion of *"taking part"* in school and elicited understandings of what pupils believed about how feeling a part of school influences taking part in school. The second question *'If it was your job to make sure everybody in your school felt a part of the school,*

what would you do?’ encouraged descriptions of participation from the school children’s perspectives.

These data indicated that feeling part of school was related to wearing a school uniform – as it identified pupils with their school, taking part in school sporting events, and their relationship with friends and teachers. The close connection or association of children with their environment has been argued as constituting a strong determinant of children’s participation in the school (Simovska, 2004). Children’s relationship with their teachers and other adults in their lives and immediate environment has been suggested as being able to influence children’s lives because those people generate crucial points of reference (Simovska, 2004).

The data also illustrated that pupils regarded school activities, including school tours, drama, arts, recycling, reading and singing songs together as important in making them feel a part of school. There is an assumption that children being allowed to participate in activities that are of interest to them, contributes not only to their cognitive development, but also builds up their capacity in learning (Simovska and Jensen, 2009). Of particular interest is the importance of friends and how being involved in school activities was linked to having fun, getting to play and get along with friends. Thus, feeling part of school was described in the context of everyday school life and the interpersonal relationships engaged in the process; this supports the principle of the health promoting school-promoting the health and wellbeing of pupils through a conducive school environment (Barnekow et al., 2006).

Data generated from the second question, which identified school activities, encouraging friendship and ensuring everyone participates – are related to the social environment of school in determining effective pupil participation within school. It has been hypothesised that encouraging children’s participation can help children gain confidence and become

empowered to participate in their schools and community when a conducive atmosphere is created for them to do so (Simovska and Jensen, 2009). To further reinforce the importance of the social environment of schools in encouraging school connectedness, pupils highlighted that feeling part of school should be inclusive of everyone. They indicated that activities should include what everyone enjoys and all should have equal opportunity to take part. Participation of children in school can help to improve cooperation and team work among pupils, facilitating good relationships between the student body, the school staff and school community as a whole (Simovska, 2000). Having fun and playing together were included as important indicators for making sure everyone felt a part of school. It has been suggested that the social interactions within and among the school community has the potential of producing an environment that fosters school development (Pianta, 1999).

Documenting the voice of children on what participation means to them could be a powerful tool in improving the planning of child participation programmes. This study aimed to explore the views of children about what makes them feel a part of their school and how feeling part of their school could be improved. The PRP gave pupils the opportunity to be involved in all phases of the research process with minimal influence from adults (researchers or class teachers). Such a process is supportive of genuine participation of children in the research process. In addition, pupils' competence and capacity for team-work was further developed and they had fun. Research claims that the genuine involvement of young people in participatory processes improves channels of communication and connection between young people, their friends and older people they interact with (Kirby and Bryson, 2002). Furthermore, pupils were given the freedom to express their views of what feeling part of the school meant to them. Children feel happy and involved when their opinions are counted as worthy and expressed in an interactive and liberal environment (Simovska and Jensen, 2009).

This study identified that pupils placed more emphasis on interpersonal relationships and belonging as important aspects of taking part in school life than on involvement in decision-making. In response to questions about feeling a part of school, pupils volunteered answers relevant to both taking part and feeling part of school. This suggests a relationship between these two dimensions of participation from pupils' perspectives. An outstanding question remains in relation to the role of '*belonging*' in defining the concept of 'child participation'. Looking at the aim of the HPS in promoting the health and wellbeing of the whole school, with pupil participation as one of the key values of the HPS approach, the issue of belonging in the school appears vital in defining what makes pupil participation real.

Within the literature, the concept of child participation has been given many different definitions, with the definition of pupil participation described within the context of the decision making processes in school (e.g., Simovska, 2007, Mager and Nowak, 2010, Griebler and Nowak, 2012) and how these could affect the health and wellbeing of school pupils (de Roiste et al., 2012). Data from this study has revealed the importance of belonging within the school setting and provides encouragement for increasing pupil participation. Future research is required to determine whether having a sense of belonging in school renders pupil participation more practicable or achievable and whether there are sequential steps in building a sense of belonging in schools that could enhance the process of genuine pupil participation?

The data from this study therefore suggests a theoretical debate in relation to the concept of child participation and whether the issue of belonging in school is the first step necessary in describing the decision-making aspect of child participation. Do pupils want to be involved in decision-making processes if they do not feel a sense of belonging or connection to their school? In advancing the decision-making processes in the school, could the subject of

belonging be considered as the first step in achieving these? Further research is necessary to answer these questions.

The Participatory Research Process (PRP) has been shown to be a useful tool in identifying children's perspectives on participation. The findings of this study have demonstrated an important dimension of participation-the children's view. These results are important contributions to research on child participation; they are significant and have the ability to translate the concept of participation within the HPS into practice. It is becoming necessary for children to be allowed to voice their opinion as partners in the whole school development; in so doing facilitate children in their development into constructive, creative and resourceful participants in their society or immediate environment (Chawla, 2001).

V. Limitations

Data from this study were collected across three primary schools among pupils in 4th, 5th and 6th classes. Having a more heterogeneous group for all age or class groups during the three phases of the PRP might have facilitated more descriptions of participation in school, a broader reflection and comparison of pupils' perspectives of feeling a part/taking part in their school. Carrying out the research process in a controlled environment within a school classroom, considering the small space could have affected the process. This limitation was reduced by dividing the pupils into sub-groups of small numbers so creating group bonding, facilitating more interaction and fun. At the schema development stage, some categories were removed and new category additions were included; thirteen categories were removed and nine new categories added to the first question, and seventeen categories were removed and twenty nine new categories added to the second question. This removal and inclusion of new categories raises questions about how the original data (as categories developed) were

represented at the schema development phase, especially for the second question. Providing sequential groups of children the opportunity to alter the data of earlier groups mirrors an iterative process, and results in the views of later participants being given stronger weighting in the final schema.

VI. The participatory research process (PRP) as a developmental tool to facilitate children's participation in schools

In this study, the participatory research process (PRP) was found to be an effective method used in engaging and identifying pupils' perspectives of taking part in school life. The PRP encouraged an active participation of pupils in all aspects of the research process and they were given the free hand to generate, categorise and analyse the data with limited interference. The procedure of the research process was explained to the pupils at the beginning of each stage and pupils were invited to ask questions if they needed any clarifications. At the end of each stage of the research process, pupils were asked as a form of feedback on their opinion about the process and if they enjoyed it. Across all three schools, pupils responded that they were happy with the process and thought that it was fun. The researchers also observed that the pupils enjoyed each stage of the research process and it encouraged group process.

In order to increase pupils' participation in school and to get their opinion on issues – both through research and for practical purposes, the PRP has the potential benefit of liaising with pupils as essential stakeholders in the school setting and engaging (involving) pupils as research participants in all aspects of the research process, by allowing them to take full possession of the research process; this allows the transfer of power and control of research processes to pupils, which has the potential benefit of empowering pupils as researchers. The

process of research can also be health promoting for pupils. Schools can adapt the PRP as a (guide) tool to facilitate the involvement of pupils to participate more effectively, also relevant for getting the perspectives of pupils on planning and issues that concerns pupils and ensuring decisions made at school level and development of school materials are relevant to pupils' school life and youth friendly.

The PRP includes other group contacts embedded in the different stages of the research process – Introduction of the research process, an icebreaker (e.g. group game), snap card games (used during the categorisation stage); group work to develop a pictorial representation of the data (schema), group game at the end of each stage as time permits – that can contribute to making the PRP an effective tool to engage pupils' in the research process.

The PRP could facilitate a change in health promotion research and practice with school children and young people. Health promotion researchers and practitioners can use/adapt the PRP as a method to engage with young people to explore their concerns and perspectives in relation to their health; this has the potential to inform research, practice and policy in relation to the health, health promoting school and other issues that concern young people.

VII. Conclusion and Implications

This study has shown the value of including children as active participants in research; children as young as 9-13 years have a clear understanding of what participation in their schools means to them. School children's contributions should be given due recognition. Exploring children's views on participation can help to ensure genuine participation of pupils in schools. Additional research is required to assess socio-ecological perspectives of the role of children participation and other HPS relevant outcomes.

Various areas emerged from this study as deserving of future research. In particular, there is a need for greater understanding of the relationships between a sense of belonging and the act of participation. Future research could explore whether belonging is a crucial step in enhancing decision-making processes in school. In the school context, the relationship between bullying and participation is also deserving of more detailed attention. Taking part in school activities was identified from the findings as a part of school life. Future research might focus on the effect, if any, school activities could have on improving levels of pupils' participation in schools.

These areas of research should also have impact on our conceptualisation of participation more generally and specifically within the framework of HPS. The identified link between 'belonging' and 'activity' for children of this age may be a crucial step in realising the potential role of children's participation in school life. Thus this may strengthen our understanding of the processes required for strengthening the capacity of school to enhance and promote health. Irrespective of setting, this study demonstrates the potential value of including the views and perspectives of the specific actors on their own roles and contribution; to this end the respective view of other education stakeholders, such as teachers and parents, are also important.

The definitions of participation from the perspectives of children should be given due consideration in HPS practice. Indeed the application of the PRP in practice settings could well compliment other needs assessment techniques and facilitate greater understanding of required initiatives and actions. In addition, the perspectives of children on school

participation could be used for developing indicators and as a tool for measuring children's participation in school life.

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