

PRIMARY EDUCATION AND STUDENT PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

Reform changes in primary education cover areas that are relevant from an upbringing, educational, whole society, and social aspect.

It is especially significant to review the students' place in primary education in order to constantly initiate certain changes in terms of improving the quality of their role and participation in the upbringing and education, as well as in building their personality.

Student participation in primary education is an issue determined by multiple factors and it covers certain aspects of legal, pedagogical, and social nature.

The successful functioning of the factors and aspects regarding the stated issue is based on the modern views and opinions on the primary education mission.

The essence and need for student participation in primary education is perceived in the development and respect of individual potentials and needs of the student, as well as in the promotion of tolerance, respect of diversity and individual, family, and civil responsibility, all of which contributes to the development of democracy and civil society.

Student participation is an opportunity for enhanced achievement of inclusion in primary education and development of a culture of living and an awareness of lifelong learning.

Keywords: *student participation, primary education, partnership, values, skills*

The matter of student participation in the upbringing and educational system is generally treated in terms of *involvement, cooperation, and partnership*. The reasons for this are partially based on the very definition of the term participation and the active attitude of the relevant factors towards its revival in the school practice. Strictly speaking, participation is considered essential to human dignity; it helps individuals to exercise their human rights (UNESCO, 2004), implying an act of participation in an activity regardless of whether it refers to participation of an individual as a part of a group, in a group, as an associate or a partner, with a sole intent to reach a certain goal.

When we talk about primary education, it is important to state the views of various authors who believe that, since primary education is compulsory, student participation is often considered as something predetermined by adults, not only due to the students' age, but also because of certain aspects of their participation, such as work in the classroom, student groups, projects, and the like. In this approach, the integrity and purpose of the student participation itself is lost. In fact, students should not be considered human beings that need to be prepared only for tomorrow, nor for what they should become, but rather for what they are today as well. (Qvortrup, 1991).

Student participation should be approached as a transforming action, an act which reinforces the need of each student to participate both 'here and now' and in

the future (Hickey & Mohan, 2004), and not only 'in the future' as a positive member of the social community. In this context, it is believed that there is a significant difference between the genuine and symbolic participation, emphasizing that in genuine student participation there is noticeable change in practice, whereas in symbolic participation we have only formal participation that does not also involve those students who are not considered to be better, exceptional, more successful and etc., or those who are 'outside' the school internal organisation.

In primary education, student participation is usually perceived and measured in relation to the learning process, work in the classroom, and partaking in various student organizations, groups, and etc. In the school itself, both inside and outside, certain knowledge is acquired regarding the student participation in their learning process through teaching, extracurricular activities, and other forms of student rights and obligations. Considering work in the classroom, student participation is measured according to the aspects of *diligence, feelings, and context* (Eriksson & Granlund, 2004), whereas in terms of the various student organisations, groups, and etc., it shall be measured according to the provided legal framework, as well as the curriculum lay out, 'sensitivity and understanding' of the school board, parents' council, and etc.

There are some attempts to determine the types of participation (Gillander-Gödin & Weiner & Ahlgren, 2009) that are usually found in primary education, like *consultative* (students are simply asked for their opinion on decisions previously reached and undertaken by the teacher or principle, and etc.); *as a means* (students are invited to participate in the process in order to reach a certain goal set up by superiors); *essential* (students are invited to be active in prioritizing change and defining problems, as well as in changing the process), and *structural* (students take the initiative to decide which change should be introduced and they have control over the entire process). Often, practicing a certain type of student participation is justified and it depends on the students' age, teachers and other persons' expectations, school atmosphere, place in the curriculum, the practice itself, and the like.

The importance of participation from a student perspective is reflected in the aspects where it:

- signifies establishment and building of *relationships* ('handing down values', emotions, thoughts, and etc.);
- creates *a sense of belonging* (identity, a sense of security, etc.);
- opens *an opportunity for discussion and dialogue* (confidence, encouragement of reflection, exchange, etc.);
- supports *agreements, arrangements, compactness* (familiar expectations, predictable environment/safety through already established expectations, provision of authority, and etc.);
- contributes to *reinforcement* (reaching decisions where appropriate, and etc.);
- increases *motivation* (for higher academic achievement, assistance, sharing, and etc.);
- develops *cultural patterns* (building, becoming familiar with specific cultural patterns and habits, and etc.).

According to various authors, participation in relation to the student is an opportunity for the student to be 'heard' and be 'visible, perceptible' as a person

by others while learning about decision making, building a dialogue with others, finding solutions, and even offering compromises, taking certain steps, activities, and responsibilities thereof. The abovementioned and other aspects of the practice of participation by the student in the everyday school life signify routes for developing values that are important for life both in the present and future of the student.

Student participation viewed in terms of the curriculum means a connection between the individual needs and abilities and the achievement of the set goals, and even more than that. In this respect, the process of learning and the accomplishment of quality teaching represent guidelines in determining the level and value of student participation. But can the curriculum, including the extra-curricular activities, be sufficient incentive for developing genuine student participation? Certainly not. The predetermined subjects alone, whether mandatory or optional, are also not sufficient and exclusive. What is necessary is to practice those subjects. There are cases when the extra-curricular activities that apply appropriate strategies and approaches influence the development of the necessary values and skills which in turn contribute to the genuine participation of primary school students.

The practice of participation by the student both as an individual and as a part of a student community enables the development of important life skills during primary school, like:

- development of democracy and democratism;
- development of the concept of civil society;
- development of inclusion;
- development of active partnership;
- development of multiculturalism, and etc.

The development of the specified life skills contributes to creating a cohesive community that is guided by the principles of human rights, tolerance, conflict resolution, and development of common points of interest and goals.

The issue of student participation in primary education in R Macedonia can be examined in relation to the prevailing introduced reforms incorporated in certain important documents, such as the National Programme for Development of Education in R Macedonia 2005-2015, the Concept for Nine-Year Upbringing and Education, the Law on Primary Education and other bylaws, regulations, and etc., and the Curriculum for Nine-Year Primary Education. Under the reform changes in the stated documents, student participation in primary education is mainly treated from pedagogical, social, and whole society aspect, covering a wide range of factors, elements, and contextual frames. Namely, the National Programme for the Development of Education in R Macedonia 2005-2015 puts special emphasis on the goal of 'encouraging social inclusion and participation' (National Programme, pg.111) as an expectation of promotion of an effective primary school. However, participation is especially emphasized in the section concerning the special principles of participation, where, among other things, it is specified that participation in the effective primary school '... encourages students to cooperate in the school activities and adopt an active attitude towards life in the local community', and also '...builds close relationships with the families, local community, and nongovernmental organisations that deal with educational issues' (National Programme, pg. 112).

In terms of the Curriculum for a Nine-Year Primary Education, apart from the introduction of certain school subjects to the mandatory and optional subjects, a certain number of teaching hours have been assigned separately for grade community, as well as for additional classes starting from second grade. Special emphasis is placed on modernization of teaching and learning by changing the classroom atmosphere, strengthening the student interaction, greater involvement and responsibility of the students for their own learning and development, student participation in certain matters of common interest, inclusion and participation of students with special educational needs, as well as participation of students in student communities and bodies, training for decision making and taking positions, acquiring necessary skills to work and communicate with others, and etc.

In the Concept for Nine-Year Upbringing and Education (2007), a number of areas provide matters related to student participation, like the section on primary upbringing and education principles, more precisely *the principle of active participation of students in the school life* which says that 'the school shall provide active student participation in all school activities pertaining to the student.' This means: a) providing atmosphere and conditions that shall stimulate the students to form their own opinion and express it freely and b) building mechanisms and procedures that shall enable students to have certain influence on decisions and events in the school. This principle includes the right of every child to seek, receive, and impart information, to participate in the decision-making processes and associate with other children for more appropriate enunciation and exhibition of their needs and interests.' (pg. 71-72). Also, *the principle of autonomy, competence and responsibility* states that '...the student has the right to expression and freedom of seeking, receiving, and imparting information and ideas of all kinds, either orally or in writing.' *The principle of partnership between the school, parents, and the local environment* includes the three components of obligations of the school regarding parents, parent participation, and opening opportunities for parents and the local environment regarding work in the school. It is further stated that '...it is necessary to use democratic methods that contribute to a proactive and responsible life of the students, critical judgment of values, and readiness for dialogue, communication, and understanding.' (pg. 75-76). The aforementioned Concept of Nine-Year Upbringing and Education provides also other aspects which more or less cover the area of student participation, such as the section of assessment of knowledge and student progress, then education of students with special needs, extracurricular activities, competences, rights and responsibilities (including those of the students), and the like.

The Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette no. 14/2014), as well as other bylaws and regulations intended for primary education, regulates a range of aspects related to the area of student participation, ensuring their proper development and learning, respect of individual differences, needs, and abilities, involvement and an attitude of partnership towards their own education, and etc., all of which is indicative of a more serious approach to promotion of student participation in primary education.

In reviewing the specified adopted documents, acts, curricula, and concepts that regulate the work in primary education, as well as the prevailing reforms and innovation regarding student participation, one can perceive an excellent pathway regardless of the scope and comprehensiveness, a search for solutions of different levels and content, as well as a need for building a personal framework and concept of student participation.

Conclusion

Student participation in primary education is a constant process of active involvement of all relevant parties and provision of quality participation practice that shall be diverse comprehensive, and constant in the everyday life of the students, both in and outside the school. In this regard, it is important to initiate direct participation and active involvement of the students, regardless of their age, then to foster and support transparency, clear communication, empathy and understanding, respect of individual needs, abilities, and differences, to give equal “voice” to all partners (students, teaching staff, parents, etc.), as well as establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, and the like.

In order to develop student participation within their nine-year primary education, it is inevitable that the primary school itself establishes an educational concept, which, among other things, shall require the school’s involvement and work towards development, contribution to, and support of the process of building and establishing a practice of genuine participation of primary school students.

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