



by Wiltrud Weidinger & Rolf Gollob

E d u c a t i o n
E d u c a t i o n
E d u c a t i o n
E d u c a t i o n
E d u c a t i o n
E d u c a t i o n
E d u c a t i o n
E d u c a t i o n

Participation in formal education: No false promises, please!

By passing a new law for compulsory schooling in 2005 the canton of Zurich set the legal framework for dealing with a variety of new challenges. This new legal framework includes elements such as “block times” and out-of-school care as a reaction to new types of family structures. It supports the schools in dealing with the heterogeneous setup of learning groups by implementing diverse integrative measures. And, it opens up opportunities for the participation of students and parents with the aim of creating a more open and transparent school. The overall goal – as often stressed – is a school for all, which guarantees equal opportunities, a high quality of teaching and learning and the optimal conditions for both learners and teachers.

Compulsory school in Zurich has received a solid basis with this new legal framework, on which it can continue to develop itself without losing proven remedies. In the context of this article our focus will be participation of students and parents. By including this in the framework, elements of civic education or lived democracy have been solidly positioned in cantonal education. But, no false promises, hopes or fears should be associated with participation and co-operation; otherwise, the risk can arise that participation becomes an empty phrase in the context of formal education with high promises that cannot be kept. If this is the case, more will be lost than won. In the following, we will present two approaches which sometimes are not distinguished from each other but are essential for the actual implementation of lived participation.

► Participation – two approaches

It is a common thought that in democracies participation is an essential element, not only in a political context but also in daily social life. The underlying roots of this understanding can be found in the concept of political participation in decision-making and exercising power of a large number of people. Bit by bit the idea has been pushed, that participation also leaves an imprint on the social context of children and adolescents. This is due to the fact that human beings have been imbedded in social relationships since they were born and likewise are influenced by their surroundings. Both school-related daily-life discussions and scientific literature distinguish explicitly and implicitly between at least two ways of participation.

1. Participation as a means of taking over responsibility

This concept of participation grants children and adolescents the right to be motivated and authorized to take over tasks and responsibility. Furthermore, they should have the right to make decisions about issues that concern them. This understanding can be traced back to the convention of children’s rights of the United Nations Organisation and addresses in particular the close social context of children and adolescents.





aspects should not be underestimated as they add a lot to solving tensions within a group, during joint project work or during negotiations of rules for living together. A study conducted by IEA Civic Education (2002) has identified the existence of interdependent relations between participative learning through experience and self-/social competences. Self and social competences improve automatically according to these results. But, what will not happen automatically is transferring the (successful) experience of participation in school to a political identity. In order to develop an explicit model of civic education the approaches in the legal framework of Zurich will have to be adapted. This will also include a reflection of lived participation. In this context, reflection means analysing the experiences or the planned projects systematically. Categories like direct and delegated power, influence, decision-making, agenda setting etc. have to be made explicit and have to be applied to understandable political and corporate situations. Then they will have to be recognised.

2. Participation as an exercise of power

The second concept is closely rooted to issues of participation of a broader public with the idea of exercising power to influence social and economic aspects of life of a bigger community.

Thus, participation has to be distinguished in these two approaches of a) integration in a social arrangement or b) actual political participation. Children and adolescents experience the first approach in their daily lives and take it for granted. In comparison, the second approach only opens up in growing up step by step. Basically, it can be stated that two different potentials can develop to different extents in this sensitive phase of (political) socialisation: the “grade of participation” and the “decision about belonging”. The different grades of influence depend on the various reactions of parents and school.

Questions about integration of children and adolescents into school life at group or school level have a long standing tradition in Switzerland as in other countries: Class conversations, round table talks, class council and students’ parliament are forms of lived discussion. But, past experiences show that the real potential of these instruments has not been used to its full extent.

► New quality of discussion

The basic guidelines of the new legal framework strongly focus on aspects of engagement of children and adolescents in the social context of school and on participation of parents. These

► No pretending, please

The expectations for this important step are good in the canton of Zurich, especially when looking at the assets of the new law and, even more important, when examining the manuals which have been developed as a reaction of the people’s voice. Especially the manual “Co-operation and participation in school” offers transparent ways and possibilities of participation of students and parents. The brochure clearly states that participation rests on the pillars of human rights and children’s rights: “The right to state one’s own opinion, to take responsibility and to be part of decision-making processes that affect oneself, is an achievement of our culture and applies to everybody. It is based on the recognition of dignity and equality as well as the perpetuity of rights that are entitled to all people.” (p.13). In this way the article 12 of the Convention of Children’s Rights has been integrated in § 50 of the compulsory education law of Zurich. What remains unclear is where participation ends. This is left up to the different municipalities. Questions like this have to be dealt with in the statutes of the organisation and have to be anchored in the schools’ programmes.





– in the building of community and not only in class or school but also in society and democracy. Actually, the concept of participation has symmetrical communication as its basis. But, every educational relationship is asymmetrical. Education is and always will be a communicative practice between unequal partners. There is a high risk of all participative approaches that the people involved are just pretending. Divisions of power and responsibility which are structurally given still remain the same. Various studies show interesting results: Adolescents know exactly when real involvement in decision-making is the case and when responsibility can be taken over or when this is just pretend. Participation has to be authentic. If the limits are exceeded, pseudo participation develops which has first of all no effect and second can lead to extended passivity and aggravation. Teachers have to know where not to negotiate: because they do not want to or because they are not allowed to (curriculum, structural questions, implementation of pedagogic-didactic professional knowledge). They also have to know where to keep the level of participation rather low. Only those who know a little about participation can know when it will become dysfunctional in short term or long term (teachers, social workers and parents share a unique opinion in this respect).

Summing up, participation can adopt various different faces according to the specific pedagogical intentions. As an interdependent effect, also the underlying opportunities of gathering experience will be completely different from each other. Formal education does not have to struggle per se with aspects of participation when it bears a few things in mind: if it clarifies conditions and limitations of participation but at the same time analyses opportunities and uses them. ■

Notes and references : ✕

- The IEA Civic Education Study is the largest and most rigorous study of civic education ever conducted internationally. This research tested and surveyed nationally representative samples consisting of 90,000 14-year-old students in 28 countries, and 50,000 17- to 19-year-old students in 16 countries throughout 1999 and 2000.

Contact : ✕

rolf.gollob@phzh.ch
wiltrud.weidinger@phzh.ch @

The basic principles that were published by the Zurich board of education (Volksschulamt) states that adults have to create and design learning processes and ways of living together in class and school together with students. This idea of school like a «polis» (Learning and living democracy) has now been integrated into the curriculum of the canton: «Just as childhood is more than just a preliminary stage of adulthood, school is more than just a preparation for life. It is a piece of life that has to be designed.» (Mission Statement compulsory school, p. 3) In its goals the school authority assumes that participation is based on mutual attention and equal value of all people involved. Participation shows its effects – according to the manual