

Finnish Youth Research Network

Doormats and Glass Ceilings of Participation

Tomi Kiilakoski



Door mats



Glass ceiling



On Participation

- Girl 1. ” *They always ask us our opinions and enquire what we want*”.

On participation

- Girl 2. "but whatever you say, nothing ever happens"

On Participation

- Girl 3. "it's about that: nothing ever happens, things never work out"

What is it about?

- Different rhythms of the young and the adults?
- Methods to promote participation?
- Generational gaps?
- The unequal power distribution in the institution?
- Unintended consequences?
- Participation without influence?

Invisible Children vs. Competent Members of a Society

- “Hearings are of no use, if you are not ready to give us power” (Interview of a young person)
- “Participation without influence is mere window-dressing” (Mary John).



Social basis of self-respect (Rawls: *Political Liberalism*)

- Citizens not only as "normal and fully cooperating members of a society, but they further want to be, and to be recognised as, such members. This supports their self-respect as citizens." (p. 81-82).
- Social bases of self-respect as a primary good which "are things citizens need as free and equal persons, and claims to these goods are counted as appropriate claims" (p. 181)

Key concept: participation

Participation is a relation between an individual and a larger social entity, such as family, school, town, society etc. Three necessary conditions for participation are:

1. Formally and/or informally recognised agency.
2. Action that is recognised by the parties concerned.
3. The action creates a sense of participation.

(Kiilakoski, Nivala, Gretschel 2012.)

- Political, social and evocative nature of participation

Participation: different dimensions

- The social dimension of participation. *Belonging, co-operating, social cohesion, networks, inclusion, adult-child relations, and the opportunities for social connection that participatory practice can create.*
- The political dimensions of participation : *decision-making, sharing power, taking part in the process, contributing to change.*
- The two dimensions emphasise different goals. In the practice the two dimensions are often confused.

Part II. Participation in practice: examples from Finnish schools

- Janus-faced nature of Finnish schools: remarkable cognitive success in Pisa Studies is contrasted with relatively low success in both school satisfaction and participation.
- The need to improve school participation is recognised in the policy level and on the daily school life level.
 - However, these analysis are seldom done in a participatory manner
 - Schools might be viewed as isolated institutions with little coordination of child and youth services.
- Participatory practices in Finland tend to representative, group based activities with a lot of adult control (Feldmann-Wojtachnia & al. 2010).
 - The over-emphasis on student councils as an instrument of democracy policy.

Results 1.

- The roles: recognised roles as elected members of a board of a student council, as an elected peer support student of the Green Flag program. Relatively little ways of influencing decisions outside this role.
- The action: some improvements on the physical environment (sofas, table tennis tables on the corridor), a break where one can be inside.
 - Student board meetings
 - Surveys

What type of things the young are able to influence

- **Social structures such as schools rules, school time tables, decision making on curriculum etc.**
- **Daily interaction within these structures**

Individu
als

Groups

- **Small-scale physical infrastructure**
- **Large-scale physical infrastructure, such as school building, school yard**

What type of things the young are able to influence

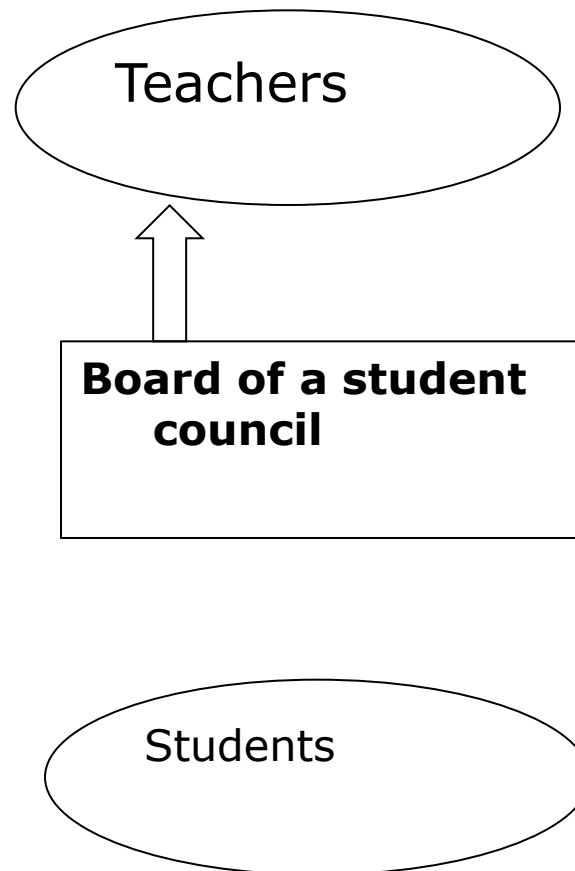
- **Social structures such as schools rules, school time tables, decision making on curriculum etc.**
- **Daily interaction within these structures**

Individu
als

Groups

- **Small-scale physical infrastructure**
- **Large-scale physical infrastructure, such as school building, school yard**

The role of the board of a student council



Results 2.

Discourses on the experiences.

- Emphasis on own effort.
- Emphasis on the structural gaps.
- Emphasis on the unchanging nature of schools.
- Emphasis on the difficulty of getting hard and challenging ideas accepted.
- Emphasis on the larger role of younger pupils. (Only on a second schools which had over-emphasis on younger pupils in grades 1-6)

Conclusions

- The agency of the students is the school community level restricted to members of formal, representative groups.
- Produces both feelings of capability and being neglected.
- Social participation seems to be limited to a representative group only.
- Immanent criticism: schools do not have structures that would help them fulfil the expected outcomes.
- External criticism: no systematic participatory culture and lack of school community perspective mean that schools do not serve as training grounds for democratic life.

About participation

- *In the seventh grade we expressed actively our own opinions, but when were not listened to, well, it started to feel like, that you don't say our opinions any longer*

Points of development

- using multi-method approaches to ensure that different children are able to participate
- combining short-term goals important for children with the long-term administrative processes
- providing wide and long-lasting ways on influencing

Why participate

- the developmental perspective (helping young people to learn democratic behaviour)
- service perspective (organising services more efficiently by listening to the actual users)
- democracy perspective (the more citizens are interested in common matters, the more likely they are to engage democratically),
- community perspective (the more groups feel they are accepted as legitimate members of a community, the safer and more comfortable and creative the community is likely to be).
- participation is not only about the young, it concerns all of us.