Children as Citizens „Here and Now” - Democratic Participation as a Core of Citizenship Education in Early Years

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Abstract

For the past ten years citizenship education has been an important part of social studies at the Department for Preschool Education of the Faculty of Education in Ljubljana. The author’s basic premise is that children’s democratic participation represents a core of democratic and active citizenship in early years. The article summarises some of the knowledge and experiences gathered from the research studies as well as from practical projects aimed at promoting children’s participation in Slovene kindergartens. The research evidence indicate that children’s influence on decisions is limited; particularly low is children’s participation in shaping their own environment and influencing the conditions for learning and play. At the same time promoting children’s democratic participation represent a top priority to Slovene teachers. Increasing number of projects in Slovene kindergartens demonstrate ethics and philosophies such as children’s involvement, decision-making, empowerment, respecting human rights, listening to children’s perspectives; they enable the development of citizenship competences such as social competence, action competence, intercultural competence, active learning competence.

Introduction

Children’s participation rights play a crucial role in conceptualisation of education for democratic, active citizenship in early years. It represents a core of pre-school citizenship and can be regarded as a necessary condition for realisation of children’s citizenship roles. Pre-school setting offers many opportunities for practicing citizenship. Being a ‘citizen’ for children of 3 to 7 years means, first and foremost, experiencing democratic relationships, equality among people inside institutions and democratic ways of making joint decisions. Democratic and active citizenship is also about children learning through participatory learning strategies, having an opportunity to be active in relation to their surrounding; influencing their lives inside the kindergarten as well as in local community.

In my opinion education for citizenship has to be conceptualised primarily as education for present time. In other words: as ‘education for childhood within the period of childhood’ rather than as preparation for future citizenship roles in the period of adulthood. Children are already citizens of their societies, members of their kindergartens, peer groups and families. Therefore, the role of early childhood pedagogy is not focusing primarily on preparing children for future citizenship roles but to create conditions for children to contribute in meaningful ways to quality of (their) lives here and now. Kindergartens should be places where preschool...
children feel part of a classroom community, stir up lively discussions on how they should spend their free time, and respect others’ opinions. These conditions fulfilled, citizenship education can ‘move forward’, towards learning how to improve the ‘outdoor’ world. Education for citizenship always involves experiences ‘here and now’. Even though the competences learned in childhood are important for exercising later adult citizenship roles, they can merely be regarded as a ‘positive side effect’, not as a primary goal.

The new sociology of childhood

Children’s democratic participation is a part of a new sociology of childhood which considers children as active subjects, citizens with rights, experts in their own lives as well as active participants in research. It challenges the traditional developmental paradigm which regards childhood as a stepping stone to adulthood and children as incomplete, as going through a process of linear progress. It represents a shift away from childhood perceived as a state of immaturity, incompetence and inability to understand the world, as well as adults being perceived as solely and fully responsible for children, since they know best what is good for them and assumed as always acting in the best interest of children. By introducing ‘philosophies’ and concepts such as child’s participation, involvement, decision-making, empowerment etc., democratic and critical pedagogy contribute to the perception of children as a social group with a potential to make a valued contribution to society (Kirby et al, 2003).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

The children’s participation rights defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child introduce for the first time in international law an additional dimension to the status of children by recognising that children are subjects of rights, rather than merely recipients of adult protection, and that those rights demand that children themselves are entitled to be heard. At the core is Article 12, which insists on the ‘visibility’ of children. Its implementation involves a profound and radical reconsideration of the status of children in most societies and the nature of adult-child relationships. It requires us to begin to listen to what children say and to take them seriously. It requires that we recognise the value of their own experience, views and concerns and to question the nature of adult responsibilities towards children. It is implied by the Convention, and its philosophy of respect for the dignity of children that adults need to learn to work more closely in collaboration with children to help them articulate their lives, to develop strategies for change and exercise their rights (Landsdown, 1997).

The key theoretical concepts

The participation rights have been strongly developed within social work. The ethos of participation (Hoffman, 1994) and the strength perspective (Saleebey, 1992) brought significant changes in relations between professionals and users; they indicate a post-modern shift towards recognizing the responsibility - between professionals and ‘users’ of the institutions. The ethics of participation obligates professionals to renovate the power over the ‘truths’ and final answers, i.e. the power that does not belong to them. Instead, they (the teachers) should create opportunities for dialogue with children in order to find joint solutions. The strength perspective emphasizes that professionals should mobilise one’s (children’s) strengths, talents, abilities and personal sources in pursuing their own personal goals.

For the past ten years ‘the pedagogy of listening’ (Rinaldi, 2005) has become an important paradigm in early childhood education. For Carla Rinaldi listening is a ‘tool’ for identification and recognition of the child’s perspective. In pedagogy of listening, learning is regarded as a process of developing ‘interpretative’ theories generated through sharing and dialogue. Listening to children’s theories enhances the possibility of discovering how children think and how they question and develop a relationship with reality. According to Carla Rinaldi ‘our theories need to be listened to by others... in order to exist’. Listening is not only about verbal communication; it also means being open to others and what they have to say, listening to the hundred (and more) languages, with all its nuances. Listening enables the ‘pedagogy of relationships’ as developed by Lori Malaguzzi (1993) is not only a technique but a way of thinking and seeing ourselves in relationship with others and the world. It is a philosophy dealing with issues of ethics, moral education and social justice as expressed in Levinas’ ‘ethics of an encounter’ (Egea-Kuehne, 2008).

Children’s democratic participation involves two aspects: involvement and decision-making. It means children belonging to a group of peers, feeling included when resolving problems, being involved in planning daily activities in kindergarten. It also means making decisions - children being consulted by the teachers on daily basis and exerting significant influence on issues concerning their well-being within institutions. It appears that kindergartens live their own ‘self-sufficient’ lives; for children, reality of institutions is often conferred upon them. Adults are those who can break the existing patterns and accept children as competent, as partners and co-creators of institutional life as well as actors who are capable and willing to act towards better societies. An increasing number of projects based on the philosophy of participation implemented in Slovene kindergartens demonstrate that many pre-school teachers share these beliefs. Children’s democratic participation is a necessary condition for democratic and active citizenship; it is a core of citizenship in pre-school age.

Research on children's participation

Research studies in European countries indicate a general conclusion that children’s participation in pre-school settings is rather limited. In most cases children are allowed to decide about ‘children’s things’, while having no meaningful impact on overall organisation of institutions.

In Swedish kindergartens Sonja Sheridan and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson (2001) interviewed children asking them about their wishes and expectations regarding decisions-making. They questioned the following:

• What would you like to do in pre-school if you could decide for yourself?
• Do you believe that your teacher knows what you like to do most of all?
• How do you make decisions; who decides in pre-school?
• What can you decide together with the teacher, what yourself?
• Where can you decide most, in pre-school or at home?

The study showed that the participation in decision-making is of vital importance for children in Swedish kindergartens. The interviews revealed that children are allowed to decide about their personal belongings, their own play and activities, and to some extent make decisions about themselves. However, the authors conclude ‘it seemed children seldom participate in and influence the overall organization, routines, content and activities that are initiated by the teachers’ (p. 188).

A comparative survey in Slovene and Finnish pre-schools (Türnšek, 2007) confirmed those findings.* The study focused on more ‘demanding’ areas of decision-making, indicating higher levels of participation. We were interested in investigating the level of children’s participating in shaping their own environment and influencing the conditions for learning and play. The teachers were asked to estimate to what extent the children exert influence on decisions in kindergarten, such as:

• purchasing toys and didactic materials,
• furnishing and decorating pre-school classrooms,
• deciding about the organisation and content of kindergarten celebrations/events, choosing ‘their own teacher/activity,
• choosing their ‘own teacher’ or the activity,
• planning daily activities in day-care centre.

* In the Slovene representative sample, there were 422 early childhood teachers working with children of 1 to 6 years. In the Finnish sample, there were 230 teachers mainly from the central and northern regions of Finland, working with the same age groups.
According to the Slovene teachers’ estimations, the children’s participation in decision-making in kindergarten is mostly low. Less than 5 percent of children exert crucial or strong influence on decisions such as, which toys and materials should be bought and how their classroom should be decorated; about the same percentage of children have an opportunity to choose the activity or the teacher initiating it. Two fifth of children are involved in planning of daily activities and less than one fifth can contribute ideas regarding the ways of celebrations (such as birthdays or mothers’ day) and other important kindergarten events.

### Table 2: Levels of children’s decision-making in Slovene and Finnish kindergartens

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Decision-making is literally about making choices: interviews with children in Slovene kindergartens

Few years after the Swedish research study interviewing the children, a similar study was performed in Slovene kindergartens with the children of 5 to 6 years. Its emphasis was on teacher’s self-reflection; we hoped that the teacher’s discussions with children would stimulate self-reflection of the teacher’s role. For that reason the teachers interviewed the children of their ‘own’ classes; after the interviews they were writing essays reflecting on what the children views and opinions tell them about the possibilities of promoting children’s participation in kindergarten.

The first lesson the teacher gained was quite a gap between their self-perception and the children’s expectations. When answering the question “Who decides in pre-school?” almost all the children responded “You, of course” or “You two are the bosses”. Even though the interviews were conducted with the teachers who were democratically oriented and confident about giving the children a lot of participatory experiences, that kind of a feed back from children came as quite a surprise. Many teachers had more positive image of their practices and had expected children to recognise the opportunities for making decisions.

Another important experience for the Slovene teachers was a significant difference between the teacher’s and the children’s interpretations of the concept of ‘making decisions’. For many teachers the meaning of making decisions was about giving children a chance to choose among several options adults offer to them. A very common example would be consulting children how they want to spend their out-door time: going out for a walk or staying on the play-ground… For many children that kind of choice was not satisfactory; referring to the previous example, for children making decisions had to be deciding to stay inside if they want or inventing other alternatives ... A lesson for all was that decision-making is literally about children making their own choices not merely choosing among the adult choices.

**Kindergartens as (nice) hotels**

If I would try to answer the question, whether there is enough space for children to co-participate, an image of a kindergarten resembling to a nice hotel comes to my mind. I should explain that statement: all the systemic indicators show that contemporary Slovene public day-care provide very good living standards, nutrition and health care; in fact, better than in many other European countries. We could say that the protection and caring aspect of the Convention on children’s rights has been very carefully deliberated; the question is how much children participation is respected, as a third aspect. In other words children are very well ‘taken care for’; however, they are not often consulted on the subject of their expectations, ideas and wishes. The latter is in most cases a matter of a teacher’s personal style rather than a general institutional policy.

If I would caricature a bit I would say that many kindergartens today still resemble more to hotels - living in a pro-democratic oriented culture - have no more say in pre-schools. However, the differences are in the areas of decision-making. In Finnish kindergartens the children seem to create their immediate classroom environment to a higher extent, while in Slovene kindergartens the children exert stronger impact on the planning of the daily programme.

The comparative study of pre-schools in 17 countries (Weikart, Olmsted and Montie, 2003) offers indirect conclusions about children’s institutional participation opportunities. Observations of an ordinary day in preschools all over the world indicate several universal characteristics of preschools: in most preschool settings there prevail adult-centred interactions, especially during learning activities, as well as negative child-management approaches and a lack of adult listening behaviour. The patterns of interactions among adults and children indicate that children’s involvement and participation is unlikely to be promoted. However, the pattern of adult-children interactions found in Slovene kindergartens represented an exception; the researchers observed significantly more child-oriented interactions and positive child-management practices comparing to other countries.

Table 1. Slovene children’s influence on decisions

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Referring to Norwegian preschools Anne Trine Kjarholt (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, p. 167) draws similar conclusions. She describes pre-schools as being ‘…designed in a particular architectural style, with particular toys and furniture representing values and norms concerning how to behave as a child in the institution. […] Placing children in this age-related social order clearly imposes many restrictions on the choices that are available to them. For example, they are not able to choose to participate in an intergenerational relationship and interact with age groups other than preschool children; they cannot participate in working activities, or decide to engage in activities together with their parents or older siblings; nor can they choose to go outside the institution. It is important to hear in mind, therefore, that the children’s voices that the discourse requires staff to listen to are produced within this particular social and ideological space’.

The teachers’ impact on decisions inside pre-schools

In Slovene kindergartens children spend eight to nine hours per day in institutional care. Therefore, it is important for teachers to consider whether children are given enough opportunities for creating their institutional life. It is very optimistic though, that children’s democratic participation is of top priority to Slovene teachers. We have asked the teachers (Turnšek, 2005, 2008) which democratic changes could contribute the most to the quality of kindergartens; the survey has shown that for more than half of the teachers children’s participation is among three top priorities. In that regard, the Slovene teacher’s beliefs are more progressive to those of Finnish; children’s participation is important only for one third of Finnish teachers.
However, the teachers themselves exert very little impact on decisions regarding their working environment and their professional development. The study (Turnšek, 2008) showed that teacher’s influence on decisions is limited and restricted mostly to implementation of the curriculum, to pedagogical practices or issues concerning ‘inside classroom life’. The obvious question is are teachers who do not buy toys for their children and do not decide what seminars they will attend, able and willing to provide experiences of decision-making to ‘their’ children?

Children’s democratic participation as a core of citizenship education in early years

The purpose of looking closely at children’s democratic participation in pre-schools is in a belief that children’s participation plays a crucial role in conceptualisation of education for democratic citizenship in pre-schools. Children’s democratic participation is understood as a culture of living and pedagogical practice, in my opinion, represents a core of early childhood citizenship. Ethics and philosophies such as social competence, action competence, intercultural competence, active learning, etc., enable the development of citizenship competences such as social competence, action competence, intercultural competence, active learning, etc. (Graph 1: Children’s democratic participation – a core of citizenship education in early years)

Citizenship education projects in Slovene pre-schools

Social learning and the development of social-emotional competences is an important component of citizenship education in Slovene kindergartens. At the beginning of the twentieth century Dewey (1916) argued for importance of education for the development of democracy, stating that it is through education that children become part of humanity’s social development. He emphasised the importance of dialogue, undisturbed communication and a shared judgement between equals, testing the relevance of various viewpoints and views in a diverse society. In Slovene kindergartens the teachers are very inclined to social learning. The goal of such projects at the individual level is learning social skills on behavioural, cognitive and affective level. In the group context we try to improve child acceptance in peer-groups and promote group identification and cooperation.

To practice citizenship children learn through active learning strategies. An inquiry is an approach promoting children’s ability to search for information, to organise them and use in order to solve problems. An example would be an inquiry project Let’s discover who lived in the nearby castle from the old time till now, how they lived, ate…?

The other approach is an open-ended problem-solving. An important part of citizenship education is independent problem-solving aimed at stimulating the children to generate various solutions, imaginative ideas and answers to various problems. Such projects are called for instance:

- Christmas is coming; let’s make our own theatre performance!
- We don’t like the name of the classroom; let’s invent a new one!
- We want to change the ways of sleeping and resting routines!

A crucial aim of citizenship education is to develop children’s ability to take actions. Since the beginning of the nineties, the concept of action and action competence has attained a central position in a number of educational spheres, most notably in the sphere of environmental health in the work done by Royal Danish School of Educational Studies (Jensen & Schnack, 1994). Action competence can be understood as developing qualifications for being able, jointly and individually, to act to promote one’s own and others health, or well-being in general. The concern about the environment, health and peace is coupled with corresponding concern for democracy or with socialisation and qualification for the role of participant. In action competence projects, the teacher and children work jointly towards improving the living conditions in kindergarten, in a local community or wider. What is specific in action competence projects is that children together with adults usually explore democratic ways of making decision; sometimes they even act as a pressure group. If I refer to some project done in Slovene kindergartens, here are some examples. In the project aimed at children’s involvement in improving a kindergarten classroom (Krek, 2007) the teachers and children had to negotiate with a headmaster, a housekeeper, to buy the paint, to allow the children to choose the colours of the walls, etc. Similar procedures were necessary in the project aimed at changing sleeping routines in kindergarten by using the children’s ideas; the changes also required a lot of discussions with kindergarten staff to persuade the teachers to accept the children’s alternative ideas. When the new kindergarten was being built, children were helping with their ideas on how the...
kindergarten should look like; but they also had to negotiate with the architects to make kindergarten more ‘children-like’. Environmental projects usually involve negotiating with local communal authorities, mayors and local residents. However, as Bjarn Brun Jensen points out (Jensen & Schnack, 1994, p 6), ‘the task is not to improve the world with the help of pupil’s activism…. the crucial factor must be what the pupils learn from participating in such activities’.

Participation as “here and now” philosophy of citizenship education

Accepting children’s democratic participation as a core of citizenship education has important implications. It enables a shift of attention to issues important for children ‘here and now’, and thereby enables a transformation of kindergartens from ‘self-sufficient institutions’ to kindergartens described by the authors (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005, Moss and Petrie, 2002) as ‘children’s places’. The well known slogan “here and now” explains well an orientation towards issues, meaningful and relevant to children themselves. Here and now means dealing with the today’s child’s world not the future one.

Participation also enables a shift away from the prevailing early childhood paradigm – away from the traditional conceptualisation of (citizenship) education as an adult’s project aiming at shaping and re-shaping children, preparing them for an adult roles of ‘good citizens’ in order to become productive members of societies when growing up. In the paradigm mentioned, children are understood in terms of human- becoming rather than human-being; for many students and pre-school teachers children are the material to be remodelled, and they believe that only in the course of socialisation they finally become ‘human like’. As stressed by Dahlberg and Moss (2005), these beliefs are empowered by the dominant Anglo-American discourse on early childhood education influenced by traditional developmental psychology stressing the importance of reaching “developmental stages”, “outputs” and “outcomes” and re-enforcing instrumental orientation of pre-schools.

It is not unusual that sometimes citizenship education in kindergartens looks like rehearsing children in adult roles such as ‘voters’ or skilled ‘political negotiators’, exercising representative democracy in a parliament. In that cases citizenship education is mainly about playing democracy in simulated situations and imitating adult’s world rather than living democracy in real situations. There is nothing wrong with playing and simulating as long as we bear in mind that we need to provide consistency of democratic experiences to children. The primary goal of citizenship education should be experimenting democracy, practicing democratic principles such as equality, plurality, justice…; teaching about democracy can be regarded merely as a secondary aim. Children can learn democratic skills such negotiating, cooperating, finding consensus, voting… inside kindergarten, and with general goal of democratization of institutional life. The projects in Slovene kindergartens demonstrate that many teachers are becoming aware of the importance of such first-hand child experiences.

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