



Global Conference on Contemporary Issues in Education, GLOBE-EDU 2014, 12-14 July 2014,
Las Vegas, USA

Participation Status of Primary School Students

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Abstract

In this study, the aim was to determine participation status of primary school students at school, in the family and in society. Research sample was composed of 348 students studying at the 6th, 7th and 8th grades in a primary school in Kirsehir which is found in the Central Anatolia Region of Turkey. In the research, data collection tool named “participation status of primary school students” which was developed by the researcher was used as data collection tool. At the end of the study, it was observed that participation of students was high in terms of classroom and teacher while their participation was low in terms of school and management. The most important factors affecting the participation of students in the school are the place where they study and the level of the class. Within the family, children are allowed to participate except for financial decisions. On the other hand, the general participation levels of students are low in the society. The most important factor affecting the participation of children within the family and society is the education status of the father.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the Scientific Committee of GLOBE-EDU 2014.

Keywords: Students, participation, school, family, society

1. Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This international legal instrument identifies a specific body of rights for children in such areas as protection, provision and participation (Jonyniene & Samuelsson, 1999). According to this Convention, “Contracting Parties recognize the right of a child who has the ability of developing his/her own ideas to express these ideas freely in every relevant field by giving due importance to these ideas in accordance with the child’s age and maturity degree.” (Article 12). Besides, the children are entitled with the right of expression (Article 13), freedom for thought, conscience and faith (Article 14), right of organization and peaceful assembly (Article 15) and the right of respect for private life (Article 16) (UNICEF, Turkey).

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The Convention, being more concerned with protection, does not emphasize the responsibilities which go along with rights. Children need to learn that responsibilities come with the rights of citizenship. In order to learn these responsibilities children need to engage in collaborative activities with other people including those who are older and more experienced than themselves. It is for this reason that children’s participation in community projects is so important (Hart, 1992). Children need to be involved in meaningful projects with adults. It is unrealistic to expect them suddenly to become responsible, participating adult citizens at the age of 16, 18, or 21 without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved. An understanding of democratic participation and the confidence and competence to participate can only be acquired gradually through practice; it cannot be taught as an abstraction (Hart, 1992).

Child participation is simply identified as “taking the child’s opinion on any decision to be taken in relation to the child”. Child participation renders the children’s roles functional by taking their opinions both on the decisions about them and the social issues in the school, immediate vicinity and society starting within the family, paying importance to these opinions or by informing them about different decisions to be taken in line with their own benefits (Polat and Gezer, 2007).

The Ladder of Student Involvement in School



Adapted by Adam Fletcher from Hart, R. (1994). *Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship*. New York: UNICEF.

Survival of primary schools in line with democratic principles is closely related to the democratic management of these schools. A repressive school environment, a repressive classroom environment can complicate the teaching activity and reduce its effect. Management is important to create a democratic environment in schools. This environment can only be achieved with a democratic management by the school principals who have internalized the democracy (Kontaş, 1997; Bülbül, 1989; San, 1985).

The graphic and explanation offers a typology that explores a variety of ways students are involved in schools. Educators and students can use apply this tool to the everyday involvement of students by using it to identify how schools currently engage students in their classes, programs, and other leadership opportunities. The Ladder can also encourage individuals and schools to aspire to higher levels by presenting the possibilities of meaningful student involvement.

The primary education period is considerably important in bringing up individuals that the democratic society needs as well as those who adopt democratic principles internalize the democratic lifestyle and put these attainments into practice in the real life situations. However, there is only a limited number of studies which determine the participation status of students in school, family and society in this period. In this study, it was aimed at determining the participation status of primary school students in school, family and society.

2. Method

2.1. Study Group

The universe of this descriptive research based on survey model consisted of the 6th, 7th and 8th grade students studying at a primary school in Kırşehir at the 2011-2012 school year. On the other hand, sample of the research was composed of 348 students, 190 (54%) of which were studying in the city center while 158 (46 %) of which were studying in the villages. 94 (27 %) students were the 6th grade students, 156 students were the 7th grade students while 98 (28 %) students were the 8th grade students. 152 students were female (44 %) while 193 students were male (56 %). In general, their mothers were primary or secondary school graduates (50 %) while their fathers were high school and university graduates (50 %). Average income of the families varies between 1000 and 2000 Turkish liras (about 600-1200\$).

2.2. Data Collection Tools

The data collection tool named “participation status of primary school students” which was developed by the researcher was used as data collection tool in the present study. While the data collection tool initially included 45 items, 15 items were excluded from the scale as it was found in the pilot application that their item reliability coefficients were lower than 0.30 and an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. Thus, the scale including three sub-dimensions was obtained as a result of the factor analysis.

The first sub-dimension of the scale was “participation in the school” and its Cronbach Alpha coefficient was $\alpha=0.82$ and the declared variance was 59.81; the second sub-dimension was “participation in the family” whose Cronbach Alpha coefficient was $\alpha=0.81$ and declared variance was 54.43 while the third sub-dimension was “participation in the society” whose Cronbach Alpha coefficient was $\alpha=0.79$ and declared variance was 41.70. Total Cronbach Alpha coefficient of the scale was $\alpha=0.79$ while the declared total variance was 60.05. In the research, a 5 point likert type graded scale was used. This scale includes such expressions as “Strongly Agree”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree”.

2.3. Data Analysis

While the items of the scale were interpreted, percentages in the grading scale were considered and thus, the participation ratios of students were determined. At the end, “strongly agree” and “agree” percentages or “strongly disagree” and “disagree” percentages were added and interpreted. Besides, the regression analysis was carried out to determine the factors affecting the participation status. The preferred regression model was the step-wise model.

3. Findings and Interpretation

Table 1. General participation status of students

	Yes	No
Have you ever been candidate for class presidency?	52	48
Have you ever been candidate for being student representative?	16	84
Have you ever casted a vote in the election for student representative?	79	21
Have you ever written a petition to the school management on a any matter?	10	90
Have you ever launched a campaign in the school? (aid, environment etc.)	8	92
Have you ever taken part in any campaign in the school? (aid, environment etc.)	33	67
Are you member to any organisation or association? (Tema etc.)	6	94
Have you ever written a letter or petition to any official institution?	10	90
Have you ever taken part in any campaign in the society?	14	86

As seen in table 1, the general participation levels of students are relatively low. A majority of the students expressed that they did not take part in any campaign in the society (86 %), they did not write a petition to an institution (90 %), they are not members of any association (94 %), they did not launch any campaign in the school (92 %). More than half of the students stated that they had run for the class presidency (52 %).

Table 2. Participation Status of Students at School

Participation at School	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Opinions of students are taken in determination of the classroom rules.	10	13	18	16	43
We are allowed to participate in the lesson during the courses.	9	2	6	17	66
Our teachers grant equal participation rights to all of us irrespective of any differences.	10	6	14	13	57
Our teachers decide on how they will teach the lesson.	49	22	16	7	5
We discuss national and international matters with teacher in the classroom.	16	13	20	24	28
We are encouraged by our teachers to assume responsibilities both in and outside the classroom.	10	7	17	25	40
Our opinions are also taken while the course books are selected.	26	22	14	16	23
I regularly take part in social and cultural activities (sports, culture-art) in the school.	11	12	15	30	32

School rules are determined together with the students in our school.	26	22	22	12	18
I can easily express my idea to the school principals on any matter.	12	18	28	18	24
I can easily express my idea/recommendation to my teachers about any issue.	12	8	14	20	45
School principals do not take our opinions about the issues related to the school management.	31	14	21	13	20
Our teachers take our opinions about any issue.	9	3	18	26	43
Our opinions are taken about the books to be bought for the school library.	25	21	25	25	4
The social clubs activities to be organized at school are determined by also taking our opinions.	19	17	25	13	27

The items for which the students have the highest participation levels in the school are that they are allowed to participate in the lesson (83 %), they have equal participation rights (70 %), teachers take their opinions (69 %), they are encouraged by the teachers to assume responsibilities (65 %), they can express their recommendations to the teachers (65 %). On the other hand, the items for which the students display the lowest participation levels are that teachers decide on how they will teach the lesson (71 %), they can not select the course books (48 %), they do not have right to speak in determining the school rules (48 %), opinions of students are not taken while books are bought to the school library and the school principals do not take opinions of the students (45 %).

Table 3. Participation status of students in the home

Participation in the home	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I also take part in the decision-taking process in the home.	9	2	14	20	55
We discuss national and international matters within the home.	13	9	17	17	44
My opinions are not taken about the TV series that will be watched in the house.	17	11	17	18	36
My family encourages me to take responsibilities.	6	4	11	20	59
My family sees me as an individual.	5	2	13	11	69
I can criticize a decision of my home.	11	15	28	24	22
I can decide on which high school I will attend after the primary school (without any repression) on my own.	8	5	14	16	57
My family encourages me to take part in any cultural and social activity that I want.	6	3	11	18	61
When I express my opinion on any issue, my family warns me by saying: “Be quiet, you are young!”	14	9	16	22	39
I have no right to speak about the economic decisions taken in the home.	21	12	20	17	30

Items for which the students displayed the highest participation levels are that they feel themselves as individuals (80 %), the family gives support for social activities (79 %), the family encourages for assuming responsibility (79 %) and they can participate in the decision-taking process in the home (75 %). On the other hand, the items for which the students have the lowest participation levels within the home are that they do not have right to speak in the financial decisions(33 %), the national and international matters are not discussed within the house (22 %) and they can not criticize the family decisions (26 %).

Table 4. Participation status of children in the society

Participation in the society	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel myself as an individual (citizen) in the society.	6	3	15	11	65
I think that our society is not aware of the child’s rights.	41	14	25	9	10
I think that participation right of children is only symbolic.	8	6	24	21	41
I think that areas related to the health and sports are sufficient in our surrounding.	16	25	21	12	26
Our opinions are also taken when a trouble arises in our environment or surrounding.	26	19	26	11	18

The item for which the students displayed the highest participation level is that they feel themselves as individuals within the society. On the other hand, the lowest participation level is obtained in the item that “child’s rights is a symbolic issue” (62 %).

Table 5. Results of the Regression Analysis Made Between the Participation Status in School and Independent Variables

	B	SE B	β	P
Constant	3,22	0,14		
Place(City or Village)	0,54	0,06	0,39**	,000
Class Level	0,29	0,04	0,31**	,000
Father Education	0,16	0,03	0,30**	,000
Mother Education	0,10	0,03	0,17**	,001
Income	0,07	0,03	0,14*	,007

Note: $R^2 = .38$ $\Delta R^2 = .37$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

According to the regression analysis, independent variables predicted the 37 % of the variance of school participation status of students. All the independent variables of the model have positive relationships with the participation status. The most important factor affecting the school participation of students was determined as the place where they study. The other important factors affecting the school participation status of students are class levels, father's education and mother's education. The least effective factor is, however, the income level of the family.

Table 6. Results of the Regression Analysis Made Between the Participation Status in Family and Independent Variables

	B	SE B	β	P
Constant	3,00	0,09		
Father Education	0,21	0,03	0,39	,000**
Place(City or Village)	0,33	0,07	0,23	,000**
Income	0,10	0,03	0,17	,001**
Sex	0,22	0,06	0,15	,001**
Class Level	0,11	0,04	0,12	,010*

Note: $R^2 = .30$ $\Delta R^2 = .29$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

According to the regression analysis, independent variables predicted the 29 % of the variance of students' participation status in the family. The most influential factor affecting the participation of students in the family was determined as the father's education status. The other important factors affecting the students' participation status in the family are the place where they study, income levels and sex. The least effective factor is, however, the level of the class in which they receive education.

Table 7. Results of the Regression Analysis Made Between the Participation Status in Society and Independent Variables

	B	SE B	β	P
Constant	2,75	0,15		
Father Education	0,13	0,03	0,25	,000**
Place(City or Village)	0,35	0,07	0,26	,000**
Class Level	0,13	0,04	0,14	,004**
Income	0,07	0,03	0,13	,025*

Note: $R^2 = .18$ $\Delta R^2 = .17$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

According to the regression analysis, independent variables predicted the 17 % of the variance of students' participation status in the society. The most influential factor affecting the participation of students in the society was determined as the father's education status. The other important factors affecting the students' participation status in the society are the place where they study and the level of the class. The least effective factor, however, was found as the income level.

4. Conclusion

In this study which aimed at determining the participation status of primary school students, the following conclusions were reached: In Turkey, general participation levels of primary school students are relatively low. A great majority of the students stated that they had never taken part in any campaign in the society, they had never written a petition to any institution and they had never become member of an association. This situation can essentially result from the lack of emphasis on the importance of student participation as well as the lack of opportunities allowing the child participation in the society.

When the students' school participation status is considered, it is seen that participation levels are high within the classroom and in the issues related to the teacher. It has been emphasized in various studies that classroom participation has certain benefits for the development of the student (Ergün ve Özsüzer, 2004; Ewens, 2000; Leeds, Stull, & Westbrook, 1998; Yağcı, 1997; Gilmore & Schall, 1996; Cooper, 1995).

Many studies conducted in various countries show that having children actively participate at school and providing children with a democratic environment positively contribute to their progress as engaged citizens and to their political participation (Council of Europe 2005; Davies et al. 2006; Morrison 2008; Perry 2009; Torney-Purta et al. 2001). However, this study shows that there are some issues with respect to students' participation at schools. For instance, students' participation levels are low in such issues as the determination of teaching methods, selection of the course books, determination of the school rules and school management, in particular. This situation can essentially originate from the fact a great part of the issues are determined centrally by the ministry of national education in the schools and the school management generally has an autocratic structure. In fact, this is the situation not only in Turkey Studies conducted in other countries also showed that administrators and teachers made decisions on school policies and students were not given many opportunities to participate (Davies 2000; Devine 2002; Raby 2005; Fjeldstad and Mikkelsen 2003; Thornberg and Elvstrand, 2012). Hyman and Snook (2000) propose the benefits of more democratic models of schooling whereby students are actively encouraged to participate in the decision-making process of school policies. International studies indicate that schools that actively invite and respond to their students' ideas regarding policy, curriculum, and day-to-day school procedures demonstrate improved attendance, academic progress, test scores, and student behavior. (Holdsworth and Thomson, 2002; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000). It is thought that when student views are respected and valued, students will be more invested in their learning and will take greater responsibility for their behaviors. Encouraging student involvement in creating school policies affords students a sense of ownership, belonging, and engagement, which is thought to be beneficial, especially for those who are at risk for failing out due to academic and/or behavioural problems. (Marachi et al., 2006)

The most influential factor affecting the school participation of students was determined as the place where they study. The other important factors affecting the students' participation status are the level of the class, father's education and mother's education.

Family is an important and essential factor enabling an individual to develop a democratic personality. Social and intellectual development of a child starts within the family and continues in the school environment (Aslan and Cansever, 2009). Thus, starting from the childhood, the family should allow the child to have the right to speak in any issue concerning him/her. In this study, it was detected that the students found the opportunity of participation within the family at most. Children stated that their parents allowed them to show their participation within the family and they even encouraged them in this respect. In the study conducted by Karatekin et al. (2012), Turkish primary school students stated that they could take decisions about themselves and their parents respected their decisions.

In the present study, child participation was found relatively low in terms of financial decisions as well as criticising the family decisions. Besides, it was found out that the ratios of discussing the national and international matters within the family were considerably low. Kuş (2011) detected in the study conducted in 26 cities throughout Turkey that primary school students did not discuss national and international issues with the family members, teachers and friends sufficiently. The most influential factor on the students' participation in the family environment was determined as the father's education status. The other important factors affecting the students' participation status in the family are the place where they study, income levels and the sex variable.

It was observed that the students did not have many opportunities for participation in the society. A great majority of the children think that the issue of child's rights is symbolic within the society.

Many Surveys have shown that children and young persons want to have a hand in shaping their own formative environment but feel, on the whole, that they have no such opportunities at present (Sylwander, 2001). A Swedish questionnaire survey in 1997, with children and youths, showed only 3 per cent to feel that they had great opportunities of influencing local politics. At the same time studies show that children and young persons want to have influence on their lives- not only family but also in school, in leisure hours, in their residential environment and in the local community- but not on the conditions offered by the traditional political system (Sylwander, 2001).

The most important factor affecting the social participation status of students was determined as the father's education status. The other important factors affecting the students' social participation status are the place where they study and the level of the class.

Recommendations

Many studies have associated the participation in school-based extracurricular activities with higher levels of academic commitment and better academic performance (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Jordan & Netdes, 1999). Therefore, more extracurricular activities can be organised in the schools. In this way, students' school participation levels can be elevated. Besides, awareness of families and individuals in the society about the importance of child participation should be raised with various studies. Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement

This study has been funded by the SBA 11-12 in Ahi Evran University Scientific Research Project Department.

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