

Promoting children as active citizens Implementing Children's Participatory Rights

Ninetta Kazantzis

Eurochild Treasurer and Chair of the Eurochild Participation Thematic Working Group
President of the Pancyprian Coordinating Committee for the Protection and Welfare of Children (PCCPWC)
and National Coordinator of the Cyprus Children's Parliament

Children suffer discrimination just because they are children. They are usually referred to as “minors”, “immature”, “vulnerable”, “unwise”, “uneducated”, “not ready to undertake responsibilities” and so on...

One wonders how many adults, even “old” people, could be given exactly the same characterizations and still are politically and socially active, indeed even respected and elected to government and high official posts!

Children are denied the right to vote and be elected not because they are not able to implement this right but because adults do not recognize it as being a children's right ...¹

A state that denies this fundamental right to almost one fourth of its population, to my opinion, is far from being a democracy – it is an oligarchy based not on quality, ability or intelligence but on mere discrimination: age discrimination.

Apart from the above statement, I feel that children are not helped, through the educational system or other institutions, to realize their role as active citizens. Political parties tend to “cage” older children in their ranks without widening their horizons and without really wanting them to be “informed voters” when they will eventually be able to exercise their political rights – they might lose them!

Participation – key in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – is the less recognized, respected and implemented child's right.

Eurochild is an international network of organisations working in and across Europe to improve the quality of life of children. Eurochild's work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) and feels that all rights recognised in it should be of equal importance, respect and implementation. As the former Director of Social Services in Cyprus once said: “If one of the UN CRC recognised rights is not implemented, none is...”

Before beginning to discuss participation I would like to make another point:

¹ Austria is the first EU country to pass a law in 2008 that recognises the right to vote to 16 year olds. The Austrian Parliament has already set up programs to educate and prepare 15 year olds to exercising their right and there have been changes in the educational system curricula to help children undertake their role as active citizens.

We have lately linked children's participation to young people's participation and we tend to mention both as being a one and same concept. To my opinion it is not...

The UN CRC defines a child to be any person from the age of 0 to the age of 18.

A "young person" is defined differently in each of our countries and it might be any person from the age of 15 or 16 to the age of 21 or 25 or 30 or, even, 35...

Constitutional rights - in all democratic countries – are recognized to all citizens without any age discrimination... all rights except the right to elect and be elected which is the ONLY right that allows a citizen to exercise his power towards accepting or rejecting his/her government's policies, practices and measures.

Any person above the age of 18 has the following recognized and implemented rights:

1. To affect the future through voting
2. To organize and make demands
3. To take part in community and political life if he/she so wishes

All persons under the age of 18 have the following rights denied, not recognized and certainly not implemented:

1. To affect the future through voting
2. To organize and make demands
3. To take part in community and political life if they so wish

Participation is the vehicle to exercising one's rights, to making demands, to organizing and to taking part in the decision making process. People above the age of 18 are automatically recognized participatory rights. People below the age of 18 are by virtue denied participatory rights.

Linking the two groups actually diminishes the importance of advocating for children's participatory rights to be recognized and implemented and disorientates from the actual goal: to make children's voices heard and respected.

Moreover, when we allow the merge of these age groups to one, we in a way encourage adult participation and lessen the importance of children's participation: we would rather have 18/19/20 year olds represent us at a workshop rather than 14/15/16 year olds because "they can speak better", "they know better", "it is easier", "it needs less effort on our part" and so on and so forth...

Is this what we are really advocating for?

In saying that, I do not in any way suggest that young people fully enjoy their participatory rights. And I do not suggest that we do not advocate for them too – I merely say that linking the two age groups (even worse, merging them) does not do justice to children... and it seems to me that children are once again discriminated upon!

In discussing Participatory rights we must first create a common understanding of what participation means and define it in a way acceptable to most. To do this, we must give answers to the following questions:

1. What is participation? It seems we are not all in agreement and the term should be defined: the framework and dimensions both for children and adults

2. What is “meaningful participation”? Is “meaningful participation” the model provided by adult participation? Do we really feel that children should participate only if their participation is “prepared”, “guided”, “informed” etc – is this the way adults usually participate? And it should be meaningful to whom – adults or children themselves?
3. What do children understand by “participation in the decision-making process”?
4. How could it be implemented?
5. What does it take for adults – in terms of time, money and effort?
6. What does it take for children – in terms of time, effort and “loss of childhood”?
7. Do children have the right to decide if they wish to participate or not or do adults impose participation on them just because they feel “it is the right thing to do”?
8. How come societies that prize children referring to them as being “the future”, “the nation’s hope”, “the foundation of future society” etc, do not accept them as equals, as citizens or as rights bearers?
9. If children are not citizens, what are they?
10. Is the future ours or theirs? Do we shape the future *for* our children or do we shape it *with* them?

The second task would be to identify ways to enable participation. These might mean:

1. Educating parents to be, parents, educators, social workers and the general public on ways to implement children’s rights in everyday life (family, school, community etc)
2. Allocating funds to programs allowing children and young people to move freely and take part in social and political events outside the narrow borders of their family and neighborhood
3. Allocating time to help children and young people understand their participatory rights and to find, together, best ways of implementing them to their benefit
4. Handing over to children a portion of adult power – and this is the hardest part given the mentality we, unfortunately, hold for children
5. Create such circumstances in the local, national and regional level that allow children not only to voice their views but to communicate these views to adults in such a way as to influence the decision making processes

In doing this, we must ensure that all children are given the exact same opportunities and, in doing so we create informed, socially and politically active persons who, no matter their age, assume their role as active citizens. Any person allowed to express his/her views and convinced that has a direct impact on the decision making process could not be discriminated upon and could not tolerate poverty or social exclusion. To drug a person away from poverty and exclusion is synonymous to giving him/her a voice and to allowing him/her to participate in decision-making. It is imperative that we facilitate children’s participation and that we demand an EU policy on the matter that would help change the situation on the local and the national level as well as the European one.

Structural Funds could be allocated especially to programs promoting children’s participation and national governments should be encouraged and directed to respect children’s participatory rights.

European Networks such as Eurochild could help this process by sensitizing its members, the Commission and the Council of Europe on this key issue, explaining very clearly that:

1. Even though the situation is different from one country to another, one can only admit that fanaticism, racism, extremism and fundamentalism are rising among young people all over Europe, due mainly to insecurities brought by the enlargement and the fear of losing one's own culture, language and heritage
2. Creating the "European Citizen" is imperative if we ever want to see a really united Europe practicing Justice, Equality and Respect of Human Rights and Personal Freedoms for all its citizens, irrespective of age
3. The issue should be addressed at the European level as it is no longer a purely national problem – it has extended beyond national borders and threatens democracy in each and every one of our countries, sustaining discrimination, racism and exclusion not only against children but against anything considered "different", "abnormal", "foreign" or "alien"
4. Looking into the situation of economic migrants, of Roma people and of sexually exploited women migrating to the "west" from ex eastern European countries, we can clearly see social exclusion and child poverty prevailing and not being adequately addressed neither locally, nor nationally, nor on the EU level

European Organizations could also help in finding, recognizing and disseminating best practice examples that promote children as active citizens thus helping both their members and the EU launch programs and formulate measures and policies towards that end.

We should all target the following:

1. Lobby national governments to introduce the "tentative vote" from the age of 14 and lower the voting age to 16
2. Lobby the Commission to allocate specific funds (through structural funds or any other program) to specifically formulated strategies and programs towards full children's participation in social, political and economic life
3. Help member or affiliated organizations understand the importance of the matter and encourage cooperation in creating and sustaining NGO programs promoting children as active citizens (e.g. Children Parliaments, children's participation in local government meetings and discussions etc)
4. Horizontally implement children's participation (mainstream?) in all our actions (decision-making, events, membership etc) on the local, the national and the EU level
5. Encourage the creation and sustain peer-led non-governmental organizations

It is not easy to measure progress... Even though institutions like the Cyprus Children's Parliament, Funky Dragon, the Finnish Children's Parliament etc exist, their impact on national policy is still low.

Nevertheless, I feel that once you give children the opportunity to participate as any other active citizen in political, social and economic life, progress would have been made anyway!

Thank you.