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**CHILDREN'S  
PARTICIPATION  
IN THE SCHOOL SETTING:  
A PEER-LED SURVEY OF STUDENT VIEWS IN CROATIA**



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# Aims and Objectives of the Survey

- ▶ the survey was carried out as part of the children's participation project in EU countries; the project was launched by *ECORYS* and the University of the West of England
- ▶ a peer-led survey on student participation was conducted in Great Britain, Netherlands, Poland and Greece
- ▶ **the main purpose of the survey was to gain more insight into the children's participation in decision-making in schools across Croatia**
- ▶ the survey was conducted by the Young Advisors Network to the Office of Children's Ombudsperson
- ▶ The survey was conducted among **214 elementary and high students** (randomly selected): 78 respondents were elementary school students and 136 respondents were high school students
- ▶ Schools were across **5 county**: Zagreb, Međimurje, Vukovar-Syrmia, Šibenik-Knin and Primorje-Gorski Kotar County

# Survey Methodology

- ▶ The survey was conducted using the **Child Participation Questionnaire**
- ▶ Members of the YAN, assisted by adult project coordinators, designed a questionnaire
- ▶ Questionnaire is composed of 15 items about:
  - (1) Experience of participation in decision-making at school
  - (2) Attitudes toward participation
  - (3) Perceived barriers to children's participation
  - (4) Proposed strategies for overcoming obstacles
- ▶ Students (researchers) conducted a survey at schools they attend; they **surveyed their peers**
- ▶ Data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics and presented in a frequency and percentage distribution tables (close-ended items); the responses to open-ended items were analyzed by identifying key themes in the data collected and then interpreting survey results

# Survey Results

## Experience of Students Participating in School Decision-Making

- ▶ Most of the respondents (53.8%) rated their experience of participation as good and positive, while such experience was rated as “unsatisfactory” by 35.5% of respondents
- ▶ Persons that students link to their experience of participation in most cases are teachers (73.8%).

STUDENT EXPERIENCE		Zagreb County		Vukovar-Syrmia County		Šibenik-Knin County		Primorje-Gorski Kotar County		TOTAL	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Student ratings of their experience of participation in school decision making	Good	48	51.1	18	75.0	16	32.0	33	71.7	115	53.8
	Bad	32	34.0	6	25.0	27	54.0	11	23.9	76	35.5
	Other	14	14.9	0	0.0	7	14.0	2	4.4	23	10.7

STUDENT EXPERIENCE		Zagreb County		Vukovar-Syrmia County		Šibenik-Knin County		Primorje-Gorski Kotar County		TOTAL	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Persons most commonly involved in student's experience of participation in school decision making	Teachers	63	67.0	20	83.3	37	74.0	38	82.6	158	73.8
	School service personnel	21	22.4	3	12.5	6	12.0	8	17.4	38	17.8
	Others	10	10.6	1	4.2	7	14.0	0	0.0	18	8.4

# Survey Results

## Experience of Students Participating in School Decision-Making

- ▶ Survey results suggest that most of the respondents feel their opinions are sometimes (49.1%) or seldom (37.4%) taken into consideration.
- ▶ Less than half of respondents (44%) find the perceived effects of expressing opinions positive, but looking at how the data is distributed may give a misleading impression that the positive effects are prevalent in the sample.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE		Zagreb County		Vukovar-Syrmia County		Šibenik-Knin County		Primorje-Gorski Kotar County		TOTAL	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Are students' views on school matters given due consideration?	Rarely	35	37.2	5	20.8	26	52.0	14	30.4	80	37.4
	Sometimes	45	47.9	16	66.7	20	40.0	24	52.2	105	49.1
	Often	14	14.9	3	12.5	4	8.0	8	17.4	29	13.5

STUDENT EXPERIENCE		Zagreb County		Vukovar-Syrmia County		Šibenik-Knin County		Primorje-Gorski Kotar County		TOTAL	
		f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Consequences of Expressing One's Opinion	Positive	38	40.4	21	87.5	17	34.0	19	41.3	95	44.4
	Negative	29	30.9	2	8.3	21	42.0	9	19.6	61	28.5
	Other	27	28.7	1	4.2	12	24.0	18	39.1	58	27.1

# Survey Results

## Experience of Students Participating in School Decision-Making

- ▶ The most common negative consequences experienced by respondents are disciplinary actions against students (reprimands, warnings) - a sort of “punishment“ for expressing one’s opinion if it differs from that of a teacher.

Some of the answers:

- ▶ *Comments are entered into the student's record.*
- ▶ *A teacher gives me a failing grade.*
- ▶ *A teacher gets angry and gives me a lower grade.*
- ▶ *A teacher hushes or ignores me.*
- ▶ *Disciplinary actions.*
- ▶ *Teachers almost always discard our opinions.*
- ▶ *Most of the teachers deem our opinions irrelevant.*
- ▶ *Teachers always do as they like.*
- ▶ *Nobody wants to hear what I have to say.*
- ▶ *It always ends badly and I get the worst of it.*

# Survey Results

## Experience of Students Participating in School Decision-Making

- ▶ The results shows that 78.5% of respondents feel they have the opportunity to express their opinions in schools, but their opinions are not always taken into consideration and their participation in school decision making does not necessarily leads to positive change in teaching practice in schools (78.5%).

	<u>Students are given the opportunity to express opinions</u>		<u>Students are given the opportunity to participate and influence change</u>		<u>Students are given the opportunity to instigate change in school</u>	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
f	168	46	46	168	46	168
%	78.5	21.5	21.5	78.5	21.5	78.5

# Survey Results

## Barriers and Challenges to Children's Participation in Decision-Making

- ▶ **the most common obstacle:** fear of negative consequences (29.9%)
- ▶ second and third ranked obstacles: public attitudes toward children and young people - with respect to their age and academic achievements
- ▶ The belief that younger children are not emotionally mature enough to be involved in decision making was identified as the second biggest obstacle to children's participation by 18.1% of respondents while 16.8% of the respondents believe that is the commonly held belief that children who have higher academic achievements may better influence decisions.



# Survey Results

## Barriers and Challenges to Children's Participation in Decision-Making

- ▶ open-ended question which refers to challenges that may discourage children and young people from expressing their opinions
- ▶ out of the analysis of data from respondents' answers, three main themes emerge:

### **(1) Community Attitudes**

- *Peer Attitudes; Attitudes of Teachers and Education Staff; Parents' Attitude*

### **(2) The effects of expressing opinion**

- *Negative consequences of stating one's opinion; Feelings of fear and distrust, fear of failure*

### **(3) Students' personality traits**

- *Individual's personality traits*

# Survey Results

## Barriers and Challenges to Children's Participation in Decision-Making

- ▶ one of the **major barriers** to freedom of expression and opinion faced by children and young people at school is mistrust and fear of negative peer reactions (fear of being laughed at, ridiculed or scoffed at by peers)
- ▶ teachers' indifferent and arrogant attitude, rigid methods and anger may prevent them from expressing their opinions
- ▶ answers given by children and young people suggest that they usually refrain from expressing opinions because they fear the negative consequences, such as experienced in the past (teachers give students failing grades; insult them; try to humiliate them; students get warned or beaten by teachers)
- ▶ children and young people recognize a lack of motivation, low self-esteem, a lack of information and ignorance of children's rights as some of the obstacles to their participation

# Survey Results

## Proposed Strategies: What Could Be Done to Help Children and Young People Overcome Obstacles?

- ▶ open-ended question and respondents are required to write out an answer and explain what they believe could help children and young people overcome obstacles
- ▶ out of the analysis of data from the respondents' answers, three main themes emerged:

### **(1) Community Support**

*- Support provided by teachers and other education personnel; Peer support; Parent support; Support provided by the state and the society*

### **(2) Getting more involved and giving children's views due consideration**

*- Greater student involvement in decision making, Creating more opportunities for all students to participate in school decision-making*

### **(3) Students' personality traits**

*- Individual's personality traits (as self-help mechanisms)*

# Conclusions

- ▶ survey respondents were **positive about their experience of participation** in school decision making, linking their experience to teachers and school service personnel
- ▶ A little less than half of the children and adolescents surveyed said that their **expressed opinions mostly produced a positive outcome**
- ▶ **top three obstacles** by the vast majority of respondents: (1) the fear of negative consequences; (2) public attitude that younger children are not emotionally mature enough to be involved in decision-making and (3) the attitude that students with higher GPAs may exert more influence over decisions
- ▶ as **basic preconditions for the full enjoyment of the right to participation** in schools: support and encouragement expected from adults or others within their environment (teachers and other school-based professionals, parents, decision makers in education and the society as a whole)