

Summary of the Research Project's Final Report

Participation of Children and Youths in Switzerland

Participation of children and youths has been continuously at the center of public as well as academic attention for some time now. In this regard, not only the participation in political decision making processes is of interest, but also – and increasingly so – taking part in everyday contexts of action that are relevant for adolescents, e.g. family, school, child and youth work. The report refers to the available information concerning participation of children and youths and takes various questions and aspects into focus, which apparently have not been answered satisfactorily. In doing so, we refer to an empirical study, which has been conducted at the Institute of Education at the University of Zurich on behalf of UNICEF Switzerland from 2012 to 2014¹. This study is structured along multi-methodical as well as multi-perspective guidelines, since it can be presumed that the heterogeneous context conditions of child and youth participation in Switzerland can be taken into account best in their complex correlation in this way. The empirical study is structured into a quantitative and a qualitative part study, respectively.

The quantitative part study represents a Swiss-wide representative examination into the participation possibilities that children and youths recognize for themselves in various areas of life. On the basis of a standardized, written survey of approx. 5'500 pupils at the age between nine and sixteen years, the relevant conditions, possibilities, and restrictions in regard to participation could be gathered. In doing so, it is also possible to determine in how far similarities and differences between male and female children or youths as well as between the different large language groups in Switzerland can be found. Furthermore, through comparing the findings of a previous study² with the present one, conclusions can be drawn to what extent participation possibilities, as perceived by children and youths, have changed in the last ten years.

The qualitative part study is focused on children of primary school age (seven to twelve years) and primarily on two communities that have established and institutionalized various participation offers on community and school levels. Taking these offers as a starting point, the opinions and experiences of children, parents, teachers, and professionals responsible for participation in the communities have been evaluated. This part of the study refers to ethnographic monitoring in regard to

1 This research project was performed by Peter Rieker, who guided and coordinated the project, Holger Stroezel, who performed the quantitative part study, and Rebecca Mörger and Anna Schnitzer, who performed the qualitative part study.

2 Fatke, Reinhard/Niklowitz, Matthias (2003): „Den Kindern eine Stimme geben“. Partizipation von Kindern und Jugendlichen in der Schweiz. Zürich: Pädagogisches Institut der Universität Zürich – unter Mitarbeit von Jürg Schwarz und Elena Sultanian im Auftrag des Schweizerischen Komitees für Unicef (available at: https://www.fr.ch/sej/files/pdf18/den_kindern_eine_stimme_geben.pdf).

institutionalized occasions of participation and to qualitative interviews with respective partners. Within the framework of the qualitative study, it is possible to reconstruct the perspective of children in regard to participation adequately. Furthermore, the perspective of other stakeholders (parents, teachers, community administration and policy makers) can be integrated and they can be analyzed with each other comparatively – as well as with the perspectives of children and observers.

The results of the study illustrate the fact that participation of children and youths has become a recognized commodity in Switzerland, which is realized in many different ways in the adolescents' everyday life. The statements of the children interviewed in the quantitative part study refer to these findings, which exhibit highly positive results concerning the possibility to participate – especially for families, but partially also for schools. Compared to the previous study, there are, at least partially, considerable results to ascertain, indicating a consolidation of participation possibilities for children and youths. In the qualitative part study, there are also according indications to be found. In different, for children and youths important areas of life, 'rhetorics of participation' have been established and participative modes of action have been integrated into everyday life of families and educational institutions frequently. Yet, there are results that oppose this positive overall impression, since they put different emphases on various fields and aspects of participation.

For *families*, high value figures are set for possibilities concerning participation and decision making. As the analysis of the quantitative data suggests, this concerns most of all the areas that are of individual importance for children and youths and to a lesser degree the areas that are importance for adult family members as well. Moreover, the qualitative analyses illustrate that narrations concerning participation refer mostly to questions relating to participation in the household. Most of all, the impression arises that parents tend to structure their children's participation possibilities in regard to domestic task sharing beforehand – with the result that adolescents describe hardly any conflicts or specific negotiating processes in this context.

For the *school domain*, it has to be established that participation is concerned mostly with school related offers, in which children and youths experience only limited creative space for themselves. Occasionally, projects and structures are implemented in schools (e.g. pupils' councils) that focus on promoting participation specifically. To some extent, children formulate with regard to these offers distinctly that ultimately adults are perceived as decision makers. Furthermore, participation in schools refers apparently and most of all to educational projects and contexts that are perceived as limited or limiting by their participants. In the school context, participation possibilities seem to be made more conditional on distinct competences that stakeholders already should possess than it is the case in other domains.

Meanwhile, participation of children and youths on a *community level* has been, based on estimates of adolescents, realized in a higher degree as compared to ten

years ago. Yet, there are distinctly lower values ascribed in this context than in other areas of life of children and youths. Not surprisingly, only a few children and youths report that they are able to participate in their communities, since the involvement of adolescents is not scheduled and embedded structurally in all communities by far. If corresponding structures are available, they are realized in pedagogically instructed projects most of all. Important fields for learning and practicing participation then belong into the context of community and youth work, respectively, which are characterized less by everyday constraints, when compared to the family, and by institutionalized definitions, when compared to schools. Accordingly, children and youths are under the impression that they are able to participate in a self-determined manner in this context rather than in school, for example. In this domain, however, it becomes apparent that adults tend to a form of 'surrogate' participation towards children and youths, i.e. most decisions are still made for them in the end.

The analysis of the quantitative data has shown that the experience of *familial education* is relevant for participation in different areas of life. While a caring educational style corresponds with higher participation rates, an authoritarian education coincides with an inferior participation experience. However, the qualitative analysis draws attention to the fact that families and children present great differences with regard to *familial participation* and most of all to participation rhetorics – some children take on the rhetorics characterized by adults to a large extent, others do not. Children who do take on these rhetorics rather tend to have a background following educated middle-class principles and rather describe experiences related to empowerment, whereas children who do not take on these rhetorics rather come from families with basic educational backgrounds and rather describe occasions of participation as a farce. Restrictively, it has to be indicated that the differences in talking about participation are not mirrored in practices relevant to participation.

Obviously, experiences with regard to peers are important as well for experiencing participation. Based on the quantitative part of the study, reports of increased participation of distinct activities within the peer circle as well as a positive experience with regard to these activities are commonly related. The qualitative part of the study provides indications that there are specific qualities in communicative negotiations in peer contexts, which are able to make them relevant for participation: Age-appropriate and consensus-oriented processes of negotiation and decision making, inclusion of justice related considerations, and measures that equate power imbalances as well as to be able to boycott possibilities that are perceived as inappropriate decisions, which are not oriented towards common interest.

According to the evaluation of the quantitative data, participation, as experienced in school and community, decreases with *age* notably. This result comes as a surprise, since adolescents are awarded more independence and decision making competences with increasing age in general. This development seems plausible

against the background of the trend of 'surrogate' participation that pedagogical skilled personnel is able to discern and which is rather perceived as incapacitation by adolescents, whereas for children it yet might entail potential for learning and empowerment. The notable decline of reported participation with age may point towards a lack of attractive offers for adolescents and may be an expression of disappointment, which stems from previous experiences of participation or a lacking sense of achievement, respectively. Since the qualitative part of the study concentrates on children, these assumptions would need to be verified with a study centered on adolescents.

Comparing *language groups and speech areas*, respectively, there are results indicating that adolescents from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland report to have less possibilities concerning participation than youths from other speech areas with regard to the family context. For the school domain, children and youths from the German-speaking part of Switzerland report minimal possibilities concerning participation, whereas school children in the Italian-speaking part are able to participate most. For the communal domain, school children from the French- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland report the most distinct and school children from the German-speaking part the most remote possibilities concerning participation. The distinct differences between the various speech areas that manifest themselves with regard to different aspects of participation indicate that specific cultural characters and diverse institutionalized parameters seem to determine possibilities of children and youths with regard to participation significantly. But also in the context of the differences between speech areas, it has to be taken into account that these can be expressions of different, culturally characterized rhetorics, which do not have to be associated with differences with regard to participative practices necessarily.

If adults are concerned and involved actively, participation for children takes place in an area of tension, in which it can be perceived either as learning field or context of empowerment, yet also as a heteronomous enactment or a farce, respectively. Taken as a whole, occasions of participation are organized and designed according to the practices of the adults in question as a rule. In doing so, it becomes for example evident that the time slots allotted by the adults are sometimes too tight for the children and youths, in order to facilitate an appropriate level of participation from their point of view. If inappropriate forms of participation should be realized, or if children and youths get the impression that participation represents only a 'playground,' this might lead to disappointment and indifference towards future occasions of participation. Before there is a discussion of a general indifference or political apathy with regard to adolescents, the possibility of such a correlation would need to be tested in specific studies.