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

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survey summary report

As one of the partners in a survey project, the Office of Children's Ombudsperson has conducted a peer-led survey of children's participation in decision-making at school. The project was carried out in 2013, and the Office, as the partner in the project, received authorisation to publish the results in 2015.

The main purpose of the survey was to gain more insight into the children's participation in decision-making in schools across Croatia. Children's participation was assessed against four evaluation criteria:

(1) Children's experiences of participation in school decision-making
(2) Attitudes toward children's participation in school
(3) Challenges and obstacles to children's and young people's participation
(4) Proposed strategies: What can be done to help children overcome barriers to participation?

The survey was conducted by the Network of Young Advisors to the Office of Children's Ombudsperson among 214 students in classes sampled from elementary and high schools in Zagreb, Međimurje, Vukovar-Syrmia, Šibenik-Knin and Primorje-Gorski Kotar County. The survey was carried out between April and June 2013 using a questionnaire designed to examine how children and youth participate in decision-making at school.

Survey results show that children and youth have a positive attitude toward school participation; participants reported positive experience of involvement in school-related decision making that may impact them. However, the results also suggest that there is a great deal of discontent among children and youth with the present situation - children's voices are not heard enough and their views and opinions are not given due weight in education-related decision making.

They believe that adults play a crucial role in enabling the participation of all children and young people; support and encouragement provided by adults, being listened to, having their views valued and acknowledged, being involved in decisions affecting them and adults' increased understanding of children and young people's participation rights, could allow children exercise their right to participation and help them overcome the existing barriers. As the most important preconditions for children's participation children have identified peer support, children's and youth's determination to persist in their efforts to fully exercise their right to participation, getting acquainted with their participation rights and improving the operation of student representative bodies. It is important to create more situations in schools offering children the opportunity to exercise their participation right, but also to empower children and youth, primarily by helping them improve their self-presentation skills.

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INTRODUCTION

2.1. 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*, the Europe's leading research and consulting company, in partnership with the Child-to-Child Trust and the University of the West of England, and co-sponsored by the European Commission. As one of the project partners, the Office of Children's Ombudsperson of the Republic of Croatia was responsible for carrying out the collaborative research with the Child-to-Child Trust - focused on gathering information about children's participation - as part of a wider survey project. Apart from Croatia, a peer-led survey on student participation was conducted in Great Britain, Netherlands, Poland and Greece.

The overall goal and purpose of the project was to explore laws, policies and practices affecting child participation in European countries, as well as to promote children's and young people's right to participate in decision-making. A more specific objective of the project (this concerns the Office of Children's Ombudsperson and the Croatia-wide peer-led survey of students' views carried out by the NYA) was to investigate children's experience of participation in consultation and decision-making in Croatian schools, and, at the same time, to identify obstacles to children's participation and come up with possible strategies for overcoming challenges.

2.2. How the Survey Was Conducted

The Network of Young Advisors, an advisory body set up to provide advice and make recommendations to the Office of Children's Ombudsperson, carried out a peer-led survey of children's participation in school decision-making in Croatia. The Network of Young Advisors is composed of 25 children between the ages of 12 and 18 years, carrying out their function via online forums - exchanging views and opinions - and meetings with employees of the Office of Children's Ombudsperson.

Members of the Network of Young Advisors to the Office of Children's Ombudsperson underwent a training course in survey methods as part of the project. During the training session, the members of the NYA have decided to conduct a school-based survey and use a questionnaire as a research tool for data collection.

With the help of adult Network coordinators, eight survey researchers selected for the task conducted a survey at their respective schools and actively participated in survey data analysis and compilation or results - writing up the survey report, especially the one intended to make the survey findings accessible to children and young people. Some of the survey researchers have a dorm living experience; others have lived on islands or in areas of particular state concern, and one of the researchers is a child with disabilities.

2.3. Representative Sample of Respondents

The sample is comprised of 214 elementary and high students randomly selected from schools across Zagreb, Međimurje, Vukovar-Syrmia, Šibenik-Knin and Primorje-Gorski Kotar County (Table 1). The respondents ranged in age from 12-16.

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Gender and County

		COUNTY OF RESIDENCE					TOTAL
		Zagreb County	Međimurje County	Vukovar-Syrmia County	Šibenik-Knin County	Primorje-Gorski Kotar County	
GENDER	Male	41	17	10	14	27	**109**
	Female	26	10	14	36	19	**105**
TOTAL		**67**	**27**	**24**	**50**	**46**	**214**

The survey was conducted in two elementary schools (later elementary school grades), four secondary schools and among members of the NYA. They also planned to carry out the survey in one of the students' dormitories, but the idea was met with disapproval from the dorm manager. Therefore, students living in dorms were not included in the sample and no data illustrative of their experiences of involvement in decision-making was collected.

78 respondents were elementary school students and 136 respondents were high school students (Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: Sample Distribution by Gender (Elementary School Students)

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS	COUNTY OF RESIDENCE			TOTAL
	Zagreb County	Vukovar-Syrmia County	Primorje-Gorski Kotar County	
Male	5	10	27	**42**
Female	3	14	19	**36**
TOTAL	**8**	**24**	**46**	**78**

Table 3: Sample Distribution by Gender (High School Students)

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS	COUNTY OF RESIDENCE			TOTAL
	Zagreb County	Međimurje County	Šibenik-Knin County	
Male	36	17	14	67
Female	23	10	36	69
TOTAL	59	27	50	136

Children and youth growing up in specific living conditions - children living on islands or in areas of special state concern or children belonging to the Romany minority - were also included in the sample.

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survey methodology

3.1. Survey Instrument

The survey was conducted using the Child Participation Questionnaire, developed to address the specific goals of this particular survey. Members of the NYA, assisted by adult project coordinators, designed a questionnaire based on the following questions:

- What are children's and young people's experiences of participation in decision-making in Croatia?
- What are children's and young people's attitudes toward child participation in Croatia?
- What are some of the obstacles to participation faced by children and young people in Croatia?
- What can be done to help children and young people in Croatia overcome such obstacles?

Questionnaire is composed of 15 items. According to types of survey items, the questionnaire may be divided into four main sections that aim to determine whether the children's and young people's right to participate in all matters affecting them is respected.

(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

The first category contains a total of 8 questions designed to explore previous participation in decisions about their education and the importance of past experiences when making future decisions about participation; whom children mostly associated with this experience; whether children's and young people's views were listened to and considered; whether they were encouraged to express their views on school; the consequences of expressing one's opinion; whether children were given the opportunity to freely express their opinions and participate in educational decision making; the impact of children's involvement in decision-making (whether children could effect change in school policy or programs); and whether they were given the opportunity to facilitate school change and improvement. The second category contains a total of 3 questions that aim to explore whether children and young people believe that they should offer their opinions in any given situation; the children's right to be provided opportunities to participate by voicing their opinions and ideas; and the work of the Student Council. The third category contains 2 questions that aim to determine what the most common obstacles to children's participation in school decision making are and what could deter children from seeking the means of expressing their views on school issues. The last category contains 2 questions that aim to explore the most common solutions to overcoming obstacles and ways to help children and young people overcome the challenges they face.

Seven researchers conducted successful surveys among students at schools they attend; one of the researchers was unable to conduct a survey among student dormitory residents. The researchers first explained the purpose or aim of the survey to respondents and then handed out written questionnaires. Members of the NYA (20) were asked to complete an online survey; they answered questions via the restricted-access forum. This pilot version of the questionnaire was later slightly modified according to their suggestions. Suggested modifications did not considerably impact data processing and analysis so the responses provided by members of the NYA were counted as valid.

The survey was carried out in accordance with the principles set out in the Code of Ethical Conduct in social research involving children in Croatia and parental consent was obtained in writing for research participation by minor respondents under 14 years of age; all participants were required to give their written consent to participate in a research study.

3.2. Data Processing Methods

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. Even though frequency and percentage data (close-ended items) were displayed in a table format, county-level analysis was not provided due to low population counties with small sample sizes.

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Presenting survey results

4.1. Experience of Students Participating in School Decision-Making

Questions 1-2

The survey inquired about children's and young people's experience of participation at the school level and the persons they mostly associate with their experience.

Table 4: Students' Experience of Participation in School Decision Making

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	16	32	33	71.7	**115**	**53.8**
	Bad	32	34	6	25	27	54	11	23.9	**76**	**35.5**
	Other	14	14.9	0	0	7	14	2	4.4	**23**	**10.7**

Table 5: Persons Most Commonly Involved in Student's Experience of Participation in School Decision Making

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	20	83.3	37	74	38	82.6	**158**	**73.8**
	School service personnel	21	22.4	3	12.5	6	12	8	17.4	**38**	**17.8**
	Others	10	10.6	1	4.2	7	14	0	0	**18**	**8.4**

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%).

Open-ended items were posed to respondents in both cases. In answer to the first question, the respondents said that they had no previous experience of participation or were simply not interested in participating in decision making and were therefore unable to rate their experiences either as good or bad (10.7%). In answer to the second question, the respondents said that both, teachers and school service personnel, mostly school-based pedagogues, played an important role in shaping students' experience of participation. Similarly, the answers indicate that respondents also link other students, namely the Student Council representatives, to their experience of participation, although to a lesser extent than teachers and other education personnel.

Questions 3-5

Table 6: Are Students' Opinions and Concerns Regarding All Matters Relating to School and Student Needs Given Due Consideration?

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	14	30.4	**80**	**37.4**
	Sometimes	45	47.9	16	66.7	20	40	24	52.2	**105**	**49.1**
	Often	14	14.9	3	12.5	4	8	8	17.4	**29**	**13.5**

Table 7: Are Students Encouraged to Express Their Opinions at School?

STUDENT EXPERIENCE		Zagreb County		Vukovar-Syrmia County		Šibenik-Knin County		Primorje-Gorski Kotar County		TOTAL	
		f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Are students encouraged to express their opinions at school?	Yes	60	63.8	20	83.3	22	44	30	65.2	**132**	**61.7**
	No	28	29.8	4	16.7	22	44	12	26.1	**66**	**30.8**
	Other	6	6.4	0	0	6	12	4	8.7	**16**	**7.5**

Table 8: Consequences of Expressing One's Opinion

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	Pozitive	38	40.4	21	87.5	17	34	19	41.3	**95**	**44.4**
	Negative	29	30.9	2	8.3	21	42	9	19.6	**61**	**28.5**
	Other	27	28.7	1	4.2	12	24	18	39.1	**58**	**27.1**

Survey results suggest that most of the respondents feel their opinions are sometimes (49.1%) or seldom (37.4%) taken into consideration. The majority of respondents also feel that they are regularly encouraged to express their views on school-related issues (61.7%). 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. A certain number of responses fell into the "Other" category (27.1%); the answers falling under this category will be given in the text below.

Question number 4, aiming to determine whether children believe they are encouraged to express their opinions, requires respondents to provide comments if answered positively (if "yes" is selected, type in "by whom"). The highest percentage of respondents answered that they were encouraged by teachers, particularly pedagogues and homeclass teachers. A small number of respondents answered that they received such encouragement from their friends, parents and even lunch ladies at the school canteen. This was another open-ended question where the respondents who selected "Other" as the answer were required to type in a comment:

• Sometimes the teachers are willing to hear and accept the ideas of students, but other times they tell us to put our hands down and ignore what we are trying to say.
• It depends on the teacher. Some get annoyed when students express their views, and the others give them due consideration.
• Rarely.
• Even when I express my opinion, nobody takes the time to consider it. Instead, we get bullied by teachers.

Question number 5, which regards the consequences of expressing one's opinion, is also an open-ended question that allows the respondents to indicate positive and negative consequences - or any other consequences they might have experienced - of expressing opinion.

Respondents' answers related to negative effects of expressing opinions may be broadly classified into two categories: personal and external. As far as their inner life is concerned, the

respondents reported feeling encouraged and motivated; when it comes to positive change in the circumstances of their lives, they said they were given the opportunity to make a difference (e.g. introduce healthy changes in school meals), organize extracurricular and afterschool activities for students (e.g. school chess tournament) or influence decisions which affect them (e.g. choosing a school field trip destination). Please find below some of the students' answers:

- Establishing positive student-teacher relationships, characterized by open communication; being less anxious of being called out in class.
- Teacher praise.
- Support.
- Motivation to continue, to try harder; feeling empowered.
- My opinion is given due consideration.
- I feel like someone's really listening to what I'm trying to say.
- We have the opportunity to give our opinion about something or someone.
- Thanks to us, so many things have changed.
- We, the students, helped bring about change.

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; adverse teacher reactions to views and opinions expressed by students (negative report card comments, provoking teachers to anger, teachers handing out failing grades); and their failure to give due weight and consideration to students' opinions (or even belittling it). Please find below 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.

Answers which respondents entered under the "Other" category mostly refer to a mixture of positive and negative impacts. The effects may be interpreted as positive or negative depending on the circumstances, the way views was expressed, teachers' reactions and whether they hold strong opinions about something or not. These are some of the answers:

- Sometimes positive, other times negative.
- It depends on the situation.
- They ask us for our opinion, but don't actually want to hear it.

- Teachers usually disagree with our opinions.
- It all depends on whom of the teachers we choose to share our opinions with.
- If I was to express my opinion about everything and everyone, I would step on many people's toes.
- There are situations in which your opinion is welcomed, but expressing opinions may have negative consequences.
- It all depends on the kind of opinion I profess.
- It depends on the way in which I express my opinion.
- Nobody wants to hear my opinion.

Questions 8, 9 and 11

The survey aimed to determine whether children and young people are given the opportunity to express their opinions, whether their participation in decision-making is effective in producing desired change and whether they have the power to initiate change in schools.

Table 9: Are Children and Young People Given the Opportunity to Express Their Opinions, Influence Change and Initiate Improvement in School Practice?

	Students are given the opportunity to express opinions		Students are given the opportunity to participate and influence change		Students are given the opportunity to instigate change in school	
	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

Frequency distribution of responses to these three questions is overlapping.

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%). In addition, the survey data shows that most respondents believe schools do not offer children and young people the opportunity to bring change in schools (78%).

4.2. Student Attitudes toward Participation in School Governance and Decision Making

Children's and young people's attitudes toward student involvement in school were explored using a set of three questions; two of these were open-ended questions. The answers to question number 6 can help reveal a little bit about when students should offer their opinions and when they should keep them to themselves, while the question number 7 is open-ended and can provide insight into what children and young people think about the children's right to participate in school decision making by expressing their views and opinions. The question number 10 is also open-ended and was designed to explore respondents' opinions on the work done by the Student Council members.

Table 10: Frequency of Expressing Students' Opinions at School

STUDENT ATTITUDE		Zagreb County		Vukovar-Syrmia County		Šibenik-Knin County		Primorje-Gorski Kotar County		TOTAL	
		f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Should students be always allowed to express their opinions, regardless of the situation?	Yes	50	53.2	19	79.2	25	50	26	56.6	**120**	**56.1**
	No	24	25.5	1	4.2	12	24	15	32.6	**52**	**24.3**
	Depends on the situation	20	21.3	4	16.6	13	26	5	10.9	**42**	**19.6**

Survey results show that 56.1% of the respondents believe that students should be allowed to express their opinions, whatever the circumstances; 19.6% of respondents believe that a decision whether or not to give their opinions depends on the situation (whether their advisory opinion is requested or not), while 24.3% of respondents think that students should not voice their opinions under all circumstances.

This was an open-ended question that required the respondents to elaborate on their answer (how the expression of opinion is related to different situations). Some of the answers are given below:

• Students should definitely express their views on issues and persons that are important to them.
• I think we should express our opinions only on issues inasmuch as they affect our lives.
• If I am directly affected by a situation, that is if such a decision would ultimately affect my life and the lives of my loved ones.
• One should always have an opinion, but choose the right time to speak.
• I think you should express your opinion if you believe your voice could make a difference. However, if you see that speaking your mind would get you nowhere or could even get you into trouble, it is better to keep quiet.
• One should never be too quick to pass judgment on the way other people live.
• It depends on a teacher; some teachers know how to make students feel free to express their beliefs and attitudes, while the others might criticize them for their views.
• I think students should let their opinions be heard as often as possible, but there are certain situations in which it is better to keep your mouth shut because you could only worsen the situation.
• There is a time for everything: a time to keep silent, and a time to speak up.

Most respondents indicated that "there is a time to keep silent and a time to speak up", that is, that children should always consider the consequences of expressing their opinion - how their actions will affect them personally, but also possible positive or negative change brought on by speaking one's mind.

Questions number 7 and 10

Out of the analysis of data from respondents' answers to these two questions, several key themes emerged, which must be interpreted in light of project goals: adults' attitudes and acceptance as to children's and young people's engagement and participation in different settings and situations - in this case, in school.

The first theme: Children have the legal right to participate in the making of decisions that affect them

This section is concerned with the acknowledgement of the existence of children's and young people's right to have their opinions taken into account, but also with the fact that their views are generally not sought or given due weight.

The existence of children's and young people's right to have their opinions taken into account - The answers given by children and young people suggest that they are well aware of the existence of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. A significant number of respondents believe that children and young people should be allowed to express their opinions in all situations, particularly in school, as that is where they spend most of their time. Moreover, respondents believe that students should have the right to express their opinions freely without hindrance, and especially without fear of consequences.

Children's and young people's views and opinions are not given due consideration - Surveyed students' answers indicate that they are dissatisfied with how often their views are consulted, the extent to which they have a voice and influence in matters affecting them and how this varies by setting and level of decision-making. Children and young people believe that their views are not listened to and valued in the school setting. They do not see themselves as full and equal participants in the decision making processes that affect them; they feel that children's participation is reduced to a mere formality, a fairy tale for the gullible - a guaranteed right in theory, but not in practice.

The second theme: The importance of active participation of children and young people in decisions affecting their lives

This section offers explanation as to why active participation is important for young people and children and encompasses positive and negative aspects of children's participation.

Positive effects of participation on children - Answers given by children and young people suggest some benefits of participation for children which is reflected in improved academic performance and more positive social behaviors and creates a pattern for continued efforts and success throughout their lives. They believe positive participation experiences at school allow children and young people to "see the world through different eyes". They also believe there is a positive side to this: at least children are being listened to and having a say, although they are well aware that their views can not always be taken into account.

Negative effects of expressing views and opinions - Reading through respondents' answers one may observe two sets of negative effects: those associated with teachers and other school personnel and those associated with their peers. Most respondents indicate negative effects of expressing views and opinions which are opposite to those of a teacher (e.g. disciplinary sanctions include warning, reprimand, a failing grade etc.), while a small number of respondents associates negative effects with their peers (being laughed at or frowned upon by their peers).

The third theme: How the Student Council works?

Question number 10 addresses the issue of the work done by the Student Council. The analysis of data provided by respondents offers an explanation of "strong" and "weak" sides of the Student Council (how much influence the Student Council actually has), how it may be a positive influence on school life and why the students are generally unfamiliar with how the Student Council works.

Strong influence of the Student Council on student life - Answers given by children and young people suggest that they believe the Student Council, as the students' representative body, is beneficial to all students as it allows them to get involved in school governance and better influence decisions affecting their education.

Weak influence of the Student Council on the way the school is run - Many answers given by children and young people indicate modest influence of the Student Council. A certain number of respondents elaborate on their statement by adding that the Student Council still has no formal power of its own in school - they merely offer advice and do not actually have authority to decide an issue. Some respondents think the Student Council is useless because its members meet to discuss irrelevant issues: school-led initiatives, school plays and musicals, school field trips etc., instead of addressing the real issues and problems facing students at school. A small number of respondents believe that poorly motivated, disinterested and passive members are to be blamed for the insufficient influence of the Student Council.

Unfamiliarity with the work of the Student Council - Answers given by children and young people suggest that students are not provided with sufficient information regarding the nature of their activities, either by teachers or the Student Council members themselves.

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

The first two questions aim to identify kinds of barriers to participation in decision-making that children face at school. Question number 12 is open-ended and refers to challenges that may discourage children and young people from expressing their opinions, while the question number 13 requires a respondent to rank commonly observed obstacles by frequency of occurrence.

Question number 12

Out of the analysis of data from respondents' answers, three main themes emerged, which must be interpreted in light of the project goal and that is identifying and recognizing the barriers and challenges to children's participation.

The first theme: Community Attitudes

Data contained in this section sheds light on the effects of community attitudes (teachers, parents and peers) on the participation of children.

Peer Attitudes - 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).

Attitudes of Teachers and Education Staff - The answers given by children and young people suggest that teachers' indifferent and arrogant attitude, rigid methods and anger may prevent them from expressing their opinions. The respondents reported that yet another obstacle to participation they face is the fact that teachers do not give due consideration to their views, but instead impose their values and force their opinion on students.

Parents' Attitude - Only a very small number of children and young people said that their fear of negative reactions by parents prevents them from expressing their views at school.

The second theme: The effects of expressing opinion

This section addresses the issue of negative effects of expressing one's opinion, but also the felling of distrust and fear of failure and criticism that can stop children from expressing their views at school.

Negative consequences of stating one's opinion - 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; turn a cold shoulder to them; act callously; students get reprimanded, warned by teachers).

Feelings of fear and distrust, fear of failure - Answers given by children and young people suggest that they may be discouraged from expressing their opinions and participating in decision-making by a fear of being embarrassed in public, a fear of consequences, a dread of being isolated or alone as well as a fear of being wrong. Apart from this, they are often discouraged by distrust expressed by members of their community, countless vain attempts to change their circumstances or even belief that nothing will ever change.

The third theme: Students' personality traits

Individual's personality traits - This section attempts to explain how children and young people believe that they themselves, their characters and their traits might just be the biggest obstacle they face when it comes to expressing their opinions and participating in decision making. The respondents' answers suggest that they came to realize that shyness, timidity and insecurity are usually the biggest obstacles to expressing their views. In addition, children and young people rec-ognize 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.

Question number 13

Table 11: The Most Common Obstacles to Students' Participation in Decision-Making at School

OBSTACLES STUDENTS FACE	Zagreb County		Vukovar-Syrmia County		Šibenik-Knin County		Primorje-Gorski Kotar County		TOTAL	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Fear of negative consequences of stating one's opinion	90	31.9	23	31.9	45	30	134	24.6	**192**	**29.9**
Belief that students who have higher levels of academic performance may better influence decision-making	46	16.3	13	18.1	18	12	31	22.5	**108**	**16.8**
Prejudice and discrimination against certain groups (e.g. religious and ethnic groups or children with developmental disabilities)	27	9.6	6	8.3	14	9.3	11	8	**58**	**9**
Belief that students from families with higher socio-economic status may exert greater influence in school decision making	24	8.5	6	8.3	29	19.3	14	10.1	**73**	**11.4**
Belief that students with behavioral disorders should be excluded from decision-making	36	12.8	10	13.9	17	11.3	19	13.8	**82**	**12.8**
Belief that younger children are not intellectually mature enough to be involved in decision making	53	18.8	14	19.5	23	15.3	26	18.8	**116**	**18.1**
Other	6	2.1	0	0	4	2.8	3	2.2	**13**	**2**

Survey results show that the same kinds of obstacles were most frequently chosen. All of the respondents perceived the fear of negative consequences (29.9%) to be the most common obstacle to children's participation in school decision-making. Public attitudes toward children

and young people - with respect to their age and academic achievements - were ranked second and third by the respondents. 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. Out of several options within a multiple-choice item, the respondents picked the prejudice and discrimination against members of specific minority groups (9%) and the belief that students from families with higher socioeconomic status have more power to influence decisions (12.8%) as the least common obstacles.

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

There were two questions concerned with proposals for overcoming obstacles, that is identifying strategies to help children and young people overcome barriers to children's participation.

Question number 14 is open-ended and respondents are required to write out an answer and explain what they believe could help children and young people overcome obstacles, while the question number 15 requires the respondents to rank the available options - the ways to overcome obstacles - according to their effectiveness.

Question number 14

Out of the analysis of data from the respondents' answers, three main themes emerged, which must be interpreted with the project goal in mind and that is to identify help mechanisms that may help children overcome obstacles to participation.

The first theme: Community support

This section is concerned with the impact of parent, teacher and peer support and the support of the society as a whole on student involvement, but also the impact of rewards and praise on student motivation and the impact of educational practices on students.

Support provided by teachers and other education personnel - Children's and young people's answers suggest that they consider getting adequate social support a key help mechanism for dealing with challenges; there are three levels representing a continuum of support (home/school/community). Support provided by school community, which might help children and young people overcome obstacles, refers to support offered to children through more frequent (and engaging) student-teacher conversations and more teacher/student workshops, as well as through behavior of teachers and other school-based personnel toward students (kind, helpful, just).

Peer support - Peer support is also considered a valuable help mechanism, although to a lesser extent than the teacher support. The support of friends can be helpful for children and young people in overcoming obstacles, too.

Parent support - Answers given by children and young people suggest that it may be helpful to talk to parents when attempting to overcome barriers to participation in all aspects of school life, even though only a very small number of respondents cited parents and the society as a whole.

Support provided by the state and the society as a whole - Children's and young people's survey results suggest that respondents consider the education system and the society as a whole a valuable help in overcoming obstacles. Respondents indicated that an improved school system and a change of public mind may facilitate children in overcoming obstacles and challenges. The survey results also suggest that children and young people need and want to discuss important issues with, among others, "people in high places", since, according to respondents, they seem to have greater influence on society and may initiate change. Generally speaking, answers given by children and young people are sending us a clear message: they are telling us that it is time for adults "to get serious", get better acquainted with children's rights and start taking children's views and opinions seriously.

Praise and reward system - Answers given by children and young people suggest that rewards and incentives may help them overcome obstacles to participation (e.g. teachers can reward students with good grades).

Role of education - Education, just like the reward system, is recognized as the least effective help mechanism for overcoming barriers. Children and young people indicated that training sessions on different topics and participation in work-activities of different organizations, associations and networks concerned with the rights of children (such as the Network of Young Advisors to the Office of Children's Ombudsperson) can be helpful in overcoming obstacles. In addition, they perceived teachers' familiarity with children's rights and child participation as one of the useful mechanisms.

The second theme: Getting more involved and giving children's views due consideration

This section indicates a need for greater student involvement and more possibilities for all students to get involved in decision making, to have their opinions listened to and taken seriously - all of these have been recognized as help mechanisms by respondents.

Greater student involvement in decision making/Having their views taken seriously - The results once again confirmed that it might be helpful if schools created more opportunities for students to think and express their ideas and show that they are capable of doing more than what they are currently asked to do. A change in attitude or behavior of teachers was also recognized as a help mechanism by the respondents: they believe teachers should seek students' opinion more often and give their views due consideration.

Creating more opportunities for all students to participate in school decision-making - Answers given by children and young people suggest that equal treatment to all students - allowing even lower elementary students, students with low GPAs and those who could be considered "difficult"

to participate in decision-making - might facilitate student involvement. Ensuring that all students, regardless of age, academic performance, school behavior problems or learning disabilities, are provided equal access to decision making structures and processes, is considered one of the help mechanisms.

The third theme: Student personality traits

This section is concerned with individual's personality traits; teaching children and young people to cope with feelings of helplessness and indifference and a lack of interest in changing the circumstances can help them overcome obstacles.

Individual's personality traits - Children and young people cited persistence; confidence in one's own words/actions; personal improvement; self-confidence; belief in oneself; courage/determination; and personal engagement in exploration of different themes and issues, as self-help mechanisms available to all students.

Feelings of helplessness and indifference & lack of interest in changing one's circumstances -Even though this item required the respondents to identify possible help mechanisms, a small number of respondents broadened on their answers and went on to write about their own feelings of helplessness and the acceptance of the fact that they are powerless to change their current circumstances and that there is nothing anyone can do to help them overcome obstacles.

Question number 15

Creating an enabling environment and situations to encourage children and young people to express their views - provided they are given due consideration - are some of the help mechanisms that respondents identified as the most effective. The respondents were asked to evaluate all three help mechanisms; they found them to be more or less equally effective: 19.3% of respondents believe that creating more situations that allow students to express their views can be useful means to overcome barriers to student participation; 18.7% believe that teachers and school professionals should consider using "words of encouragement" to help students overcome obstacles; while 16% of respondents believe that having their ideas and thoughts taken seriously by teachers and school professionals might help students overcome obstacles to participation. As the least effective tools for overcoming obstacles the respondents identified the possibility of having better structured and governed student representative bodies (6.4%) and educating children in schools about their right to be involved in decision making (7.5%).

Table 12: Proposals for Overcoming Obstacles to Participation

HELPING STUDENTS	Zagreb County		Vukovar-Syrmia County		Šibenik-Knin County		Primorje-Gorski Kotar County		TOTAL	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Creating more opportunities for students to express their opinions	57	20.2	17	23.6	23	15.3	27	19.6	**124**	**19.3**
Teachers and school professionals creating a stimulating climate which develops active involvement of students in their education	43	15.2	14	19.4	36	24.0	27	19.6	**120**	**18.7**
Teachers and school professionals taking students' views seriously	46	16.3	9	12.5	29	19.3	19	13.8	**103**	**16**
Familiarizing teachers and school professionals with the right of students to be involved in decision making that influences their future	25	8.9	4	5.6	16	10.7	10	7.2	**55**	**8.6**
Familiarizing students with their right to be involved in decision making	24	8.5	4	5.6	10	6.7	10	7.2	**48**	**7.5**
Peer support	35	12.4	13	18.1	20	13.3	26	18.8	**94**	**14.6**
More (and better structured) student representative bodies (e.g. student councils etc.)	27	9.6	3	4.2	3	2	8	5.8	**41**	**6.4**
Students persisting in efforts to exercise their right to participation	25	8.9	8	11.1	13	8.7	11	8	**57**	**8.9**

5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion about children's participation in decision making were drawn from the results of the peer-led survey conducted among 214 children and young people (respondents) by eight survey researchers. The survey explored how children's participation rights are respected in schools. Overall, the survey respondents were positive about their **experience** of participation in school decision making, linking their experience to teachers and school service personnel. Most of them feel that they are being encouraged to express their point of view in school. However, their involvement in school decision making has not resulted in any significant change of circumstances. The majority of respondents believe that school environment is not best suited for students to acquire and enhance these competencies; schools should create an opportunity for children and young people to initiate change. A little less than half of the children and adolescents surveyed said that their expressed opinions mostly produced a positive outcome. The rest of the respondents reported having experienced negative consequences or positive and negative impacts were closely intertwined. One of the negative consequences causing major concern are incidents involving explicit and utterly unacceptable demonstration of power and authority of teachers over students. Such adult responses to child behavior might definitely seem discouraging from the child's point of view; children are well acquainted with their right to express their views in matters affecting them, but usually trigger negative reactions when they try to exercise it.

The respondents' **attitudes** toward the ways children make decisions to exercise their right to freedom of expression seem to indicate that more than half of respondents believe they should be able to express their opinions in almost any given educational situation. These findings suggest a positive outlook for the active involvement of children and young people as it allows them "to see the world through different eyes". They are well aware that their views can not always be taken into account, but even the fact that they are given the chance to speak their mind is considered a sign of progress. They believe that their opinions are not given due weight in educational setting. Children are denied an equal opportunity for participation in decision making processes affecting their lives; the participation rights of children and young people are reduced to a mere formality and not fully respected in practice.

The following **obstacles** were singled out for being the biggest factor that inhibits children's participation in school decision-making: environmental influences (students are influenced by peers, parents, teachers and other staff), having experienced negative consequences as a result of expressing opinion at school in the past, a perception of distrust from the community and countless vain attempts to change their circumstances. Children see themselves as one of the biggest obstacles to a free discussion of ideas and opinions, admitting that shyness, timidity and insecurity hamper their freedom of expression. They see the lack of motivation, low self-esteem and insufficient knowledge of children's rights as another obstacle to children's participation. Survey results show that nearly all respondents picked the same obstacles as the most common ones. The fear

of negative consequences, public attitude that younger children are not emotionally mature enough to be involved in decision-making and the attitude that students with higher GPAs may exert more influence over decisions, were ranked as a top three choice by the vast majority of respondents.

Children and young people surveyed suggested several strategies that may **help them overcome obstacles**: creating circumstances or preconditions to enable meaningful child and youth participation in school decision-making, which includes information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect and acknowledgment. As basic preconditions for the full enjoyment of the right to participation in schools and the communities, "working shoulder to shoulder" with adults, children and young people cited 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); acknowledgement of children's and youth's advice and assistance; and teaching adults about children's participation rights. What can children do for themselves? Children identified several important preconditions to enjoyment of the participation rights, besides peer support: students need to learn to persist in their efforts to exercise their right to participation, familiarize themselves with their participation rights, get ideas together and get organized in student councils and other student representative bodies. According to children and young people surveyed, another important precondition for children's participation is creating a positive and supportive school climate to ensure that each individual student has the opportunity to fully exercise his/her participation rights.

In our opinion, provision of education, support and empowerment to adults and children should occur simultaneously. An essential part of the change process is raising awareness of the countless advantages of identifying key school issues and solutions through interactive dialogue between youth and adults over the traditional approach in which students were silenced and excluded from the decision-making and educational-change process. The acknowledgement of the fact that certain rights are granted to children by laws and international treaties does not guarantee their successful implementation in practice, at least not in accordance with the best interest of the child. Adults have the power to create an environment that supports the possibility of children's participation in decision-making. Apart from their readiness to encourage children to get involved in decision making, adults need to possess excellent communication skills and understand principles and characteristics of individual child's development. It is exceptionally important to support child-initiated activities by providing supervision and consultation to children and youth. We need to empower children with information, skills and support to advocate for their right to be heard. We believe that an excellent way to empower children is to help them improve their communication and self-presentation skills, which should be incorporated into the education program and extra-curricular activities.

6

ANNEX

Child Participation Questionnaire

Please hand in the consent form for the participation in the study to the person conducting the study prior to filling in the questionnaire

Information on the study:

This study aims to analyse the experience of children from five European countries of their **right to participate in the making of decisions that affect them**. It is carried out by the members of the Network of Young Advisors to the Ombudsman for Children, in cooperation with Child-to-Child Trust and with the financial support of the EU. Your participation is voluntary and anonymous. Please read the questions and answer each one honestly. You should answer all the questions. If something is not clear, feel free to ask.

1. What are your previous experiences with participation (in decision-making) at school?
a) good
b) bad
c) other:

_____

_____

2. Which people at school do you mostly associate with this experience?
a) teachers
b) specialist service
a) others:

_____

_____

3. Is your view taken into account at school?
a) rarely
b) sometimes
c) often

4. Are you encouraged to express your views at school?
a) yes (by whom?) _____
b) no
c) other:

_____

_____

5. What are the consequences of expressing your view?
a) positive: _____
b) negative: _____
c) other:
_____
_____

6. Do you think that you should express your view in every situation?
a) yes
b) no
c) it depends on the situation (please explain) _____
_____
_____

7. What do you think about children's right to participate in decision-making at school by expressing their views?
_____
_____
_____

8. Do you have an opportunity to express your view at school?
a) yes
b) no

9. Has the participation of children in decision-making at your school led to any changes?
a) yes (which ones?)
_____
_____

b) no

10. What is your opinion of the work of your school's Student Council?
_____
_____
_____

11. Do you have an opportunity to initiate any changes at your school?
a) yes (which ones?)
_____
_____

b) no

12. What can discourage children from expressing their views at school?

_____
_____
_____
_____

13. Circle THREE of these obstacles to children's participation in decision-making at school that you think are the most common:
a) fear of negative consequences of expressing one's view;
b) attitude that students showing a higher level of academic performance can have more influence on decision-making;
c) prejudice against the members of certain groups (e.g. religious and national groups, children with disabilities);
d) attitude that students from families with a higher social and economic status can exert greater influence in decision-making at school;
e) attitude that students with behavioural disorders should not participate in decision-making;
f) attitude that younger children are not mature enough to participate in decision-making;
g) something else (what?): _____

14. What could help you to overcome these obstacles?

_____
_____
_____
_____

15. Circle THREE of these methods of overcoming the mentioned obstacles that you think would be the most helpful:
a) creating more situations for students to express their views;
b) encouragement from school teachers and specialists;
c) school teachers and specialists' taking into consideration students' views;
d) raising awareness among school teachers and specialist of the students' right to participate in decision-making;
e) raising awareness among students of their right to participate in decision-making;
f) peer support;
g) better student involvement in representative bodies (such as the Student Council, etc.);
h) students' persistence in exercising their right to participation.

Thank you :))

If you have any further questions, please ask the people in charge of conducting this study.