

THE ROLE OF STUDENTS' COUNCILS IN CHILD PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Child participation in schools is based on participatory rights of children defined in the Convention on the Right of the Child (UN, 1989). To participate as a student means to receive and share information, express her/ his own views, and be consulted about all things that are connected with student's life in school, to actively participate in all activities in school that are important for students and to initiate and implement ideas and project (Osmak Franjić, & Borić, 2019). Dürr (2005) suggest following classification of forms of student's participation in school: parliamentary participation, which manifests itself through student representative bodies (such as the student council); open participation, which implies relatively informal forms of participation that are often spontaneous or prompted by some current problems; participation in projects, which is most often related to specific projects related to educational content; simulation of participation as a form of teaching about democratic procedures and participation aimed at solving certain problems. Similar to that, Fielding (2004) differs three main ways in which student's participation is achieved: peer support, representative bodies (such as student's councils, and activities that enable students to be leaders and initiators of activities at school.

Focus of this paper is specifically on student's councils as a form of parliamentary (Dürr, 2005) or representative participation (Fielding, 2004). The basic idea of these councils is to enable representation of children and voice of the children in decision-making on the school level, but also potentially on the level of educational system. However, there are many critics concerning this form of students' participation regarding their declarative nature and lack of influence on decision-making in schools. Student's' councils that have no influence or meaning for the students may have negative effect on students' motivation to participate in school. Students may become frustrated and alienated from the idea of participation and may be under the impression that the adults' desire to hear their voices is merely declaratory.

This paper presents results of the qualitative part of research within the broader study on child participation in schools in Croatia. In first part of research, 19 focus groups were conducted involving a total of 70 children from primary and secondary schools in Croatia. In following phase of research, after the COVID-19 pandemics, additional focus groups were conducted online with the aim to gain insights in functioning of students' councils during the period of pandemic, including smaller sample of 16 students from different primary and secondary schools.

Results indicate that students are poorly informed concerning role and purpose of students' councils, prior and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Basic common perspective of children is that students' councils are merely formal bodies, without any real impact on school life or decisions. From the perspective of students, students' councils are not inclusive, meaning that mostly students with excellent grades can become members of councils and in some cases those students are not interested to participate. Furthermore, students' councils are mostly led by adults in schools and children are merely passively participated whereby student's councils are often used as a place of sharing already known information about school life, instead of being a place to discuss children's perspective and suggestions. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and online school, research has shown that students have had many objections and suggestion to improve their school life during the pandemic, however student's councils mostly did not meet during the pandemic, so children didn't have chance to share their experience and needs through formal representative students' body.

The research data will be used for developing framework for meaningful participation of students within the student councils. Furthermore, results will be used as a basis for creation of standards of operations for school councils at the national level.

Keywords: *Students' councils, participation, schools.*
