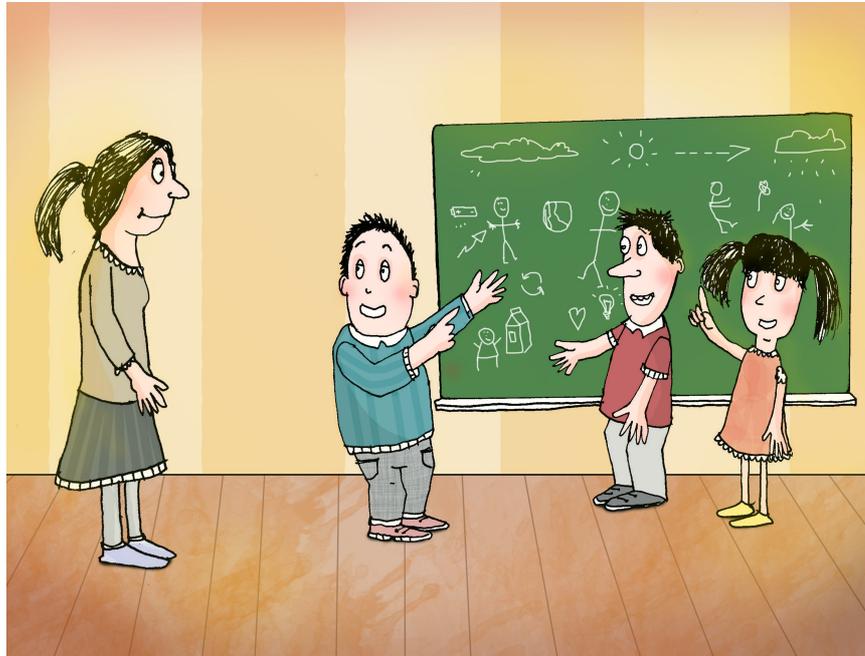




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Estonian Union for Child Welfare



A brief summary of the study

Children and young people's participation and involvement in school life

Tallinn 2012

Introduction

„Any child is active. Any adult should work both with him- or herself and with a child in order to promote activity and guide it to the right direction. Allow children to have their own opinion. Teach them not only to express it in a most appropriate way but also to listen to their opponents and take others' opinion into consideration. Involve the children into the decision making process concerning all the affecting them matters. Teach children to communicate actively at school being respectful with both adults and their mates, critical but constructive and cooperative“.

Loone Ots, NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare president 01.09.2014 in Viljandi proclaiming school peace.

School is a very important social environment for both children and teenagers. It must be secure and support their thorough development¹. School studying environment development where the pupils are motivated as well as satisfied is one of the goals for school. School and gymnasium law² currently in force § 3 presents the whole list of school basic values that state that our school system is obliged to support mental, physical, apt, social and emotional development. Special conditions for balanced growth, self-expression and scientific world picture perception are being

created. Moreover, values, introduced in the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, UN Declaration of Human Rights, and UN Convention of the Rights of the Child as well as in other European Union basic documents, known as ethical principles, are also considered to be very important. According to UN Convention of the Rights of the Child³ (in the text CRC) basic idea any child, regardless of age, is considered to be an autonomous and active rights possessor. This idea is presented in the CRC article 12, which guarantees the child the right to form his or her own views and opinion on the affecting the child's life matters, to be heard, not forgetting that the views of the child should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

The article mentioned above concentrates on the right of the child to have his or her views and express opinions guaranteeing the child the right to participate and be a part of the process of information exchange as well as the dialogue between the child and the adults⁴. It is necessary to assure that the child who is capable of forming his or hers independent opinion exercises the right to express it freely. UN Committee of the Rights of the Child points out that the article 12 in Convention of the Rights of the Child does not set any age limits and encourages to involve the child in a decision making process concerning all affecting the child matters starting from the early age⁵. The child's right to participate is closely connected with the other CRC general principles – in all actions concerning children the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration (article 3 par 1)⁶. Evaluating the best interest of the child we should not forget about the child's right to special protection, as well as to judge the matter from the position of the child as adults should not decide for the child on regular basis but to listen to the child's opinion about the matter before making final decision. In order to execute the child's right to participate in the most effective way certain clear social and political changes must occur⁷.

1 According to Estonian State Education Act § 2 one of the educational goals is to create proper conditions for personal development in the context of both economical and cultural context ad as a result to bring up people who will respectful and law-abiding citizens. RT 1992, 12, 192, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/968165>

2 RT I 2010, 41, 240 <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/13332410?leiaKehtiv>

3 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.web site: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/24016>

4 UN Committee of the Rights of the Child general comment nr 12 (2009) „The right of the Child to Express opinion“ p 3. website:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.doc>

5 Ibid. p 20

6 Article 3 is being commented in the Committee of the Rights of the Child General comment No. 14 (2013) on the right of the child to have his or her best interests taken as a primary consideration (art. 3, para. 1). Text in Estonian on the web: <http://www.lastekaitseliit.ee/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/%C3%9Cldkommentaar-nr-14.pdf>

7 Hakalehto-Wainio, S. (2014) Lasten oikeudet lapsen oikeuksien sopimuksessa. Teoksessa Timo Koivurova & Elina Pirjatanniemi (toim.): Ihmisoikeuksien kasikirja. Tietosanoma. Tallinna, p. 133–164.

One of the features of the developed democratic society is the consideration of the interests and needs of all social groups' (including children and the youth) as well as their social involvement. Involvement itself is an activity which assures both children and the young people not only an equal role as a member of society but also provides an experience of active participant. Moreover, it shows that anyone can be an active member of any society, for example at school. Still, according to some research⁸, as far as certain questions are concerned (ex. social life organization) part of the children say that they do not want to discuss those issues, which in its turn may prevent them from participation in a decision making process concerning questions affecting school life or other social spheres.

At the same time, there are some authors⁹ who stresses that it is necessary to teach children to express their views as this ability does not develop itself – this competence builds up through practical experience all lifelong. For both children and the youth to form their understanding of democratic society it is not enough to learn the corresponding terms at civil studies lessons, but what really helps is to do so through discussions and personal experience, only this way they will be able to have their own opinion, learn to express it, participate in discussion and decision making process. Thus, school, as well as teachers play an important role in this process (see p.20.3). At the same time it is not only the school who is responsible for bringing up a citizen, but also family, extracurricular activities (youth organizations, special interest groups), and society as a whole.

EARLIER RESEARCHES: In February 2010 European Commission Directorate –General for Justice conducted Eurobarometer qualitative research "Rights of the child through children's eyes"¹⁰ among the youth from 27 member states, in the course of which young people pointed out that they would like to obtain a greater role in the process of discussion and decision making especially concerning the issues that affect them and their society directly or at least to have an opportunity to do so. In order to guarantee their rights protection at school, children would like the teachers to be better trained, so that they could listen to children more, be able to notice when the rights of the child are being broken and which is more important to take children seriously especially when they report the cases of humiliation and one's dignity violation.

The necessity to promote democratic values (especially the rights of the child) in Estonia was confirmed by monitoring "The Rights of the Child and precedence 2012"¹¹ results published in June, 1 in 2012 by Praxise and Children's ombudsman (further in the text - monitoring conducted by Praxise and Children's ombudsman in 2012) according to which 23% of adults and 16% of children have never heard about the right of the child. Monitoring also showed that the majority of children are on the position that listening to a child's opinion is as important as to the adult's one (96% of questioned children rather agreed with this statement or fully agreed with it). Almost all the children agreed that as far as the questions affecting the children are concerned it is always necessary to ask for their opinion (97%). Three fourth of children (76%) agreed that children must have an opportunity to express their opinion about the questions directly connected with the processes affecting their life. At the same time, monitoring proved that at the moment in Estonia in comparison with other countries little do children have opportunities to influence the organization of their school life and the other matters on the greater social level.

Earlier NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare in cooperation with Association of Estonian Cities and Estonian Youth Organization's Union conducted a wide-range opinion poll "Children's involvement support and participation in decision making process"¹² under the period from October 2012 till May 2013, which goal was to study the best practices of local authorities, priorities for participation and ways of involvement of both young people and children, as well as to gather both target groups proposals on how to improve and develop the situation in this field.

688 Estonian and Russian speaking school children and young people aged 9- 26 participated in the opinion poll (the majority were aged 12-17) were from 110 schools together with 115 municipalities from all over Estonia.

Among the participants of the poll 67,3% of both children and the youth were aware of their right to express opinion about the issues concerning the process of life organization on the local level. Thus, it is necessary to provide the young people the chance to execute their right not forgetting the initial interest and readiness of the children to express their opinion (54,4% of the respondents want that they would be asked for their opinion about the issues concerning organization of life on the local level). The opinion poll confirmed that both children and the youth have a lot of different suggestions about the way life at their places of living could be organized and constant cooperation between two parties – the young people and the children on

the one hand and local government on the other – as well as their reasonable involvement should be organized.

8 Karu, M.; Turk, P.; Biin, H.; Suvi, H. (2012) "The rights of the child and precedence" (Lapse õiguste ja vanemluse monitooring). Children' and adults opinion poll summary. Praxis – political studies center. More info on the web:

http://lasteombudsman.ee/sites/default/files/lapse_oiguste_ja_vanemluse_monitooringu_kokkuvote.pdf

9 James, A., James, A. L. (2008) Key Concepts in Childhood Studies. SAGE key concepts. Los Angeles, California – London: Sage Publications Ltd.

10 Eurobarometer research „The rights of the child through its own eyes“ (2010). More info on the web: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/fundamental-rights/files/rights-of-the-child_et.pdf

11 Karu, M.; Turk, P.; Biin, H.; Suvi, H. (2012) "The rights of the child and precedence" (Lapse õiguste ja vanemluse monitooring). Children' and adults opinion poll summary. Praxis – political studies center. More info on the web:

http://lasteombudsman.ee/sites/default/files/lapse_oiguste_ja_vanemluse_monitooringu_kokkuvote.pdf

12 Negative answer to the question "Have you ever heard about UN Convention of the Rights of the Child" was given by 61,3%.

Author's notes.

WHAT and WHY? Approximately 15 000 of children became the 1st grade pupils in 2014/2015. Teaching and supporting approximately 137 000 pupils in basic schools is a real challenge not only for school and the family but also for the whole society. As NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare finds it important to conduct regular opinion polls concerning the implementation of the Convention of the Right of the Child, the research conducted under the period from 01.06 till 15.10.2014 focused on the environment children and young people are closely connected with on regular basis – namely on schools. The goal of the research "*Children participation support and involvement at school*" (in the text - research) was to find out with the help of the opinion poll conducted among the children and the youth to what extend pupils are involved in the decision making process concerning the issues regulating school life organization, how it is done and in connection with what topics. Also, our goal was to learn whether the pupils consider it sufficient, on what topics they would like to express their opinion and what would be the most favorable way to do so.

HOW? It was possible to answer the questions of the poll in both Estonian and Russian digitally on the NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare website www.lastekaitseliit.ee¹³. For data collection website www.connect.ee was used (the questionnaires in Estonian and Russian can be found in part 20). Such form of research is preferable as it allows not only to gather a great amount of information and data to work with, but also to cover a larger group of respondents and offer them a greater number of questions to answer¹⁴. The questionnaires on paper back were also distributed during the summer camp shifts in Estonian Union for Child Welfare study and leisure centers in Remniku as well as during info days which guaranteed the larger scale of respondents' coverage. To specify the results of the opinion poll it is worth mentioning that the majority of summer shifts participants in Remniku study and leisure center were the young people from Ida-Virumaa some of them enjoying social vocation packages¹⁵. All together we received 1033 (671 answered in Estonian and 362 in Russian) questionnaires with the answers on paper back, 754 respondents preferred to fill them electronically on the web www.connect.ee.

WHO PARTICIPATED? Analysis (part 1 to19) includes solely opinions and suggestions of the young people from all over Estonia (in the text: *in italics, no changes to the original text were*

made). 1787 young people participated in the opinion pool (in the text the key word: *all together*), out of whom 1383 were Estonian speaking (in the text the key word: *Estonian speaking*) and 404 Russian speaking (in the text the key word: *Russian speaking*). As far as participants gender is concerned among them there were: 766 male and 1021 female respondents. Their age was from 7 to 26 16, thus, the average is 12,35 (Estonian speaking 12,9 and Russian speaking 11,8). We can separate a group of respondents, namely 36 people who participated in NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare project „The Voice of the Child!“¹⁷ (among those there were Estonian as well as Russian speaking pupils), whose answers were used as a control group in order to find out what influence can such project have on young people and how their awareness has changed (key word in the text: *control group*).

13 info on the web page covers the topic of involvement:

<http://www.lastekaitseliit.ee/lapse6igused/kaasamine/kusimustik-laste-ja-noorteosalus-ja-kaasamine-koolis/> Author's notes.

14 Hirsjarvi, S., Remes, P., Sajavaara, P. (2004). *Uuri ja kirjuta*. Tallinn: Medicina. Lk 182.

15 Asenduskodu voi KOV-i toetusega lapsele maaratud soodustuusik. Author's notes

16 As far as the questionnaire was aimed at children and young people we did not take into consideration the answers provided by the respondents whose age was over 26. Author's note

17 Supported by AEF and SOM in 2012-2014 project “The Voice of the Child” which goal was to promote the awareness about children rights and the situation with them in order to use the obtained knowledge to involve the young people. Expected influence of the project: children (namely 48 young people aged 14-16 from Ida-Virumaa) will have the knowledge and ability to participate in decision making process. <http://lapsehaal.lastekaitseliit.ee/>

The positive sign is that Estonian and Russian speaking pupils from 212 and 63 schools from all over Estonia respectively answered the questions of our opinion poll. Thus, among the respondents there were the representatives from basic schools, gymnasiums, vocational training centers as well as kindergartens (1 respondent) and universities (1 respondent from Tartu University, 1 respondent from University of Tallinn). There were also several foreign respondents from five schools from Finland and Germany. NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare is very grateful to all opinion poll participants.

SPECIAL THANKS TO: the research summary was written by Helika Saar (NGO Estonian Union of Child Welfare), Kiira Gornischeff did a great job distributing the questionnaires (NGO Estonian Union of Child Welfare). A special thanks to all who contributed into the process of preparing research. We also would like to thank our partners who assisted us in distributing the questionnaire: Estonian Pupils Representations union, Estonian Youth Associations union, Association of Estonian Open Youth Centers, Estonian Youth Work center, The Ministry of Education and Research, special thanks to Tiina Petersonile, and many others. Research was supported by the Ministry of social affairs through Hazard Games Taxes Council.

SOME ADVICE: It is not enough to have political acts regulating the rights of the child to support child's life, development and welfare. Child welfare becomes apparent when we start evaluating to what extend we guarantee his or her human and citizen rights, social justice and participation in civil society¹⁸. In order to guarantee the rights of the child presented in Convention of the Rights of the Child on regular basis to every single child we all can contribute. It is important to give a due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child to the views of the child in all matters affecting them while decision making process (the analysis presented in parts 1-19 is in accordance with the summaries and advice). Such a dialogue can be started within the family and as the child grows up it will expand to other levels of society (among others school).

An additional goal of the present research is to initiate an active discussion in the society about the children involvement and participation in school milieu. The importance of the topic was proved by active participation in the opinion pool as well as the fact that young people made a lot of suggestions how it would be possible for them to participate in school life organization and promotion. Thus, schools should pay more attention to the fact that pupils' participation and involvement improves school life and strengthen the bounds and the sense of belonging on the school level. Do get acquainted with the research results and consider the suggestions!

Wishing you active participation and involvement,

NGO Estonian Union for Child Welfare

18 Reinomagi, A., Sinisaar, H., Toros, K., Kutsar, D. (2013) Introduction: *The rights of the child and welfare*. Compendium of the department of statistics: Children welfare. Tallinn