

I WANT TO PARTICIPATE, TOO!

children's participation in school



OMBUDSMAN FOR CHILDREN

The publication I WANT TO PARTICIPATE, TOO! – CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL aims to inform children about the results of the research PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM, carried out by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and collaborators. The whole research is presented in the scientific publication PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOL, Osmak Franjić, D., Borić, I. (2019), published by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and the University of Zagreb Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences.

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These are children's statements about an important children's right – the right to participation – and about adults who sometimes ignore this right or have to be better informed about it.

The research Participation of Children in the Education System, carried out by the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in collaboration with the researchers of the University of Zagreb, was intended both to help children realise this right and to help adults facilitate its realisation.

This booklet provides a short overview of the research and its main results and messages.



Participating
= expressing our views in all matters that affect us
= participating in making decisions about things that concern us



In accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, every child has a right to express his or her views in all matters that affect him or her. Adults are obliged to listen carefully to the child's views and give them due weight when making decisions concerning the child. This right, **the child's**

right to participation, is described in Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The participation principle is immanent to all children's rights: the right to live with their parents, the right to education, the right to health, the right to protection from violence and all other rights.

Why does children's participation in school matter?

School is important for the growth and development of every child. Children spend a lot of their time at school, where they acquire new knowledge, skills and values, and meet new friends. Through learning, playing and socialising with their schoolmates, children

create their own social networks and develop as individuals. School is also a key place for children to learn about and exercise their rights, including the right to participation.



THE RESEARCH

The research on participation employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the qualitative part of the research, children and adults talked with the researchers in small groups and answered their questions, prepared in advance. Their replies were recorded and thoroughly analysed, with the data obtained used to compile the Questionnaire on the Participation of Children in the Education System.

In the quantitative phase of the research, children and adults filled out questionnaires and responded to a large number of questions about children's participation in school. These replies were processed by special statistical methods and the researchers drew

important conclusions from all collected data and responses.

Child members of the **Network of Young Advisors to the Ombudsman for Children (NYA)** played an important role in the research: they acted as consultants during the first phase of the research and during the preparation of the Questionnaire on the Participation of Children in the Education System, and they also took part in the presentation of results and conclusions. Another important role was played by children from two primary schools and one secondary school who participated in the pilot implementation of the Questionnaire.



What was our aim?

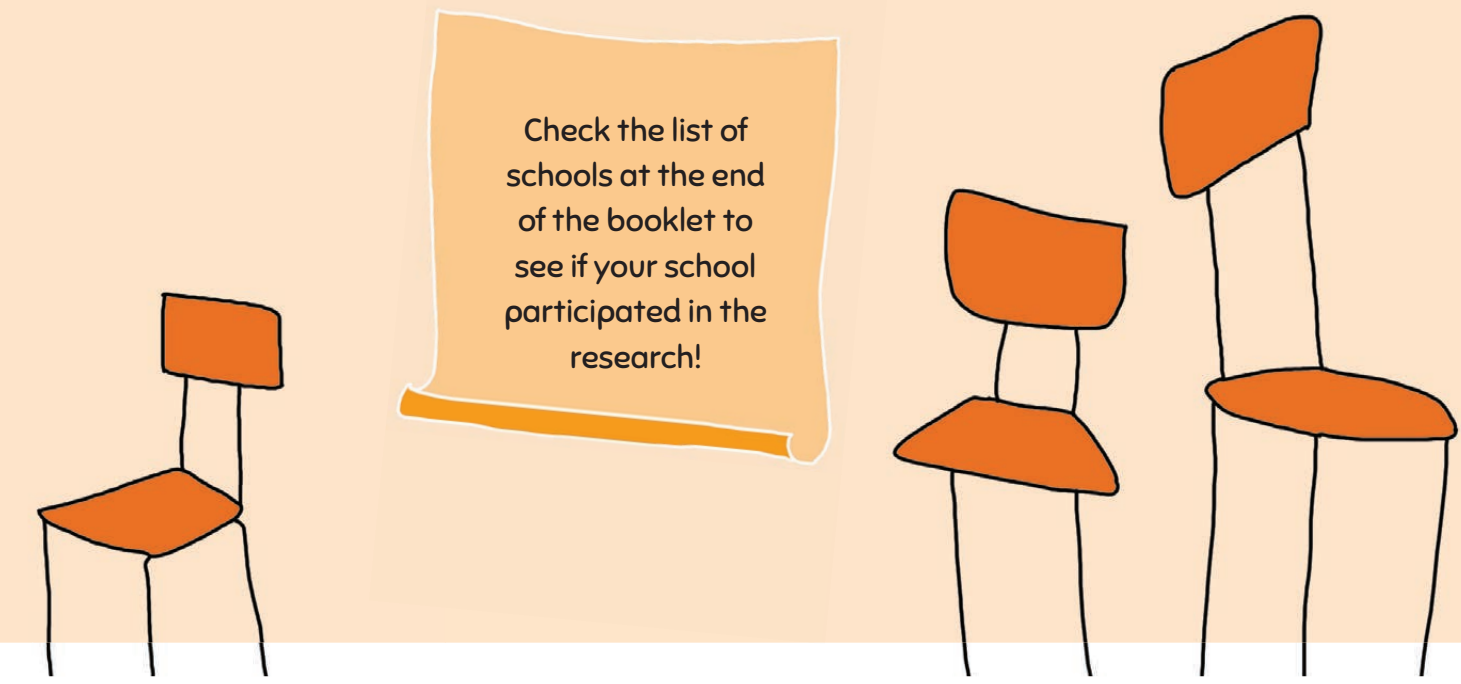
Our aim was to obtain information that would improve our understanding of the perspectives of children (students) and adults (teachers and counsellors) on the realisation of the

children's right to participation in school and to use this information to develop guidelines for the enhancement of students' participation.

Who participated in the research?

The research, in all its phases, involved 3,145 children and 502 adults (teachers and school counsellors) from primary and secondary schools from the whole of Croatia (65 in total). The schools that participated in the research

were of different kind and from all Croatian counties: large and small, city schools, village schools, island schools, schools providing classes in minority languages, and others.

An illustration featuring a scroll with text, three simple chairs, and a light orange background. The scroll is the central focus, with text written on it. To the left and right of the scroll are three simple, stylized chairs with orange seats and backs. The background is a solid light orange color.

Check the list of schools at the end of the booklet to see if your school participated in the research!

Students' participation in school, as described in conversation with children:

To participate in school as a student means to receive and share information, to be asked and consulted about matters regarding class and school life, to participate actively in curricular and extracurricular activities, to take part in making decisions that are important for students and to propose and realise ideas and projects; it also means to do all this in line with your own interests and abilities while being supported and respected by children and adults in your school.

Research questions

- How do students (children) and adults (teachers and counsellors) perceive school?
- How do students and teachers perceive children's participation in school?
- What are the forms and levels of students' participation in school?
- What is the role of student councils regarding students' participation in school?
- What is the role of adults in students' participation in school?
- What encourages and what hinders children's participation in school?



WHAT DID WE LEARN?

1 HOW DO CHILDREN AND ADULTS PERCEIVE SCHOOL?

Both adults and children are generally satisfied with school – adults a little bit more. However, they are dissatisfied with the curriculum overload, and they also notice some other problems.

+ Both children and adults are satisfied with:

- good relationships with schoolmates or colleagues;
- good relationships between students and teachers;
- good condition of schools.

- Students say:

- some schools do not provide meals and lack hot water and toilet paper;
- some teachers are rude and disrespectful towards students.

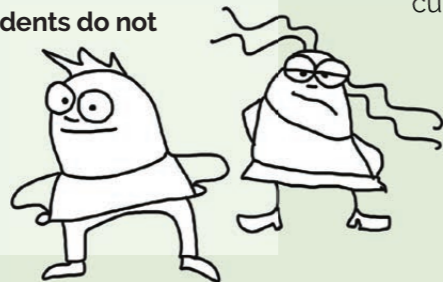
Adults say:

- village schools and vocational secondary schools are more disadvantaged than others.

Both children and adults point out that students are overburdened with curriculum requirements.

Reasons for concern

More than 24.5% of students do not feel connected with their schoolmates and adults in their school and are not happy there.



2

HOW DO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS PERCEIVE CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL?

Both children and adults consider children's participation in school very important because children view and experience things in a different way than adults, which can make school life better for everyone.



This is good, but we actually do not think that our views can make any difference in school or influence the outcomes of some decisions. Adults believe that we cannot participate in discussions on issues that really matter!

Good students participate the most – this is **hands-up participation**, and it takes courage.

All students should be encouraged to participate and be involved in participation!

Children's participation is important, but there is no clear vision about what students' participation in the education system should be about. We lack knowledge about the ways to encourage children's participation and skills to develop good relationships between teachers and students. This is not something we learned in college!

3

WHAT ARE THE FORMS AND LEVELS OF CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN CLASS AND SCHOOL LIFE?

Children's participation in school is rich and diverse when it comes to extracurricular and leisure activities as well as various school happenings and events, which are mostly initiated and guided by adults. However, children do not often initiate such activities themselves and their participation in making important decisions in school is low. They are not interested in sitting on student councils and representing their class, but in participating in school and class projects and actions.

In lower grades – up to the 4th grade – students have more opportunity to participate in matters concerning their school life and develop their relationship with teachers. In upper grades, however, this is no longer possible due to time constraints caused by loads of school assignments and other obligations. In secondary schools (especially in vocational courses) there are even fewer possibilities for participation and students are expected to initiate these activities themselves.



Children think that adults decide who participates and to what extent and that they determine the content of participation – adults choose well-behaved students; they approve children's ideas and proposals and decide whether they will support their realisation. Therefore, the participation of the school majority (children) is under the strong influence of the minority (adults). What is more, adults are inconsistent when it comes to accepting children's proposals: rather than having the same criteria for everyone, they act at their own discretion.

4

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF STUDENT COUNCILS REGARDING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL?

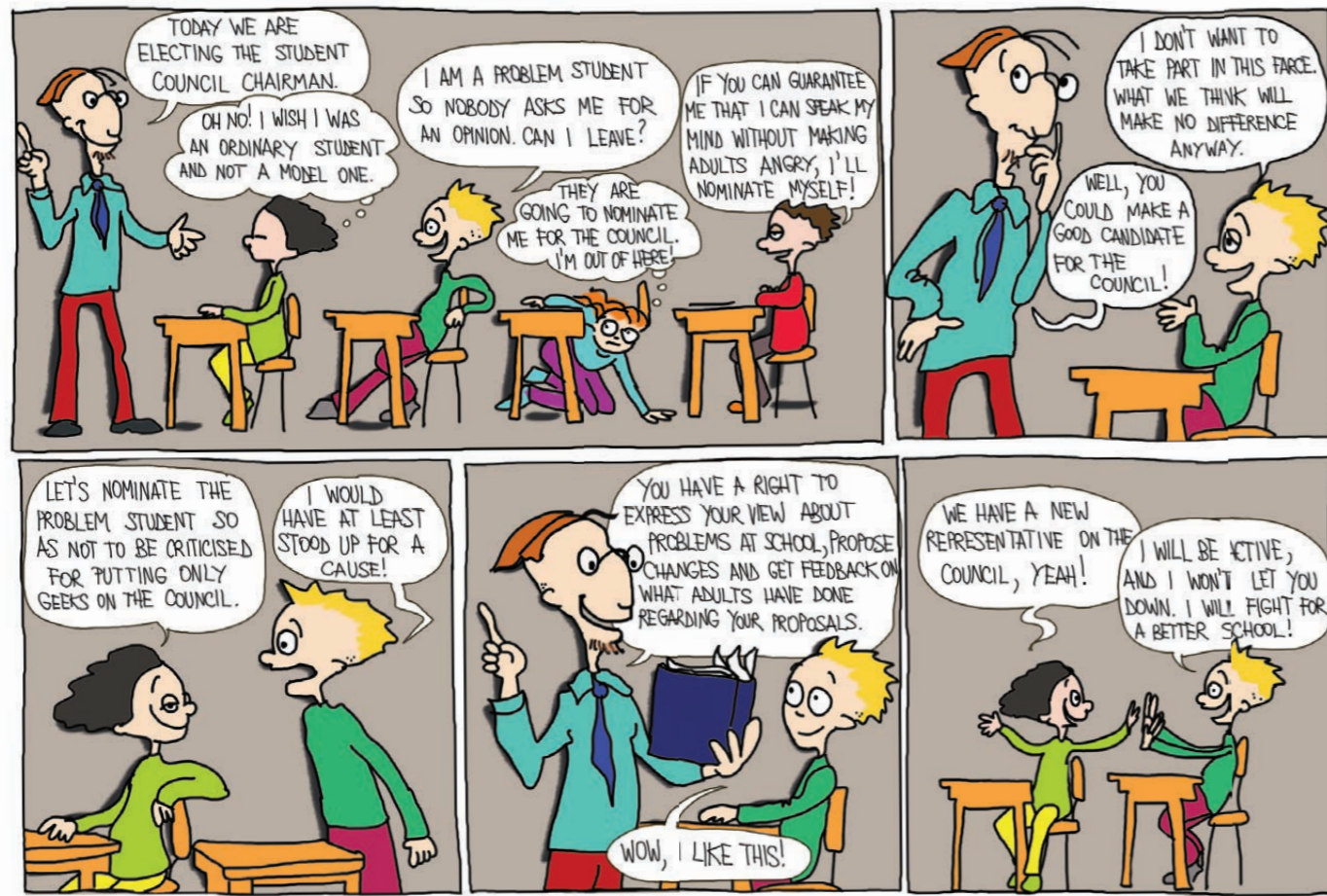
Both children and adults are aware that there are student councils in their schools, but they are not well informed about what they do. A large number of students believe that student councils do not participate in resolving school problems and are therefore not interested in council membership (*I'd rather be just a regular student!*). Student council members are mostly students who are at the top of the class, exemplary and "non-problematic".

However, both children and adults support the idea of student councils actively representing children's views and interests. Councils also provide assistance in students' democratic civic education.



If only the council was a safe place where students could express their views – without making adults angry!

The range of activity and importance of student councils primarily depend on adults – they should support children and prepare them for active participation in student councils, standing ready to hear and accept their proposals.



Children strongly desire to be treated (and loved) equally, but in reality this is often not so. Students notice that some teachers favour the opinion of excellent and well-behaved students, *teachers' pets*, while taking those who are "different" less seriously and being prone to neglect their opinion.



Adults are more knowledgeable, experienced and powerful, so that it is normal that they have more rights in school than we do and that their word carries more weight. Still, we want more respect, equality and justice in relationships with adults.

It should be noted that most children are not aware of the role of principals, that is, they do not see them as persons they can turn to for help. They perceive school counsellors – pedagogues, psychologists and librarians – as adults who support them, represent their rights and protect them.

5

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ADULTS IN CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL?

All research participants think that children and adults are not and cannot be equal in school.

A lot depends on teachers' mood and students' behaviour. When a teacher is in a good mood, and students study well, do their homework and "stay out of trouble"

– everything is fine. Otherwise, teachers tend to abuse their power, thus adversely affecting the feeling of trust and connection as well as the participation of children, who then tend to refrain from participating and keep silent.

How do adults see their role?

In order to effect changes in school, adults have to get involved and act as role models for participation and for building better relationships and equality, based on mutual respect between children and adults in school. It is important that teachers have a "loving authority" that derives from sincerity, fairness and respect.

6

WHAT ENCOURAGES AND WHAT HINDERS CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL?

Children's participation in school would be best encouraged by better relationships with adults: fair treatment and grading, the openness of adults, good mood and kindness.

Children find it important to feel safe in school and not to be afraid to express their views. They consider the support of adults as an incentive to participation, more important than the support of peers.



Participation in school could be enhanced:

by increasing the number of elective courses (especially in secondary schools),

by creating an atmosphere of acceptance and freedom of expression for everyone in school,

by encouraging collaborative learning and work in small groups,

by setting up child-friendly areas where children can socialize and meet at school premises.

Secondary school students point out that schools are UNCREATIVE and OUTDATED, emphasising their dissatisfaction with the educational system as a whole.

RESEARCH MESSAGES

1. Both children and adults think that it is important and desirable to actively involve school children in all matters and issues concerning them.
2. The current methods of work and life in schools do not encourage true participation of children in making decisions important to them. All focus is on grades and learning outcomes, while creating good relationships between teachers and children is neglected. Both teachers and children are dissatisfied with that. Good relationships are the key to promoting children's participation.
3. A reduced curriculum burden and relaxed rules as well as increased openness in teacher-student relationships would create an opportunity for a dialogue between children and adults and facilitate true children's participation – participation that makes sense for them.



Messages to children

You have a right to participate in school and make decisions about things that concern you.

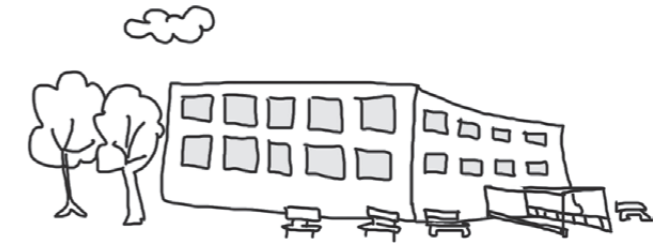
This means that you have a right to:

- participate in creating class rules;
- propose changes to school house rules;
- propose school projects and activities and express your views about class and school problems;
- seek help for yourselves when something is bothering you, or seek help for a friend of yours;
- receive feedback on what adults have done about your proposals – which proposals have and which have not been accepted (and why);
- and do much more.

Messages to adults



Schools participating in the research

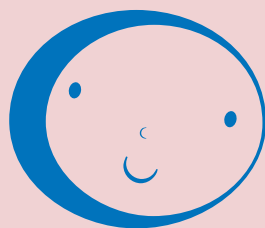


PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Sesvete Primary School, Braća Radić Primary School - Kloštar Ivanić, Milan Lang Primary School - Bregana, Pavlek Miškina Primary School - Zagreb, Orehovica Primary School, Čazma Primary School, Ivan Lacković Croatia Primary School - Kalinovac, Ivan Kukuljević Sakcinski Primary School - Ivanec, Fran Galović Primary School - Zagreb, Retkovec Primary School - Zagreb, Miroslav Krleža Primary School - Zagreb, Borovo Primary School, Kneževi Vinogradi Primary School, Braća Radić Primary School - Pakrac, Trpinja Primary School, Višnjevac Primary School, Antun Mihanović Primary School - Osijek, Mato Lovrak Primary School - Petrinja, Vladimir Nazor Primary School - Duga Resa, Dr. Jure Turić Primary School - Gospić, Rikard Katalinić Jeretov Primary School - Opatija, Skrad Primary School, Marija and Lina Primary School - Umag, Pehlin Primary School - Rijeka, Waldorf Primary School - Rijeka, Malinska - Dubašnica Primary School, Juraj Dalmatinac Primary School - Pag, Kistanje Primary School, Gripe Primary School - Split, Don Mihovil Pavlinović Primary School - Metković, Primary School "1st October 1942." Čišla - Dislocated School Kostanje, Strožanac Primary School - Podstrana, Knez Trpimir Primary School - Kaštel Gomilica

SECONDARY SCHOOLS

School of Applied Arts and Design Zagreb, Ivan Švear Secondary School Ivanić Grad, Antun Gustav Matoš Grammar School Samobor, Zabok Secondary School, Fran Galović Grammar School Koprivnica, School of Natural Sciences Vladimir Prelog - Zagreb, Tituš Brezovački Grammar School - Zagreb, Administrative School Zagreb, School of Construction and Geodesy Osijek, School of Economics Vukovar, Požega Grammar School, School of Medicine Osijek, 2nd Grammar School Osijek, School of Electrotechnics and Traffic Osijek, Technical School, Slavonski Brod, School of Industry and Crafts Virovitica, Vocational School Gospić, Medical School Karlovac, Grammar School Sisak, Secondary School Delnice, School of Economics Delnice, School of Tourism and Hospitality Management Anton Štifanić - Poreč, Italian Secondary School Rijeka/Scuola media superiore italiana Fiume, Bartul Kašić Secondary School - Pag, Dr. Antun Barac Secondary School - Crikvenica, School of Design, Graphic Arts and Sustainable Construction Split, Medical School Šibenik, Grammar School Metković, 3rd Grammar School Split, School of Crafts and Technology Split, Braća Radić Secondary School - Kaštel Štafilić



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