

PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING IN KINDERGARTEN: EXPERIENCES IN GERMANY AND LITHUANIA

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Summary

In the paper the authors try to describe, in regard to Germany and Lithuania, how much the idea of children's participation in democratic decision-making is acknowledged in kindergartens and which research projects on the topic already exist.

The paper discusses kindergarten children's participation in democratic decision-making, which is crucial in implementation of the rights of a child. Democratic participation makes a child and his/her inner world visible and meaningful. It is important to

let a child experience the democratic-decision making process, power and consequences of the decision. Research shows that kindergarten children are capable of reporting important issues in their everyday life. They can make projects, conferences, deliberate in conversations, moderate a meeting, and represent other children in the kindergarten parliament. Kindergarten children participation in decision-making responds and satisfies the main objectives of: 1) children's rights (UN CRC), 2) modern education and 3) social welfare/well-being. The research data of a few pioneer research projects done in Germany (2003, 2010 and 2011) and in Lithuania (2012) on child democratic participation in kindergarten are discussed in the paper. Results of the research show that the idea of kindergarten children's participation in decision-making is neither understood properly or accepted or implemented widely. Child participation is not linked semantically to listening to the child's opinion and deliberations with a child. Parents fear that children don't feel dangerous issues, that education of children is neglected when implementing a child's participation in projects. However, generally, activities with child participation increased and improved the democracy and the education of the children in the kindergartens where it is implemented. However, generally, activities with child participation increased and improved the democracy and the education of the children in the kindergartens where it is implemented.

Keywords: *children's rights, early childhood education and care, education to democracy, comparative education science.*

Introduction

Children's participation in democratic decision-making theoretically is approved by UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted in 1989. It means that believing in a child's ability and need to take part in decision-making has to be the basis of social and legal action.

Recent research done in relation to young children's standpoints on matters that they may have an opinion about (Harcourt 2008, 2009; Sargeant 2007, 2008) established children's competence in articulating their views and opinions and their ability to report on important issues in their childhood experiences (Harcourt, 2011).

However, according to the CoE policy review on child and youth participation, the biggest obstacle that prevents child participation from becoming a reality lies in the attitudes of adults (Council of Europe, 2011). That led the Council of Europe to launch a pan-European campaign to promote the new recommendation on child participation and CoE tools on participation (Council of Europe, 2011).

In the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2012-2015) as well, one out of four pursued strategic objectives is promotion of children participation, which links to the child's right to be heard and taken seriously. That means a theoretical shift towards foregrounding new construction of children as participants in the process.

D. Harcourt (2009) notes that over the past decade the theoretical shift toward child participation has been particularly evident in early childhood research. D. Har-

court (2011) conceptualizes young children as “sophisticated thinkers and communicators,” who are capable of reporting on important issues in their everyday encounters of an early childhood setting, where teachers and groups of children engage in a program of learning. That leads to the notion that a child’s democratic participation in kindergarten is possible and necessary as the main principle of communication.

The aim of this paper is to substantiate the idea of kindergarten children’s participation in decision-making and explore, in regard to Germany and Lithuania, how much the idea of children’s participation in democratic decision-making is acknowledged in the kindergarten and which research projects on the topic already exist.

The authors aim to answer the problematic questions: How can the idea of democratic participation in early childhood education and care be justified? How does theoretical understanding of a child’s in kindergarten participation reflect in reality? How can empirical research about democratic participation in early childhood education and care be improved?

Results of separate research on child participation in kindergarten, completed in Germany in 2003, 2010 and 2011 and in Lithuania in 2012 are reviewed and discussed with the aim to answer problematical questions raised.

In Germany, two research projects were empirical investigations in 7 and in 2 kindergartens, including interviews with child care workers, with children and parents and observations of group processes; a third research project was a content analysis of the kindergarten curriculums of 16 German constituent states. In Lithuania, 96 child care workers/teachers working in Utena town kindergartens were asked to answer the closed type question (with proposed response options)—which activities in kindergarten strengthens children’s activity, participation, expression of personal opinion.

1. What does democratic participation in kindergarten mean?

Democratic participation in kindergarten means that the children in a kindergarten are involved in decision-making. The involvement is not symbolic, but real and democratic. The children can’t participate in all, but in many decisions—for example in decisions about the social rules in the group, about the program for the day, about the renewing of the group room.

There are different forms of participation in kindergarten.

(1) Participation in projects: The children participate in decision-making about the subject and the execution of a project. Examples for projects: planning an excursion; making a kindergarten newspaper; creating an activity path in the forest.

(2) Open forms of participation are children’s conferences, morning circles or children’s conventions. In children’s conferences and morning circles, children of one group come together. In children’s conventions all children of a kindergarten come together. These meetings can be moderated by children, by a child care worker, or all together. In the meetings the children and the child care worker discuss actual issues and make decisions.

(3) A representative form of participation is the parliament. There are different ways to organize it. For example, in one kindergarten in Frankfurt/Main in Germany, all children who are in the year before they are sent to the primary school are appointed to be members of the parliament. Two child care workers help them organize and structure the weekly parliament meetings. The chairman is an elected child. The day after the parliament session there is a convention of all adults and children of the kindergarten. In this convention the chairman gives a report on the results of the parliament session (Hansen, Knauer, Friedrich, 2006).

2. How the idea of democratic participation is justified?

There are three lines of argumentation for child participation: (1) the human rights line, (2) the education line and (3) the quality line.

(1) Human rights

Article 12 of the UN convention on the rights of the child says:

1. "State parties shall assure 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, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".

Article 12 of the UN convention on the rights of the child has a strong impact on kindergarten practice because it means:

- The children have the right to express their opinions freely.
- They have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them.
- All children are capable of expressing a view.
- They have the right to have their views taken seriously.

(Lansdown 2001, p. 2)

(2) Education

In democracies there is a need for children to experience the implications of democratic decision-making. "Children need opportunities to learn what their rights and duties are, how their freedom is limited by the rights and the freedoms of others and how their actions can affect the rights of others [...] Only by experiencing respect for their own views and discovering the importance of their respect for the views of others, they will acquire the capacity and willingness to listen to others and so begin to understand the processes and value of democracy." (Lansdown 2001, p. 6). In other words: the kindergarten is the first school of democracy.

Participation is one of the main keys of general education and of education to democracy. Participation connects all areas of education. Participation has a large efficiency (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Arbeit und Sozialordnung, Familie und Frauen, 2007).

(3) Quality

"Children have a body of experience and knowledge that is unique to their situation. They have views and ideas as a result of that experience." They are 'experts in

their own affairs'. To involve children in decision-making leads to better decisions. (Lansdown 2001, p. 4; Ministerium für Bildung und Kultur des Landes Schleswig-Holstein, 2009). Also, child's democratic participation in decisions making is one of the main imperatives in child well-being policy (Kickbusch, 2012). Children's quality of life, well-being includes objective and subjective domains, so it is imperative to take into account children's subjective viewpoints in the decision-making process that shapes children's world and destiny (Kickbusch, 2012).

3. How much is the approach of democratic participation acknowledged in kindergartens?

The situation in Germany:

A look at the recent official kindergarten education plans of 16 constituent states (Ministerium für Bildung und Kultur des Landes Schleswig-Holstein, 2009) of the Federal Republic of Germany, shows very different degrees of acknowledgement with regard to the topic. If one were to take a look at these education plans, one could ask:

- Does the topic "democratic participation" exist in the plan?
- Does the plan say something about the relation: rights of the child—democratic education?
- How much space is given to the topic?
- Does the plan give examples for participation?
- Does the plan describe democratic participation as basic principle of the kindergarten?
- Does the plan recommend formalized processes of participation?
- How strong is the meaning of participation/ how many power shall the adults give in the hands of the children?

The analysis of the official kindergarten education plans by above questions leads to the following result:

You can place the 16 plans in five categories A, B, C, D and E.

- A: The plan gives long and detailed descriptions of the topic. The plan says: early childhood services offer an excellent space for participatory democratic practice. This practice must be established firmly by formalized procedures (3 plans).
- B: The plan emphasizes the importance of participatory democratic practice. The plan does not say how exactly participatory democratic practice should work (6 plans).
- C: The plan mentions the topic and acknowledges the idea of participatory democratic practice. The plan does not say in which way there is an obligation to implement the idea (4 plans).
- D: The plan says it is okay when children express their own views. The plan does not say which meaning these expressions have in day-to-day-practice (1 plan).
- E: The plan does not mention the topic (2 plans) (Danner 2011).

In Lithuania, kindergarten education programmes (plans) are based on the Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Education (17 March 2011 No XI-1281). The goals of the mentioned Law specifies that education shall enable a person to become independent and responsible, cultivate the communication skills important in modern life, acquire social competence and the skills to shape one's own life independently (from Article 3.1) and "to ensure conditions enabling a person to acquire the basics of civic and political culture that embody democratic traditions, and to develop the abilities and experience needed by a person as a competent a citizen of the Republic of Lithuania, a member of the European and global community as well as of a multi-cultural society" (Article 3.5). Various kindergarten education programmes include the aforementioned things, however, the child's participation in a democratic decision-making is not mentioned or specified.

4. Research

The situation in Germany.

There are a few practice reports about democratic kindergarten projects and there are two extensive empirical studies.

The first of these two studies was executed between 2001 and 2003.

7 Kindergartens in the constituent state Schleswig-Holstein were the focus of the investigation. The methods of the investigation have been interviews with the child care worker and questionnaires for them at the beginning and at the end of the project period.

The data confirms the hypothesis that the children have acquired a lot of social skills and as well a lot of general knowledge (Hansen, Knauer, Friedrich, 2006).

The second study was executed between 2009 and 2010. 2 kindergartens in the constituent state Nordrhein-Westfalen were the focus of the investigation. Both kindergartens had a "kindergarten constitution." The "constitution" described explicitly issues in which the children (1) can decide self determined, (2) can decide within limits and (3) can't participate in decision-making.

The methods of the investigation have been interviews with child care workers, with the children, the parents and also observations of the conferences and parliament sessions.

The answers of the interviewed parents showed that there are advocates and sceptics. The sceptics said: too much time is spent on participation; the children don't feel dangerous issues and shouldn't participate in decision-making; the education of children is neglected; there is too much bureaucracy by participation.

However, the main result of the investigation is: the project increased and improved democracy education and the general education of the children in the kindergarten (Richter, 2011).

But still there are many questions and the empirical base for the new education approach is still very small. For the next research projects in the future these points can be recommended: 1) the research periods should be longer; 2) the number of the included kindergarten should be extended; 3) Control groups should be included; and 4) the research method observation should be increased.

In Lithuania the pilot study was completed in 2012 (Kviklyte, 2012). 96 child care workers/teachers working in kindergartens in the town of Utena were asked to point out in a questionnaire which activities in kindergarten strengthens children's activity, participation, expression of personal opinion. Teachers chose the following answers: play, painting /fine art, dance, music, singing, drama, excursions, cleaning up, pets, projects. However, teachers think that fairytales, communication, discussion and questions are not the activities that promote child's democratic participation. There is no understanding of child participation as "listening to the opinion of a child" or "establishing partnership with a child" based on the principle of democratic communication (figure 1).

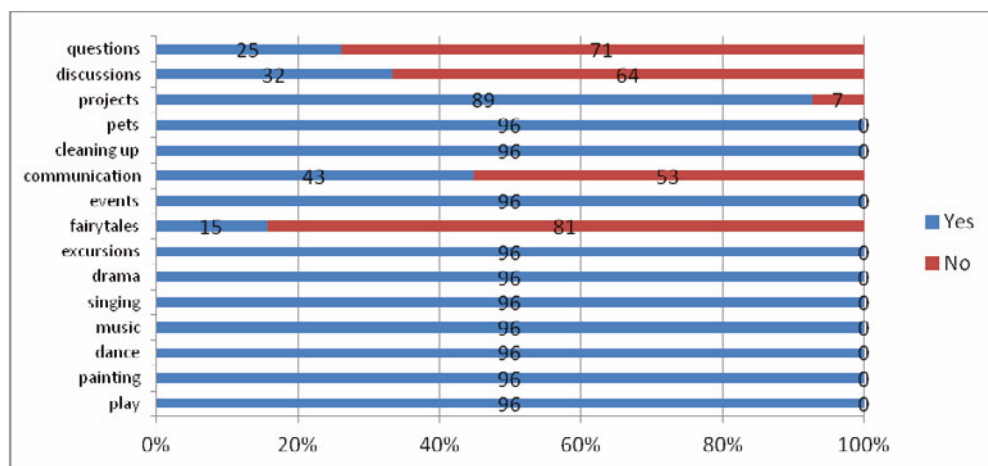


Figure 1. Activities that strengthens children's activity, participation, expression of personal opinion. Teachers' opinions (Lithuania).

Conclusion

Children's participation in democratic decision-making is crucial when implementing the rights of a child, connecting a child with his/her inner world, and it needs to be visible making visible a child's inner world and needs. It is important to let a child experience the democratic decision-making process, as well as the power and consequences of the decisions.

Kindergarten children are capable of reporting on important issues in their everyday life. They can make projects, conferences, deliberate in conversations, moderate a meeting, represent other children in the kindergarten parliament. A kindergarten child's participation in decision making responds and satisfies the main objectives of children's rights (UN CRC), modern Education and Social Welfare/Well-being. The first pioneer research in Germany and Lithuania showed that the idea of child par-

ticipation in decision-making is not understood properly, accepted, or implemented widely. Various methods of child participation need to be conceived and developed, applied little by little in kindergartens, in order to see the effect of the phenomena on human development.

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VAIKŲ DALYVAVIMAS DEMOKRATIŠKAI PRIIMANT SPRENDIMUS DARŽELYJE: SITUACIJA VOKIETIJOJE IR LIETUVOJE

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Santrauka

Šio straipsnio tikslas – aptarti ir pagrįsti darželinukų dalyvavimo demokratiškai priimant sprendimus idėją bei, apžvelgiant Vokietijoje ir Lietuvoje šia tema atliktų tyrimų rezultatus, įvertinti, kaip šios idėjos priimamos, suprantamos ir įgyvendinamos praktikoje. Siekiama atsakyti į keliamus probleminius klausimus: kuo grindžiama demokratinio dalyvavimo ikimokykliniame amžiuje idėja? Kaip teorinė vaiko dalyvavimo ikimokyklinėje įstaigoje samprata atsispindi praktikoje – ugdymo planuose ir ugdytojų sampratose? kaip galima būtų plėtoti ir tobulinti tyrimus apie demokratinį vaiko dalyvavimą ankstyvojo ugdymo ir priešišios institucijose?

Teorinėje straipsnio dalyje atkreipiamas dėmesys, jog vaiko dalyvavimas demokratiškai priimant sprendimus yra esmingai svarbus siekiant įgyvendinti vaiko teises, nes leidžia vaikui atsiskleisti ir tapti svarbiu, reikšmingu savo aplinkos dalyviu. Svarbu sudaryti sąlygas vaikui mokytis demokratiškai priimti sprendimus, jausti savo indėlį, atsakomybę už sprendimą ir jo pasekmes. Naujausi tyrimai rodo, kad ikimokyklinio amžiaus vaikai pajėgūs kalbėti bei reikšti pastabas apie savo kasdienį gyvenimą. Jie galėtų rengti projektus, konferencijas, diskusijas, vesti susirinkimus, atstovauti kitų vaikų interesams darželio parlamente. Vaikų dalyvavimas demokratiškai priimant sprendimus darželyje atitinka trijų sričių tikslus: 1) vaiko teisių, 2) 21-o amžiaus švietimo, 3) socialinės gerovės.

Kiek teorinės idėjos įgyvendinamos praktikoje analizuojama apžvelgiant kelis pirmuosius šia tema atliktus tyrimus Vokietijoje 2003, 2010 ir 2011 bei Lietuvoje 2012 metais. Vokietijoje buvo apklausiami vaikų darželių auklėtojai, tėvai ir patys vaikai, Lietuvoje tik vaikų darželių auklėtojos siekiant nustatyti jų sampratas ir nuostatas vaiko demokratinio dalyvavimo ikimokyklinio ugdymo procesuose atžvilgiu. Taip pat Vokietijoje atlikta 16-os vaikų darželių iš skirtingų federalinių žemių ugdymo programų analizė, siekiant nustatyti, kiek ugdymo programose skiriama vietos demokratinio vaiko dalyvavimo įtvirtinimui. Visai nieko apie vaiko dalyvavimą priimant sprendimus nesakoma dviejuose ikimokyklinio ugdymo planuose. Kituose minimas (1 plane),

išaiškinamas (4 planuose), pagrindžiama svarba (6 planuose), numatomos vaiko dalyvavimo įtvirtinimo procedūros ir būdai (3 planuose).

Lietuvoje ikimokyklinis ugdymas reglamentuojamas Lietuvos švietimo įstatymu (2011 Nr XI-1281) ir ugdymo programos derinamos su šiuo dokumentu. Švietimo įstatyme ir programose akcentuojamas vaiko savarankiškumo, atsakomybės, kūrybiškumo, gebėjimo bendrauti moderniaame pasaulyje bei savarankiškai modeliuoti savo gyvenimą ugdymas, tačiau vaiko dalyvavimas demokratiškai priimant sprendimus neįvardijamas kaip būdas toms kompetencijoms įgyti, t. y. dokumentai neįtvirtina pozicijos, kad vaiko demokratinis dalyvavimas yra būdas įgyti demokratinės kompetencijos.

Ugdytojų nuostatų apie vaiko demokratinį dalyvavimą darželyje tyrimų rezultatai rodo, kad vaiko dalyvavimo darželyje idėja nėra tinkamai suprantama ir įgyvendinama. Vaiko dalyvavimas nesiejamas su vaiko nuomonės išklausymu bei apsvaistymu. Tėvai bėgštuoja, kad vaikai nėra pajėgūs numatyti grėsmes, kad vaiko dalyvavimo projektai trikdo švietimo procesą. Tačiau praktiškai vaiko dalyvavimo projektų įgyvendinimas pakėlė demokratijos ir švietimo lygį tyrime dalyvavusiuose darželiuose.

Studijos išvadoje galima daryti prielaidą, kad vaiko demokratinio dalyvavimo plėtrai pagalbėtų renkami, kuriami ir nuolat pamažu darželyje taikomi įvairūs tiksliniai vaiko dalyvavimo metodai.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: vaiko teisės, ikimokyklinis ugdymas ir rūpyba, demokratinis ugdymas, lyginamoji edukologija.