

# FEAR, MISUNDERSTANDING AND DECORATION AS KEY ASPECTS OF CHILD PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS

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## Abstract

The paper is based on results of the study conducted by the Office of the Children's Ombudsperson of the Republic of Croatia, entitled *Child Participation in the Educational System*. The study combined both qualitative and quantitative approach. The research goal was gaining a deeper understanding of children's participation in the education system from the perspective of students and adults (teachers and professional associates). In relation to the goal, the following research questions were defined: experience of school, experience of participation in school, levels of participation, role of the student council in participation, role of adults, factors that encourage or hinder participation, age and status (role) specificities in the experience of participation. The research was reviewed and approved by the Faculty Ethics Committee. The quantitative part of the research included students and adults from 41 schools across Croatia: 21 primary schools and 20 secondary schools. The sample is convenient, but in account was taken the representation of schools from all regions in Croatia. A total of 2720 students and 461 adults participated in the quantitative part of the research. 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 choice of schools from a particular region was made in consultation with the advisors of the ombudsman for children in the regional offices. It is a convenient sample of participants, which is relevant to the topic research since children and adults from schools are the ones who are best informed about topic.

Looking at the results of this research, it seems that fear and resentment are underlying aspects in relationships between children and adults in schools. Fear is mutual: children are afraid of adults, and adults are afraid of children (or children's rights) and parents. In children, this fear results in withdrawal and non-participation, and in adults, resentment and little encouragement of participation. In the perception of adults, children have (too) many rights and everything is "*as children wish*". In this sense, adults feel that they have lost other important adults as allies- parents. Parents are perceived as the ones who defend and advocate rights of children but in teachers' opinion, often unduly. Adults in schools face even more fear than children because children are (only) afraid of adults, and adults are afraid of children (their rights), parents and educational inspections. This leads to lack of spontaneity in everyday communication between children and adults. Fear and caution in relationships seems to override dialogue and trust. Some adults are nostalgic about a time when children were obedient, and parents unreservedly supported the teachers. With such nostalgia, there is also a lack of confidence in new concepts such as autonomy, responsibility and children's participation. It appears as if adults feel that the rights of children have in some way diminished adult rights. The voice of pupils (and generally the voice of children) at the school and in society is still relatively silent, although adults often feel that everything revolves around children and their rights. Children, though they are the majority in school, do not have much influence on school life, especially if it goes beyond the colour of walls, panel drawings, or the singing and dancing in school events. Metaphorically described by young participants: *when adults write the rules, children are allowed to decorate them*.

Looking into future, it seems that focus should be on transformation of relationship and power between adults and children and changes in relational and spatial dimension of school life.

**Keywords:** *Child participation, schools, aspects.*

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