On Barriers to Accessing Children's Voices in School-Based Research

Jacqueline P. Leighton, PhD
Professor, Educational Psychology
University of Alberta

Abstract

The objective of the present paper is to highlight an important tension that exists in conducting research on matters of child development and learning in classrooms and schools. The tension unfortunately could be translating into a relative absence of studies about children's wellbeing in academic environments. Based on years of experience conducting formal studies about children's academic achievement and wellbeing in school, I hypothesize the reasons for the difficulty in accessing children's voices about their relationships with teachers and their experiences in academic learning environments. The reasons are complex but necessary to consider as researchers navigate the best ways to gather reliable and valid data from students in schools. The paper concludes with implications of not being able to access children's voices and the need for researchers to become advocates in pursuit of this vital source of data.

Keywords: Children's Academic Wellbeing; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Student Assessment; Student-Teacher Relationships; Student Advocacy

Introduction

In the research conducted since the inception of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC; UN, 1989), relatively little theoretically driven *psychological work* has been devoted to exploring the issue of children's rights in classrooms and/or framing children's learning issues against a backdrop of children's rights in the classroom (Urinboyev, Wickenberg, & Leo, 2016). Notable exceptions include Covell & Howe (2001; also, Covell, Howe, & Blokhuis, 2018); Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi (2014); and Fee Ziemer & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger (2019), but in general there is little research from these perspectives.

Children's rights in classrooms and schools can be defined as the intersection of the principles of the CRC with the activities that take place for children in these environments. Although not an exhaustive list, classroom and school activities for children include such events as (1) asking the teacher questions and interacting with the teacher about academic matters, (2) contributing to classroom discussions and group projects, and (3) participating in sports, health, social, and academic school-wide events. These types of classroom and school activities can be crossed with the four key principles of the CRC, namely, (1) nondiscrimination, (2) adherence to the best interests of the child, (3) assurance of children's healthy development and survival, and (4) respect for the views of the child. Thus, psychological work exploring children's rights in classrooms and schools can be defined by asking questions about children's activities in classrooms and schools through the prism of these four principles, for example:

- Are student–teacher interactions in the classroom nondiscriminatory?
- Are student–teacher interactions in the classroom conducted in the best interest of the child?
- Are student–teacher interactions in the classroom adhering to what is known about children's healthy development (and survival)?
- Are student–teacher interactions in the classroom respectful of children's views?

Although there are many child development studies that focus on highly relevant issues related to children's well-being in school settings (e.g., bullying, mental health, inclusion; e.g., Bradshaw, 2015; Geary, Hoard, Nugent, & Bailey, 2015; Mychailyszyn, Beidas, Benjamin, Edmunds, Podell, Cohen, & Kendall, 2011), most of this work is neither directly motivated by a focus on children's rights nor is it clearly translated in ways that apply to enhancing children's rights in the classroom. For example, researchers studying bullying in elementary schools should

not just publish findings in journals with the hope that government or school officials will read and implement their recommendations. Rather, researchers should secure commitment on the part of participating school administrators to jointly generate implementation plans based on a study's results. In other words, research that involves children should be actionable in serving children's rights. Otherwise, it is unclear how psychological research designed to understand children's issues helps those children as key stakeholders. Psychologists are in a special position not only to conduct child-rights research but to also ensure that children benefit from the research.

In their thorough review of the literature, Urinboyev et al. (2016) underscored the scarcity of research on children's rights in the classroom and school. Indeed, their review was instrumental in motivating the writing of the present paper as Urinboyev et al. highlight a gap in the research literature that is especially important for mobilizing psychological researchers:

Although the CRC enjoys such global recognition along with an almost global consensus on what constitutes children's rights, there are numerous challenges that exist in implementing its principles at the ground level, namely in the schools. This school level challenge is highlighted as a particularly pressing issue in academic and policy circles, since children spend a significant portion of their time in school. (p. 523)

Although scholars such as Landown et al. (2016) have emphasized the need for psychologists to be at the heart of this work, there continues to be little theoretically driven and empirical work on how children's rights are enacted and supported in schools directly.

Not all child development studies need to *explicitly* address children's rights to be useful to those individuals wishing to advance children's rights. However, it is my position that psychological researchers who claim to conduct developmental or learning research in the interest of children should be more aware of how their data and conclusions *implicitly* affect children's interests and well-being – which by definition should include children's rights. For example, researchers who study standardized achievement testing and claim that testing advances the interests of children's learning should be required to outline the evidentiary arguments for this claim for all groups of children who are required to take such tests.

Psychologists are uniquely positioned to conduct child-rights research since not only are they expected to uphold research ethics but they must also abide by the broader ethical standards of those involved in a *helping profession*. According to the Canadian Psychological Association

(CPA, 2014), psychologists are expected to abide by the following ethical principles at all times when working with individuals: general respect, general rights, nondiscrimination, fair treatment and due process, informed consent, freedom to consent, protection for vulnerable individuals and groups, privacy, confidentiality, and extended responsibility for work done under one's watch. Thus, to suggest that it is not realistic to expect psychological researchers working with children to be advocates for children's rights is incorrect if the CPA's ethical standards are to be interpreted as written.

Purpose of Present Paper

The purpose of this paper is *not* to review the literature or share results of an empirical study on how children's rights are supported or not in schools. Instead, the purpose is to take a step back and based on my experience hypothesize the reasons for the relative absence of such theoretically driven empirical research in classrooms and schools. The motivation for this work stems from the following premises: The first premise is that developmental, school and clinical psychologists are naturally interested in studying children in a variety of domains. The school is one of the two most important domains in a child's life; the other being the home environment. The second premise is that some of the most important questions about children's activities in school are not being studied – such as implementation of their rights in classrooms and in relationship with teachers.

An obvious starting point in the study of children's rights in the classroom and with teachers is the school. Approaching the school permits the collection of evidence that could not be obtained simply by approaching families; for example, the school provides access to (a) observing children in the classroom, (b) observing children with their peers and teachers, and (c) collecting data on groups of children who share similar instructional environments. However, conducting research in schools is largely controlled by school administrators and teachers. This control can create problems for researchers asking certain questions. As Urinboyev et al. (2016, p. 536) state “some studies [have] found that there is a strong resistance among teachers to accept fully children as rights holders in many schools.” Consequently, it is perhaps not unsurprising to find significant challenges for researchers in accessing children's voices about matters that pertain to them in school settings.

Thus, this paper is designed to provide a short analysis of the types of barriers that may cause school personnel to resist participating in psychological research related to children's

rights in school settings. In particular, the paper focuses on my experiences in attempting to solicit children's voices about their relationships with teachers for understanding the learning climate in classrooms. Toward this goal, I share two real-life illustrative examples. The paper then presents the implications of not having access to children's voices for gathering high quality data on key aspects of children's activities in schools. Finally, a two-pronged approach for how psychological researchers might begin to advocate for access to children's voices is presented.

The Quagmire of Soliciting Children's Voices in School Settings

Over the last 20 years, I have conducted research into children's learning and assessment. Although some early studies were conducted in children's homes, most have been conducted in schools. During that time, firsthand experience revealed time and again a quiet but clear institutional resistance to one of the main articles in the CRC, namely, Article 12. As elaborated by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009), Article 12 pertains to children having a voice, having their views heard, and having those views afforded proper weight given the child's age and maturity.

In education, children's views *should* matter greatly since the learning and assessment experiences they are subjected to by schools are supposedly carried out in their interest. Yet, children rarely have an explicit voice in such matters. Covell and Howe (2001) indicate that school administrators might be supportive of some platforms for student voice such as student councils but rarely do these councils have a formal or functional voice in school decisions. Moreover, school administrators and teachers can exercise an implicit resistance to having children share their experiences with researchers despite the affirmative consent of parents and children. For example, a teacher can make it challenging to access children by asserting every time a researcher shows up to talk with a child that the lessons of the day are too important for the child to be removed. Likewise, implicit resistance can be inferred from lukewarm endorsement of the study when communicating with parents.

Repeatedly observing these situations begs the question of why this might be taking place. Relatedly, these observations force consideration of the ramifications for research designed to enhance children's experiences and rights in educational settings. For example, one of the most fundamental relationships for children's success in school settings is the relationship they share with their teachers (Pianta, 2016). Although relationships are interactive systems, depending on the pedagogical and socioemotional practices of teachers with children, one thing

is certain – children have very different learning experiences depending on the teachers with which they interact (Longobardi, Prino, Marengo & Settanni, 2016; Pianta, 2016).

Student–Teacher Relationships

By the time children enter Grade 1, many of them are spending almost 50 per cent of their waking hours in school. This is where they develop many of their friendships, learn institutional rules and regulations, and cultivate frames of mind not only for how much they like or dislike learning but also who they are becoming as individuals. What happens to them in school has significant socioemotional and academic effects. It is precisely because children spend many hours in school that the relationship they have with their teachers has become a significant area of thought, analysis, and calls for additional research (Pianta, 2016).

The relationships students share with their teachers are consequential because teachers are sources of critical information such as feedback for learning (Leighton, 2019a). Teachers can also provide affective protection by helping a child integrate into the classroom culture and navigate peer bullying. Teachers are in privileged positions to assist children as they can observe a child day in and day out and see changes in behaviour that require follow-up such as when child abuse is suspected (Longobardi et al., 2016). It is no wonder then, that teachers bear the burden of serving as secondary attachment figures in the lives of children (Leighton, 2019b). What teachers say and do matters greatly not only for helping children learn but also for helping children feel at ease in the classroom and develop healthily into their full potential.

In the last three decades, psychologists and educational researchers have begun to systematically study the social and emotional climate of classroom environments (Dweck, 2002; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Hughes, Cavell, & Jackson, 1999; Poropat, 2009; Leighton, Chu, & Seitz, 2013; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). A critical source of information in these studies is having access to children's voices and being able to solicit their perceptions about what is going on in the classroom and in the school. In addition to having access to children and their voices, it is imperative that children feel at ease sharing their thoughts confidentially to ensure accuracy of the data collected from them. However, there is reason to be attentive to how this research is facilitated and received by school professionals such as teachers and principals. Access to children's assenting voices follows a sequence of permissions, not the least of which is parental consent. Teachers and principals serve an important role as gatekeepers for either facilitating or resisting research with the children they

oversee. For scholars who work directly with teaching professionals and are responsible for coordinating permissions to work with children, *lived experiences* suggest the existence of implicit barriers to accessing children's voices. These barriers may be especially resistant when what is being sought and measured are children's perspectives on the student–teacher relationship. Two real-life illustrative examples are interwoven into the following sections to show the resistance researchers can encounter when accessing children's voices for the purpose of studying student–teacher interactions.

Seeking and Measuring Student Voices: Illustrative Cases 1 and 2

In research I have conducted, school administrators and teachers have expressed concern about having children answer questions about the teacher. For example, in the process of recruitment for one study, concerns were raised about survey questions that asked students to indicate how they *felt* about teachers' instruction in the class, communication of feedback, and participating in classroom activities. These survey questions probed students to provide their perceptions of the comfort or satisfaction they felt with the affective and pedagogical direction provided by the teacher in the classroom. The survey scale being used in this case and to which administrators and teachers objected was the well-established Forsyth, Adam, and Hoy's (2011) "Student Trust in Faculty" (also labeled "Student Trust in Teachers") scale. The research I was undertaking was designed for elementary and secondary students. Items such as *teachers at this school do a terrific job*, *teachers at this school are good at teaching*, *students at this school can believe what teachers tell them* from well-established surveys invited elementary and secondary school children to share their perceptions of what they thought and felt about their teachers.

From a teacher's perspective, however, a child's observations of teachers can appear as an *evaluation* of the teacher, including ability. Although the items in the "Student Trust in Faculty" scale do not explicitly probe children to comment on teacher ability, the items do probe students' perceptions of a teacher's trustworthy *interaction* with them. In this specific case in my research, one group of school administrators and teachers withdrew from participation in the study despite my willingness to modify the wording of items. The impediment school officials claimed was asking students questions that breached teachers' professional standards.

The Center for Evaluation and Education Policy Analysis (2015) at Penn State University also publishes surveys designed to have elementary school students provide ratings of their teacher on several dimensions such as Welcoming and Safe Climate (e.g., *My teacher cares*

about me, my teacher treats students fairly) and Responsive Teaching and Learning (e.g., *My teacher gives good directions on how to do classwork* (see <https://sites.psu.edu/ceepa/2015/12/08/school-level-student-and-teacher-surveys/>). Again, the items pertain specifically to a teacher's ability to connect with students not just on socioemotional affective matters but also on pedagogical (instructive) matters. One of the broadest research initiatives that has solicited student views on teaching is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) Project. In response to the question of why students *should be* asked directly about teachers and teaching, the MET response is unequivocal:

No one has a bigger stake in teaching effectiveness than students. Nor are there any better experts on how teaching is experienced by its intended beneficiaries. But only recently have many policymakers and practitioners come to recognize that – when asked the right questions, in the right ways – students can be an important source of information on the quality of teaching and the learning environment. (MET Policy and Practice Brief, 2012, p. 2)

In the MET project, children as young as five years old are found to be able to respond reliably to items about teachers when items involve simplified but clear and direct language. Parenthetically, this is one reason why modifying survey items from established questionnaires is often not recommended. In the process of “softening” the wording of items, the language can become confusing to children and the intended object of measurement undermined. Moreover, the MET project has found that students are able to rate and distinguish teachers on socioemotional dimensions as well as teaching practices that are effective from less effective. For example, there are discernable differences among classrooms at the 25th and 75th percentiles in how students respond to items such as *My teacher knows when the class understands* or *I like the way we learn in this class* or *my teacher wants us to share our thoughts* (MET Policy and Practice Brief, 2012, p. 6). However, as well designed and intentioned as these items might be from a researcher's perspective, the items can be viewed as *evaluations of practice* by teachers.

First Barrier: Perceiving Student Voices as Evaluative

Evaluation of teachers is a highly contentious issue. For example, in Canada, each province oversees its own educational curriculum, teaching and assessment procedures. In the case of providing evaluations of teachers, this is also subject to provincial discretion. Normally, the school principal provides an evaluation of the teacher and this takes place by scheduling classroom observations of the teacher. Principals might collect additional data about teacher practice, but these data would rarely include surveying classroom students directly about teacher practice. In fact, teacher associations, unions, and the professional bodies that represent the teaching profession are explicit in the rights and responsibilities of teachers in the full scope of their activities. For example, the Alberta Teachers Association's (ATA) Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities (2018) for Teachers indicates 10 areas of rights and responsibilities, including number 7 that pertains directly to teacher's rights and responsibility in light of teacher evaluation:

Teachers have the right to fair and reasonable evaluation of professional performance and have the responsibility to give sincere consideration to any suggestion for improvement.

In the province of Alberta, the policy to conduct teacher evaluation is mandated by Alberta Education, the government ministry responsible for all education matters in the province.

According to the Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy (2015), Clause 10(1):

[T]he evaluation of a teacher by a principal may be conducted (a) upon the written request of the teacher, (b) for the purposes of gathering information related to a specific employment decision, (c) for purposes of assessing the growth of the teacher in specific areas of practice, and (d) when on the basis of information received through supervision, the principal has reason to believe that the teaching of a teacher may not meet the teaching quality standard.

The formal evaluation of a teacher is therefore a matter between the principal and the teacher. Students are not queried for their experiences.

Despite this policy on teacher evaluation, there are many ways in which teachers might feel covertly and unfairly evaluated. For example, in Canada and in the US, student performance on standardized large-scale assessments is often linked to judgements about teacher quality and performance. The outrage among many teacher organizations about linking student performance to teacher quality stems from the fact that poor student performance can be explained, in part, by

other variables such as poverty and family circumstances. Notwithstanding the existence of other, familial variables in accounting for student academic performance, research consistently shows that high-quality, effective teaching can *mitigate* the impacts of poverty on student learning (Willms, 2006). In other words, teaching quality matters and so does the relationship teachers have with students in influencing student academic performance. Indeed, in the Canadian context, Willms (2006) has shown that even after socioeconomic student characteristics are considered, there is significant variation in schools as to how well teachers teach and prepare children to learn.

Thus, from a researcher's, or even parental perspective, survey questions that might appear to be straightforward about how well students relate, trust, and learn from teachers might be perceived differently by teachers and school administrators. For example, in teachers' minds, student data about the perceptions they have of teachers could be weaponized. Teachers might fear negative results being shared with parents or even being reported non-anonymously in academic journals and conferences. Of course, such an event would not occur given that research ethics requires clearly outlining in consent forms confidentiality of participation and how data will be reported. However, at least in my experience, most teachers and even principals do not fully understand the strict ethical protocols that scholars are obliged to follow in conducting research studies. The fear of how student data could be used (or weaponized) prevails and can be understood by considering teachers' experiences of how students' large-scale assessment results are often presented by government ministries and sensationalized in the media, often in judgment of teachers as professionals.

If teachers do misconstrue how student data will be used and reported, this misconception must be addressed directly and carefully not only in consent forms but also in the initiation of research studies. I implemented such action with one such school (case 2, which will be discussed in the following section). A partnership agreement was initiated with the school primarily to explicitly and systematically reinforce the fact that any data gathered from students (and teachers) would remain confidential and results would be reported anonymously. In this process, the valuable role of listening to children's voices was underscored to parents and school officials. I explained that evidence-based teaching and learning reforms have the greatest likelihood of being successful when students are integrated into the process, as they are the main beneficiaries of an educational system that works.

If educational systems are to improve with regard to how children are treated and taught, data must be gathered on all aspects of the system. In the US, the No Child Left Behind ([NCLB] 2001) legislation as well as the Race to the Top (2009) grant have included a variety of ways to encourage and/or mandate state-based standardized assessments, more consistent reports of children's learning progress, and varying degrees of consequences for teachers and schools that chronically present under-performing students. The motivation, in part, for Race to the Top was to find ways to incentivize more accurate measures of evaluating or discerning effective from ineffective teaching.

Assessment of high-quality teaching needs to expand beyond the limited review provided by the school principal. In defense of this view, the 2009 report by the New Teacher Project, another initiative jointly funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation along with the Robertson Foundation and the Joyce Foundation, explains that school principals are often unable to discern effective from ineffective teaching, thus compromising efforts to improve teaching for the children being served – something called the *widget effect*:

The Widget Effect describes the tendency of school districts to assume classroom effectiveness is the same from teacher to teacher. This decades-old fallacy fosters an environment in which teachers cease to be understood as individual professionals, but rather as interchangeable parts. In its denial of individual strengths and weaknesses, it is deeply disrespectful to teachers; in its indifference to instructional effectiveness, it gambles with the lives of students. (p. 4).

The widget effect is not only relevant in the US educational context but also in Canada. Any school jurisdiction that relies on evaluation systems that fail to include multiple forms of reliable and valid sources of data is unlikely to improve. Multiple forms of independent data would permit a teacher's practice to be understood from different perspectives, including the perspective of the children being taught. Unfortunately, the tension between critics and advocates of the public school system has unintentionally silenced one of the most important sources of data – students' voices in their learning and assessment.

Second Barrier: Misperceiving Student Voices as Uninformative (Case 2)

An entire monograph could be devoted to detailing the factors that have led to the difficulty of accessing children's voices in an effort to better understand student-teacher relationships. As mentioned previously, significant factors of accountability in public education, fairness in understanding teachers' limited roles within complex organizations, and teachers' rights and responsibilities need to be considered in light of access to student voices.

Notwithstanding the need to be judicious about the way any data source is treated and used to draw conclusions, the challenge of accessing student voices about their school experiences, including their relationship with teachers, continues to perplex.

Another factor contributing to the lack of access may stem from claims that children will be offended or misunderstand survey questions and thus provide information that is unreliable. For example, in another study (case 2), I was strongly discouraged from asking elementary school children questions about how they felt in some academic situations and activities. The questions were part of a much larger and well-established survey instrument, in this case, Midgley et al.'s (2000), "Patterns of Adaptive Learning Scales." The items (questions) of concern were designed to measure children's avoidant behaviour in learning and included the following:

- It's very important to me that I don't look stupid in my class.
- I do my school work so my teachers don't think I am dumb.
- I do my school work so others won't think I'm dumb.
- I would not say something in class if it made me look dumb.

The school administrator and teachers strongly objected to the words "dumb" and "stupid." They claimed that children might be confused by the words as the school had a policy of no tolerance for such words. I explained that despite the school policy, children often use these simple words to describe themselves, tease others, and especially to think about themselves. As hurtful as the words dumb and stupid might be to caring adults, they prevail on TV, the internet, and in the playground. I explained this was one of the reasons that the Midgley et al. instrument incorporated these words. As indicated previously, survey items need to include vocabulary that makes sense to children. Otherwise, children's responses may not reflect the construct being measured.

Despite appeals to ensuring validity and reliability in measurement, the wording needed to be changed. In order for the school to continue to participate in this study, the items had to be reworded for the youngest students and a disclaimer included for the older students. School administrators and teachers were firm that they did not want these research activities to confuse students about the acceptability of these words. In complying with their wish, I also requested permission to do a separate pilot study to assess whether the students were truly confused by the words. Unsurprisingly, the results of the pilot clearly indicate the students were not confused by the words; they knew these words were unacceptable but also that kids and parents often use them.

The question of whether children understand what they are being asked is a fair question but not one to be answered by adults in the absence of empirical data. For example, Hughes and his colleagues (2012) raised concerns about the accuracy and consistency of children's self-reports. Their concern arose from low-correspondence studies between what children and teachers reported about their relationships; children's reports were found to not match teachers' reports very closely. Interestingly, Hughes and colleagues interpreted this finding not as "children and teachers have different opinions," which is one interpretation of the data. Instead, Hughes and colleagues interpreted the results as reflecting the unreliability of reports *by children* younger than nine years of age. However, upon inspection of these low-correspondence studies (e.g., Henricsson & Rydell, 2004; Hughes et al., 1999; Mantzicopoulos & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2003; Murray, Murray, & Waas, 2008), I (2020) found that many of the survey items administered to children and teachers involved *differently worded questions*. The disparities, then, in survey wording administered to teachers and students raise doubts as to whether the same underlying constructs were measured between both groups. Incidentally, it is also not clear why the low correspondence between student and teacher reports would necessarily lead a researcher to the conclusion that students' reports are the inaccurate ones! It is possible that teachers are the inaccurate reporters or possibly, both teachers and students are not providing accurate portrayals of their relationship or that they genuinely hold different opinions!

I (2020) am sceptical about the apparent "unreliability" of children's self-reports given that children's reports have actually been found to be more predictive of student academic outcomes than parental reports (Pelegrina et al., 2003). It is also notable that the MET Project (2012) found that children as young as five years old were able to respond reliably to survey

items about teachers using simplified but clear and direct language. Even if such language might be viewed as problematic by adults, the surveys are designed to obtain the most accurate data from children. However, there is a bigger issue at stake here. That children's reports about student–teacher relationships would be considered inaccurate because these reports do not coincide with teacher reports is of real concern. In the absence of corroborating evidence, this interpretation reflects the limited consideration extended to children's experiences, voices, and their rights to participate in efforts to measure their views.

Hypothetically, if children's self-reports were found to be unreliable because of complicated survey wording or survey administration instructions, why would researchers not be encouraged by school officials and teachers to find better ways of accessing students' perspectives? It is perplexing why children's voices are not more enthusiastically sought unless one again considers the fear teachers might have about how the data might be used. Well-known magazine articles have pointed to the absence of these data in educational systems and why problems prevail (e.g., "Why it's so hard to fire bad teachers," Mendleson, 2009; "Teacher tenure under fire as education reform reviewed," Martin, 2011). The New Teacher Project provides a commonsense rationale for collecting these data to improve educational systems ("Why kids should grade teachers," Ripley, 2012):

A decade ago, an economist at Harvard, Ronald Ferguson, wondered what would happen if teachers were evaluated by the people who see them every day – their students. The idea – as simple as it sounds, and as familiar as it is on college campuses – was revolutionary. And the results seemed to be, too: remarkable consistency from grade to grade, and across racial divides. Even among kindergarten students. A growing number of school systems are administering the surveys – and might be able to overcome teacher resistance in order to link results to salaries and promotions.

It is important to recognize that comprehensive, high-quality data to improve educational systems does not exist. First, conducting experimental work in schools is virtually impossible. Thus, most research is quasi-experimental or correlational, meaning that unequivocal conclusions are difficult at best. Second, for this reason, it is essential to gather comprehensive data from multiple sources in order to triangulate, understand, and contextualize findings. Third, comprehensive data needs to include the experiences of key stakeholders such as parents and children, and would require standardized measures. As already indicated, such data, especially

from children, are often not collected. Of course, there is research on many aspects of educational systems from class size (e.g., Ehrenberg, Brewer, Gamoran & Willms, 2001) to teacher effects on student achievement (e.g., Burroughs, Gardner, Lee, Guo, Touitou, Jansen, & Schmidt, 2019; Mincu, 2015). However, comprehensive, high-quality data on how to improve educational systems is a different matter. Indeed, Roser, Nagdy, and Ortiz-Ospina (2013) from Oxford University's *Our World in Data* indicate that while empirical data on access to education is well known, much less is known about quality of education.

To begin to understand quality of education, one needs to consider how children's best interests *are served* by educational systems. However, little is known about the effects of teacher unions, teacher tenure, and accountability pressures on student–teacher relationships or even the receptivity of teachers and school administrators to participate in research initiatives about collecting data about student voice and participation. Here it is important to distinguish between *research on educational approaches* and *research that explicitly includes children's perspectives and voices* – and the latter cannot be narrowed down to test scores. Not even Montessori school approaches are all that well researched despite the fact that such approaches are supposedly based on psychological principles (Marshall, 2017). As Marshall (2017, p. 1) notes in her review of the literature “Despite its existence for over 100 years, peer-reviewed evaluations of Montessori education are few and they suffer from a number of methodological limitations, as will be discussed.” While common sense would caution against using any single source of data in isolation for high-stakes decisions about teacher salary and promotion, data from students provide a critical lens for helping principals contextualize teacher practice and student performance. Moreover, these data would serve as a catalyst for principals to broach child-centred topics with teachers such as attentional differences, student experience of differentiated instruction, and general classroom climate.

In their research on children's rights in Canada, Covell and Howe (2001) identify four basic areas where schools can explicitly include children's active participation. These four areas include student councils; accommodation for students with special needs; freedom of expression (voice), association and conscience; and teaching of children's rights. I would recommend that an additional area be included – promoting children's voices in *research*. Among Covell and Howe's four areas, most of the instantiation of children's rights is seen in the presence of councils and accommodation for students with special needs, even though advances vary by

school jurisdiction and province. Many schools have student councils, but often these councils are not involved in school decisions in any real substantive manner. The other two areas – freedom of expression, association and conscience; and teaching of children's rights – are far more mixed in instantiation. For example, Covell and Howe describe the current state of affairs:

Provinces commonly have given school principals or other education officials very broad authority to approve suitable textbooks, and other learning materials, to censor material in student newspapers and other publications, and to impose codes of student speech and dress. In the exercise of this wide authority, little has been done to develop procedures by which students can provide input. (p. 112)

Although Covell and Howe's four areas of children's participation are broad, children's voices about the relationship they share with teachers can be categorized primarily under freedom of expression about matters that pertain to them. However, if children's voices are not typically sought in the process of making school decisions, it is not surprising that children's participation would also be curtailed in psychological research, especially on matters such as student–teacher relationships, which might be viewed as impinging on the authority of the teacher.

Implications of Inaccessible Student Voice

The upshot of school and teaching personnel resisting research questions about the student–teacher relationships is manifold: lack of high-quality data about children's development in school, missed opportunities to better serve children's interests about academic matters, and mixed messages to children about when and where human rights matter, including who is entitled to such rights.

Lack of High-Quality Data

One outcome of resistance to research on student–teacher relationships is the absence of high-quality data about what is happening to children in classroom settings. The general public, parents, and ultimately educators who wish to improve aspects of classroom pedagogy will not have access to independent evidentiary sources of information, the type that are normally gathered by scholars, to inform practice. If experts are not permitted to administer surveys, or other instruments, analyze results, and share findings for discussion and debate, then high-quality data will not be produced.

In some cases, researchers may be allowed to ask certain questions of children only if the wording of items is modified so as to avoid sensitive issues. As mentioned previously, I experienced several situations in which revision to several survey items were requested. For example, an item such as “*I wish my teacher would tell me more about my learning*” was considered problematic by teachers. This item was perceived to suggest that the teacher *could or should be* providing more feedback to a student than is already provided. The request was made to modify the item to “*My teacher tells me about my learning.*” However, notice how this revision alters what is actually being asked of students (Leighton, 2017; Leighton & Gokiart, 2005). In the first case, the item is querying children about their interest in *wanting more feedback* because the current situation maybe unsatisfactory. In the second case, the subtlety of the item has been eliminated. Now the item is querying children simply about whether or not *feedback is provided*. The original item is transformed into an item about whether the teacher provides or does not provide feedback instead of whether the *teacher could provide more* feedback irrespective of the feedback already provided. When the wording of well-established survey items changes to satisfy political concerns, the validity and reliability of surveys is undermined (AERA, APA, & NCME, 2014; Leighton, 2017).

Under-Serving Children

Another consequence arising from resistance to research on student–teacher relationships is the danger of at-risk children disengaging, failing, and leaving school early. The lack of access to children’s voices hurts vulnerable children the most. Consider the concern of school personnel in case 2 discussed previously over words such as “dumb” and “stupid” in some of the survey items considered for measuring how children felt about themselves in the classroom. School officials did not wish to include such survey questions because these words were simply *not* used in the school. The paradox of this resistance is that a systemic denial of language can actually interfere with children coming forward to report harms in *their own words*. An atmosphere where language is carefully monitored is commendable to ensure hate speech does not take root, but an environment where some language is simply purged does not provide children the freedom to ask questions or seek understanding and can even scare children from talking about harms they are observing and/or experiencing for fear that their disclosures will not be understood. Any educational program or process should methodically include the perspectives and experiences of the individuals being served. In particular, special attention needs to be paid

to the perspectives of different groups of children. For example, perspectives from Indigenous, immigrant, visible and gender minorities, and children with diagnosed learning exceptionalities should be explicitly sought because these children are at the greatest risk of experiencing chronic negative events and relationships within schools. These children may experience the classroom differently including in relation to the classroom teacher.

In addition, children who live in lower-income households and/or do not have access to educational and psychological supports should be explicitly considered as well. Arguably, children from all potentially vulnerable groups have the greatest need to have their voices heard because discriminatory practices are most likely to befall them and they often will have the fewest resources to confront such practice. Data gathered on student–teacher relationships needs to be targeted to inform not only the overall climate of the learning environment but also to how student–teacher relationship can be specifically improved for at-risk children.

Mixed Messages About Human Rights

Another consequence arising from resistance to research on student–teacher relationships is that it sends students mixed messages about human rights. One of the truths about human behaviour is that children and adults learn in part by observing others and modelling others' behaviours (Bandura, 1986). Children learn not only from what is actively said and done but also from what is not. The exclusion of children's voices about their experiences in the classroom implicitly teaches children that their voices do not matter as much as other, adult voices. The exclusion may be informal, meaning that children may not be told explicitly that their voices are not considered. However, the exclusion is nonetheless real if teachers, school personnel, parents, and researchers fail to advocate for opportunities to ask children for their perspectives on important matters such as the relationship they have with their teachers. The failure to advocate for children to have a voice effectively communicates to children the relative *unimportance* of what they have to say and their right to say it.

Sending mixed messages about human rights to children cannot possibly be helpful in efforts to curtail bullying in schools. Many elementary and secondary schools have antibullying policies today, which outline acceptable behaviours from those that are not acceptable. For example, the Alberta government's site for Bullying Prevention for Educators includes advice for teachers and school personnel on learning to recognize, prevent, and respond to signs of bullying in school (<https://www.alberta.ca/bullying-prevention-for-educators.aspx>). The role of

adults is described as one of staying calm, ensuring children's safety, listening to all perspectives, determining if the bullying took place, and providing support to those children affected by bullying. Importantly, one of the advised responses involves giving students the skills and confidence to intervene in bullying behaviour when they see it. This is recommended as a way to have children *internalize respectful ways* of responding to bullying. However, much of this guidance is reactive rather than proactive as it centres on dealing with bullying *after* it has occurred and not before it occurs. For example, the guidance does not involve explicit programs of how to create classroom spaces that teach students from day one about human rights so that bullying can be avoided all together. A reading of Covell, Howe, and McNeil, 2008 suggests that in the absence of discussing and enacting human rights explicitly and consistently in the classroom, it is unlikely that children will learn to generalize skills and develop the confidence needed to intervene on behalf of others.

The stance of dealing with bullying after it occurs instead of before it occurs effectively teaches students about human rights from a position of crisis. Moreover, this crisis-oriented stance teaches students that human rights is not an everyday practice but one that has limited applicability – an ideal to be practiced in particular moments to solve problems rather than daily in the full scope of their lives in classrooms and schools. In the absence of discussing and actually modelling human rights behaviour in daily school life with children, it is unrealistic to expect children to apply human rights consistently in their conduct with others. Children's rights should be emphasized alongside all other human rights, including the rights of teachers to be fairly evaluated in their practice. In pursuit of this goal, more school administrators and teachers need to open their schools and classrooms, respectively, to the questions that scholars may have about the experiences of students.

Advocating for Children's Voice in Psychological Research

An important question for psychologists who study children's learning and well-being is how to advocate for children so that data can be obtained about what is happening to children inside schools and classrooms. It is only through the gathering of high-quality data that any type of improvement to children's experiences can be made based on evidence. However, the topic of advocacy for scholars is a difficult one. Scholars by training are not political in their endeavours, but schools and classrooms have become political domains. Thus, doing and saying too little will effectively accomplish little, but doing and saying too much, risks alienating teachers and

administrators and possibly parents. There needs to be a balance in how this is done and mistakes are undoubtedly going to be made. However, doing and saying nothing is also not an option for those who wish to understand how to best help children in their learning and well-being.

In the decades of research I have conducted in schools, with parents, and university organizations, two avenues for advocacy of children's rights seems particularly salient. The first is more direct education of stakeholders. This proposal could be worded as *working with preservice teachers and parents directly to inform them about what (a) child development entails and (b) is gained from having children learn about their rights, including their voice*. From decades of experience and teaching, many parents, preservice and in-service teachers and administrators narrowly interpret the topic of children's rights as pertaining to issues of abuse and consequences of child maltreatment. This is only one aspect of a much fuller set of human rights issues for children. Children's rights include not only general protection from abuse and exploitation but also the specific protection of their participation and voice (Landown et al., 2014). Vulnerable groups such as Indigenous children, minority children, and children with disabilities are especially susceptible to not having a voice. For example, a recent report commissioned by the British Columbia Ministry of Education on *Racism in Schools* (2016) outlines the many forms in which racism against Indigenous students occurs in the school. Racial slurs, low expectations, social isolation and marginalization, and denial of systemic racism are just some ways in which the majority culture can create a toxic learning environment for vulnerable groups of children. Instituting systemic ways for racialized children to speak up about their classroom experiences should not be a once-in-a-decade process for a ministry report. Educating preservice teachers about how implicit racism can take form in classrooms and how to become aware of these biases needs to be made explicit. Just as preservice teachers learn about basic child protection from physical and psychological harm, universities and colleges must incorporate the articles of the CRC in teacher education. Moreover, teacher education programs need to elaborate on the importance of data from children about how they see matters that pertain to them.

Teacher education programs lag far behind in incorporating high-quality data about how to improve student–teacher relationships (Leighton, 2019b). Data on what happens in classrooms is sorely missing. However, for this deficit to change meaningfully, high-quality studies are needed. It is surprising that the push for these data has not come directly from parents. It is

possible that parents too might be concerned about what such data might reveal. Having children know they are eligible to share ideas and even opposition to parental action has been a source of concern, at least in the United States. For example, according to a Congressional Research report (Blanchfield, 2013, p. Summary) “[s]ome are also concerned that [the] CRC could interfere in the private lives of families, particularly the rights of parents to educate or discipline their children.” Of course, the CRC does not contravene parental rights. As Lansdown et al. (2014) indicate:

Article 12 does not give children the right to complete autonomy. It does not give them the right to take control of all decisions affecting them. It does not give them the right to act in ways that ride roughshod over the rights of others \ whether those others are students, teachers, parents, or administrative staff. However, it does mean that children should be involved when decisions about them are being made, that they should be afforded space to articulate issues that matter to them, and that adults should give weight to what children say in accordance with their age and maturity. (p. 4–5)

Thus, parents also need to be educated about what is gained from having children become aware of and exercise their rights. Parents can be informed through public forum, social media, and informational material about research studies sent directly to them. It is instrumental that parents be explicitly included in advocacy for children's rights in schools. Put simply, parents are the ones who provide the consent required for children to participate in research studies about the experiences they have in school. If parents understand the value of helping to realize children's rights in schools, including the value of children's voices in studies of student–teacher relationships, undoubtedly parents can facilitate the implementation of such studies in schools.

Parenthetically, that consulting children on matters relevant to them is interpreted by some as posing a threat to authority is concerning. An analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (Chao & Willms, 2000 as cited in Matusicky & Russell, 2009) suggests that only about 1/3 of parents reported the type of warm and democratic parenting style often called *authoritative* (as opposed to authoritarian, which is demanding, highly controlling, and less responsive). Matusicky and Russell (2009, p. 664) indicate:

both Willms' and Invest in Kids' studies indicated that parenting skills need improvement. Willms found that only approximately one-third of parents use the authoritative parenting style, the style most frequently associated

with positive outcomes for most groups of children in North America (5). Invest in Kids found that one-third of parents could increase their positive parenting practices and two-thirds could decrease their negative parenting behaviour. Together, these surveys present a strong case for universal interventions designed to increase parenting knowledge, confidence and skills.

Parental education of children's rights and interventions are therefore needed. Research on parenting styles and help for parents to acquire more responsive and less dominating forms of parenting are key pieces in advocating for children's rights in schools.

The second avenue for advocacy is pursuing a research agenda that involves not only actively *measuring children's voices but also disseminating these data to academic and public audiences about what is gained from listening to children about their student-teacher relationships and their experiences in school generally*. Although there are many developmental psychologists, school and clinical child psychologists who conduct research (e.g., Bradshaw, 2015; Geary, Hoard, Nugent & Bailey, 2015; Mychailyszyn, Beidas, Benjamin, Edmunds, Podell, Cohen, & Kendall, 2011) that focuses on listening and helping children in a variety of areas (e.g., bullying, anxiety, learning disorders, and disabilities), what is missing is an explicit application of this work into school environments, teacher behaviours, and relationships. It is important here to remember that psychological research with children does not automatically translate into classroom and school practice. Indeed, much of the work psychologists do needs to be translated and *accepted by school personnel* to ensure students in schools and classrooms are helped. Otherwise, much is learned about children's development without it helping the most important stakeholders – children – if the application of the work remains limited.

It has become tiresome to comment on the schism that exists between research and teaching practice in schools. The 2019 book *The Knowledge Gap* by Natalie Wexler outlines the limited uptake of research findings by most teachers in primary and secondary schools. Academic articles have also outlined the divide (e.g., Nelson & Campbell, 2017; Scheeler, Budin, & Markelz, 2016). This divide seems especially evident in special education where the absence of evidence-based practice can have life-altering negative implications for children's educational attainment. For example, Elik, Corkum, Blotnicky-Gallant and McGonnell (2015) describe the situation for teachers charged with teaching children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD):

Despite clear knowledge of what is effective in treating ADHD in children, classroom interventions are rarely implemented and when implemented are often ineffective (Fabiano & Pelham, 2003; Repie, 2005). To our knowledge no exact statistics are available about the percentage of teachers or the frequency with which teachers utilize evidence-based interventions, however, research consistently shows that teachers prefer strategies that require less time and complexity (e.g., preferential seating, proximity of the teacher to the student) over those that are more time-consuming and complex, such as individualized response cost programs (Blotnicky-Gallant, Martin, McGonnell, & Corkum, 2014; Girio & Owens, 2009; Martinussen, Tannock, & Chaban, 2011). (p. 43)

Part of the solution here is for psychological researchers to do more than simply conduct the research. Advocacy must become an extension of the research by disseminating results publicly so that desire for change can gain momentum. By using newspapers, magazines, social media, and even public TV network channels, public consciousness can be raised. Grassroots pressure can be placed on school boards and government ministries, including teacher preparation and education programs to change pedagogy – meaning a systemic effort to begin to incorporate evidence-based psychological practices correctly in the classroom.

Before concluding, it is worthwhile to consider a research question that should be studied, namely, if the threat of evaluation is the main reason school administrators and teachers often resist specific forms of research and researchers in the classroom? Some researchers might argue that participatory research approaches could be used to create stronger ties with school personnel and cocreate the research conducted. Teachers, for example, could help inform the direction of the study, the materials, and even help write the survey items asked of students. The expectation is that by doing so, participating teachers might feel more included in the research conducted. This suggestion is excellent in principle. It is the practice that is tricky. It is tricky because there is an inherent conflict of interest in the inclusion of teachers if they feel they stand to benefit or lose from the outcome of results. If the topic of the research is potentially threatening to a group of stakeholders (teachers), involving the stakeholders must be done carefully to ensure that their inclusion does prejudice the original research question. Fundamentally, adult political interests should not usurp research aimed to understand children's experiences.

The act of raising public consciousness about children's issues, especially from research that is explicitly focused on addressing systemic and structural barriers in children's relationship with teachers, can only enhance the success of instantiating children's rights in schools. While research on student-teacher relationships could be conducted outside of the school with direct assistance from parents, this workaround should not be pursued casually. First, by not being able to conduct research in schools, children cannot be observed in the classroom and interacting with teachers and peers. Second, that a workaround with parents might need to be considered as an alternate route to study children's relationship with teachers in schools highlights the insufficient regard children suffer in some educational systems. The very first step in honouring Article 12 of the CRC is to operationalize what it means to allow children to have a voice in consideration of their age and maturity about what happens to them in classrooms. Article 12 has to be actionable in public education systems. This is the only way to begin to acquire high-quality data about children – *from children*. Overall, the instantiation of children's rights in schools must be done by directly speaking to the issues that affect them. Children's voices are vital here. In the absence of doing this, it is unclear how momentum is gained in trying to obtain a more right-based environment for children in schools.

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