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Children's citizenship – between children's rights and reality

Lead-in

Social participation of children is among the most dynamically developing pedagogical discourses of the past decade, in fact being a multi-area, multidimensional, interdisciplinary issue. The issue is discussed in this contexts at scientific or scientific training conferences, and as practice at such meetings more and more frequently. In this double dimension, social participation of children became the subject and practice of discussion of participants of the Social Pedagogical Congress in Poznań on September 17–18, 2018 concerning children's citizenship, social participation of children. On the one hand, it was discussed in the profile of various approaches to detailed topics and problems related to its implementation, i.e. in the contemporary Polish educational, cultural and political reality, and on the other hand, it was implemented through the presence and discussion of young people with educators, researchers, academics and practitioners.

During the discussions several of the main aspects of the issue, as well as a number of specific threads, appeared. Among the basic thematic aspects discussed were:

— changes in the discourse about children and childhood as a basis for consideration of children's participation and problems of its implementation;

— the normative scope of children's active citizenship (social participation) in the light of current theoretical, political and practical discourse;

— questions, barriers and demands regarding the possibilities of promoting children's citizenship.

The evolution of the approaches to children and childhood as well as children's citizenship in social science and practice

The starting point for the discussion as well as the base for contemporary research on childhood became the thesis, proposed by Barbara Smolińska-Theiss and Ewa Jarosz, that children and childhood are socio-cultural constructs and their semantic scope, perspectives of their recognition against the social and cultural background and as a consequence the epistemological aspects changed with the development of civilization and with the changes and processes taking place either globally or regionally. The moderators of the discussion stressed that in the thematic discourse there are many proposals to systematize the changing perceptions of children and childhood as well as to systematize the discourse about childhood (e.g. Postman 1994; Newman and Grauerholz 2002; Corsaro 2005; Kehily 2008; Stanton 2008; Jenks 2008; Smolińska-Theiss 2010; Warming et al. 2018). In this diversity a specific evolution of the attitude towards children as human beings can be seen, in terms of the rights and autonomy granted to them and in comparison with their relations with adults. From the perspective of the discussed topic of children's citizenship and the pedagogical profile of the discussion participants, according to Ewa Jarosz the most accurate criteria differentiating individual constructs of child and childhood seems to be the perspective of mutual positions of adults and children – their mutual place in social and educational relations. This perspective shows the constructs of a „child" as changing on the axis of social and discursive time, in the light of successive categories:

domination and exploitation of children → recognition of the children's needs and their protection → value of a child and partnership with a child→ recognition of children's autonomy and self-governance

In the temporal (evolutionary) perspective, the constructs of children and childhood according to the above continuum can be ordered into several areas: constructs of the *Past Child/Childhood* (or passing), constructs acting as bridges between the past and new discourse tendencies that show the *Current Child/Childhood*, and constructs that show the *Coming Child/Childhood*.

The *Past Child* covers the constructs of the child known from socio-historic analyses (e.g. Postman 1994; Aries 1995; Newman and Grauerholz

2002; Warming et al. 2018). Among them there is an *unnoticed/invisible child*, a miniature adult, but also a sinful child, bad characterized by animalistic nature and a natural tendency to do wrong – *a monster child*. In these past constructions, there is also a naturally defenseless child, an *innocent child 20 and* therefore susceptible to evil and temptation, and falling into trouble, constantly threatened. These types do not exhaust the image of childhood ending, passing. Already in this passing concept of a child, a *biological child* defined by universally treated stages of development is settled. *A mascot child*, a sweet creature, a doll, serving and perceived as „something" to play with, a „non-serious" child, treated as a decoration of a family or an adult, „to show off" in front of other people. *Child as a social investment* is also a passing concept, a child used by an adult for various „own interests", providing social prestige, being a form of security for the old age, a child producing family goods and providing material benefits, a worker. The *child as a property*, subordinated to adults' psycho-emotional interests and „managed" authoritatively, dominated, but also a child defended by parents against the „temptations" of various other social entities aspiring to its protection and being an influence. The essential experience of a passing child is subjective treatment, being exploited, used for the needs, interests of adults and sacrificed in the name of those interests.

Breakthrough (Current) childhood is above all *childhood of needs*, fragile, treated as susceptible to harm and aberrations of successful development due to various deficiencies or threats. It is therefore a childhood requiring protection and care from adults, requiring appropriate social conditions, cultural and educational influence, and legal protection. Childhood is therefore exposed to numerous dangers and requires the best possible protection. It has given rise to the *childhood of rights,* secured by the responsibilities and duties of adults, on an individual, institutional, state and global level, to respect its rights, rights to protect and secure the fulfillment of needs and adequate access to civilizational and socio-cultural goods. The child is protected here by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and various national codes. It is the *Current Childhood*, childhood where the expected experience is to include safety, happiness, full satisfaction of needs… However, it should be noted that the needs are determined by adults. Therefore, in its area there is a concept of a *child as social entity*, an important member holding numerous rights, and of a *child* as a *social actor* recognized in terms of certain possibilities of social action and decision making, a *heard-out child*. However, this is a childhood, the social action and social decision making of which is seen as a set of needs and conditions for proper social and subjectivity development, the fulfillment

of those needs should be provided by adults. At the same time, the relationship between an adult and a child, in the perspective of their position in the diada system, is guided by the attitude of adults „for the child's sake", an attitude which in fact is characterized by protectionism and adult domination, which is emphasized by critics of this perspective (see e.g. Milne, 2013 and 2015; Liebel 2007).

In recent years the criticism of adults' protectionism in the creation of the construct of a child and childhood (and in the actual relations with the child's world) has led to a particular emphasis, accentuating the meaning of equality, freedom and self-governance in the understanding of the sociocultural position of children and childhood as well as emphasizing the construct of an adult *child as a partner*, a partner on the social arena. As a result, the principle of democratization of relations between children and adults is becoming more prominent. Moreover, the progress of democratic thinking about the child and childhood clearly shows the perspective of wider recognition (on the basis of the principle of equality, partnership) of the *child as a self-managing/ self-governing entity*, in particular in the collective sense, i.e. children as self-governed, autonomous groups. This is the *Coming Childhood*, „only now and already" entering the arena of the discourse in question, especially of social practice. The understanding of the child and the nature of relations with children is based here on a deeper sense of democracy, on relations with the child as a partner, on cooperation with children in all possible spheres and sectors of life. In this perspective, the child (children) becomes: a co-operator, co-decision-maker, co-creator, co-researcher, co-discusser of the adult(s). Moreover, guided by a profound idea of democracy and recognition, this perspective also covers the categories of self-determination, self-governance, self-organization and self-management of their own affairs by children. As part of this already intensively developing discourse of the *Coming Child*, individual constructs of the child (childhood) that can be encountered in scientific or socio-political discussions not only refer to the child of a social actor and social entity (James and Prout 1997; Corsaro 2005), there is also a concept of a *child as a politician* ("political actor") (Toots et al. 2014), *child as an organizer*, *activist and social leader*, *child as a initiator* of social projects, as well as *child as a defender of its rights* and *child as a researcher* of its problems (Dahl 2014; Shier 2015). The attitude of adults towards children undergoes a clear transformation from „for" to „with children". And the basic ideas, which strongly define and permeate the relations between the world of adults and children, which are promoted by the discourse in these relations, are: inclusion, partnership, democracy, community, co-participation.

Attention was also drawn to the occurrence of „internal" transformation of the theoretical context of the discourse about the social participation of children. At the beginning (1980's and 1990's) it referred, in a theoretical sense, to the concept of a „new child" as a child with „new" social competences, capable of social action, making choices, expressing one's opinion in a responsible way and deciding – as a competent social actor. At the same time, it was a discourse built to a large extent on the reflection on the practice of children's participation on the basis of which formulating understanding, stages and conditions – i.e. models of children's social participation (see e.g. Lansdowne 2005; Shier 2001; Treseder 1997). Currently, to an even greater extent, the theoretical basis for the discourse is formed by the socio-political theories – theories of social inequality, theories of liberal democracy, general theories of social participation and citizenship, theories of inclusion, as well as theories of social management, theories of social change and finally theories of recognition (Thomas 2012; Fitzgerald et al. 2010). Partially related to this aspect of deliberations over discourse on participation of young people is the reorientation of the discourse from an individual to a collective perspective. The collective perspective – considering children's participation from the point of view of the social group(s) of children, groups entitled to make decisions, organize themselves and create socio-cultural values, becomes increasingly significant, pushing aside scientific discussions about individual participation, in the perspective of the individual child.

The participants of the Congress also pointed out that a particularly important feature of the modern discourse about childhood and children's participation is the recognition of the „multi-reality" of childhood and the existence of *polymorphic childhood* as the most accurate image of the diversity of children's life situation and experience in the context of various individual and environmental conditions. The emphasis on this epistemological perspective of is also evident in the change of nomenclature in the discourse in question, which consists in using the term in its plural form. Therefore, the basic term is not childhood, but *childhoods*.

Subject of discussion
Normative dimensions and nature of children's active citizenship

The main initiating factor of the scientific and political discourse on the social participation of children was the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the international community in 1989. In the catalogue of the rights contained in it, the dimension of social participation

of children constitutes, apart from their protection and providing them with specific goods, the third basic dimension, the social and individual obligations that adults should provide to children, as the basic conditions for their full development, and jointly constructing the so-called 3P of the Convention.

In a detailed form, the participation of children is expressed in several articles of the Convention[1]. In their light and taking into the account the explanations and indications as to the nature and importance of children's participatory rights contained in other documents (see, i.a., Jarosz 2016), including the 2009 Special Comment No. 12 of *The right of the child to be heard /CRC/C/GC/12* by the UN Committee of Children's Rights, participation of children, defined by some authors as „active citizenship of children" (see, e.g. Cockburne 2013; Lister 2009; Szczepska-Pustkowska 2011 and 2012; Jarosz 2015 and 2014) is specified in various dimensions of activity and situation of children's participation in social life.

This variety of forms of social participation of children was pointed out by the participants of the discussion on children's citizenship during the Congress in Poznań. On the basis of the indications found in various sources (documents, literature), a quite extensive catalogue expressing the possibilities and at the same time the forms of social participation of children can be formed. It includes:

— children's access to information in the most appropriate for their reception forms possible *(child friendly)*;
— presentation /free expression/ of one's own opinions, views, perception reality, including spontaneous presentation activity with the use of new means of communication and technological means (including in cyberspace);
— the creation and transmission of information through a variety of media;
— participation in decision-making processes concerning children and their surroundings in the form of direct participation as well as representative agencies (councils, local governments, children's parliaments);

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[1]   In this respect article 12 of the Convention is commonly mentioned. It sets out children's rights to freedom of expression and obliges to adopt these views with due attention in accordance with the principle of the child's developing abilities (Lansdowne 2005). However, beyond that, the Convention contains other articles: Article 13 which specifies the children's right to freedom of expression and to seek, receive and communicate information and ideas of all kinds, article 14 which specifies the children's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, article 15 which specifies the right of association and assembly, and article 17 which specifies the right to access to information and materials concerning children.

— expressing assessments of actions concerning children and those imple-
  menting them;
— the right to form associations, organizations or social movements;
— design and performance of activities for the benefit of others and the
  environment in the form of social, cultural, ecological or economic ac-
  tivities;
— participation in research on the situation and problems of children.

As it can be seen, the range of activities and opportunities that make up
children's citizenship definitely goes beyond the common understanding of this
concept, which brings them down to existence of representative body imitating
bodies of democratic representation in the world of adults and often only to
their consultative role in making decisions which strictly concern children's
affairs, often of secondary importance for their of life situation or experienced
problems (Percy-Smith, Thomas 2010).

In order to grasp the proper sense of participation, it is important to un-
derstand the conditions that define its actual / desired character. In this direc-
tion, as the participants of the discussion also pointed out, specific rules are
proposed. Among other things, there is a condition of freedom as to the form
and content of children's expressions and the method of presentation of one's
own position, opinions or assessments, including criticisms of actions taken
for the benefit of children. Another is the lack of manipulation of children and
ensuring their participation is voluntary rather than forced upon, and on the
basis of children's awareness and understanding of the intentions of a given
action or activity, task or project and their own participation. An important
factor is also the importance of this participation and avoiding fake participa-
tion through actions give children the impression of agency and that their ac-
tions, positions, ideas, decisions and assessments are taken into account. With
regard to the functioning of representative bodies within the scope of inten-
tions of ensuring the actual participation of young people in decision-mak-
ing, advisory and consultative processes, the question of proper representation
of children's opinions by means of participatory structures (councils, commit-
tees or youth parliaments) by ensuring a deep democratic access of represent-
atives of young people to these structures is also raised. During the discussion
of the participants of the Poznań Convention it was mentioned that many of
these conditions of „real" participation, which have been formulated for years
as standards of understanding the meaning of participation of young people
in scientific discourse (see e.g. Hart 1992; Lansdowne, 2005), are not fulfilled
in social practice and as a result there are multiple distortions of the image
normative opportunities of children's active citizenship. Including those de-

scribed by scientific discourse, such as manipulation, children as decoration, tokenism, coercion and other undesirable phenomena (see e.g. Hart 1992 and 1997, Taylor and Percy-Smith 2008; Jarosz 2016).

Questions, barriers and challenges in the area of promoting social participation of children and youth – voices of discussion

The questions posed in the light of the confrontation of the normative image of social participation of children with the socio-educational reality usually take the following forms in the discourse in question: how to fully implement the participation of children in different environments and at different levels of society?, what are the barriers to dissemination?, how to break down barriers to dissemination of participation?, how to shift the relations between children and adults towards partnership in social practice?

Observing the reality of social participation of children and youth brings a number of observations and critical insights. The participants of the discussion raised various detailed topics on this issue:

— experiencing discrimination against young people in various spheres of functioning because of age (adultism) (Dagmara Dobosz);
— the need to develop young people's participation as of the way of developing bonds between young people and the local community as well as their responsibility for the common good and as a way of developing their subjectivity, including developing active citizenship in the relatively early stages of development (Gabriela Piechaczek-Ogierman);
— the importance of education, including intercultural education for interpersonal co-existence between children and adults as well as the development of a „towards others" and „towards the world" attitudes among children through education (Ewa Ogrodzka-Mazur);
— the importance of the Internet in the development and ensuring social participation of children and young people, as an environment conducive to activity, self-fulfillment and expression, independent creation of knowledge and even as a testing ground for civic education (Sylwia Galanciak);
— problems of social participation of children and youth with special educational needs, including young people suffering from autism (Marta Wilk) and with problems with social adaptation, as well as personality and character problems (Karol Konaszewski);
— problems with the social situation of siblings of children with intellectual disabilities (Urszula Klajmon-Lech).

The discussion, conducted by educators and researchers together with representatives of young people, also allowed young people to express their perception of the barriers to the dissemination and development of active citizenship of children and young people. The main factors hindering the discussion were: the historically unequal and subordinate social position of children, i.e. lack of equal social status of children, lack of adult trust in children and their competences, responsibility and prudence, as well as lack of recognition of the value and importance of the socio-cultural products of children, the social and cultural world created by them. As the young people who participated in the discussion themselves said: *children are not taken seriously* (Malwina Wilińska, 20), *potential of youth is not being used. We have a lot of energy and a fresh look at certain matters, but due to our age we are often not taken seriously not only by decision-makers but also by teachers or generally of people older than us* (Artur Ryszkiewicz, 19). However, young people also pointed to frequent repressive behaviors on the part of adults in situations where they presented their own opinions, especially different from those of adults or when children expressed criticism of adult actions. Here, the determining factor was indicated as the fear of adults of the loss of authority or control over the upbringing situation. Comments of adult researchers on the low level of social involvement of young people in civic matters or social activity, young participants in the discussion made an accurately: *…and what is the level of social and civic involvement of adults?* (Mateusz Mielczarek, 17), thus aptly indicating one of the basic mechanisms (and brakes) for the development of social participation, which is modelling and imitation of adult attitudes by young people. To a large extent, these voices on the factors hindering children's participation coincide with the positions expressed in critical scientific discourse (see e.g. Taylor and Percy-Smith 2008).

An important result of the discussion was an attempt to formulate recommendations for changing the situation, factors and activities of overcoming multiple barriers to dissemination of active citizenship of children and youth, with a clear position pointing to the need for such dissemination: *It is worth talking to young people. Such conversations can be a learning experience for both adults and us young people. We can learn from each other* (Artur Ryszkiewicz, 19). Among the proposed directions of actions were: education of adults, children and youth on the subject of social participation as well as its various possible forms and conditions of its true meaning and significance, and a change in attitudes towards the social status of children (direction of dissemination of the status of the child as a social partner and partnership relation). The need to criticize and eliminate the distorted sense of

participation of activities and situations occurring in social-educational practice (actions, decorating oneself with children, manipulating tokenism, limiting participation to consultation only) was also raised. The need to ensure that the „voices" of children and young people have a real impact was stressed: *Young people's participation in society must be real and based on genuine partnership principles. Participation should not only be of advisory, but also instrumental nature. Young people will not get involved until they understand (knowledge) and feel (practice) that their voice has a measurable value* (Mateusz Mielczarek, 17). Among the main „tools" to promote children's social participation, experiencing it is indicated as the essential one. Experiencing social and civic activity by children, experiencing cooperation and cooperation by children as well as the adults, mutually experiencing partnership and its effects by adults and children. It is therefore about the mutual experience of children's participation in practice, in joint action and mutual respect, the creation of opportunities for different forms of participation, environments and at different levels of society and children and adults learning it in action. It is important that begin these activities as early as possible, so that subjectivity and social participation can be experienced from an early childhood. In addition, the importance of „setting an example" for children by adults of in terms of modelling attitudes of civic participation and motivating social and civic participation, and the importance of teacher education of as a kind of „facilitators" for the promotion of children's active citizenship.

Summarizing the discussion on the subject of active citizenship of children during the Social Pedagogical Congress in Poznań in relation to the discourse itself, it was emphasized that as such, it must take place and develop in dialogue with children and youth, i.e. with the participation of young people. Researchers and practitioners should reflect together with young people on the various questions that concern this discourse. Among these questions, the following appear as the most important ones: how and where can children's participation develop?, what are the participation needs of different groups of children (gender, age, health, territorial, religious, ethnic, educational capital status, etc.)?, how to monitor and study the implementation of children's participation rights in society and different environments?, how to identify and minimize barriers and obstacles to the promotion of children's participation in different social, cultural, political environments? The discussion held during the Congress showed that such dialogue with young people and their participation in scientific discussions brings many mutual substantive benefits… as well as psycho-emotional benefits.

Representatives of young people Malwina Wilińska, Mateusz Mielczarek and Artur Ryszkiewicz – Youth Advisors of the Children's Ombudsman, Marek Michalak – Children's Ombudsman took part in the discussion on children's citizenship and children's participation. The discussion was led by: Barbara Smolińska-Theiss and Ewa Jarosz as well as social educators and academic researchers from various centers: Maria Deptuła, Dagmara Dobosz, Sylwia Galanciak, Jolanta Jarczyńska, Urszula Klajmon-Lech, Karol Konaszewski, Ewa Ogrodzka-Mazur, Gabriela Piechaczek-Ogierman, Magdalena Roszak and Marta Wilk.

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