THE PROMOTION OF DEMOCRATIC AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION OF KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN: POSSIBILITIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL PREPAREDNESS

Abstract. This paper argues for various possibilities to promote and experience democratic participation and civic education-practices among children in kindergarten. Kindergarten age children have the ability to understand, consider and decide about issues related to the child. There is thus the necessity to develop these abilities, which are essential in the formation of democratic values in children.

This paper presents the results of the completed research in Lithuania (2012) on kindergarten care workers / teachers’ educational style used in daily life situations. 43 care workers / teachers from 7 kindergartens located in Kaunas, Šiauliai and Jonava cities were asked about: their solutions for usual confusing daily situations in kindergarten; what is institutional order with regard to a child’s self-determination; what would they expect from the participation project, and what possible problems and difficulties could arise when implementing child participation projects.

The research results show that a majority of kindergarten educators maintain a democratic style of communication with children. The new practices on democratic and civic children’s participation are widely practiced in some kindergartens but not at all or just at some level in others. Environmental preparedness of the kindergarten to promote democratic and civic participation of kindergarten children is deficient in documentation but favorable in terms of care workers / teachers’ attitudes. The principal question is – how much of the teachers’ answers regarding the accepted educational style are reliable. In other words, does it reflect the real practices or understandings of how it should be?

Keywords: children’s rights, early childhood education and care, education to democracy.

Introduction

With the ratification of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), particularly article 12, the child’s status as a rights holder and citizen was officially recognized as a member of a childhood invited to dialogue on the issues important for children, childhood and their surroundings.

According to the UN COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD General Comment No. 12 (2009) UN CRC, the notion of child participation “has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect,
and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes” (UN CRC General Comment No. 12, 2009, p. 5).

With regard to the promotion of child participation in societies, UN COMMITTEE on the Rights of the Child proclaims that States should encourage the child to form a free view and should provide an environment where the child can exercise her or his right to be heard. Also, the Committee emphasizes that article 12 imposes no age limit on the right of the child to express her or his views, and discourages States from introducing age limits either in law or in practice which would restrict the child’s right to be heard in all matters affecting her or him. In this respect, the Committee underlines that “the concept of the child as rights holder is anchored in the child’s daily life from the earliest stage” (UN CRC General Comment No. 12, 2009:9), as research shows young children have an ability to report on important issues in their childhood experiences (Harcourt, 2011). They are able to form views from the youngest age, even when she or he may be unable to express them verbally (UN CRC General Comment No. 12, 2009; Harcourt, 2011).

Consequently, full implementation of child participation (CRC article 12) requires recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication including play, dance, music, storytelling, mime, body language, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences (UN CRC General Comment No. 12, 2009; IFSW, 2002). Hence, democratic participation means shared information on issues among stakeholders, debates and shared decisions. Coming to the notion of civic participation, it is clear that the fundamentals of civic participation lay in the competences of democratic participation in daily life. In recent decades within some social and educational contexts, civic participation means socially-oriented action and communication (Zaleskiene, 2008).

Active democratic and civic participation by an individual is essential in order for a democratic society to thrive. Promotion of children's participation is inevitably linked to education that aims, by consensus in almost all countries, to promote full potential of every person and develop active and democratic dispositions.

Kindergarten is the first step of formal education and could be considered as the “nursery of the democracy” (Hansen, Knauer, Frieddrich, 2006). It is essentially important that kindergarten children start their education in an atmosphere of dialogue, democracy and internalize social tactics of participation into their daily life through practical experience.
Children’s democratic participation in kindergartens has a long history. Here are two German examples: In the 1970s, representatives of the situation approach in the pedagogy of kindergartens began to involve intensively children in the decision making process; the focus was especially on thematic projects developed by children and adults altogether. Another pulse was released by Lothar Klein and Herbert Vogt in the 1990s; based on the direct democratic ideas of the French progressive educator Célestin Freinet, the two pedagogues recommended to consistently implement the idea of participation in day nurseries. They wrote empathically: “To allow children to speak, so to think and act child-centred, means:

– negotiate;
– be in a continuous processes of change;
– be together with the children;
– keep an individualized approach;
– specific-based situations;
– define where the limits of freedom are,

A public dialogue on child-centered pedagogy and child participation began to resonate and as a result were crowned by official, international and national documents. However, the biggest obstacle that prevented child participation from becoming a reality were linked with the attitudes of adults (Council of Europe, 2011).

The subject of this research focuses on the attitudes of kindergarten teachers towards the democratic participation of preschool children. The Aim is to investigate the formal and actual preparedness of the educational environment to promote democratic participation in kindergartens. The aim is concretized by the following objectives: 1) conceptualize how the idea of democratic participation in early childhood education and care is justified; 2) investigate social and educational tactics of kindergarten and its teachers used in daily life situations with children; and 3) describe the strengths and limitations of kindergarten preparedness to promote democratic participation among children.

Substantiation of democratic participation of children in early childhood education

Children participation in early childhood education is substantiated by 3 aspects: 1) human rights, 2) education, and (3) life quality and well-being.
1) Human rights

Article 12 of the UN convention on the rights of the child says: “State parties shall assure 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 will they 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 fur Arbeit und Sozialordnung, Familie und Frauen, 2007).

3) Life quality and well-being

“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.” By involving children in the decision-making process, children make better decisions (Lansdown, 2001, p. 4; Ministerium für Bildung und Kultur des Landes Schleswig-Holstein, 2009) and experience increased well-being in his or her personal perspective as well as true prosperity (Kickbusch, 2012). Child’s democratic participation in decisions making is one of the main imperatives in child well-being policy (Kickbusch, 2012). A child’s quality of life and well-being include objective and subjective domains, so it is imperative to take into account a child’s subjective viewpoints in the decision-making process that will shape a child’s world and destiny (Kickbusch, 2012).
Preparedness of educational environmental to promote children’s democratic participation in kindergarten

“Participation” in educational schemes

Situation in Germany

A look at the current educational schemes / plans of kindergartens shows that the German federal states approach the topic of participation in a very different way – this means that throughout Germany there is an inconsistent rate of establishment within states (See for the following: Danner, 2011). Although there are similar educational schemes, all in all five different options are evident:

In option A, the kindergarten is considered as a “nursery of the democracy.” The respective implementations are accordingly enormous and detailed; it emphasizes that the children’s rights of participation have to be institutionally rooted. Option B emphatically supports the principle of the democratic participation. Yet, the question of when exactly and in which form participation should be enabled and how far institutional establishment of rights of co-determination are required remain open. Option C names the concept of participation and affirms it. It is uncertain, to what extent, when exactly and in what form children are able to be co-determinants and how compulsory the idea of participation is rooted in daily life. Option D allows children to express their views. It is open, though, as to the significance these expressions of opinion have in the daily routines at kindergartens. Option E doesn’t explicitly address the topic of participation.

Let us take a closer look at two of the educational schemes that could be classified with option A: the educational scheme of the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein and the educational scheme of the federal state of Bayern.

First, the guidelines of Schleswig-Holstein explain the democratic, theoretical, and pedagogical background of a participatory kindergarten-approach: “Democracy is based on the human rights and the associated fundamental values of freedom, justice and solidarity. It is internationally agreed in the UN-Convention for the rights of children from 20 November 1989 that these individual rights of every single member of the society are also valid for children. Democracy as a guiding principle assures democratic rights for children and opposes undemocratic procedures. <…> Children usually experience in day nurseries for the first time outside of the family, how a community between children and adults is organized, how decisions are made and what influence they have on those processes. They experience if all decisions are made by others or if their voice is heard and if they have an impact on the organisation of
their actual daily life in the institution. When democracy as a guiding principle is in use, day nurseries are a place of learning and practising democratic political education and act as a ‘nursery of the democracy’” (Ministerium für Bildung und Kultur des Landes Schleswig-Holstein, 2009, p. 14).

Accordingly, the guidelines of Schleswig-Holstein characterize participation as a consistent principle of the kindergarten: “Participation is more than just a selective contribution of children in particular questions. It is rather a pedagogical principle in the entire everyday life of the day nursery.” Therefore, from the point of view of the authors of the “guidelines”, democratic participation needs to be a “structural establishment” of the participation rights in kindergartens: “Every day nursery is confronted by the question, which rights they want to concede to the children. To have rights also always means to have knowledge of these rights and to be able to independently make use of them. Day nurseries can ensure this by, in the context of their concept, clearly stating in what issues children have a say and how the participation processes are regulated.” At the end of the “guidelines”, readers are made aware of a special service that once again underlines the significance of the topic: “To support the realization of the educational schemes and the participation, multipliers were qualified. They support day nurseries in specific plans to improve the quality of education to support them in the implementation of participation in the daily routine of the institution” (Ministerium für Bildung und Kultur des Landes Schleswig-Holstein, 2009, p. 16, 63).

The educational plan of the federal state Bayern emphasizes similar features. It is pointed out: “Being people affected and being ‘experts on their own accounts’, all children are regularly involved in educational and institutional orientated planning, negotiation and the decision making processes. They are genuinely granted influence on the contents and procedures.” The authors explain that participation is feasible from an early age. The age matters to the form of participation, but not to the participation as such. Accordingly, the principle of participation is rated high: “The involvement of children proves central plank of a future-orientated educational and nurturing practice, it is the key to education and democracy. It has a wide application range and a high efficiency. <…> Participative educational processes connect all fields of competence and education. They exercise and strengthen children in their entire personality. Participation aims for maturity, the ability to self- and co-determine, which children can only gain by self-activation” (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Arbeit und Sozialordnung, Familie und Frauen, 2007, 401 ff).
Situation in Lithuania

Lithuanian 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 specify 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 (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 process is not mentioned or specified.

The first research completed in Lithuania in 2012 (Kviklyte, 2012) revealed that the idea of child participation in decision-making is not understood properly, accepted, or implemented widely by child care workers / teachers. 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 (Danner, Jonyniene, 2012).

Social and educational tactics of kindergarten and it’s teachers used in a daily life situations with children

Research methodology

The research was conducted in Lithuania in November 2012. 43 Care-workers / teachers from 7 kindergartens located in Kaunas, Šiauliai and Jonava cities were questioned using the questionnaire which was created originally for the research project “Die Kinderstube der Demokratie” (The Nursery of the Democracy). This research project was part of a model project of the German federal state of Schleswig-Holstein. The questionnaire data were gathered from seven day nurseries / kindergartens in the beginning (2001) and at the end (2003) of the model project (Hansen, Knauer, Friedrich, 2006).

In Lithuania, the research was conducted collaboratively by the authors of this article. The questionnaire contained a description of 10 confusing situations usual for kindergarten daily life. 4 possible ways for solving each situation were described (a-d). Respondent teachers were asked to point out how often they chose similar solutions
The variety of answers-solutions reflects 3 main educational styles – authoritative, democratic, and liberal. The teachers’ answers enable us to assess which educational style is most frequent in a kindergarten’s daily life or at least most preferred by care-workers / teachers practically and / or at least theoretically.

Results

43 Care-workers / teachers from 7 kindergartens were questioned. Some teachers who worked occasionally at kindergartens chose not to fill in the questionnaire so their choice was respected. All respondents – kindergarten care-workers / teachers – were female. Age groups of respondents: respondents were from to 21–30 years of age, 12 respondents from 31–40; 15 respondents from 41–50; 10 from to 51–60, and 1 respondent was older than 60. No statistically important correlations based on age groups were found. The Excel program was used for processing of research.

First of all, respondents expressed their opinion on the common practical experience in their institution. They assessed, through a 7 point scale (never true – always true), 10 situations-indicators in kindergarten that relate to conditions for a child’s self-determination and participation.

The results showed that in the kindergarten children can freely choose the object and toys they want to play with; they have free time to choose their own activities; and problematic situations related to children are usually discussed with them in order to search for solutions (see Table). The answers regarding these situations are fairly uniform, with comparatively small deviation. This could mean that there are reliable standards in Lithuanian kindergartens. When it comes to the questions on commonly established rules in kindergarten (7) and children’s participation in decision making (9), average mean of practices evaluations is high enough (4.88 and 4.47 of max 7 points), but the deviation of evaluations are also high (StDev 2.18 and 1.9 accordingly). This could mean that the situation in this regard is not united in kindergartens and is not standard (Table).
Care-workers / Teachers’ opinion about common practical experiences related to child participation in their institution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Mean</th>
<th>(STDEV)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6,65</td>
<td>(0,997)</td>
<td>3. Toys and objects are at the children’s disposal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,64</td>
<td>(0,79)</td>
<td>1. The children can choose freely what they want to do during free time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6,49</td>
<td>(1,2)</td>
<td>10. Problematic situations are discussed and solved together with children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,88</td>
<td>(2,18)</td>
<td>7. Rules are laid down together with children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,47</td>
<td>(1,9)</td>
<td>9. Children vote during decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,24</td>
<td>(2,27)</td>
<td>2. The children can eat something by the time they are hungry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,88</td>
<td>(1,52)</td>
<td>4. The children are allowed to be as noisy in the institution as they want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,48</td>
<td>(1,9)</td>
<td>6. The children decide on their own if they want to wear slippers in the institution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,44</td>
<td>(1,95)</td>
<td>5. The children have the right to deny access for adults and other children to the room where they stay in.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,21</td>
<td>(0,72)</td>
<td>8. The children can use the outdoor areas of the institution whenever they want to.</td>
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Literature


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DARŽELINUKŲ DEMOKRATINIO DALYVAVIMO BEI PILIETINIO UGDYMO GALIMYBĖS IR APLINKOS PARENGTIS


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