

Towards a pedagogy of participation? – Exploring children’s experiences in regional youth councils

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Abstract

This article approaches children’s participation in the context of regional youth councils in Finland. Based on the survey data and thematic interviews of children aged 9 to 16, the aim is to deepen the understanding on what children consider they are gaining from their membership in the councils. For children, participation refers to their ability to express their own opinions and take part in the decision-making, while being able to interact with their peers is regarded as equally important. Regional youth councils are considered spaces for learning about the democratic culture, and the actual skills and knowledge essential to act in it. Children note this as also being important for their future lives. Based on children’s experiences, this article argues that to make participation arenas more meaningful and effective for all participants, pedagogical perspectives should be strengthened. In the final part of the article, some premises for the pedagogy of participation will be outlined. Keywords: children, participation, regional youth council, pedagogy of participation

Introduction

Discussion on children’s participation possibilities has been extensive for several decades. Overall, children’s position in society has slowly moved from the margins towards them being recognized as active agents with their own rights, though often in need of adult protection and guidance (James and James 2004). From the 1980s onwards, discussion on children’s participation was strengthened in academia and beyond, and at the latest the United Nation’s (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (from now on UNCRC) articulated the rights that children also possess. Often referred to as the «Three P’s», UNCRC (1989) introduces children’s right to protection, provision and participation (Gal and Duramy 2015).

In this article, participation is discussed in the context of regional youth councils that exemplify adult-initiated platforms for promoting children’s participation rights in practice.

Research on children’s participation arenas is vast nowadays (Feringa and Tonkens 2017; Sant and Davies 2018; Taft and Gordon 2013), and though earlier research has indicated the benefits of children’s participation in general (Sinclair 2004), critical voices appear alongside. Some (Hart 1992; Lundy 2018) suggest that children’s participation often appears as non-participation and consultation, and adults mostly dominate the agendas and the means of participation. Overall, the adults’ role is considered crucial, though often ambivalent and unclear (Alanko 2013; Lansdown 2010), and merely promoting the self-governance of children (Raby 2012).

Here, children’s participation is approached as an educational practice, in need of a more solid understanding of how to support it pedagogically. Some researchers (Hart 1992; Wyness 2006) have suggested that children’s

participation is, in fact, equal to political socialization, and youth councils are mainly promoting citizenship education among children (Cockburn 2007). Through citizenship education, children are considered to gain specific skills and knowledge, and democratic awareness to act as active citizens (Korsgaard 2001). However, according to Biesta (2006), this view on learning about the democratic culture appears instrumental and individualistic, thus neglecting the situational and relational side of it.

This article is based on a case study conducted in a Finnish northern city, which from 2006 onwards has promoted children's participation through regional youth councils. There are 15 regional youth councils operating in the city, and each of the councils has members aged 9 to 16. The councils serve as a platform for children to discuss the issues of their concern and to take part in the decision-making. The data consists of council members' survey answers and thematic interviews. In the article regional youth council members' conceptions of participation are explored. This lays groundwork for the main question, which explores what children consider they are gaining from membership in the councils. Based on their experiences, participation is discussed from an educational perspective, which leads to considering how best to promote pedagogically children's participation rights in the regional youth councils. In the final part of the article premises for the pedagogy of participation will be outlined.

Children's participation in the context of youth councils

Though the idea of children's participation has been widely accepted, the concept itself seems to lack clear definitions, and it has even been considered contested and ambiguous (Horgan, Forde, Martin, and Parkes 2017). In this article, the starting point for understanding children's participation lies in the UNCRC (1989) and in its Article 12, according to which children should be assured the right to freely express their opinions in the matters of their concern,

though in accordance with their age and maturity. Moreover, for the purposes of this article, Article 29 is important, as it emphasizes that the education of the child shall be directed towards, among other things, the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society (UNCRC 1989).

Various models (e.g. Hart 1992; Shier 2001) are introduced to approach children's participation theoretically. Here, participation is understood through three interrelated dimensions based on the literature. The *political dimension of participation* follows the lines of the UNCRC (1989) and refers to the above-mentioned ability to express one's opinions, which should be acknowledged when planning and making decisions in the matters affecting children's lives. The *social and relational dimension of participation* emphasizes the social relations through which children interact with their peers and adults. The social dimension of participation refers to children's ability to come together with others and be recognized as active members of their societies (Thomas 2007: 206–207; see also Horgan et al. 2017). Furthermore, participation can be understood as a *subjective feeling*, a sense of belonging and empowerment, through which children acknowledge their ability to participate and influence on the matters meaningful to their lives (Gretschel 2002: 93).

The idea of participation has also been contested, as, for example, Wyness (2013) notes that it is the Western ideas of childhood that lead to the consideration that all children have a voice that needs to be recognized in the decision-making processes in different spheres of societal life (see also Horgan et al. 2017). Furthermore, Smith (2012) argues that children's participation is overtly aimed at creating future citizens, hence the present moment is ignored, but is equally important. Critics (Horgan et al. 2017) also demand acknowledgment of the diversity of children's participation in their everyday lives.

Youth council represents an adult-structured arena for children's participation that is being created to support the requirements of the UNCRC (1989). The Local Government Act (410/2015) in Finland requires the local executives to set up a youth council or an equivalent to support young people's participation possibilities (see also Youth Act 1285/2016). Youth councils often follow the methods and goals of representative democracy in that members are selected through voting, with the chosen children representing the voice of their peers (Wyness 2009). In Finland, the history of youth councils stems from the 1990s, though in formal educational settings there were already student councils in the 1970s. The Union of Local Youth Councils (2019) states that the aim of the youth councils is to represent the youth population of the municipality and to express the opinions of the youth in current issues. Councils act as intermediaries between the youth population and the officials of the municipality, and they organize different kinds of events and activities.

Educational perspective on participation

Children's participation has a close connection to personal growth and education. It does not happen in isolation, nor does it happen without educational support from others (Nivala and Rynnänen 2013: 30). As Gert Biesta (2006: 118) notes, discussion on what kind of education would best prepare people for participation in society dates back to the polis of Athens. This also has implications for pedagogy. Watkins and Mortimore (1999: 3) refer to pedagogy as a conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another. Furthermore, for Alexander (2008: 540), pedagogy is both an act of teaching and a discourse of educational theories, values, evidence and justifications related to it. In this article, participation is approached mainly outside formal educational institutions, in the context of youth work that aims at supporting the growth of children and young people (Youth Act 1285/2016).

Youth councils are often regarded as spaces for citizenship education (Adu-Gyamfi 2013; Sant and Davies 2018), where young people learn different skills in relation to democratic awareness (Kendall 2010). They are also considered to enhance social, personal and emotional competence (Halsey, Murfield, Harland and Lord 2006), as well as promote young people's self-confidence (Crowley 2012). Shier, Méndez, Centeno, Arróliga, and González (2014) state that in youth councils, young people learn to work together, and become more aware of children's rights (Sant and Davies 2018). Interestingly, however, Sant and Davies (2018) question whether the councils promote young people's empowerment or simply preserve the political status quo.

In this article, citizenship education serves as a starting point for understanding participation from an educational perspective. According to UNESCO (1998), citizenship education refers to «educating children, from early childhood, to become clear-thinking and enlightened citizens who participate in decisions concerning society» (see also Shultz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, and Losito 2010: 22). Korsgaard (2001: 12–13) notes that citizenship education consists of knowledge and understanding about, for example, how societies function, what kinds of rights and duties citizens possess and what kinds of channels can be used for participation. Values and dilemmas relate to the ethical and relational side of citizenship education; sense of belonging and being recognized as an active subject is a crucial part of citizenship education. Furthermore, various skills and competencies, such as being able to negotiate and discuss diverse topics, take initiative and take part in decision-making, are needed to take part in societal life in practice.

Gert Biesta (2006: 123–124) notes that citizenship education has too often been understood as «education for democracy», which refers to equipping children with the right kind of knowledge and skills, and the values and norms of the democratic

culture. Hence, it appears as simply socializing children to the existing system and preserving the status quo. This has been considered to be mainly the school's duty. In «education through democracy», Biesta (2006: 124-125) states that democracy is learned through participating and acting in the everyday lives of children. It is not only the schools, but all spheres of societal life, that should support children's right to participate. However, both outlooks are insufficient, as Biesta (2006: 119-120) points out: they view citizenship education as individualistic and instrumentalist. They seem to aim at imbuing children with certain competencies, which reduces citizenship education to simply educating individuals with a specific future goal in mind (see also Biesta, Lawy, and Kelly 2009).

In his later writings, Biesta (2011: 2) argues for a more open understanding of what learning about democratic citizenship is: an ongoing process through one's life. Furthermore, democracy is a space where one can act as a subject. The central question, then, is: What kinds of places are needed to support the activities of children and young people? Learning democracy refers to the idea that children and young people learn democracy through their participation in the contexts and practices that make up their everyday lives, in school, college, and university, and in society at large (Biesta 2011: 6). Biesta and Lawy (2006) also state that moving from teaching citizenship to learning democracy means moving from individualistic notions of citizenship as a set of skills and competences to an idea of youth-in-context. This means that we need to ask how children learn democracy and how they can be active citizens. Moreover, citizenship learning must be understood as a situated and relational process, which is uniquely linked to young people's individual life-trajectories (Biesta et al. 2009: 9).

The study: Regional youth councils as a research context

The study was conducted in the north of Finland, in one of the biggest cities in the country, with a high percentage of youth population. A model for youth participation was established in 2006, which resulted in establishing regional youth councils in different regions of the city. The city's Educational and Cultural Services have the main responsibility in supporting children's participation possibilities in the city, according to which participation is referred to as a learning path that should be supported from early childhood education onwards, while school councils and regional youth councils are considered important sites for learning active citizenship. While children learn about active citizenship, the structures and the communities within which children act also need to be developed (City of Oulu, 2019).

Regional youth councils operate mainly in the context of youth work, though schools interact with the youth workers especially in recruiting new members for the councils. Youth work is guided by the Youth Act (1285/2016), according to which children's and young people's participation possibilities must be promoted and their personal growth supported. Each regional area in the city has a varying collection of primary, secondary and upper secondary schools, and youth houses. Only a few of the areas have vocational schools in the area. Member selection is conducted within the schools and the youth houses of the area, most often through voting, though on some occasions teachers have requested children to join, or a friend has advertised the councils (Alanko 2013). Each school and youth house in the area has two to five members in the council. However, council members are mainly from primary and secondary schools, aged 9 to 16. The number of members in each council varies from approximately 10 to over 20 persons. During the time of the study, 11 councils were operating in different regions of

the city. Nowadays, due to a consolidation of several municipalities into the city, 15 regional councils are operating in the city

Each regional youth council has its local meeting approximately once a month. The meetings are constructed based on the members' own interests, but city officials may also assign a theme to the councils to discuss and to make a statement based on these discussions. Each council is guided by a local youth worker who will support children in their activities within the council. Youth workers also often act as intermediaries towards the city council and other decision-making structures and officials in the city. Besides each council's own meetings, there is an annual city meeting, which gathers all the councils together to discuss issues of their concern. Each regional youth council collects ideas from the schools in their own region, after which they discuss these and decide which ideas they will take for further consideration in the city meeting. The city council grants a budget for the city meeting, the use of which is decided during the meeting based on the ideas presented by different regional youth councils. Besides the local meetings and the annual city meeting, councils can organize various kinds of activities, for example camps and events, in their own region or in the city at large (Alanko 2013).

Methods

This article is based on the data that was created among the members of regional youth councils in 2011 and 2012 for the author's (2013) dissertation. It should be acknowledged that the data is relatively old, yet it offers an insight into the phenomenon during the time that the youth participation model in the city was introduced and developed.

At the beginning of the data collection, it became obvious that the number of council members was not static. A cautious estimate is that approximately 147 children took part in the eleven regional youth councils that operated in the city during the study. However, it appeared

that some members were actively taking part in the council activities, while some attended the activities only once or twice. Thus, member registers were not up to date and some memberships were simply nominal, some of the members had left the council without notifying. After discussing with the youth workers, each council sent a list of the members that were most active in the council activities. This resulted in a list with 113 members. The children on this list and their guardians were sent an invitation and a consent form (see Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2012) to take part in the survey and the interviews that took place afterwards.

Fifty-one (45 %) members took part in the survey. Most of the respondents were girls (65 %). Forty-five percent of the respondents were children from primary schools (aged 9 to 12), and the rest studied in secondary or upper secondary school. The purpose of the survey was to gain information about the councils' activities and how the members themselves experienced them. For this article, the questions «What does participation mean in your opinion? », and «What have you gained from your membership in the council?» were coded and analyzed.

After the survey, the children were asked to take part in interviews. Thematic interviews were conducted with 22 council members to deepen the understanding gained by the survey. Special attention was paid to creating an open dialogue with the children for them to discuss their experiences during their membership in regional youth councils. Themes included questions, for example, about participation in general, in the school context, and more specifically in the regional youth councils. The pros and the cons of the councils, and the roles of the adults and the peers, were discussed in detail. Overall, the aim of the interviews was to allow children to discuss their experiences holistically, not putting too tight restrictions on what they could talk about. Interviews lasted from 20 to 90 minutes. At the time of

the interviews, the children's membership in the council had lasted for at least one year, though this was not a precondition for taking part in the interviews. The youngest interviewees were 11 years old and the oldest ones were 16 years old. Out of 22 interviewees, 68 % were girls. The research frame follows the principles of childhood studies in which it is stated that children and young people can express their experiences through interviews, hence also being active subjects in creating research data (Christensen and Prout 2002). Thematic interviews took place at schools or in youth houses during the school day.

In the article, open-ended questions, as well as the interview data, were analyzed through qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012). The analysis of the data can be best described as an abductive analysis, where the data has been read bearing in mind the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). First, children's conceptions of participation were read through political and social dimensions of participation, though also critically examining other possible dimensions of participation. This resulted in creating the third category of participation as a subjective feeling. In the results, children's conceptions of participation will be discussed through three interrelated themes: *participation as a political activity*, *participation as a subjective feeling*, and *participation as a relational activity*. After this, the data was re-read based on what children had gained from their membership in the councils. Three themes were created based on children's experiences: *knowledge of participation and democratic life*, *skills to participate*, and *personal growth and the value of participation*. In the final part, these themes are also critically discussed in relation to Biesta's (2006; 2011), and Biesta et al.'s (2009) ideas about learning democracy. In the results, pseudonyms are used when using direct quotes from the data.

Results

Children's conceptions of participation

Conceptions of participation were first analyzed to study how children understand the phenomenon in the first place. Three interrelated themes were created based on the data analysis as discussed in the following section.

Participation as a political activity was a theme most often discussed in relation to participation. For children, participation referred mostly to an ability to express one's opinions and views in the matters that affected their lives. Furthermore, it was about being able to take part in the planning of the council activities – for example, city meetings and other events – and being able to influence the decisions made in the councils. A common line of thought was outlined by a respondent in the survey as follows: «it means to be able to influence the things that matter to you, in your own community». Moreover, council members noted that participation in the councils included the sense of responsibility, as they were chosen to represent the voice of the youth population in their area (Wyness 2009). Overall, children's conceptions of participation often related to those outlined in the UNCRC (1989), and this was also considered an important issue from the point of view of human rights. Lida, a primary school girl, contemplated at length the reasons why adults have become interested in children's opinions:

Probably for that reason, that they [adults] have noticed that children can think with their own brain, that they are not stupid! That they only have different perspectives on issues and that they [adults] want to listen their opinions as well. Necessarily all of them won't be acknowledged, or some of the ideas goes in one ear and out the other. But they [adults] might pick out something that they haven't themselves considered.

For children, participation also referred to a *subjective feeling*, a sense of being recognized as an active member of the council, a person in

one's own right, one among many who collectively formed the council. This was expressed in the survey by stating, for example, that «during the city meeting, it felt great to be able to present our [councils'] ideas in public». Moreover, this relates to the idea that taking part in the council activities was one thing, yet another one was the sense of having been able to influence the activities of the council. A survey answer crystallizes this idea, as one of the members stated that «participation means that you take part in something, for example in a play, and the sense of participation means that you actually do something, not just sit there without doing anything». For children, the subjective feeling of participation referred to the fact that they are being taken seriously, their opinions have been recognized and they have been able to take part in decision-making. Through this, their sense of personal competence (see also Halsey et al. 2006) and self-confidence (see also Crowley 2012) had strengthened.

Participation is fundamentally an intersubjective (Siljander 2002) process, something that takes place in relations with others. The political dimension of participation was intertwined with the relational and the subjective aspects. *Participation as a relational activity* was discussed in the survey answers and in the interviews especially in relation to the children's peers, even though adults' role in supporting and encouraging their activities in the councils was regarded as pivotal. For most, a regional youth council was an arena of peer culture where it was possible to create new friendships. Thus, to participate was to interact with peers in meaningful but also joyful activities. Some of the children also expressed that the preliminary motive for joining the council was because of their peers. However, the relational side of participation was not always considered unproblematic, as the councils include members of different ages. Older members pondered whether the questions and the needs discussed in the councils were shared between different ages, thus *how* to participate was not

always agreed upon among council members. Kaisa, a primary school girl, offered an insight into this question:

Members from secondary and upper secondary schools, they act differently from us [members from primary schools], they think from the point of view of an older person and we think from the point of view of a younger person, we see the world as a child, and we do not worry so much about the problems of our own country, or the world problems. Maybe a little bit about our own city and the school, but we think smaller. Secondary school members, they know already more about the environment, they think bigger. They think more adult-like, they are more mature.

Although the age difference was considered a challenge, most of the members preferred councils consisting of members of different ages. Other council members were also considered an important resource for learning. In the survey, children were asked to list those people who had helped and supported them most in the councils. Fifty-three percent of the respondents stated that it was their peers who had supported them most in the council activities. For many, the simple gesture of welcoming a new member to the council was valued, as one of the members stated in the survey: «They have included me in the group in a friendly way and they have encouraged me to express my opinions». Based on this, an important aspect of children's participation entails the possibility to be recognized as an active subject with one's own opinions, both in intergenerational and in peer relations (see also Thomas 2012).

What do children consider they are gaining from membership in the regional youth council?

In the survey, children were asked what they had gained from membership in the regional youth council. This question was also discussed during the interviews. Even though the concept of learning was not explicitly used in the survey or in the interviews, children themselves

expressed their experiences through learning. Three themes were created based on the data.

Knowledge of participation and democratic life was often discussed in the answers of the survey and during the interviews. In general, regional youth councils created a space where children learned knowledge of the democratic life and the ways children themselves can influence the matters of their concern. Children expressed that in the councils, they had gained, for example, «knowledge about my own home-town», «knowledge about my own possibilities» and «knowledge about the political system». Children also pointed out the importance of gaining knowledge while joining the regional youth council. As the study was conducted in the beginning of the establishment of the councils, children felt more attention should be paid to how councils are being promoted among children. Children noted that schools and teachers, who were mostly responsible for recruiting new members for the councils, often lacked adequate knowledge about the councils to discuss with prospective new members. Knowledge of participation was regarded as a fundamental human right based on which children were able to act and make decisions in relation to their participation. In the interviews, secondary school girl Sari noted that: «Everything has changed, people and everything, women have rights nowadays, so it has been acknowledged, that children should have them too». However, this was also critically discussed, as children pointed out that they still lacked relevant knowledge concerning their participation possibilities. In relation to regional youth councils, a common concern among members was how familiar children in general were with these councils and their possibilities to join them. Overall, children agreed upon knowledge being a collective resource that should be available for all the participants, both the children and the adults alike, that are involved in the council activities. It was also acknowledged that council activities should be more actively promoted among the wider public.

The children discussed very concrete issues in relation to what they have gained during their membership in the councils. *Skills to participate* include comments such as. «I have learned how to express my opinions in public», «I have learned meeting procedures», and «I have learned how to influence matters important to me». A secondary school girl, Paula, offered a more in-depth view on what she has gained during her membership in the council:

That we learn, meeting procedures, this might be an example, but at least I understand that it must be useful for the future. And that we learn to act in a group, work as a group. And that things don't always go as you yourself want, and we learn how to influence on things and what is possible. All those different ways how we can promote our ideas further. And we can represent our schools and peers and we learn to listen to their opinions. And we can really make a difference.

Regional youth councils are regarded as sites where children can practice and develop different skills with their peers and adults. Furthermore, children regard them as important for their future life, and even though council activities mainly take place outside the school, children consider the skills practiced useful for their school life and academic performance. Children notice that the councils serve as an important site for learning the democratic life that schools cannot offer. This also resulted in some members considering themselves privileged and that their peers at school were missing out on such important activities. Paula also notes that besides being able to learn specific skills, such as meeting procedures and promoting initiatives in decision-making, membership in the regional youth council also allowed them to practice interactional skills and to learn resilience as group members.

Though children most often expressed gaining knowledge and various skills in relation to participation in regional youth councils, they also discussed more abstract things that re-

late to personal growth and attitudes towards participation. *Personal growth and the value of participation* entails statements such as: «I think I have become more broad-minded», «I've been praised by the teacher about my activities in the council», «I've been trusted», and «It has encouraged me to proceed with my studies». For many, being trusted and recognized as a member of a council strengthened their self-confidence and self-trust (see also Crowley 2012; Halsey et al. 2006). In relation to this, children reported gaining more self-assurance to interact with others, and to express their own opinions in the council. In general, taking part in the council activities and decision-making also strengthened their trust in the democratic system:

Absolutely! I have noticed that you can really make a difference, if you just bother! In addition to this, I have learned to know great people around me that support me in everyday life.

Children also noted that through their membership in the council, they have realized the value of participation. It was also referred to as a certain kind of spirit or a right kind of attitude, as one respondent in the survey replied:

Participation means that you want to influence on different things in your life and you are interested in them. It means that you don't stop halfway, and you understand that to influence entails even small things.

Overall, children expressed several benefits they had gained during their membership in regional youth councils. Traditional views on citizenship education have been criticized for being instrumental and individualistic, as simply equipping children with certain skills and a right kind of mindset (Biesta 2006, 2011). However, children themselves report that learning, for example, the knowledge and various skills on how to participate is crucial for the activities in the regional youth councils. For most members, participation in the regional

youth councils also offered a space for personal growth and the realization of one's possibilities to participate. Moreover, children were also looking to the future, as secondary school girl Paula notes:

It is just that when you are grown up, so you dare to get involved more and not simply stating your opinions at home, and not anywhere else. So, encouraging and developing, I think this is good for us, there will be better youth!

Discussion

This article has introduced children's conceptions of participation in the context of regional youth councils. This has laid the groundwork for understanding councils as sites of learning about democratic life and the ways to act in it. As the article has demonstrated, children learn a variety of things while in the councils; for example, they learn about the democratic system and their possibilities to act in it, and they gain practical skills to promote the issues of their concern. Moreover, according to children, regional youth councils offer a space for social relationships and for personal growth. This has also been noted in earlier research (see Crowley 2012; Halsey et al. 2006; Kendall 2010; Shier et al. 2014).

In this article, it is argued that if we are to move forward in the discussion around children's participation, more attention should be paid to the educational dimension of participation. The question is, how can we best support children's participation in the youth councils pedagogically? Pedagogy of participation can best be described as a frame of reference through which children's participation could be effectively approached. It requires a special mindset from the point of view of adults who interact with the children in their endeavors to participate. This requires acknowledging children as active agents, persons in their own right, with their subjective life histories. Furthermore, this requires attention to the contexts of children's

lives. In the regional youth councils, children and adults bring their subjective worldviews and opinions into dialogue with others, and this requires a safe and supportive environment (Biesta 2006; Biesta and Lawy 2006). Pedagogy of participation highlights the importance of acknowledging that the right to participate is intertwined with the sense of responsibility. This means responsibility of the adults to support and guide children in their participation activities. It also means that children themselves learn to take on responsibility gradually in the councils.

It should be noted that participation – or the idea of active citizenship, for that matter – does not entail a static set of skills and knowledge that can be simply transferred from one person to another. Instead, these must be understood as situational: hence, children and adults construct their everyday lives and activities in the context of regional youth councils in reciprocal interaction. Ideas about citizenship and democratic education have been contested for their instrumentalist and individualistic nature (Biesta 2006). In this article, it is recognized that the knowledge and the skills practiced in the councils are not self-evident in the possession of a certain group – like the adults – on the contrary, these values are constructed collectively in the group. For Biesta (2011), learning democracy refers to children learning democracy through their participation in the contexts and practices that make up their everyday lives, not only the schools. Regional youth councils offer a space, outside the school system albeit in close connection to it, where children of different ages come together to discuss issues of their concern.

Lastly, as educational relations between adults and children always carry with them questions of power, they should be discussed openly. The last quote from Paula suggests that regional youth councils offer a place where the youth will somehow be improved – as if there is something wrong with the youth population to begin with. This

view is problematic and should not be considered a basis for the pedagogy of participation. Instead, it should be recognized that people of different ages come together in the context of regional youth councils, with their subjective life histories and resources. Simply concentrating on the deficits that a certain group of people are claimed to possess, does not support children's participation possibilities effectively. More emphasis should be placed on creating spaces where children and adults can interact with each other and take part in activities that are meaningful for all (see also Biesta et al. 2009). Youth councils should also be critically reviewed, as they illustrate adult-initiated structures of children's participation, forming just one example of how children can express their opinions and influence in the matters of their concern. Moreover, as Percy-Smith (2006: 154) argues, more attention should be paid to how children and adults negotiate the agendas and means of participation in the context of youth councils.

The article has several limitations. Experiences of children in a specific cultural and historical context are presented in this article, and the number of participants in the study is limited. Thus, generalizations cannot be made. The data is relatively old, but it offers authentic experiences from children themselves, which should be regarded as important. Furthermore, based on children's experiences, discussions on participation as a pedagogical practice can be elaborated. Further research is needed to deepen the understanding of various kinds of participation arenas, experienced both by the children and the adults alike. Different kinds of data collection methods should be developed to allow children's authentic experiences to come alive. Moreover, as the regional youth councils are still operating in the city, follow-up studies should be conducted.

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Author presentation

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