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SCHOOL CITIZENSHIP – CHILDREN’S VOICES DURING THE PANDEMIC AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

SZKOLNE OBYWATELSTWO – DZIECIĘCE GŁOSY W CZASIE PANDEMII I WOJNY NA UKRAINIE

Abstract: The article concerns school citizenship – children’s voices during the pandemic and war in Ukraine. School citizenship is based on viewing children as students able to act in the school environment and entitled to a say in what is done for them and how they are treated in crisis situations. In my research, I refer to the latest biographical and participatory trends in children and the contemporary interpretation of Korczak’s concept. The aim of the research is to give children the right to vote and to freely express their own opinion on the current socio-political situation. The article is part of the area of research on childhood.

Keywords: school citizenship, children’s rights, participation, children’s voices

Streszczenie: Artykuł dotyczy szkolnego obywatelstwa – dziecięcych głosów w czasie pandemii i wojny na Ukrainie. Szkolne obywatelstwo opiera się na ujęciu dzieci jako uczniów zdolnych do działania w środowisku szkolnym i upoważnionych do głosu na temat tego, co się dla nich robi i jak się wobec nich postępuje w sytuacjach kryzysowych. W badaniach odwołuje się do najnowszych nurtów biograficznych i partycypacyjnych dzieci oraz współcześnie interpretowanej koncepcji Korczaka. Celem badań jest umożliwienie dzieciom prawa do głosu, do swobodnego wyrażania własnego zdania na temat aktualnej sytuacji społeczno-politycznej. Artykuł wpisuje się w obszar badań nad dzieciństwem.

Słowa kluczowe: szkolne obywatelstwo, prawa dziecka, partycypacja, dziecięce głosy

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Theoretical framework

It seems extremely difficult to provide a clear definition of school citizenship. From the perspective provided by Jürgen Habermas, citizenship is understood as a lasting bond of an individual with the state manifested, in the formal dimension, as state membership, and in the material dimension, as the status of full and joint participation with other individuals in the rights and obligations defined by the legal order of a given state (1993, pp. 12-13). According to Thomas Marshall, citizenship is “a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community. All who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed” (Marshall 2010, p. 135).

Children’s citizenship, in turn, is understood mainly as the right to recognition and respect as well as to active participation in social life (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska 2014, p.11).

Children’s citizenship has a specific character “*Children differ from adults, their lives lack some things and abound in other things*” – argues Korczak and he continues: “*Children need to be given a space and they have to be provided with proper conditions for development in the family, at school, in the local environment, in society*”. In a truly pioneering way, Janusz Korczak referred to children as citizens claiming that each child is “already a citizen” (Korczak, 1928). In his opinion, children’s voice deserves respect, children have the competences to participate in society and make decisions. Due to specific criteria of recognition and dignity, it is important to listen to children and appreciate their views and opinions. In his teaching practice, Korczak tried to realize children’s citizenship and their right to social participation by implementing their right to decide about their own affairs and by developing children’s self-government. For this purpose, he developed solutions, such as a children’s parliament, a peer court, a newspaper and others, through which he enabled children to practice and develop citizenship (Smolińska-Theiss 2013). Korczak warned against too easy an affirmation of children’s rights. He believed that children were particularly at risk in a world that did not recognize their subjectivity or did not see the difference between childhood and adulthood. “*There are no children, there are people, but people having a different understanding of the world, different experiences, different drives, different feelings. Remember that we do not know them*” (Korczak 1958, pp. 210-211).

In the introduction to their textbook on citizenship studies, Isin and Turner state that contemporary citizenship theory does not define citizenship in terms of rights, but as a social process in which individuals and social groups participate in decision-making (Isin, Turner 2007). Consequently, children’s citizenship must be defined beyond legal norms that provide the measure of adult citizenship as social and cultural practice. It consists in the way in which, in specific contexts, adults attribute agency to children in various spheres of life, the way in which they

facilitate or hinder children's public participation (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska 2014, pp. 16-17).

Contemporary childhood researchers prove that children are full participants in social life, equipped with a driving force that manifests itself in the process of creating and shaping not only their own lives, but also the lives of people around them as well as of the society in which they live (Dahlberg, Moss, Pence 2013, p. 105).

Laury Lundy (2007) developed a model of children's participation that allows to conceptualize children's right to participate in accordance with Art. 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This model comprises elements organized in a rational chronological order. It assumes giving children **space** by providing them with safe, inclusive opportunities to shape and express their views; a **voice** that will make it easier for them to express their views; the **audience** who should listen to these children's views and the **influence** that will enable them to respond to these views according to needs.

Following Hart, participation considered in the context of children is often understood, as "the process of participating in making decisions that are significant for the lives of individuals and the community in which these individuals live" (Hart 1992). The participation ladder he proposed sets out eight degrees of possible involvement of young people in public activities. The first three rungs are only apparent (non-participation). These include manipulation, decoration and tokenism (participation for show). The next five rungs mark an increased level of children's and young people's involvement: assigning tasks to young people and communicating how and why they are involved in a given project; making decisions by adults while consulting them with young people; adult initiative, which, however, assumes making decisions together with young people; youth initiative and leadership; youth initiative in which decisions are made in partnership with adults (Hart 1992, p. 8).

Lister (2007) views participation more narrowly as recognition of the right to experience and act, recognition of the right to participate in decision-making. Each child is already a citizen – every act of participation in social life is a civic act. School citizenship rests in perceiving children as pupils who can act in the school environment and who are entitled to voice their opinion on what is done for them and how they are treated. We would like this voice to be acknowledged, listened to and respected today. Children have a lot to say about themselves, about us and about our common world of children and adults. Children speak out on their own issues, talk about the problems of their friends, home and school (Smolińska-Theiss 2013, p.19). As active subjects of the school life, they have their own aspirations and priorities equal to those of adult citizens capable of cooperation and decision-making (Qvortrup 1994, quoted from Szczepska – Pustkowska 2011).

What I mean here is, on the one hand, children's participation resulting from being immersed in the world, from the need to notice it and the curiosity to learn about it – and therefore an invitation to share this perspective. On the other hand, children's participation understood as recognition of (we still talk about

the citizenship of children and students as recognition of their ability to participate) their ability to make decisions, and therefore an invitation to decide.

It is important to realize that children, due to their dependence on adults, their sensitivity, and their ability to understand situations, are also exposed to destructive crises plaguing this world.

Crisis as a context for participation and understanding of rights

Today, we need to look at a crisis from various perspectives, not only socio-cultural, but also economic, environmental and personal. G. Caplan (1971) emphasized that a crisis is an obstacle that makes it impossible, objectively or subjectively (in the individual's opinion), to achieve goals and which is difficult to overcome using the previously known means. A crisis leads to temporary disintegration, decreased sense of agency, increased conviction of the ineffectiveness of undertaken actions, a loss of balance and a temporary breakdown (Caplan 1971; Fraser 1998, pp. 125-143). A crisis may constitute not only a threat, but also an opportunity. It may bring the following consequences: increased social deprivation, intensification of existing problems or the emergence of new ones, increased social activity and involvement, and implementation of new solutions, including innovative ones (Dąbrowa 2020, pp. 61-63).

In the article, I refer to the children's perspective seen in the context of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The situation of children changed along with the situation of adults. The authors of reports from the *Save the Children* series (including Warren, Wagner 2020, Loperfido 2020) point to the violation of children's rights, limited access to education, deterioration of the economic and health situation, and reduced access to health care. Children found themselves in a very difficult situation due to the lack of any information that would help them understand what was happening.

Did anyone ask the children what they felt, what they thought, what they were afraid of at that time? Are there any places in the public space where young people could express their thoughts? Janusz Korczak not only gave children the right to have a voice, but also proposed tools enabling children's social participation, such as a peer court, a self-government council, a mailbox, a newspaper, and a children's parliament that dealt with the problems of children and youth. Children wrote to the correspondence-based "Mały Przegląd" newspaper creating their own, unique language in which they expressed their views.

During the 28th session of the Sejm of Children and Youth held on June 1, 2022, young people discussed topics which were planned in advance by adults, and which did not concern the problems faced by young citizens. It is a mistake to view children's rights in isolation from human rights. As regards education, the pandemic limited children's access to education or even made such access impossible; it led to reduced children's participation in teaching activities, psychological support

and obstructed contacts between the school and family environment. Currently in Poland, the war in Ukraine and the influx of refugees from this country, make it impediment to deepen our knowledge about children's reactions to war and the ways of dealing with them. It is worth realizing that the very concept of "war experience" covers an entire spectrum of possible conditions and ways of experiencing them: it concerns the acute and long-lasting war, it comprises situations of being a direct or indirect witness of war, it includes the loss of loved ones or the risk of it, it may refer to body injuries, or to experiencing harm (Dąbrowa 2020, pp. 72-74).

We are now in the critical moment of the global crisis of children's rights and their position in society, and there is a great need to promote any activities aimed at supporting the rights of the youngest (Kuna 2023, p. 183). This is the moment to get to know their perspective and give them a sense of agency and having influence on their own reality.

Research purpose and problems

The aim of the research is to understand schoolchildren's standpoint on the current socio-political situation and to create space for their participation and agency by exercising their right to have a voice and to freely express their own opinions. We can create, open, spaces for children's agency by allowing them to have a voice, we can also see them in children, facilitating the forms of articulating their voice, but we can also deny that voice to them both out of concern for them and out of fear of the unpredictable consequences of their independence. Children participate in broadly understood social life through a diverse range of actions and participatory activities in formal and informal contexts, in spaces to which they have been invited (closed space), which they have created (created space) or which have been appropriated by them (Brzozowska 2017, pp. 53-60). Janusz Korczak was considered that child's agency but by transcending, negotiating, encouraging children to experiment with writing and capture certain text forms reserved for adults and through them build their autobiographical stories.

When constructing research problems, I referred to Roger Hart's (1992) participatory ladder model and the study poses the following questions:

1. How do children's narratives reveal various threads related to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine?
2. How do children describe their experiences related to the pandemic and war?
3. How do they describe and interpret the time of pandemic and war in their own childish way?
4. How do they cope with the pandemic and war in Ukraine in their own childish way?

Research methods

The methodology of research on childhood must be child-oriented, i.e. have a participatory and inclusive character, starting from the use of child-friendly research techniques, such as drawings, play techniques and games or storytelling, while focusing on the child in the ethical dimension (Soffer, Ben-Arieh 2014) up to perceiving children as co-researchers and collaborators in the implementation of research projects, treating them as persons cooperating with adult researchers at every stage of the process (Jarosz 2017, p. 65).

The latter aspect emphasizes possibilities of learning about children's worlds and childhoods through the use of participatory research techniques. This direction brings benefits to both the research (academic) community and children. While adults gain a true insight into children's experiences, children strengthen their subjectivity and raise the importance and activity in acting for their own benefit and towards solving their problems (Ibid., p. 66).

The study uses school autobiography, which is a method of engaging children in research on childhood that is widely recognized in pedagogical literature (Jarosz 2016; Brzozowska-Brywczyńska 2014). Children act here as researchers, experts in the area of their lives, using a specific language and building specific narratives. Such children's narratives become the subject of pedagogical analysis focused on the questions of not only what children say, but how they say it and why (Wasilewska 2013). Moreover, school age is also a time of intensive development of children's language skills, allowing 10-12-year-olds to construct a coherent autobiographical narrative.

The study used the method of free autobiographical statement on the topic "My Day at School". The research technique was a diary written by students. Being at school implies fulfilling duties, controlling, checking, and examining. There is little space for free conversation or reflection on the difficulties and obstacles that students face in an insensitive institution. An institution that sticks rigidly to the curriculum framework, in which there is no place for students who do "not fit" into school conditions. Such research is very important for children because it gives them the opportunity to express their views on issues that concern them, and often also prompts reflection on students' "existence" at school. Such a form enables students to unleash their potential and at the same time allows adults to get to know children, pupils and look at them from a different perspective. It allows adults to perceive each individual child not only as a pupil who must be rewarded, punished, examined, taught, but also as a person, citizen, child who thinks, observes, experiences, processes, evaluates; who is a subject competent to give meaning to his or her (school) life and to take actions based on his or her own understanding of the situation; who in this sense acts rationally in school conditions, among others, by questioning, expressing anger or frustration, requesting, demanding, and thus sometimes shaping his or her own children's social world. Children change this

world in the perspective of understanding themselves in the children's world and using children's rights that are not directly expressed.

The research is of a participatory character. The first student diaries were written in mid-October 2020 (there were 11 of them). The writing is still continued. The researched group are children, pupils who are to start their education in the fourth grade of primary school in the next school year. The research meets ethical standards and was carried out in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. The study consists in writing diaries called "My Day at School" by volunteers. Children describe their stay at school, the situations they face, things that they find difficult, and things that bring them pleasure. They write about how they spend their time at school.

School as time – school time

In their diaries, students deal with this time. Time can be treated as an aspect of social change, which is ubiquitous nowadays (Sztompka 2005).

Barbara Adam emphasizes that cursory look at contemporary school life reveals that everything within it is measured by time; that the actions and interactions of all participants in social life are harmonious parts of a symphony of alarm clocks and bells, timetables, schedules, and the so-called deadlines (2008, p. 488).

My study treats the time at school as "a kind of social construct" (Koczanowicz 2009, p. 113). The school is an institution which, on the one hand, is imposed upon a certain temporal order determining, for example, the duration of the school year, and on the other hand, is itself "empowered" (Ibid., p.113) to construct intra-school time (planning, segmenting, diversifying, controlling). Each educational entity is obliged to include its own activity in the temporal framework of the school as an institution (Korzeniecka-Bondar 2018, p. 39).

In the children's narratives, school was inscribed in the present time:

today is Thursday, again, yesterday, tomorrow, at the end of the day, I am writing in the evening, the next one was Polish, but I can't wait for tomorrow, this Wednesday.

School serves as the measure of time:

after lessons I went to my grandmother, before lessons, the first lesson was English, the day before the last day of the school week, on the first day of the week, today we have started 3 full weeks of school, today is the last day of the school week.

School is embedded in time, time spent at school, before school, after school, present time, future time. Each child is an entity that actively creates his or her

social world, the school world. Children actively take root in the school space making a mark on this space with their actions. They build their biographies and fill their time at school. A biography always takes into account the category of space and time, both in the individual and social dimensions (Smolińska-Theiss 2014, pp. 39-41).

Time, therefore, constitutes a category through the prism of which the school reality can be analysed at its multiple layers. The temporal environment of the school is the outcome of the following orders: political, economic, social, cultural, and individual (Korzeniecka-Bondar 2018, p. 40).

Pandemic time. Daily life in the pandemic

The specific period of the pandemic, the period of distance learning, has been referred to in scientific literature as crisis or forced distance education (Bozkurt, Sharam 2020; Murphy 2020). In addition to the real issues related to changing the mode of education, problems emerged in other not so obvious areas, such as: peer relations, teacher-student relations, issues associated with the well-being and mental health of students and teachers, as well as digital well-being related to qualitative and quantitative changes in the area of using information and communication technologies (Pyżalski, Walter 2021, p. 3).

In children's narratives, during the pandemic, school was inscribed in the socio-political context. Children described their time of distance education.

“As if there was no school”, “lessons are nice because they are short”, “lax lessons”, “it’s nicer at school than at home because I could meet my friends in person”, “Online school means free time”, “Today I was very excited because I could finally see my math teacher live”, “today I had only one online lesson, i.e. mathematics, there were no other lessons”, “With online school, every day looks similar”.

Distance education has become children's everyday life.

“I feel lonely...”

“my online lessons look similar”

“I have lost contact with my friends”

“I can lie in bed and do nothing”

“I have better grades”

“I don't have breaks”

“during the first lessons, I usually take my phone, log in and go back to sleep”

“online school is even cool”.

There appeared new terms related to online learning that have become a permanent element of the school reality. Suddenly, it appeared that teaching and learning can be done remotely, even without a teacher. The virtual world became the only ally of children who were compelled to adapt to current conditions. They were not asked to, but in fact forced to perform actions that were defined as new, unknown, unrecognized.

“Deschooling” the school

“Deschooling” made it possible to limit the requirement to recreate school rules related to the cultivation of educational myths or the segregation of learners. In a broader perspective, “deschooling” became an anti-systemic activity, it questioned the rationality of the system based on omniscient/omnipotent institutions and the conformity of people subject to them. Ivan Illich (2010), when he proposed abandoning the idea of school, he actually demanded a systemic change. He noticed that school rather than changing living conditions, only consolidates them, which means that the problem of marginalized groups is constantly deepening. Illich listed his accusations against the school system: coercion, focus on certificates, compulsory education programs, dividing children by age, hierarchical structure (built from top to bottom, with students at the bottom). The scientist argued that most people acquire knowledge outside school while education provides diplomas rather than education. He proposed abolishing the school because “it is ineffective when it comes to learning a profession [...], or creating conditions conducive to the free, innovative use of acquired skills [...] school is compulsory” (Illich, 2010, p. 52). He argued that students studying in schools confuse teaching with science, promotion from class to class with education, the diploma with professionalism, ease of expression with the ability to say something new. Illich assumed that only the generation freed from compulsory schools would be able to revive universities (Ibid., pp. 128-141).

In the children’s narratives, the category of “deschooling” emerged in the context of distance learning, which showed an alternative form of teaching. Children’s expressions incorporated distance learning into school. Here are some examples of children’s narratives:

“go to online classes”

“online time well spent”

“I keep in touch with my friends, I even go out with them, and we see each other on the phone”

“all lessons went well”

“we’re not learning again, someone took my time”

War as content and context

This thread emerged very clearly when the war in Ukraine broke out. On the one hand, it was a current “hot” topic discussed in the media and in the community. On the other hand, it resonated externally in everyday school situations. Teachers were terrified and lacked the skills to talk about the war. Pupils felt anxiety, fear, and terror. Hence children’s narratives telling about feelings and experiences related to pupils’ understanding of the war. The diaries revealed fear about the future, as well as dissatisfaction with the decisions made by the authorities (e.g. “*we don’t want Ukrainian children in our class*”). That is why, presenting this thread seemed justified.

This is war time in Ukraine. War is an impending phenomenon. Not only adults but also children talk about it. This situation is completely new and even adults find it difficult to understand it. There is fear, anxiety, concern, and sense of threat. These emotions take us on a journey, distract us and make it difficult to live an ordinary life at school or outside.

“I can’t concentrate during lessons”

“I’d like to talk to someone about it”

“I’m afraid they will attack us”

“I’m sad, my grandmother lives in Ukraine. I talk to her every day. She says she’s fine, but after each conversation, my mother cries, she is worried, so I also worry, I cry”

Children’s first contacts with refugees are difficult for both Polish and Ukrainian children. They express their dissatisfaction by saying that they do not want Ukrainian children in their class. Janusz Korczak clearly emphasized the value and strength of children’s potential and their ability to make choices and decide. He believed that they make them capable of social participation, self-determination about their own affairs and their own reality (Jarosz 2016, p. 311).

Children hear stories about the war (school, family, overheard), interpret them, translate them into their children’s language. They cannot understand why this is happening. They ask questions.

What will happen next? What will happen to us? Will there be a war here too? Should I go to school now, is it safe? Who will win the war? What will happen if Russia wins or attacks us? I don’t want them in my class.

They take everything from us. I would rather go back in time so that there would be no war. They are being bossy here.

Children describe situations that are new to them. New concepts appear (fear of war, alienation, lack of information). Narratives about the war are true and

honest, they are a defensive reaction in children who feel threatened and afraid of the unknown.

Children, as active subjects of school life, have their own rights, are able to cooperate and make decisions, ask questions, look for answers, negotiate and try to interpret reality themselves. For Korczak, a child was a “master” from whom adults could learn. He wrote: “the child provides me with experience, influences my views, the world of my emotions” (Korczak 1925, p. 69).

Conclusions

The narratives contained various voices demonstrating how children created their reality, the way they experienced and interpreted it. In other words, how they participated (unnoticed) in the construction of the world during the pandemic and the war.

The children were left out, forgotten about. The right to acknowledgement and respect the right to have a voice is a fiction cultivated by science but ignored in real world. Denying children civil rights, and one such right is the right to participate in decision-making processes and participation, contributes to their social marginalization. We refer here to tokenism in Roger Hart’s (1992) participatory model, where children are asked to express their own opinions, but they have no influence on the form of expression. Adults most often fail to take this voice into account, or when they do so, it is only in matters of little importance.

Children are full citizens, therefore, in a civil society they have the right to freedom, respect, dignity, and to their world of childhood. At school, they have the right to participate actively and act in their environment, as well as the right to dialogue. For Korczak, dialogue means freedom to speak, to act and to be heard. School citizenship is a manifestation of children’s social presence, their participation in school life, and rights granted to them and confirmed in practice. School citizenship, children’s participation in educational institutions becomes a very important task of building a new model of childhood in which the children develop their own activity and at the same time learn responsibility for their own actions and their own children’s biography.

The research allowed to reach the fifth level of Hart’s (1992) participatory ladder, which defines situations when adults make decisions after consulting and providing information to young people. Young people are informed and participate in consultations. Their opinions and suggestions are listened to and taken into account. The diaries gave children a space, a voice, and an audience allowing them to be noticed and taken seriously.

The diaries created a space for children’s participation and agency by exercising their right to have a voice and to freely express their own opinions. The children could comment on topics that they were not asked about. In their own childish way, they created the reality during the pandemic and war in Ukraine. The children

wrote in their diaries about difficult experiences, feelings related to distance learning, the war, tasks imposed on them as well as about the lack of support. In their statements, they demonstrated their readiness to act and explore the problems important to them.

The diaries gave them an opportunity to articulate their own children's voice, however, no agency or decision-making occurred. The only element of decision-making concerned what they wrote in their diaries and not what they would like the school or the world to look like during the turmoil of war. Children have no agency, and no empowerment to co-create the school. Their decision-making is expressed only in the activity to act and experience the children's world, to consult what they say, what they experience and what they struggle with. However, the school is not open to implementing these activities. The children show it in their diaries. They describe their difficult experiences and express emotions related to the lack of involvement and participation on the part of adults who were, likewise, unprepared for it. These were new situations for everyone.

Therefore, it is worth giving young people a space to freely express their views and opinions on topics reserved not only for adults. Children are among us, they want to be acknowledged, noticed, heard and they want to participate in activities undertaken for their good.

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