

PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN in School



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Summary of the scientific publication



Zagreb, 2019



This booklet is the English summary of 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.



Preface

The right of children to participate is one of the four fundamental principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and it refers to the children's right to freely express their opinion on all issues that concern them. Although this area of children's rights is extremely important, both for the affirmation of the child as right holder, and for her/his future role as an active citizen, it is still insufficiently researched in our country. In the daily work of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children, we notice that the problem of ignorance and misunderstanding of the purpose of the child's right to participate is still present, not only in school, but also in other areas of the child's life, and that there is a low level of adult competence to communicate and work with children to achieve their rights.

In order to contribute to a better understanding of the situation in the exercise of children's participatory rights in the education system, in 2017 and 2018 we conducted research entitled "Participation of children in the education system". With this research project, we marked the 15th anniversary of the work of the Ombudsman for Children in Croatia, with a special focus on the influence of children on our work, especially through the Network of Young Advisors of the Ombudsman for Children – the NYA.

The research was conducted by a research team led by Associate Professor Ivana Borić, PhD, from the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation of the University of Zagreb, consisting of the following experts in the field of children's participation: Associate Professor Valentina Kranželić, PhD, Assistant Professor Anja Miroslavljević, PhD and Andrea Ćosić, mag. paed. soc., all from the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation in Zagreb, Ana Širanović, PhD, from the Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Zagreb, and Davorka Osmak Franjić, adviser to the Ombudsman for Children, who is also the

research coordinator. In the quantitative phase of the research, the research team was joined by Assistant Professor Aleksandra Huić, PhD from the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb.

Almost the entire team of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children participated in the research, while the children from the Network of Young Advisors of the Ombudsman for Children were important consultants in the first phase of the research and the preparation of the questionnaire, and they also participated in drafting recommendations and in presenting the results and conclusions of the research.

The research results were published in 2019 in the scientific publication “Participation of children in the education system”, published by the Ombudsman for Children and the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation of the University of Zagreb. The reviewers of the scientific publication are Prof. Nivex Koller Trbović, PhD and Prof. Dubravka Maleš, PhD.

In addition to presenting the methodology and results of the qualitative and quantitative part of the research, this publication also offers an exhaustive theoretical part on the fundamental starting points for understanding children’s participation. It shows the role of children’s participation in the work of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children – mainly through the work of the NYA, it lists all the national documents in which children’s participatory rights are stated, and it shows a number of examples of good practice of children’s participation in school, collected during the research. All members of the research team are also authors of individual articles in this publication.

The book also offers an extensive list of professional literature that deals with children’s participation, and the appendix at the end contains the instruments used in the research: questionnaires for students and teachers, guides for discussion in focus groups with students and teachers, invitation letters and more. In this way, it is also an incentive to others for further research into realization of children’s right to meaningful participation.

In the text that follows, the main conclusions of the research and the recommendations arising therefrom are summarized.



Participation of Children in the Education System

Summary of the Research

The Office of the Ombudswoman for Children of the Republic of Croatia, in cooperation with the scholars from the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences and the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb have conducted the research on the participation of children in the education system. The field of education was deliberately chosen for research, since the majority of children are involved in education, and school life is a crucial part of growing up for each child.

As educational institutions, schools represent an important environment in the growth and development of every child. Children spend a significant part of their time at school, where they create their own social networks and develop as individuals through learning, playing, and socializing. Therefore, school is in fact the key place for learning about and promoting children's rights, as well as for the realization of their rights.

Participation of students in school activities implies different things: from formal participation through student representative bodies, individual contribution at class level, participation in activities and projects, to independent initiation of projects in school.

The importance of researching the participation of children in the field of education has been further recognized through the work of the Network of Young Advisors to the Ombudswoman for Children (NYA). Several generations of young advisors have identified the need to further investigate the nature of the participation of children in school activities.

The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the participation of children in the education system from the

perspective of children (students) and adults (teachers and school counselors).

The following research questions have been defined:

- 1) How do students and adults experience schools?
- 2) How do students and adults experience the participation of children in school activities?
- 3) What are the forms and levels of the participation of students in school activities?
- 4) What is the role of student councils in relation to the participation of children in school activities?
- 5) What is the role of adults in student participation in school activities?
- 6) What encourages children to participate in school activities and what makes it more difficult for them to do so?

The research was conducted in the period from September 2017 to June 2018, using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The qualitative part of the research included 19 focus groups and was conducted in 4 regions of the Republic of Croatia, involving a total of 70 children and 41 adults from primary and secondary schools.

The quantitative part of the research included students and adults from 41 schools across Croatia: 21 primary schools and 20 secondary schools. Convenience sampling was used, but much effort was made to include schools from all Croatian counties. The aim was to cover different schools: larger, smaller, schools in urban and rural areas, schools in more isolated areas, schools where children are educated in the languages of national minorities, schools on islands etc.

A total of 2720 students and 461 adults participated in the quantitative part of the research.

Conclusions drawn in relation to the research questions are based on the collective results of the qualitative and quantitative part of the research.

1 Perception of school

The children and adults are generally satisfied with the schools they attend or in which they work. However, adults are more satisfied than children. Good relationships (among peers/colleagues and good relationships between children and teachers) and good school conditions are mentioned among the factors that make children satisfied with school life.

What makes children and adults dissatisfied is the overloaded curriculum and the responsibilities that create stress for students and cause teachers to feel that their work is reduced to administrative tasks. Modernization and digitalization, which have contributed to the technical advancement of teaching, at the same time hinder the relationship aspects of school life. Teachers and school counselors also warn of the disadvantageous position of schools in rural environments, and vocational schools.

It is important to point out that children often say that certain basic requirements are not met in their schools. They mention the lack of hot water, toilet paper, a warm meal at school, and a presence of particularly troubling practices of gross violations of children's rights that are manifested through rough and hurtful behavior of some teachers. All this suggests that in addition to the general satisfaction with the school, there are many areas where improvements are needed.

2 Perception of participation in school activities

Children and adults believe that the right of children to participate in school activities is extremely important, with adult attitudes being pronouncedly positive. Participation is considered to be important because of the uniqueness of children's perspective and the experience of children that both the adults and the children recognize and appreciate as qualitatively different from the adult's perspective.

Children believe that participation of children in school activities can improve school life for everyone. Although they consider participation

important, children emphasize that they do not believe their opinion can lead to changes at school or affect the outcome of certain decisions.

Children are rarely involved in the discussions about relevant topics because adults often think that children are not competent enough to participate in them.

Children believe that their participation would become significant if a shift were made from symbolic to relevant, and from putting forward always the same, good students who frequently participate, to encouraging and including all students, especially those who are not likely to get involved of their own accord.

It is emphasized that although the participation of children may have different forms, it is generally reduced to one - “hands-up” participation, which favors those with higher intellectual capacities and more successful at school. In practice, the school system often “*condemns participation*” so that sometimes a greater participation results in absence from class and worse grades, thus discouraging some of the students from participating more.

Adult research participants believe that there is no clear vision about what is expected of the student participation at the level of the education system. They emphasize the need to introduce content related to child participation into formal education of teachers, as well as the need to put emphasis on the content that provides knowledge and skills that develop a good relationship with children.

3

Forms and levels of student participation in school activities

Participation of children in school activities is rich and diverse when it comes to extracurricular and leisure activities, as well as various activities and events. This kind of participation is mostly initiated and guided by adults. But when it comes to the level of decision-making and participation in the decision-making process, as well as children’s initiatives, the participation is much lower and much more limited.

Students want to participate in school activities to a relatively high degree, and they believe that they are capable of this and possess sufficient skills to do so.

However, it is also evident that the least desirable way for them to achieve this is formally by representing their class in the student council. They are more attracted to participation in both school and class projects and activities or more informal activities.

Similarly, a student as an individual (depending on his or her abilities and choices) can be involved in a variety of school activities, but students as a group actually participate very little in the discussion of relevant topics related to their school life.

In the lower grades of primary school children have more opportunities for direct daily participation and developing relationships with teachers, while in the upper grades children are more content-oriented.

In secondary schools (especially in vocational programs) the opportunities for participation are even more limited and more student initiative is expected.

It is interesting to note that with an increase in age, children's competencies for participation (e.g. development of communication skills, abstract thinking, and gaining experience) grow, whereas the possibilities for participation in school activities become reduced. While children become more able to participate, there are less possibilities for them to do so within the traditional system.

Children still think that the power to decide is clearly the domain of adults: adults choose those who behave well (they decide who will participate) and adults approve children's ideas and suggestions (they decide on the content of participation). So, the participation of the majority (the children) in school is under a great influence of the minority (the adults), who almost completely dictate it (through relationships and resources).

In doing so, the adults in school are inconsistent when it comes to accepting children's suggestions, and they accept them depending solely on their mood and, as children often emphasize, their current mood.

4 The Role of Student Councils

Students and adults (teachers and school counselors) are well acquainted with the student council and they say they are aware that such councils do exist in their schools. They are to a lesser extent familiar with the work of the student council itself, i.e. questions and issues that the student council deals with.

It is interesting that a significant part of the students believes that the student council is not actually involved in solving problems in school, which raises the question of whether the student council is recognized only as a formal body with no real purpose in fulfilling the student's right to participate or even solving a problem. It seems that neither the children nor the adults are entirely clear about the role and purpose of the student council, nor do they attribute to it any possibility of influencing school-related decisions.

Student councils are in principle seen as formal bodies and the interest of children to participate in the work of a student council is low. Generally speaking, children would be more interested in being involved in the work of the student council if the council itself were a safe place to express opinion without the adults getting angry. Both the adults and the children see the student council as a potential, as a body that can contribute to the strengthening of the competencies of active citizenship, but also as a body that can actively represent the opinion and interests of children.

A strong message delivered from the research participants is that the adults are the key factor when it comes to the significance and activities of student councils; children need adults who will facilitate and mentor the work of student councils and adults who will be prepared to hear and accept suggestions from the student council.

It is also a matter of concern that formal participation through student councils actually empowers those who have already been established, since the members of the student council are most often exemplary and non-problematic students with better school success.

5

The role of the adults in relation to student participation in school activities

The data show that all participants unanimously agree that children and adults in school are not and cannot be equal. Children attribute to adults more knowledge, more experience, more power, greater perceived value of opinion, and even more rights, and as a result they almost perceive all the above as an axiom. It would seem that children need to respect adults more than they respect them in turn, and that is almost considered to be normal and acceptable behavior in the eyes of the children.

Moreover, children often mention that much depends on the conjunction of two components: the mood of the teachers and the behavior of the students. If the teachers are in good mood (*“if he/she is in good mood, if everything is ok at home”*), and the students are well-behaved (*“they learn, they do homework, they do not cause any trouble”*) then everything is fine, but if one (or even both) of the components changes, teachers tend to abuse their power.

Children sometimes find it difficult to understand the adults and to anticipate their behavior, which has a negative impact on the feeling of trust and connection, and thus the participation of children in school activities. In such cases, children often choose not to participate.

On the other hand, there is a great need for all children to be equally treated (liked) by teachers, but this hardly reflects the reality. The students notice the teacher’s bias, in the way that when teachers take into account the opinions of students, they tend to favor top students, the obedient ones and the so-called teacher’s pets, while at the same time they take less seriously those “other and different” or neglect their opinions more often.

Children ultimately want more respect, equality and justice in their relationship with the adults. It is also interesting that most children do not know the school principals, they do not feel that they can turn to them, whereas school counselors are recognized as those who support them, represent their rights and protect them.

The adults themselves believe that to achieve change in schools, it is important that the adults become more involved and act as role models for participation and encouragement of change.

The adults clearly emphasize their own responsibility for developing a good relationship with the children. They point out that it is important to work on equality when it comes to the relationship between the adults and the children, but simultaneously not give up the responsibility that is part of their formal role.

The adults say it is important to achieve “*loving authority*,” based on openness, integrity and respect.

However, adults clearly emphasize that the behavior of teachers (and generally all adults who work at schools) has become to a too high degree an issue of individual behavior that depends a lot more (for the most part) on particular teachers, and too little on common values and the behavior of the school community. They also point out their concern over the overwhelming passivity in the society, the mistrust in public systems, and low level of civic participation that is transferred from adults to children. It is important not to ignore the messages of the adults who talk about the experiences of teacher marginalization and the pressure that parents, but also the system as a whole put on children.

6

Encouraging the participation of children in school activities

Better relationships with adults are the element that would above all encourage children to participate more at school. Regarding this, children emphasize the already mentioned fairness in approach and assessment, the openness of adults, as well as good mood and kindness. However, it is important that the children feel safe and that they are not afraid to express their opinions. They also want school rules to be less enforced, and more mutually agreed upon.

Children attach great importance to space, especially when it comes to

allowing longer stays outside classrooms and regular classes (in nature, in parks) and informal socializing with adults.

For students, adult support is more important than peer support: they will be more motivated for participation by available, motivated and appreciative adults.

It seems that participation in school activities will increase when forms are relaxed in the following ways: by increasing the number of elective courses in schools (especially in secondary schools), by creating an atmosphere of acceptance and freedom of expression for all, by changing teaching methods so that they encourage collaborative learning and work in smaller groups and by creating accessible and child-friendly areas where children can socialize and meet at the school premises. In this regard, secondary school students point out in particular the lack of creativity and inefficiency of schools and emphasize their dissatisfaction with the education system as a whole.

Examples of children's participation in school - the *treasury* of children's participation

In order to further expand our understanding of the level and ways in which children participate in school activities, the Office of the Ombudswoman for Children of the Republic of Croatia has initiated in February 2018 an activity to collect examples of different forms of participation of children in school activities, with the goal of creating the so-called *treasury* of children's participation.

The aim of this activity is to become permanent and to gather and exchange good practices of child participation in school activities. An invitation was sent to all the schools in the Republic of Croatia (to students, principals, teachers and school counselors) with a request to choose examples of participation in school activities that were most important to them, for which they felt their contribution was meaningful and influenced their life in class and school.

A total of 71 schools replied, out of which 43 were primary and 28 were secondary schools.

The examples received mostly refer to the participation of children in extracurricular activities, various activities and events in school, most often encouraged and guided by adults. Fewer examples refer to the children's actual initiative and their impact on changes and decisions at schools, but it is encouraging that these examples do exist and also that children can have an influence on their school life, especially if they receive adequate support from adults.

Participation of the members of the Network of Young Advisors to the Ombudsman for Children (NYA)

It is also important to emphasize the active role of the members of the Network of Young Advisors to the Ombudsman for Children, with whom we talked and consulted about the questions posed to children in the focus groups. The Young Advisors were also exceptionally active in giving feedback on the working draft of the questionnaire drawn up after the focus groups were formed.

Further participatory work with the Young Advisors is planned with the goal of validating the research results, formulating recommendations and further disseminating the results and conclusions.



Conclusion

Based on the results of the research, there are two groups of key messages that are confirmed both by the children and the adults - these are messages at the process and content level.

At the process level, this research has confirmed that it is important, valuable and indispensable to actively involve children in topics and discussions regarding their lives. Children are interested and competent interlocutors. With this, the participation becomes both the method and the content within the work and the relationship with the children - therefore it is necessary to develop participatory (or more participatory) methods of working with children, as well as to nurture respecting the children as equal stakeholders in their relationship.

In this regard, it is important to review the existing curricula for those professions that are primarily aimed at working with children in schools and to encourage teaching in the sense of enhancing the competencies of the adults to work with children in a participatory way, as well as to teach children how to participate.

Regarding the content level, all research participants state that the involvement of children in school activities is important and desirable, but that the current way of working and school life does not encourage the essential participation of children in deciding on relevant topics.

The influence of formal student representative bodies is also negligible, and the participation is to some extent limited to those who have been established and involved, as well as to participation within the already predicted and well-known frameworks (such as extracurricular activities, activities and events at school).

A good relationship between adults (especially teachers) and children, which is recognized as the key factor in encouraging participation, is often put on the back burner in order to achieve learning outcomes and school success. Such an approach oriented towards academic success, which at the same time neglects (or even sacrifices) the relationship level, ultimately satisfies neither the children nor the adults.

Relaxing certain forms (and formalities) in schools, or even giving up on and not accepting the mere formal functions of the student representative bodies, should open up opportunities for dialogue between children and adults, as well as for a meaningful participation of children.



The Office of the Ombudsman for Children has published a publication for children “I WANT TO PARTICIPATE, TOO – Children’s Participation in School” in which the results and main messages of the research on children’s participation in school are presented in a child-friendly manner. The publication is available on the website of the Ombudsman for Children, at <https://dijete.hr/en/publications/>.

