



The Children and Youth Participation in Politics: Case Study of the Project “Youth Voice: Empowering Positive Change (Youth4Change)”

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Abstract. This paper examines the effectiveness of children and youth participation in politics through the case study of the “Youth4Change” project. The study uses a Participatory Action Research and “Project Citizen” methodologies to explore the impact of the project on youth empowerment and political engagement. The project aims to add to a model empowering young people to participate in local decision-making processes and promote best practices for youth participation in local and municipal politics. The article highlights the importance of youth participation in politics for building a more inclusive and democratic society and presents the findings of the study as the impact of the “Youth4Change” project. The hypothesis of the project is that the chosen methodological approach will have a positive impact on youth empowerment, political engagement and increased participation and influence on local policymaking. This is particularly tested for a group aged 15–19 years and in relation to its potential influence on a local municipality. Inspired by several models for engagement of vulnerable and general youth in local and regional policymaking, the “Youth4Change” trains the youth to influence and advises a local municipality partner on models to seek advice from youth in the rural region.

Keywords: *children and youth participation, empowerment, positive change, participatory action Research, project “Citizen”.*

Introduction

The rights-based recognition of children and youth as active participants in society has been officially documented in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which stresses the participation rights of every individual under 18 years. But the EU has gone further in its engagement of youth as referenced, in particular, in: Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on strengthening the multilevel governance when promoting the participation of young people in decision-making processes (2021), raising opportunities for young people in rural and remote areas (2020) and on the role of young people in building a secure, cohesive and harmonious society in Europe (2018) (Odonovan, 2023).

The European Union Youth Strategy (2018) is the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for 2019–2027, based on the Council of the European Union Resolution of 26 November 2018. It fosters youth participation in democratic life. The EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 reveals the overall objectives: “EU youth cooperation shall make the most of youth policy's potential. It fosters youth participation in democratic life, in line with Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. It also supports social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society”. Thus, by promoting youth participation in political processes, the EU aims to build a more inclusive and democratic society that values the input of all its citizens.

The recognition of children and youth as active participants in society is also reflected in other current, international documents: the World Program of Action for Youth (1995), the UN System-wide Action Plan on Youth (2013), the guiding principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the African Youth Charter (2006), the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (1998), Revised European Charter on the participation of young people in local and regional life of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (2015).

Considering the above-mentioned international documents, it can be stated that overall, they emphasize the importance of youth participation in democratic life, social and civic engagement. Democratic societies should strive to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society. To contribute to the raised objectives, the Lithuanian College of Democracy and Europe People's Forum have launched a project “The Youth Voice: Empowering Positive Change (“Youth4Change”)” (LDUK, 2022). The objective of this paper is to present the main activities and interim results of this ongoing project. To reach the stated objective, the case study method has been used. The paper consists of the five main parts: the presentation of the project activities and results; the description of “Project Citizen” and Participatory

Action Research methods that are used to encourage youth participation in politics; discussion; conclusions; limitations and further development.

Case Study of the Project “Youth Voice: Empowering Positive Change (“Youth4Change”)”

Youth participation in politics is crucial for building a more inclusive and democratic society. The “Youth Voice: Empowering Positive Change (“Youth4Change”, 2021-2-LT01-KA210-SCH-000049552.)” project aims to empower children and youth to participate at the political level by reflecting their needs, creating an innovative tool of open dialogue with decision-makers, and stimulating democracy and inclusive democratic participation (“Youth4Change”, 2022). By empowering young people to take part in decision-making processes, this project aims to build a more inclusive and democratic society that values the input of all its citizens. Specifically, the project aims to: empower children and youth to participate in political processes at the local and regional level; inspire an innovative tool for open dialogue between decision-makers and young people; stimulate democracy and inclusive democratic participation; promote best practices for youth empowerment in local politics. This project runs for 24 months from 01/03/2022 – 29/02/2024.

The “Youth4Change” project is expected to yield the following outcomes:

1. **Guide of best practice:** A guide of best practice will be developed to promote youth participation in politics. The guide will include case studies of successful youth participation initiatives, practical tips for engaging young people, and strategies for building sustainable youth participation structures.
2. **Study of youth empowerment in politics:** A study of a selected group of 15–19 years old vulnerable children will be carried out through surveys before and after their empowerment training in politics. The survey will identify their local needs, visions and skills to engage in local politics. This study will be conducted to identify barriers to youth participation and strategies for overcoming them. The study will involve consultations with young people and key stakeholders as well as a review of existing models for engagement and participation of vulnerable and non-vulnerable youth in policymaking, based on existing evaluations and research on particularly local European models.
3. **Policy paper:** A policy paper will be developed to promote youth participation in politics. The paper will be based on the findings of the guide of best practice and the study of youth empowerment in politics. It will provide recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders on how to create an enabling environment for youth participation.

The project is developed by the Lithuanian College of Democracy in association with Europe's Peoples' Forum (EPF). Europe's Peoples' Forum and its national partners form a center of excellence for the development of participatory and deliberative designs and implementation. They work both with the EU and the Conference on the Future of Europe as well as with the national and regional authorities on the preparation and implementation of participatory processes and deliberative dialogues. The EPF has actively advised the European Parliament in preparation of its now agreed resolution on Citizen's Dialogue and Citizen's Participation in the EU Decision-Making (2021). The Europe's People's Forum has professional and civil society member organizations in each of the 27 countries that are ready to implement the model for rural and vulnerable youth participation in local policymaking, should the "Youth4Change" project prove to yield a successful model.

"Project Citizen" and Participatory Action Research as Innovative Approaches for Children and Youth Participation in Politics

The "Project Citizen" is a public-policy, process-based program to help students grades 3–12 learn about the political process and to develop a commitment to active citizenship (Jayadiputra, 2018). This program provides the knowledge and skills required for effective citizenship participation and involves students in learning about and improving their communities as well as develops an understanding of the importance of citizenship participation (Kvieskaitė, 2011).

The "Project Citizen" can inspire students in the classroom and use it in the future as an example of civic behavior in everyday life (Adha, & Yanzi, 2014; Öztürk, Rapoport, & Zayimoğlu Öztürk, 2021). It aims to increase the student's self-confidence, by implementing the rights and duties of democratic citizenship, by conducting a study of the current problem of the school, society, environment where the students live (Celišienė, & Bakšytė, 2023). Based on active citizen participation, the program ensures that democratic values and principles are internalized. The methodology of the "Project Citizen" provides opportunities for political participation of students in activities of the government and civil society, while developing the skills of critical thinking, dialogue, debate, negotiation, and cooperation, decision-making and organizing social actions for public interests (Center for Civic Education, 2020). In the "Youth4Change" project we work with activities at the level of rural municipalities, based on the needs and visions of young people. Students share their experiences, discuss the local challenges and how they understand and use democratic citizenship. The "Project Citizen" methodology not only encourages students to research and understand the problems of their communities, but also teaches them how to solve those problems. It helps them

better understand the principle of government of the people, by the people, and for the people (Adha, Yanzi, & Nuralisa, 2019).

The “Project Citizen” was identified as a good practice for children and youth empowerment in politics and active citizenship (Kvieskienė, Čiučiulkienė, & Trasberg, 2022). While the program educates for democratic citizenship, it applies learning to real world issues, and uses cooperative learning, where children act as change agents. The “Project Citizen” was integrated in University’ Social Pedagogue curriculum (Kvieskienė, Kvieska, & Celiešienė, 2018; Merkys, Čiučiulkienė, Bubelienė, & Kvieskienė, 2021).

However, what is expected to create innovative results in the “Youth4Change” is that the training approach from “Project Citizen” is combined with specific collaboration with the municipality of Trakai. Based on the relevant tools and tested models (Odonovan, 2023), the training of students is combined with the partnership of Trakai – a rural municipality in Lithuania. The students are trained to influence, and the municipality advised on modalities for how to seek influence from young people.

The project “Youth4Change” is not only implemented by the approach of “Project Citizen”, but also uses the Participatory Action Research (PAR) strategy (Chevalier, & Buckles, 2019). PAR, which generates possible changes and integrates the synergy of theory and practice, ensures the process of knowledge transformation, and can be understood as a “complex strategy for the communal process of democratization of social reform” (Greenwood, & Levin, 2006). PAR is often used when there is a lack of theoretical knowledge about a certain phenomenon. It helps to ensure the use and transfer of good practice from practitioners in the relevant field, improving existing practice and presenting new forms of it (Shaw, Briar-Lawson, Orme, & Ruckdeschel, 2009; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2017; Silversman, 2022; Bröer, Veltkamp, Ayuandini, et al., 2023). Moreover, PAR may be called as one of the most effective tools for institutional change (López, Soria-Oliver, Aramayona, García-Sánchez, Martín, & Martínez, 2021). PAR refers to the thoughtful acceptance of new experiences and processes, so action research in education would be education (Shamrova, & Cummings, 2017).

A first part of PAR was implemented in the branch of Lithuanian College of Democracy – children day center “Navininkai” (the first project phase from 01/04/2022 till 01/04/2023). The center was founded in 2006 by Lithuanian College of Democracy, focuses on complex services for children and youth (from 6 till 18 years). “Navininkai” is in a rural area – about 40 km from the capital Vilnius.

Activities held in children day care center “Navininkai” involve: intensive individual and group social work with children and families from risk groups; development of positive socialization programs and prevention programs; providing social help for children and families in order to ensure social security and well-being of children. The day care center has a long-standing experience in developing children’s social-life skills, organizing children leisure activities, encouraging positive socialization process. Children are motivated to be creative, active, and effective at work and various other

activities. Undertaken afternoon breaks are full of diverse topics for children, they learn to discuss, express, and justify their opinion, understand a friend's right to have a different opinion, learn to communicate, formulate ideas, speak out loud and ask in confidence.

During PAR, different research methods were used to ensure the reliability of the results, including in-depth interviews, analysis of written texts (reflections), documents (described group projects according to the relevant methodology), and questionnaires (specific information and feedback). PAR involved children, youth and social pedagogues as well as assistant of social worker from "Navininkai" (Table 1).

Table 1

Characteristics of informants

Informants	The number of informants	Male	Female
Children and youth	26	12	14
Social pedagogue	1	0	1
Assistant of social worker	1	0	1

When applying the "Project Citizen" methodology, educational activities are divided into six steps:

1. Clarification of community problems. During it, the participants are introduced to reflexive research as a practical means of investigating a problem.
2. Simulating live voting to determine which topic is most important. During it, participants' critical thinking and decision-making skills are developed, creating a space for developing effective, creative communication.
3. Community problem research. The practice of searching for information is carried out, developing the skills of analyzing facts and opinions.
4. Preparation of a set of documents. Participants improve reasoning, discussion, presentation skills to responsible institutions and public persons.
5. Modeling of participation in public self-government. Communication skills with institutions, goal-oriented behavior, and problem-solving skills are strengthened.
6. Summary of experience. To develop a more positive self-image and confidence in exercising one's rights and responsibilities.

Moreover, during the "Youth4Change" project, children and young people participated in practical civic activities (missions), one of them – civic education activities related to Lithuanian traditions (i.e. traditionally celebrating Lithuanian holidays), as well as – distributing the state budget and discussing the topics of gender equality and disinformation. These activities helped to achieve more active civic involvement in politics.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significance of civic education in empowering vulnerable individuals and facilitating their integration into society. Civic education promotes independence, knowledge of rights and responsibilities, and personal accountability towards oneself and others. By engaging in community activities, young people are encouraged to take an active interest, participate, and contribute.

One key aspect emphasized by the informants is the importance of communication and connection in the development of citizenship. “In developing citizenship, we talk and are constantly interested in each other – how you feel, how the other feels. This is where getting to know each other, connection and civic education begin.” (A3).

Building relationships and fostering an understanding of one another’s feelings and experiences form the foundation for civic education: “Civic education is the promotion of independence for societal needs, knowledge of one’s rights and duties, and personal responsibility towards oneself and others; With us, civic education helps to get involved in community activities, young people are encouraged to be interested, to act, to participate” (A1).

Specialists from various fields play a crucial role in this process by sharing their knowledge and experiences and conducting educational sessions for young people. Their involvement enables young individuals to identify and articulate existing issues and challenges, while also presenting potential solutions. The personal example set by these specialists serves as an educational tool for vulnerable youth.

Informants emphasize that the participation of specialists is important in the process of civic education, sharing their knowledge and experience and conducting classes for young people. In their opinion, the active involvement of different specialists ensures that young people will have the opportunity to improve knowledge and capacities to find a solution for identified community problem. It is important to highlight that such co-working helps to find rational ways to express and present option of participating young people: “Vulnerable youth in the group often do not want or cannot express themselves, do not accept certain information, shut down if someone says something or is overshadowed by others” (A5). Moreover, professionals and young people co-working guarantee holistic understanding about various social, educational, community, and ecological communities’ issues.

During the civic education program, group work was found to be challenging. Some educators implemented a mixed approach, incorporating both individual and group activities. This approach allowed children to present their individual action plans and raise personal concerns. By deviating from the planned group activities and creating individual presentations instead, educators gained insights into the important and unmet needs of the children and young people.

It was observed that vulnerable youth in group settings often struggled to express themselves or accept certain information:” He conflicts with his peers, so he hardly gets involved in activities” (A3); “He got angry, so he presented his drawing with his problem” (A4).

They tended to withdraw or be overshadowed by others, leading to communication barriers. Creating a patient and accepting atmosphere within the workgroup is crucial for the development of citizenship. Learning to tolerate and listen to differing opinions fosters an environment where everyone's voice is heard and respected: “When developing citizenship in the work group, the atmosphere needs to be created patiently, we learn to accept opinions tolerantly and say that others should listen to each other tolerantly” (A1).

The positive aspects of the civic education program were recognized by most social pedagogues and youth workers. The program provided a platform for children to express themselves, raise individual concerns, and engage in discussions about their environment. It also unexpectedly opened doors to local institutions, addressing the lack of youth cooperation and opportunities. This highlights the program’s potential to bridge the gap between young individuals and community resources.

In sum, it can be stated that civic education plays a vital role in empowering vulnerable individuals by equipping them with essential skills to navigate the challenges of everyday life. By promoting independence, knowledge, and responsibility, civic education enables young people to actively participate in their communities. The involvement of specialists and the creation of a supportive environment are key factors in the success of civic education programs. Future efforts should focus on strengthening group dynamics and further leveraging the program’s potential to address the specific needs of vulnerable youth.

Conclusions

The findings of this research shed light on several important aspects regarding the development of civic education programs for young people.

Firstly, addressing current issues that are relevant to young individuals, such as bullying, lack of leisure time, and entertainment, provides an effective platform for them to express themselves and raise individual concerns. The influence of their environment and the information they receive through public media significantly shape their perspectives. By understanding and addressing their unmet needs, young people become more receptive to accepting and listening to the opinions of others.

Secondly, there is a lack of clarity and understanding regarding the role of elders and community leaders in the lives of young individuals. This calls for increased communication and cooperation between different generations. It is crucial to provide opportunities for community leaders to engage children in activities and serve

as examples of civic behavior. By witnessing positive role models, young people can develop a clearer understanding of their civic responsibilities.

Lastly, incorporating aspects of the country's culture is essential for fostering civic and political awareness among learners. The interpretation of civic participation within everyday activities becomes a means of nurturing cultural customs, traditions, and transmitting the local language and heritage of the community. By connecting civic education with cultural values, young individuals can develop a stronger sense of identity and belonging, thereby strengthening their civic engagement.

In conclusion, to enhance civic education programs for young people, it is important to address current issues that resonate with them, foster intergenerational communication and cooperation, and integrate aspects of the country's culture into the curriculum. These steps will contribute to the development of civic and political awareness among learners and promote active participation in their communities.

Limitations and Further Development

To develop an easy-to-use model for secondary and high schools to make young students participate at political level, which may be adaptable in different contexts, it is essential to expand target group and pilot activities in different schools. Highlighting the objectives of Generation Z, i.e. young generation 15–19 years old, the following further needs appear: to stimulate their willingness to participate and change political landscape; create new, innovative guide/course that encourage to participate and reach the policy level and open dialogue with decision makers; stimulate democracy and inclusive democratic participation; develop concrete models to be replicated in other European contexts as ways of engaging youth in policymaking and for local politicians to take on board the inputs from young people.

In this context it is expected to train the students to identify, analyze and influence local Trakai community issues through the “Project Citizen” methodology and to strengthen the interaction and inclusion of the youngsters’ in influencing the local municipality policy and decisions. The target group would be 15–19 years old, predominantly vulnerable youth, but also younger children in the Children’s Day Centre “Navininkai”, who will be invited to take part in the discussions. Besides the older classes in the school, in which “Navininkai” is located, also a rural and urban based high school will have a group of students trained. The questionnaire-based survey before the consultation of the students, and after, so we can see whether our model has functioned. All created material will be open sourced and eligible for all interested Stakeholders.

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Vaikų ir jaunimo dalyvavimas politikoje: projekto „Youth4Change“ atvejo analizė

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Anotacija

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamas vaikų ir jaunimo dalyvavimo politikoje efektyvumas, pasitelkiant projekto „Youth4Change“ atvejo analizę. Tyrime taikomos veiklos tyrimo dalyvaujant ir projekto „Piliėtis“ metodikos, siekiant ištirti projekto poveikį jaunimo įgalinimui ir politiniam įsitraukimui. Projektu siekiama papildyti modelį, įgalinantį jaunimą dalyvauti vietos sprendimų priėmimo procesuose ir skatinti geriausią jaunimo dalyvavimo vietos ir savivaldybių politikoje praktiką. Straipsnyje pabrėžiama jaunimo dalyvavimo politikoje svarba kuriant įtraukesnę ir demokratiškesnę visuomenę, o tyrimo išvados pristatomos kaip projekto „Youth4Change“ poveikis. Projekto hipotezė yra ta, kad pasirinktas metodinis požiūris turės teigiamos įtakos jaunimo įgalinimui, politiniam įsitraukimui ir padidins dalyvavimą bei įtaką vietos politikos formavimui. Tai detaliai patikrinta 15–19 m. amžiaus grupėje, atsižvelgiant į jos galimą įtaką vietos savivaldybei. Remiantis jaunimo įgalinimo ir įtraukimo į vietos ir regioninės politikos formavimą modeliais, „Youth4Change“ skatina jaunimą daryti įtaką ir pataria vietos savivaldybės atstovams, kaip įgyvendinti kaimo vietovių jaunimo idėjas.

Esminiai žodžiai: *vaikų ir jaunimo dalyvavimas, įgalinimas, pozityvūs pokyčiai, veiklos tyrimas dalyvaujant, projektas „Piliėtis“.*

Gauta 2023 04 22 / Received 22 04 2023

Priimta 2023 05 22 / Accepted 22 05 2023