PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING. EMPOWERING CHILDREN IN SHAPING THEIR OWN FUTURE

Alexandra Damaschin
Assist. Prof., PhD, „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi

Abstract: The paper highlights the importance of participation as a right of the children and underlines the limitations of it, especially when it comes to empower the children in decisions that concern them. Child participation appears as a social construction which manifest in different contexts as family, school, or community environment. Special attention is reflected to children's school participation, as vulnerable children are the most deprived by educational opportunities. Thus, children's experiences are important, and the decisions that implies their well-being should reflect this aspect, and not be generated from the experiences and perspectives of the adults. To make progress in this area, participation needs to be embedded in organizational structures, this fact asking a change in the way adults think about the significance of children's participation.

Keywords: children, decision-making, empowerment, participation

Introduction

Participation is a multifaced and controversial concept. First at all we bring into discussion the participation as a social activity and the participation as a power to influence the social and political processes. Rampal (2008) sustains that over time child participation had different connotations, but there is an agreement that participation is one of the fundamental children's rights (UNICEF, 2006). Broadly speaking, child participation means the engagement of children in decisions that affects their life (Brady, 2007). This fact involves the support of the children to express themselves, and to share their own thoughts in an efficient way. The voice and the capacity of children to think independently are two concepts recently embodied within the *new* sociology of childhood (Mayall, 2002). The voice of the children refers to the intentions, hopes, grievances and expectations that children have and defend themselves (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004). So, the *new* sociology of the childhood sees children as being social actors that are involved in the interactions with people or with the institutions that at the same time make a place for themselves (Alanen, 1997; Valentine, 1997). However, even if the children may be active in relation within their surroundings, the environmental structures are difficult to transform. Smith (2007) explains that if we are taking into consideration children's rights to participate, then we should embrace the role of children as being active social agents. Child participation means the protection of children's rights, equal opportunities, access to social services, decision-making, empowering children to contribute to their self-esteem. Matthews (2003) brings into discussion three alternative arguments concerning child participation: the civil education, the integration of young people in society, and the consolidation of young people in relation to adults, aiming to improve children's lives. These arguments refer to ensure the experience of participation so that children learn new skills, gain trust and build social networks and relationships (O'Kane, 2003). Sinclair (2004) notes the fact that in practice child participation is used more for listening or for consultation and less for the opportunity to engage in active participation. Children offer socially expected answers, the messages of the adults are dominated, and the appreciation of children as being social agents is lacking.

Children's rights to participation

Over the last decades, we can see an increased interest in children's participation. This orientation has been described as part of the two great global social trends of democratization and individualization (Fairclough, 1992), which as Prout (2000) confirms have facilitated the contemporary understanding of children's right to have their voices to be heard. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is generally seen as the impetus for school participation and the benchmark for adult-child relationship (John, 1996). The UN Convention it also served as a catalyst for many organizations with interest in children's participation in all the issues that affect them culturally, socially and institutionally (McNeish & Gill, 2006). A huge number of studies and theories emerged for support and develop children's participations in organizations and institutions (Arnott, 2008). Since the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, child participation has also been the subject of numerous development and academic research projects (Lansdown, 2001). In many ways, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child represents a first in the history of the United Nations (UNICEF, 1989), not necessarily because it is the first convention in the world and it is the most well-known, but especially because it is the first that emphasizes the civil and political rights to which children are entitled (Twum-Danso, 2010). These refer to the influencing the decisions taken on their behalf, to expressing their views on the issues that affect them (the articles 12 and 13), freedom of thinking, consciousness and religion (Article 14), creating associations (Article 15), but also receiving information (Article 17). The new focus of the UN Convention led to a paradigm change concerning the sociology of childhood with reference to children and young people. Now children are seen as social actors and representatives of their own lives, entitled to have a voice and take part in public forums and decisions that affect their lives (Wyness, 1999; Mayall, 2002). Thus, the dominant discourse about children and young people participation takes another direction. Children now have the right to be actors in their own lives and not just passive receivers of decisions made by adults (Percy-Smith, 1998). The UN Convention represents children as full human beings with their own identity who should be respected as independent citizens (Pufall & Unsworth, 2004). Article 12 of the Convention with a particular note, has a strong affirmation regarding children's rights. It articulates that different opportunities are necessarily to be created for children to express their points of view. Many societies still see the children as being too vulnerable and their opinions barely are taken into consideration. The culture and the values of the societies are the main limitations regarding the children's participation.

Vulnerable children's participation

The influence of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989 has influenced many organizations interested in child participation. Children's rights and the discrimination against them has led to an attention on children whose rights are violated, who live in poverty or are in extremely difficult situations (Ray, 2010). Children that are living in the most difficult situations are still marginalized regarding the school activities or community activities (UNICEF, 2020). The most vulnerable children are children affected by extreme poverty, violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, discrimination and social exclusion, catastrophic events, disasters or conflicts (Ray, 2010). Thus, child participation is affected and influenced by the power of the adults who exercises it on them. Vulnerable children face difficulties to ensure their basis needs as food, hygienic products, clothes or supplies for school (UNICEF, 2020). These situations bring them shame, a low self-esteem, fear and stigmatization from others, making very hard the participation of children in community life or the possibility to benefit from public services (Ray, 2010). A study conducted by ONU concerning the violence on children shows that violence is very common on families, schools, and communities , especially on the marginalized groups (Ray, 2010).

The form of discrimination varies from a culture to another, but for example children with disabilities are discriminated regardless the culture or the traditions of the countries (Ray, 2010). The limitation of vulnerable children regarding school participation leads to school dropout and functional illiteracy. Markussen (2010) shows that pupils who drop out the school find very hard a workplace, they risk becoming unemployed, and rarely get opportunities. The school dropout influences thus the social inequalities. The social problems represent another factor who contribute to school dropout. It is widely known that the rate of school dropout occurs to children who belong to disadvantages backgrounds, children with disabilities, children who belong to minority groups, such as Roma children, children who are victims of neglect, abuse or labour exploitation, or children who use psychotropic substances from a very young age (Baklien et. al, 2004; UNICEF, 2007). In this context, the main challenge is how schools can prevent dropout and contribute to the well-being of the children? When schools are facing with pupils who are extremely poor, abuse or neglected by their families, it is necessarily to find the appropriate mechanisms to understand and to support the vulnerable children. We can affirm that the most important practices and lessons are drawn from working with the most vulnerable children.

Child participation in schools and communities

The recognition of children's right to participation is a long concern within the legal documents of the European Council. Among the strategies that are targeted by European Council is also the implementation of the UN 2030 Program for sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals, also known as the Global Goals, included in the 2030 Agenda, also refer to the participation of children and adolescents which aims to ensure an inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities (Bradshaw et al. 2017). Children and young participation need a systematic and continuous support with a persistent application of the techniques that enable this. For being efficient, children's participation requests different resources to participate in adults' life. In practice, very few young people have abilities and resources to influence the world around them (Sotkasiira et al. 2010). During the projects carried out with young people and the research about children and their participation Horelli et al. (2007) affirm that rather to offering an alternative to participation that comes from the world of adults, they promote the concept of effective participation. "Ideally, it makes space for meeting two processes, the transformation of young people's living conditions and the learning of citizenship skills" (Horelli et al. 2007, p. 3). Sotkasiira et al. (2010) sustain that effective participation may be promoted through a learning-based network approach to planning, proposing the LENA model. The LENA model was developed by children and young people (Horelli, 2006), it is based on the psychological environment, sociology, studies with young people and looks to integrate the networks (resources and to "know how") with the learning process. The model proposed by Sotkasiira et al. (2010) affirms that the chosen set of strategies encourage the interested parts to create and to reproduce the nodes and the links of the networks that finally provide the supporting infrastructure of daily life (Horelli, 2006). The model includes a basic idea, content analysis, a collective vision, but also common principles of implementation.

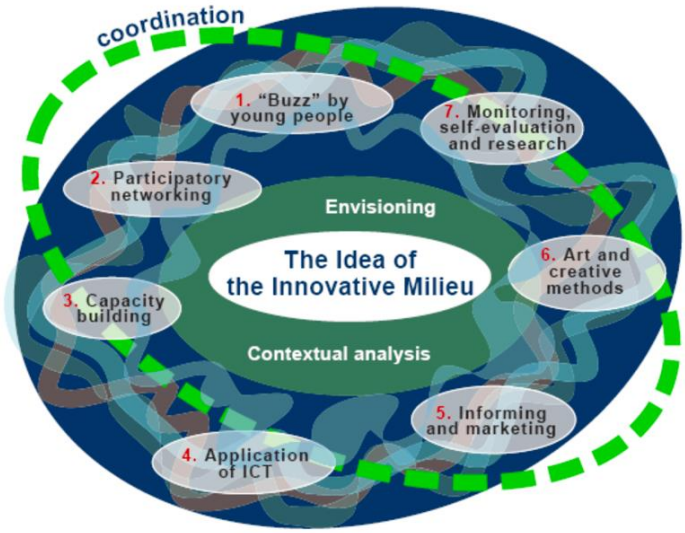

Fig 1. *The model of learning-based network approach to planning in which nodes and their links emerge through the implementation of the chosen strategies and a sensitive coordination* (Sotkasiira et. al, 2010)

The young people and children are living in contexts that are becoming more and more complicated. Therefore, it is necessarily to pay more attention to the social realities and to empower children from early age to participate in different actions in order to have a voice in decisions that concern them. Thus, participation in school contexts and communities can take place in different ways such as: participation as presence, participation as verbal expression and discussions, participation as political representation, participation in decision-making, participation as involvement (Brito & Siveres, 2014). To be successful, a participatory school management should promote different ways to facilitate the participation of children in discussions and debates regarding the implementation of ideas and new projects in schools with a positive impact on children's well-being (Brito & Siveres, 2014).

Conclusions and challenges of children's participation in practice

Percy-Smith (2007) considers that in practice there is a need for a reflexive critique on child's participation. The changes appear quite rarely, and the practice requests an increased attention in terms of development of child participation (Percy-Smith, 2007). Reflecting on the challenges of practice, child participation cannot be understood outside the context in which it manifest itself. The starting point in the definition of child participation is often perceived as the lack of opportunity for children to have a say in decisions that concern them (Wyness et. al. 2004). The involvement of children in activities would contribute to the increasing of self-esteem among them and would reflect the real need of children (Sinclair, 2004). The opinions of the children are essential, and the challenge is how to embed the voice of the children in school culture to make room for decisions. Child participation should be authentic and meaningful and in order to be firmly embedded in organizational culture, there is a need to move from an exclusive approach to inclusive approach to children and their abilities (UNICEF, 2003). To influence how children's participation is seen, professionals and the researchers should be focused more on children's life, to recognize children's culture as being independent from that of the adults, and to emphasize new ways of interacting with children. The whole attention should be on a system that embraces children's value and appreciate children's role as active participants (Malone & Hartung, 2010).

Involving children in dialogue and conversations about decisions that affect them will contribute to their development of independent life skills. In this regard, a very important step that we bring into discussion is the legislative project number 417 of 2024 for completing the Law number 272 of 2004 regarding the promotion and the protection of children's rights in Romania (Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities, 2024). The project will ensure children's participation in decision-making processes at the level of central and local public administration reflecting a firm commitment to inclusion and civic responsibility. By adopting the Law, Romania becomes the first country in the world to regulate at the level of primary legislation children's participation in the decision-making process. The main objective of the law includes annual consultation with children (the public institutions will organize annual consultations with children, ensuring an open and protected dialogue on topics of interest to them), an accessible communication (institutions will publish in a language friendly and adapted to children, promoting transparency and facilitating the informed participation of children in public life), and will promote an active involvement of children in decisions that concern them (Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities, 2024). In this way, the presented project creates a mechanism through which children's opinions will be integrated in the decision-making process, thus contributing to the formation of civically involved and responsible citizens.

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