

Author manuscript

Published in final edited form in:

American Journal of Orthopsychiatry. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/ort0000343>

The Subjective Importance of Children's Participation Rights: A Discrimination Perspective

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Abstract

This study examined how children appraise the importance of their participation rights—that is, the right to express their views and the right to be heard—and whether such appraisals vary as a function of perceived discrimination in the school environment. The sample comprised 1,006 children (9.6–14.3 years old, 51% boys) from fourteen public primary schools in Geneva, Switzerland. Results indicate that a majority of children considered their participation rights as very important. Children's appraisals of these rights varied marginally between classes and schools. Moreover, children's individual-level appraisals were sensitive to their perceptions of discrimination in the school environment, in that higher levels of perceived discrimination were associated with a greater subjective importance attached to participation rights. This suggests that appropriate measures must be taken to implement participation rights in such a manner that all children—including those who feel discriminated against—will be protected by, and fully able to enjoy, their participation rights.

Keywords

Participation rights; Perceived discrimination; Schools; Subjective value

Public Policy Relevance Statement

The Convention on the Rights of the Child assures participation rights to every child. The present study indicates that participation rights are particularly important to children who perceive discrimination in their immediate environment. Thus, policymakers, teachers, and other professionals should implement participation rights to such an extent that all children, including those who experience discrimination and are therefore at risk of being marginalized, will be able to claim their participation rights to the full extent and in all circumstances.

The Subjective Importance of Children's Participation Rights: A Discrimination Perspective

In recent years, there has been an increasing trend towards recognizing the importance of children's participation rights. Participation rights are assumed to empower children to influence decision-making processes in matters directly or indirectly of concern to them, and thus to become active agents in their lives. Participation rights are, moreover, supposed to enable children to acquire those skills needed for participating in, and contributing to, human rights-based democratic societies (Howe & Covell, 2005; Lansdown, 2010). Children's rights advocates have argued that, if fully implemented, participation rights would represent "one of the most profound transformations in moving towards a culture of respect for children's rights, for their dignity and citizenship, and for their capacities to contribute significantly towards their own well-being" (Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi, 2014, p. 4). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is a crucial milestone in the implementation of participation rights in a wide array of social spheres. Moreover, broad global ratification of the CRC contributes to growing recognition that children's participation in various domains of life is not only a moral requirement and a policy goal, but also a legal obligation (Ben-Arieh & Attar-Schwartz, 2013; González et al., 2015). Accordingly, children's participation in various spheres of social life is becoming the norm in most countries across the world (Lansdown & Karkara, 2006; Sherrod, 2008; Tisdall, 2017). This trend towards greater child participation necessitates a deeper understanding of how children perceive their rights. While there is a growing body of research on children's participation in private and public life (see below), comparatively little quantitative evidence exists on whether children actually

consider their participation rights as important. Policy initiatives typically stress the crucial role of these rights for all children (UNICEF, 2007; Willow, 2010). However, individual children might differ in their evaluation of participation rights and, if so, it is essential to analyze the factors that may explain such differences. With this in mind, this study examined children's appraisals of their participation rights—that is, the right to express their views and the right to be heard—and, moreover, whether perceived discrimination in their school environment explains variation in these appraisals.

Discrimination in the school environment might explain differences in children's appraisals of their participation rights because these rights should entitle and guarantee equal opportunity for participation. The experience of discrimination, however, is likely to restrict children's opportunities for participation. Prior research suggests that the experience of discrimination leads children to refrain from participating actively in social groups, as they experience increased levels of psychological distress and anxiety, alongside lower levels of self-confidence, and thus deploy avoidance strategies in various spheres of life (Brody et al., 2006; Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012; Spears Brown & Bigler, 2005). The experience of discrimination limits children's ability to participate actively in social groups, and consequently may affect how children evaluate their participation rights, given that these rights should ensure that every child has the equal opportunity for participation in social life.

The links between perceived discrimination and the subjective appraisal of participation rights are worthy of investigation, not least in the possible case where experiences of discrimination increase the importance that children attach to participation rights. In such a case, appropriate measures should be taken to ensure that children, who feel discriminated against, will be able to fully enjoy their participation rights.

Children's Participation Rights

While participation rights have been conceptualized in various ways, there is now broad agreement that these rights are supposed to enable children to represent their views and interests and thus to exercise some degree of control over their own lives (Hart, 1992; Herbots & Put, 2015; Lansdown, 2010). Participation rights also ought to ensure that children are seen as persons with agency, who are entitled to respect, and whose voices must be heard and acted upon (Freeman, 2007; Smith,

2016). Hence these rights are grounded in the recognition of children’s evolving capacities and their need to gradually gain autonomy and independent status in society (Burger, 2017; Lansdown, 2005; Lloyd & Emerson, 2016; Ruck, Peterson-Badali, & Helwig, 2014).

The CRC summarizes the essence of participation rights, primarily in Article 12, which assures to the “child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child” (Art. 12) as well as the right to have these views “given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (ibid.). Hence, thanks to the CRC children can now invoke (1) *the right to express their views* and (2) *the right to be heard* and thus taken seriously. In this study we analyzed how children subjectively appraise these two major components of their participation rights, which reflect their right to fully participate in society and be recognized as active participants.

It is important to acknowledge that in spite of being recognized as persons with agency, children remain dependent on support in exercising their participation rights. For instance, the CRC emphasizes that adults play a central role in providing “appropriate direction and guidance” in the formation and expression of children’s views (Art. 5). Nevertheless, participation rights are premised on an understanding of children as increasingly self-determined social actors and equal members of society who have their own concerns and agendas, and who are entitled to actively influence the course of their lives (Lundy, 2007; Melton, 1999; UNCRC, 2005).

Prior Research

The subjective importance of participation rights. So far, researchers have examined children’s participation rights in several contexts, such as protection and welfare services (Cossar, Brandon, & Jordan, 2016; van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2014), care arrangements (Cashmore, 2002; Magalhães, Calheiros, & Costa, 2016), foster care placements (Nordenfors, 2016), educational institutions (Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2009), and the wider community (Kosher & Ben-Arieh, 2017). In the majority of studies it is assumed that participation rights are generally important to children. However, some studies suggest that the extent to which children value participation rights differs across contexts (Hart, Pavlovic, & Zeidner, 2001; Taylor, Smith, & Nairn, 2001). They also point to children not always wishing to exercise their participation rights (Kirby & Gibbs, 2006), or seeking to participate at varying levels of intensity (Ben-Arieh & Attar-

Schwartz, 2013; Kosher, Ben-Arieh, & Hendelsman, 2016), or simply displaying different types of unique yet equally “valid” forms of participation (Treseder, 1997; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). Such findings imply that the subjective importance of participation rights may vary across individuals and contexts—and possibly across classes and schools. Against this backdrop, the present study analyzed children’s appraisals of the importance of their participation rights, and whether these appraisals differ between classes and schools.

Participation rights in a discriminatory environment. Experiences of discrimination may affect children’s appraisals of participation rights because these rights should also prevent marginalization and exclusion, which are typically the purpose and direct consequence of discriminatory actions (cf., OHCHR, 1969). Children who are victims of discrimination frequently display lower levels of self-esteem (Armenta & Hunt, 2009), develop internalizing symptoms (Sirin et al., 2015), and experience emotional distress and depressive symptoms (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). More generally, perceived discrimination negatively influences psychological adjustment, as well as mental and physical health (Neto, 2009; Pachter & Coll, 2009; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009), which are important prerequisites for children’s active participation in social life. That is, discrimination experiences undermine children’s participation, consequently restricting the rights to which they are entitled.

Research shows that an environment of *non*-discrimination is a necessary prerequisite for children to consider their participation rights as being realized and that, by contrast, children who perceive discrimination are likely to report that their participation rights are being compromised (Burger, 2017). A climate of discrimination increases the likelihood that children will feel insecure, powerless and alienated, thus impairing children’s belief in themselves as agents able to influence their lives (Smith, 2007). Furthermore, discrimination experiences prevent children from developing a sense of belonging and relatedness, which are basic psychological needs that must be fulfilled for any individual to participate effectively in society (Goodenow, 1993; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Walton & Cohen, 2011).

In summary, perceptions of discrimination may affect not only children’s participation, but also their subjective appraisals of participation rights. Against this backdrop, we investigated whether children’s appraisals of the importance of their participation rights vary in relation to

perceptions of discrimination in the school environment. As noted above, perceived discrimination may increase the subjective importance of participation rights given that these rights should prevent marginalization and exclusion, often the purpose and direct result of discrimination that impairs the equal enjoyment of the right to participate in social life (OHCHR, 1969). Thus, in a discriminatory environment children may ascribe particular importance to their participation rights, because these rights entitle all children to equal opportunity for participation.

Research Hypotheses

In light of the above, and with the importance of schools in children's lives in mind, we examined the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The subjective importance of participation rights—that is, the right to express one's views and the right to be heard—varies across children, classes, and schools.

Hypothesis 2: Children's appraisals of the importance of participation rights differ as a function of perceived discrimination in the school environment.

In addition, we assumed that children's appraisals of participation rights vary not only as a function of individual-level perceived discrimination in the school environment, but also as a function of class-level perceived discrimination, that is, a shared perception of discrimination within a school class. Hence we also formulated a third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Children's appraisals of the importance of participation rights differ as a function of class-level perceived discrimination in the school environment.

We distinguished between individual- and class-level perceived discrimination to investigate whether a child's evaluation of his/her participation rights was associated with an idiosyncratic perception of discrimination in the school environment, or rather with a collective perception of discrimination within a school class, or indeed with both.

Method

Procedure and ethical considerations

We administered a survey in public primary schools in Geneva, Switzerland, in May and June 2014, following formal approval from the General Directorate of Education of the Canton of Geneva, the Review Board overseeing research to be conducted in educational institutions, and the principals of the schools. Informed consent was obtained from all children and anonymity was guaranteed. Moreover, children could refuse to take part, or to end participation at any time during the administration of the survey (which occurred in < 1% of the cases). Trained research assistants (holding BA degrees and pursuing their MA studies in our children's rights program) collected the data in Geneva-based schools by means of standardized questionnaires. These questionnaires were administered during a lesson in the presence of the class teachers. Prior to this main phase of data collection, we had conducted a smaller-scale pilot study during which we tested all the items of the questionnaire in a sample of 42 children from two classes in one school. Children were asked to report any difficulty they had in understanding and answering the questions. Based on their reports, the questionnaire was finalized for the main data collection phase. All research procedures conformed to the Ethical Code and the Charter of Ethics and Deontology of the University of Geneva (UNIGE, 1997, 2010), as well as with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017).

Sample

The sample comprised 1,006 children from fourteen public primary schools in the City of Geneva (51% boys). The age of the children ranged from 9.6 to 14.3 years, but 90% of the children were between 10.7 and 12.8 years old ($M=11.71$, $SD=0.71$). The children were chosen using a two-stage procedure. In the first stage, nine districts of the city (out of a total of 16) were selected using purposeful sampling to guarantee sociodemographically diverse districts in the sample (OCSTAT, 2017). In the second stage, we randomly sampled either one or two schools per district. Within the fourteen schools, all pupils in the 7th and 8th grades out of a total of 56 classes were included in the sample (the 7th and 8th grades are the last two grades of primary school). The number of

children surveyed per school ranged from 38 to 136 ($M=71.86$, $SD=24.52$), and the number of children surveyed per class ranged from 6 to 24 ($M=17.96$, $SD=4.08$). Table A in the appendix provides an overview of the number of schools, classes per school, and children per class. The children were either enrolled in the 7th grade (46.5%), the 8th grade (49.8%), or the 7th/8th *mixed-age* grade (3.7%), in which children from both grades were taught together. In Geneva, children are assigned to either same-age or mixed-age classes, depending on the size of the student cohort per grade. Thus, the assignment to same- or mixed-age classes follows a purely administrative, rather than pedagogical, logic. The mean age of the children was 11.21 years ($SD = 0.55$) in the 7th grade; 12.17 years ($SD = 0.48$) in the 8th grade; and 11.79 years ($SD = 0.87$) in the 7th/8th grade.

In Geneva, 83.1% of all primary-school children attended public schools in 2014 (SRED, 2015b). Within these public schools 43.0% of the pupils came from immigrant families (SRED, 2015a). 19.3% of the pupils came from families belonging to ‘higher’ socio-professional categories (e.g., top managers, employers), 45.1% came from families in ‘middle’ socio-professional categories (e.g., intermediate managers, skilled employees), and 35.7% came from families in ‘low’ socio-professional categories (e.g., semi-skilled and unskilled workers) (SRED, 2017).

Measures

Drawing on prior research, we developed a questionnaire that assessed children’s perceptions of their rights as well as information on their school and community experience. In this study we used the following variables.

Dependent variables. The two dependent variables were (1) *children’s appraisal of the importance of the right to express their views* and (2) *children’s appraisal of the importance of the right to be heard* in the school environment. These two variables were assessed on a 4-point rating scale ranging from 1 = not important to 4 = very important. Children’s appraisals of the importance of the two rights were positively correlated, $r(1004) = .49$, $p < .001$. To examine children’s understanding of these two single-item measures, and whether they discriminate between them, we conducted brief semi-structured interviews during the pilot phase. This pilot research showed

that the children in the targeted age range both understood, and clearly distinguished between the items and, more generally, had a good understanding of the meaning of rights, including the knowledge that others must respect their rights and that these rights must not be denied (see also the section below on the comprehensibility and appropriateness of the variables). In addition, our research also showed that children appraised different rights in various ways. They discriminated, for instance, between participation rights and other rights, such as the right to education, the right to access information, and the right to rest and leisure (results available on request). Hence we can reasonably assume that the current research does not suffer significantly from any general rating response bias.

Predictor variables. The central predictor variable was *perceived discrimination*, which regards whether a child believes different groups of children are *not* equally respected in his/her school. Perceived discrimination was measured on a scale consisting of four items: “In your school, do the adults respect all children equally, (1) boys as much as girls?”, “..., (2) girls as much as boys?”, “..., (3) children with disabilities?”, and “..., (4) children who have a different skin color, appearance, language, or religion?” These items were evaluated on a 4-point rating scale (1 = yes, 2 = rather yes, 3 = rather no, 4 = no) (Cronbach’s α coefficient = 0.82).

Based on this four-item measure of individual-level perceived discrimination, we also created an aggregate-level index measuring the average level of perceived discrimination within a school class, or *class-level perceived discrimination*. This class-level predictor was used to evaluate whether children’s appraisals of the importance of their participation rights were associated with a collective perception of discrimination in the school environment.

Covariates. To control for potential confounding effects, we took into account the following covariates: *gender* (0 = male, 1 = female), *age* (as measured in May 2014), and the *school grade* a child was enrolled in at the time of the questionnaire administration (7th, 8th, or 7th/8th grade—we dichotomized the school grade variable, defining 7th grade as the reference category). Age and school grade were positively related. However, given the relatively wide age range in each grade, the two covariates were not redundant, as confirmed by variance inflation factors < 1.9. In addition, considering that children who feel insecure in school perceive their participation rights as being less well realized, and that safety needs must be fulfilled before children can fully use their

participation rights (Burger, 2017), we also assessed children's *feeling of safety*. We assumed that children who feel lower levels of safety will participate less actively, and thus be more likely to see their participation rights as being curtailed. This leads to greater importance being attached to their participation rights, which protect against such restrictions of opportunity for full participation. Children's feeling of safety was assessed using the item "Do you feel safe at school?" and a 4-point rating scale (1 = no, 2 = rather no, 3 = rather yes, 4 = yes).

Comprehensibility and appropriateness of the variables. We tested the measures during a pilot study in two school classes. This also included interviews with children regarding their understanding of the measures. The final version of the questionnaire included a series of single-item measures to assess various topics related to children's rights and their school and community experiences, while keeping the response burden at an acceptable level (the administration of the complete questionnaire took between 45 and 50 minutes). Although these measures are potentially less informative than multiple-item measurement scales, prior research has demonstrated their usefulness in research involving children (Casas et al., 2012; see also Gardner, Cummings, Dunham, & Pierce, 1998), and our own research confirmed children's understanding of these measures (authors, 2017). Analyses of item appraisals by children's age further demonstrated the appropriateness of the measures, and replication analyses based on subsamples of children who reported different degrees of comprehension regards the questionnaire corroborated the results reported here.

Analytical Strategy

We performed multilevel (linear mixed-effects) regression analyses to predict the subjective importance of participation rights as a function of individual- and class-level perceived discrimination, while controlling for the covariates gender, age, school grade level, and the feeling of safety. As noted above, considering perceived discrimination at both the individual and class level allowed us to estimate whether a child's appraisal of his/her participation rights was related to his/her idiosyncratic perception of discrimination in the school environment, or to a shared perception of discrimination within a school class, or indeed to both. Multilevel regression analysis allows for examining variance in an outcome variable when predictor variables are at different

hierarchical levels. This technique takes into account the hierarchical nature of the data—children nested in classes, classes nested in schools—thereby considering the fact that individual observations cannot be regarded as independent. Children who are clustered, for instance, in classes, are likely to be more similar to each other, than to children in other classes, with respect to characteristics such as their perspectives on participation rights. Therefore, the assumption of statistical independence of errors, a requirement for OLS regression analysis, will not be met (Peugh, 2010; Snijders & Bosker, 2012). Thus, we conducted multilevel analyses to obtain unbiased parameter estimates, using SPSS version 23. We applied weights to correct for unequal probabilities of selection of individual children into the sample (inverse probability weighting). The weights took into account both the probability of selecting a given school out of all schools in Geneva, which was 28% (or $n_{\text{schools selected}} = 14 / n_{\text{schools in total}} = 50$), and the probability of selecting a given child within a school, which varied between 86% and 100% across schools.

Equation (1) specifies the unconditional model, which includes a child’s *appraisal of a given participation right* as the outcome variable, as well as random intercepts at the individual-, class- and school-levels, but no predictor variables:

$$y_{ijk} = \beta_{000} + v_{0k} + \eta_{0jk} + \varepsilon_{0ijk} \quad (1)$$

In this model, y_{ijk} represents the appraisal of an individual child i from class j in school k . β_{000} represents the mean intercept across schools, or, in other terms, children’s overall mean appraisal of a given participation right, whereas v_{0k} , η_{0jk} , and ε_{0ijk} represent the random intercepts, or residuals, which are assumed to be mutually independent and normally distributed with zero mean and constant variances σ_v^2 , σ_η^2 , and σ_ε^2 , respectively. Specifically, $v_{0k} \sim N(0, \sigma_v^2)$ is the residual at the school level, $\eta_{0jk} \sim N(0, \sigma_\eta^2)$ is the residual at the class level, and $\varepsilon_{0ijk} \sim N(0, \sigma_\varepsilon^2)$ is the residual at the individual child level. The three variance components (σ_v^2 , σ_η^2 , and σ_ε^2) contribute to the total variance of the outcome variable, given the overall mean β_{000} , as follows:

$$\text{Var}(y_{ijk}) = \sigma_v^2 + \sigma_\eta^2 + \sigma_\varepsilon^2 \quad (2)$$

To assess the extent to which individual appraisals of a given participation right are correlated within a school or class, we calculated the intra-school and intra-class correlation coefficients, which can also be interpreted as measures of the amount of variance at the school and

class level, and thus indicate to what extent children's appraisals of their participation rights vary between classes and schools. They are calculated as:

$$\rho_{\text{school}} = \frac{\sigma_v^2}{(\sigma_v^2 + \sigma_\eta^2 + \sigma_\varepsilon^2)} \text{ and } \rho_{\text{class}} = \frac{\sigma_\eta^2}{(\sigma_v^2 + \sigma_\eta^2 + \sigma_\varepsilon^2)} \quad (3)$$

To address the question of whether children's appraisals of their participation rights differ as a function of perceived discrimination in the school environment, we firstly added the individual-level predictor *perceived discrimination* along with the covariates *gender*, *age*, *school grade*, and *feeling of safety* to the model. Secondly, in the full model, we also added *class-level perceived discrimination*. Equation (4) specifies this full multilevel model,

$$y_{ijk} = \beta_{000} + \sum_{h=1}^p \beta_h x_{hijk} + \beta_q x_{qjk} + v_{0k} + \eta_{0jk} + \varepsilon_{0ijk} \quad (4)$$

where a child's appraisal of a given participation right (y_{ijk}) is estimated as a function of the overall mean appraisal across schools (β_{000}), individual-level variables (x_{hijk} to x_{pijk} and their respective estimates β_h to β_p), and the class-level variable (x_{qjk} and its estimate β_q). This model includes three residuals (v_{0k} , η_{0jk} , and ε_{0ijk}) and the respective variance components as specified in equation (1).

To test for collinearity among the predictor variables, we computed variance inflation factors (VIF). The VIF values indicated no collinearity issues, implying that none of the predictor variables was redundant. We used dichotomous and grand mean-centered variables (see also the note to Table 2). Although we had only fourteen units of analysis (i.e., schools) at the highest analytic level, we performed three-level models, because research showed that ignoring a level of nesting in multilevel analysis typically leads to biased estimates of variance components and of standard errors of regression coefficients at adjacent analytic levels (Chen, 2012; Moerbeek, 2004; Noortgate, Opdenakker, & Onghena, 2005). Even a small intra-school correlation (such as $\rho_{\text{school}} = 0.01$) can substantially inflate the probability of a type I error (the alpha level) in a model omitting the school level (Kreft & de Leeuw, 1998). Furthermore, not including this third level of analysis in the models would clearly be less accurate, since this would imply setting the school-level variance to zero (Gelman & Hill, 2007). However, analyses in which we removed the school-level random intercept, estimating only the individual- and class-level variance components, confirmed the results reported here.

Missing Data

As shown in Table 1, the proportion of missing data ranged from 0% to 3.6%. We performed multiple imputation to adjust for missing data, imputing data across 10 datasets using fully conditional specification. Subsequently, we conducted the analyses on each of these datasets and then pooled the results using Rubin’s (1987) rule. These pooled results were very similar to those from analyses based on the complete-case dataset where we used listwise deletion. We will report the pooled results because they can be assumed to be more accurate than those from complete-case analyses. Specifically, multiple imputation techniques are considered to produce parameter estimates that are less biased than those that arise from traditional missing data strategies such as listwise deletion, both when data are missing at random, and when data are not missing at random (Baraldi & Enders, 2010; Gelman & Hill, 2007).

Table 1

Correlations (Pearson and Point Biserial), Phi Coefficients, and Descriptive Statistics for (Continuous and Dichotomous) Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Importance of the right to express one’s views	1.0							
2. Importance of the right to be heard	.49***	1.0						
3. Gender: female (ref. cat.: male)	-.09**	-.07*	1.0					
4. Age	-.03	-.10**	.11***	1.0				
5. Grade: 8th (ref. cat.: 7th)	-.02	-.07*	.01	.65***	1.0			
6. Grade: 7th/8th (ref. cat.: 7th)	.08*	.07*	.02	.02	-.20***	1.0		
7. Feeling of safety	.06	-.02	-.04	.05	.06	-.02	1.0	
8. Perceived discrimination	.15***	.09**	-.08**	-.07*	-.03	-.06*	-.30***	1.0
<i>Descriptive statistics</i>								
Mean	3.55	3.66	0.49	11.71	.47	.50	3.60	1.31
Standard deviation	.73	.64	–	.71	–	–	.65	.58
Range				9.58–				
	1–4	1–4	0–1	14.33	0–1	0–1	1–4	1–4
Missing data	1.2%	1.5%	1.9%	3.6%	0%	0%	1.5%	0.9%

Note. For Phi coefficients (which measure the association between two dichotomous variables) approximate significance is reported. ref. cat. = reference category.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Results

Descriptive Results

Most children considered their participation rights as either important or very important: 27.7% of children saw the *right to express their views* as ‘important’ (95% CI: 24.9, 30.5) and 65.1% of children saw this right as ‘very important’ (95% CI: 62.1, 68.1). Moreover, 21.6% of children considered the *right to be heard* as ‘important’ (95% CI: 19.0, 24.2) and 72.9% of children saw this right as ‘very important’ (95% CI: 70.1, 75.6). Further descriptive statistics and intercorrelations among all study variables are presented in Table 1. Key results are that the average level of perceived discrimination was relatively low ($M = 1.31$, $SD = .58$) and that the level of perceived discrimination was significantly correlated with the subjective importance of the right to express views $r(1004) = .15$, $p < .001$, and with the subjective importance of the right to be heard $r(1004) = .09$, $p < .01$. In interpreting these correlations we need to take into account the relatively small amount of variance in our measures: a majority of children reported low levels of perceived discrimination and appraised their participation rights as clearly important. With this in mind, relatively weak bivariate correlations were to be expected. These bivariate correlations provide preliminary evidence of the hypothesized links between individual-level perceived discrimination and the subjective importance of participation rights. Importantly, however, these links need to be explored further in analyses which take into account observable potential confounders. The following section will report the findings of these analyses and, moreover, consider whether class-level perceived discrimination is related to the subjective importance of participation rights, independent of, or in addition to, individual-level perceived discrimination.

The Role of Perceived Discrimination in Children’s Evaluation of Participation Rights

Table 2 summarizes the results of the multilevel analyses predicting children’s appraisals of the importance of their participation rights. Models A.0, A.1 and A.2 estimate children’s appraisals of the *right to express their views*, whereas models B.0, B.1 and B.2 estimate children’s appraisals of the *right to be heard*. Both sets of models include the same predictor variables.

The first, unconditional models A.0 and B.0 include children's appraisals of their rights as the outcomes, as well as random intercepts at the individual-, class- and school-levels, but no predictor variables. These models served to partition the total variation in children's appraisals into three components—individual-, class- and school-level variance—and thus to evaluate whether, and to what extent, children's appraisals of the importance of their participation rights differed not only at the individual level, but also across classes and schools. Model A.0 suggests that 93.6% of the variance in children's appraisals of the importance of the *right to express their views* was attributable to individual-level characteristics (both measured and unmeasured), whereas 1.6% of this variance was estimated to be at the class level, and 4.8% of this variance was estimated to be at the school level. This implies that approximately 6.4% of this variance was at the class-within-school level. Model B.0 suggests that the proportions of variance in children's appraisals of the importance of the *right to be heard* attributable to the individual-, class- and school-levels amounted to approximately 96.3%, 3.4% and 0.2%, respectively (figures do not add up to 100% due to rounding). Thus, roughly 3.6% of the variance was estimated to be at the class-within-school level. These findings indicate that children's assessments of their participation rights varied predominantly at the individual level, and to a much more limited degree across classes and schools.

In models A.1 and B.1 we included all the individual-level variables. Key findings of these models are that the level of perceived discrimination was positively related to children's appraisal of the importance of the right to express their views, $b = 0.185$, $t(999) = 4.65$, $p < .001$, as well as to their appraisal of the importance of the right to be heard, $b = 0.120$, $t(999) = 3.29$, $p < .01$, when holding constant the other individual-level variables. In standard deviation units, this implies that a one-standard-deviation increase in perceived discrimination was related to an increase in the subjective importance of the right to express views by 0.25 standard deviations. Moreover, a one-standard-deviation increase in perceived discrimination was related to an increase in the subjective importance of the right to be heard by 0.19 standard deviations. Model A.1 further shows that being female was negatively related to the subjective importance of the right to express views, whereas children's age, the school grade in which they were enrolled, and the feeling of safety did not significantly predict the evaluation of this right. Model B.1 further indicates that being enrolled in the 7th/8th (mixed-age) grade, as opposed to being enrolled in the 7th (same-age) grade, was positively related to children's evaluations of the importance of the right to be heard, whereas

children's gender, age, and their feeling of safety was not significantly related to their evaluations of this right.

In models A.2 and B.2 we included the class-level mean appraisal of the importance of participation rights. Adding this class-level variable did not significantly improve the fit of the models, as shown by a non-significant change in the -2 log-likelihood indices relative to the more restricted models, $\chi^2(1) = 1.6, p = .21$ (for model A), and $\chi^2(1) = 0.1, p = .75$ (for model B). Thus, the more restricted models A.1 and B.1, which include only individual-level variables, can be seen as the better models, given that greater parsimony is achieved with no significant decrease in the overall fit of the models (cf., Pitt & Myung, 2002).

Table 2

Multilevel Analyses Predicting Children's Appraisals of the Importance of Their Participation Rights

	Appraisal of the right to express views						Appraisal of the right to be heard					
	Model A.0		Model A.1		Model A.2		Model B.0		Model B.1		Model B.2	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Intercept	3.545***	0.049	3.143***	0.114	3.120***	0.116	3.655***	0.028	3.390***	0.099	3.386***	0.101
Individual level												
Female (ref. cat.: male)			-0.092*	0.044	-0.090*	0.044			-0.070	0.040	-0.069	0.040
Age (in years)			-0.010	0.045	-0.010	0.045			-0.067	0.040	-0.067	0.040
8th grade (ref. cat.: 7th)			-0.006	0.068	-0.006	0.067			0.004	0.062	0.004	0.062
7th/8th grade (ref. cat.: 7th)			0.145	0.143	0.231	0.142			0.270*	0.129	0.266*	0.131
Feeling of safety			0.023	0.036	0.026	0.036			-0.049	0.033	-0.048	0.033
Perceived discrimination			0.185***	0.040	0.194***	0.041			0.120**	0.036	0.121**	0.037
Class level												
Class-level perceived discrimination					0.173	0.156					0.027	0.140
Variance components												
Individual-level variance: σ^2_{ϵ}	σ^2	SE	σ^2	SE	σ^2	SE	σ^2	SE	σ^2	SE	σ^2	SE
Class-level variance: σ^2_{η}	0.471	0.022	1.757	0.081	1.758	0.081	0.391	0.018	1.486	0.069	1.486	0.069
School-level variance: σ^2_{ν}	0.008	0.008	0.009	0.008	0.008	0.008	0.014	0.008	0.011	0.007	0.011	0.007
	0.024	0.013	0.023	0.013	0.022	0.013	0.001	0.005	0.002	0.004	0.002	0.004
<i>N</i> children	1006		1006		1006		1006		1006		1006	
<i>N</i> classes	56		56		56		56		56		56	
<i>N</i> schools	14		14		14		14		14		14	
-2 log likelihood	2131.3		2098.7		2097.1		1940.0		1920.5		1920.4	

Note. Maximum likelihood estimation was used (sensitivity analyses based on restricted maximum likelihood estimation yielded substantially identical results). For the fixed effects, unstandardized coefficients (*b*) with standard errors (SE) are reported. For the random effects, variances (σ^2) with standard errors (SE) are reported. Wald tests were used to determine the significance of the coefficients (two-tailed tests). All continuous predictors were centered at the grand mean. Weights were applied in the models with predictors to correct for unequal probabilities of selection of children into the sample, as described in the *Analytical Strategy* section. None of the models suffered from collinearity problems, with all variance inflation factor values being below 1.9.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Discussion

Children's participation rights are now widely recognized as an essential component of human rights-based modern societies. Participation rights should ensure that children are given the opportunity to influence decision-making processes and thereby take some degree of control over their own lives (CRC/C/66/2, 2014; Jones, 2017; Lansdown, 2010; Thomas, 2007). This study examined children's appraisals concerning the importance of the two dimensions of participation rights that are stipulated in Article 12 of the CRC, namely, the right to express views and the right to be heard, which constitute a necessary condition for children to take part in social life. Furthermore, the study investigated whether children attribute greater importance to these rights if they perceive discrimination in their school environment.

Findings indicate that a large majority of children enrolled in the final two years of primary school considered their participation rights as either important or very important, which supports policy initiatives aimed at strengthening children's active participation in school and, more generally, in all matters directly and indirectly of concern to them. The high level of importance ascribed to participation rights points to children clearly desiring opportunities to express their opinions and, moreover, to have these opinions taken into account. This is in line with conclusions from smaller-scale, qualitative research, which indicated that children expect to be involved in decision-making processes, appreciate being afforded respect in such processes (Morrow, 1999), and value being given the opportunity to express their viewpoints (Smith, Taylor, & Tapp, 2003).

Our study also indicates that children's appraisals of their participation rights differed to a minor degree between classes and schools, although most of the variation in these appraisals was estimated to be at the individual level. Hence contextual conditions in classrooms and schools had a measurable yet weak effect on how children assessed their participation rights. This evidence of weak contextual effects is somewhat at odds with prior research showing that children's perceptions of their rights differ along the lines of school characteristics, such as schools' openness to children's criticism (Khoury-Kassabri & Ben-Arieh, 2009), and across different social spheres, including both the school and the community (Ben-Arieh & Attar-Schwartz, 2013). Thus, although children's views of their participation rights should be understood within a social-ecological framework whereby both individual-level characteristics and sociocultural contexts impact children's interpretations of their rights (Gal, 2017; Peterson-Badali & Ruck, 2008; Ruck et al.,

2014; Sherrod, 2008), we nevertheless found that most of the variance in children's evaluation of participation rights was at the individual level. Across the Geneva-based schools investigated, contextual influences on children's views of their participation rights were modest. This is, in part, due to the small overall variation in children's appraisals of their participation rights. Hypothetically, it might also be a consequence of policy initiatives promoting children's exercise of participation rights in the city of Geneva (Karabasheva et al., 2015; Ville de Genève, 2014). However, further research is needed to test this hypothesis and elucidate the socio-cultural determinants of children's appraisals of participation rights, before drawing any such conclusions.

Our findings also suggest that children who perceived discrimination in their school environment attached more importance to the right to express views and the right to be heard, than children who did not perceive such discrimination. These results relate to evidence illustrating the psychological undercurrents of children's views of participation rights (Burger, 2017; Magalhães et al., 2016). Psychological theory suggests that fundamental needs for belonging and relatedness must be satisfied in order for any individual to thrive and participate in social life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Where the needs for belonging and relatedness are left unsatisfied owing to discrimination experiences, children will in all likelihood feel deprived of their basic right to take part in social life (which includes the right to express views and to claim that these views be taken into account). As a result, children who feel discriminated against are likely to ascribe greater importance to their participation rights, which formally acknowledge their entitlement to equal opportunity for participation.

Discriminatory behavior has the purpose and/or effect of marginalizing or excluding children and thus clearly interferes with children's need for social acceptance by other people. Children who are discriminated against will feel a need for social acceptance and for positive interpersonal relationships, and may see participation rights as a means to such an end. In order to build and maintain positive interpersonal relationships based on mutual respect, children must be given space to express views and be heard. That is, such relationships can only exist "in the context of a stable framework of affective concern for each other's welfare" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497), rather than one where children's views are, for instance, ridiculed or ignored. A climate of discrimination clearly undermines a stable framework of affective concern for each other's welfare, which would be a prerequisite for positive relationships and the fulfillment of the needs for social acceptance, belonging and relatedness. Thus, in a discriminatory environment, children

tend to attach greater importance to their participation rights, which lay the foundation for respectful interactions and the fulfillment of primary socio-psychological needs.

As discriminatory environments are “conducive to neither the expression of children’s views, nor to those views being taken seriously” (Lansdown et al., 2014, p. 4), our research also examined whether the average level of perceived discrimination in a school class was associated with a child’s appraisal of the importance of participation rights. The findings suggest that class-level perceived discrimination was not significantly associated with a child’s appraisal of the importance of participation rights. Thus, a child’s idiosyncratic perception of discrimination, rather than the average perception of discrimination in a school class, explained more of the variation in the appraisals of participation rights. However, this should be interpreted cautiously given the restricted overall variation in children’s appraisals of their participation rights.

Further findings indicate that, on average, girls attributed less importance to the right to express views than boys. This difference may be related to how girls and boys experience important aspects of their social world. For instance, theory suggests that in families with traditional gender roles, girls are frequently granted fewer participation opportunities than boys (Ruck & Peterson-Badali, 2006). However, empirical evidence on gender differences in the subjective importance of rights is scarce, and thus further research is needed to clarify underlying processes. Finally, our study shows that children in mixed-age (7th/8th grade) school classes attributed more importance to their right to be heard than children in same-age (7th grade) school classes. This serendipitous finding is potentially relevant to children’s rights research and school psychology (e.g., Quail & Smyth, 2014), and thus we recommend that future research analyze whether the finding is replicable in other school systems and in larger samples, considering that in the present sample only 3.7% of children attended mixed-age classes.¹ In addition, we also encourage researchers to explore those mechanisms that explain why children in mixed-age classes may be more likely to emphasize the importance of their right to be heard.

¹ In sensitivity analyses, we excluded the school grade variables (8th grade, 7th/8th grade) from the models to determine whether the findings remain robust (given that we already controlled for age). These findings fully confirmed the results and conclusions of the study. As noted previously, we included both school grade and age in the models that we reported here because there was a relatively wide age range in each grade, and these two covariates were therefore not redundant.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The CRC brought the imperative for protecting, respecting, and fulfilling the participation rights of every child to a global scale; and schools should be among the primary actors to realize the CRC in children's everyday lives. The present study suggests that initiatives to promote children's active participation, and fully realize participation rights in schools and beyond, will be highly valued by children. School principals, teachers, psychologists, social workers and other professionals are obliged not only to inform children about their participation rights, but also to enable children to participate effectively in everyday social life. Children must be given the opportunity to articulate their views, present arguments and negotiate; and these must be heard and taken seriously (Chawla & Heft, 2002; Hart, 1997; Lansdown et al., 2014). Such opportunities will allow them to address issues and problems constructively (Horwath, Kalyva, & Spyru, 2012), allowing for the development of greater independence and higher levels of self-determination (Kosher, Jiang, Ben-Arieh, & Scott, 2014; Ruck et al., 2014). Where children lack such opportunities, the value of any formally guaranteed participation right is diminished because children will be unable to fully enjoy their rights in practice (c.f., Burger, Karabasheva, Zermatten, & Jaffé, 2016).

Moreover, the study indicates that participation rights are particularly important to children who perceive discrimination in their school environment. Teachers and other practitioners are therefore urged to guarantee that the participation rights of these children are respected. They should not only respect all children equally themselves, but also impose sanctions on discriminatory behavior perpetrated by others, as such behavior hinders children's participation and the fulfillment of their participation rights. Furthermore, children who feel discriminated against or otherwise marginalized, should be offered social support and helped to challenge such occurrences of discrimination. Prior research has shown, for instance, that children who receive higher levels of social support develop a higher level of self-esteem, confidence, subjective well-being, and resilience (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005; Dumont & Provost, 1999; Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2010). These psychological resources are, in turn, important determinants of children's participation in social life. Furthermore, relationships of trust and processes that embody respectful interactions in the school environment are crucial tools to promote children's participation, as well as to translate their participation rights into practice (Bell, 2002).

Study Limitations and Implications for Further Research

The current study provides empirical evidence that children's subjective evaluations of their participation rights vary according to perceived discrimination in the school environment, adding value to the wealth of research on children's rights in schools (e.g., Kosher et al., 2014; Lansdown et al., 2014; McLoughlin & Hart, 2014) and on the psychosocial outcomes of discrimination (e.g., English, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2016; Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012; Pachter & Coll, 2009). However, findings must be considered in light of certain limitations, which call for future research to extend the body of knowledge. First, the cross-sectional design of the study did not allow for detecting causal or dynamic relationships. Effects reported in this article refer only to relationships among variables and have no causal interpretation. Longitudinal research spanning the period from early childhood to young adulthood would allow for determining to what extent children's views of their rights change over time (e.g., as a function of environmental influences and/or developmental stages) and to what extent experiences of discrimination causally impact children's evaluation of their rights. Second, this study did not examine the mechanisms underlying the link between perceived discrimination and the subjective importance of participation rights. We recommend that future analyses clarify those mechanisms by focusing, in particular, on the role of both psychological and social factors, such as self-esteem and trustful relationships, in mediating this link. Third, we did not collect sociodemographic information and, consequently, did not conduct group-specific analyses or assess interaction effects between perceived discrimination and sociodemographic variables. Bearing in mind that perceptions of discrimination and participation rights may differ for children with respect to socioeconomic, cultural or ethnic background, we encourage researchers to analyze potential disparities associated with such variables. We also acknowledge that the dependent variables used here were single-item measures, rather than latent constructs, and we recommend that further research develop multi-item scales to assess more facets of children's appraisals of their participation rights. Finally, our sample included children from only fourteen schools, and a majority of these children perceived relatively low levels of discrimination and attached great importance to participation rights. Future research should therefore replicate the analyses using other (larger) samples and different contexts in order to assess variations in the results. For example, in contexts characterized by higher levels of

discrimination, relationships between perceived discrimination and the appraisal of participation rights may well be stronger. Moreover, it is worth noting that children's participation rights have been conceptualized in different ways. We considered those two dimensions of participation rights stipulated in Article 12 of the CRC—children's right to express their views and the right to be heard. We believe future research should focus on further, more closely differentiated, aspects of participation rights, such as the differences between children's right to be heard and their right to have their views given due weight, children's self-determination and autonomy in decision-making, or the conditions that must be met for a child to become a meaningful participant in social life (e.g., Helwig, 2006; Lundy, 2007; Melton, 2008; Ruck, Keating, Saewyc, Earls, & Ben-Arieh, 2016; Stern, 2017).

Conclusion

Participation is a fundamental human right and a general principle of the CRC, accompanying and underlying all other rights of the child. This study found that most children attending the last two years of primary schools attached great importance to their participation rights. Furthermore, children who reported that adults in their school environment did not respect all children equally, tended to assign greater value to their participation rights. We conclude that the subjective importance of participation rights is potentially greater when children are exposed to discrimination, as these rights protect children against marginalization and exclusion, which is the purpose and/or consequence of discriminatory behavior, and thus clearly impairs the full and equal enjoyment of participation rights. In light of this, it is imperative that governments, policymakers, and practitioners implement participation rights in such a way that all children, regardless of perceived or actual circumstance, are capable of claiming these rights effectively in their everyday life.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Approval to conduct this research has been obtained from the General Directorate of Education of the Canton of Geneva, the Review Board overseeing research to be conducted in educational institutions, and the principals of the schools. We have no conflicts of interest.

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Annex

Table A

Number of schools, classes per school, and children per class

School	Class	Children	School	Class	Children
1	1	20	8	1	24
	2	21		2	21
	3	12		3	23
	4	24		4	19
2	1	23		5	7
	2	19	9	1	24
	3	19		2	8
	4	20		3	20
	5	17	10	1	15
	6	21		2	16
	7	17		3	14
3	1	22		11	1
	2	18	2		22
	3	16	3		21
4	1	22	12	1	18
	2	21		2	20
	3	19	13	1	16
	4	20		2	17
5	1	20	14	3	17
	2	20		4	19
	3	21		1	17
	4	21		2	16
6	1	10		3	15
	2	19		4	18
	3	17		5	15
	4	16			
	5	6			
	6	6			
7	1	20			
	2	19			
	3	15			
	4	19			