If you had power, what would you do with it? Perspectives on children’s concerns and their understanding of power and participation

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Abstract

Interest in children’s voice in society has been increasing gradually, at least in part due to the United Nation’s Convention on the Right of the Child. This implies both the creation of new channels for participation, and also research activities. This article asks what ideas twelve years old children have about using power and about their own opportunities of having a say in their schools. The study is based on qualitative questionnaires, in which the respondents were asked questions about how they would improve different spheres of their life-world. The questionnaire also asked about their experience of agency in schools. According to the responses, these children’s main concerns were focused on the physical environment. As to their class and school, it was the informal level of the school that was important, in the global level, the children wished that the world would be safe. These respondents were fairly well informed about current problems both in local and global levels. As to their agency in school, they seemed to depend on adults who organize students’ participation.

1 Introduction

Childhood has traditionally had a label of an apolitical or nonpolitical part of human life, and children have been quite invisible and passive in society and politics. Their opinions or their knowledge have not been recognized, neither has society offered them many real opportunities for participation. Large-scale studies on adolescents’ knowledge, skills, attitudes and participation have been focusing on the age groups of 14 years and older (Schulz et al. 2010), but there is not much research on what children younger than that think or know about politics and society, nor about their political agency.

It is, nevertheless, important to pay attention to young children as citizens, and to their thoughts about society. They are as much a part of society as adults, and as Näsman and von Gerber (2002) express it, “children’s accounts are a necessary part of our knowledge of society” (p. 8). Childhood is not an isolated category, but children are observing the same social reality as adults, although their opinions have traditionally, to a great degree, been neglected as naive and inadequate. Children are living in the middle of the same societal and political processes as adults, and much of the “political background noise” (Moss 2011) in society is filtered also to them, often including strong emotional aspects, such as fear, sorrow and empathy, and therefore they can also have concerns about their society and their futures.

In Finland the question about children and society is topical, because social studies will become a subject for lower grades in the new national core curriculum for the compulsory education that will be published in 2014. It will be implemented in schools from 2016 on. The plan is for there to be two lessons /week for one school year. It may be placed in the syllabus of grade four, but schools can also decide how they divide this teaching time between grades four through six. This will create more opportunities for discussion of society with children, compared to the National Core Curriculum 2004 and preceding years, according to which civic education normally has not been taught until grade nine, for 15-year-old students. However, questions of citizenship, society and participation are not only confined to specific subject studies but they are also a concern for the whole school curriculum, and embedded in the cultures in schools, and the way of living in the schools.

The purpose of this article is to discuss children’s understanding of their life-world and its different spheres. The question that was posed to them involved discussing what improvements they would do to their surroundings, starting from their closest space and broadening to the global level. They had to think about power: what they would do if they had much power and could change things. Another part of the questions dealt with their possibilities of having an influence and participating at the school level. The questions about the changes children would have done, if they had power, are also indications about how they experience the problems and how they react to the problems they see in their surroundings, in society or in a broader context, at the micro and macro levels.

2 More focus on children’s thinking of society and participation

In many societies there are signs of an increasing interest in children’s role as citizens. This is mainly due to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that emphasizes that children should be heard in issues concerning them, at the present and not only as future citizens (Invernissi & Williams 2008, 2-3; Salo 2010, 420; Kallio & Häkli 2011). This interest has been expressed, during the past few years, both in academic research and in the efforts to create more opportunities for children’s participation. Children’s roles in society and politics have been studied in a number of fields, such as sociology, political science, education and geography. In many countries, there have been national projects, which aim at enhancing children’s and adolescents’ engagement in politics and skills of participation. However, these pursuits and projects are as a rule designed from the adult’s point of view, controlled by them and also modelling adults’ modes of participation, which children are expected to follow (Lewis 2010; Fleming 2013). Children are seen more as objects than subjects; their role is not active, and they are lacking political power (James, Curtis & Birch 2008). Thus the purpose can be that of socializing children to the existing models of participation. The focus is also generally more on children’s role as future citizens, than in their existing situation and concerns as citizens, which was underlined in the UNCRC (Wyness 2009). This way of thinking is also partly based on developmental psychology, underlining that their competence is developing, not finished.

Wood (2010) characterizes children’s position in society, and also in school, with the expression liminality: they are in a kind of liminal space, as citizens without full rights of participation, but at the same time being and becoming citizens (Weller 2007). Although the interest in children’s roles as citizens has arisen gradually, this strand of research is still rather thin, and one can also ask why children’s voices are not heard more often in society. One justification for the view of a passive child is the purpose to protect children from the risks in society, and therefore focus has more often been on how they should be controlled. Their relation to society has been considered from the adult’s perspective, framed with adult’s terminology, and mediated, regulated and controlled by adults (Wyness 2009; Salo 2010). Furthermore, the new channels of participation are often available to a small minority of children, those who are most active and enthusiastic. What would be challenging, is to engage all children, and therefore it is important to focus on the spheres of life that are relevant to all, and in which children normally interact and meet in everyday life (Kallio & Häkli 2011).

What also is crucial, is how the concepts of politics and participation are defined. Children’s political engagement has been underestimated, because it is often defined from a narrow perspective of formal social and political participation, and if the emphasis is there, children can be seen as politically apathetic, disinterested and ignorant (Weller 2007, 30-31; Moss 2011).The lack of exact terminology can be one reason, why children’s opinions of society are often ignored as begin underdeveloped. They can, nevertheless, have an understanding of society long before they have acquired abstract concepts or political terminology, before they are able to express their opinions with abstract terminology. For instance Cullingford (1992) approached in his study the children’s understanding of politics in their own sphere of life, without using the actual word politics, and children had actually a rather multifaceted understanding of political questions.

There are several studies on children’s conceptual understanding with reference to economy and politics, such as power, state, economy and political institutions. These studies indicate that there are vast individual differences as to the level of understanding ( Berti 2002; Furnham 2002). However, there are also great differences between adults, and not nearly all adults have developed a solid knowledge basis or deep level conceptual understanding of abstract concepts ( Elo & Rapeli 2008; Rapeli 2010) so, children are not alone with their developing, often naive concepts.

3 Learning from a close life world

For instance Vygotsky (1978) understands children’s interpretations of society as social constructs, largely dependent on adults’ constructs of the world. Children’s understanding of society can partly be based on what they learn or hear from adults or media (Cullingford 1992, 2; Näsman & von Gerber 2002, 7; Gill & Howard 2008, 8-9). However, it cannot be taken for granted that children adopt their ideas about society, as such, from, for instance, school or adults around them, although this mediation is inevitably significant. Children start constructing their opinions and frameworks for understanding society from very early years, in their closest contexts, including families, kindergartens, playground, and schools, and they are also influenced by the media. They make observations about hierarchies and power relations, about the importance of cooperation, and about different roles in society. There are also indications that children at an early age can have coherent theories that they believe in very consistently. Their perspectives become gradually broader. Children are “enmeshed in power relations of various kinds and with various different power agents right from the beginning – their experience of power is direct and lived” (Gill & Howard 2008, 28).Their learning is not only formal but also informal, and they try to understand their experiences. Children are active in their learning about society, and only children themselves can speak about their experiences, also those experiences related to the society.

A key question is how we define a political act or participation. It can be seen very broadly, not only in terms of traditional politics, but instead, how it is expressed in everyday life, and how children have observed and experienced it. It is important to start from children’s agency in everyday life and the political processes and power relations that are relevant for them (Kallio & Häkli 2011). For instance, the school is a context in which children can learn much about society, directly and indirectly, and practice democracy, although this is complex, and hierarchies and power relations can be very complicated (Lockyer 2008; Wood 2010).

Although school as such can be a microcosm, reflecting the society and teaching about society by its very structure, children learn about society informally outside their schools. Children do not learn only what they are taught but also from what they observe, and they may very well make observations about undemocratic practices (Biesta 2006, 124-125). For instance, in Warwick, Cremin, Harrison and Mason’s (2012) study, some adolescents experienced formal civic education as enhancing their motivation to participate in community, while others felt that they were not listened to and schools were undemocratic institutions.

What can be relevant for younger pupils as children-citizens is the trend of revisiting the traditional forms of civic education. On the one hand, the focus is on educating active citizens who would be able to participate and also to appreciate human rights and social justice. On the other hand, another focus is on looking for different codes of participation instead of the traditional channels and citizen roles (Llewellyn et al. 2010; Westheimer & Kahne 2004).

4 The study

Doing research on children’s ideas about society or politics can be complicated. Children may be lacking the relevant concepts, or not be used to expressing themselves in an abstract code, although they have ideas and opinions. Kallio and Häkli (2011) refer to methodological and conceptual constraints in collecting data, but also emphasize that researchers cannot be sure about a child’s agency in issues that concern them, if they do not know what is significant for the child.

The data for the present study was collected as part of the evaluation of an Interreg project Safe and Active School Day (SAS). The SAS project was a common effort between the cities of Turku (Finland) and Tallinn (Estonia), aiming at enhancing students’ participation and experience of a safe school. In both cities, the evaluation was conducted separately. In Turku, the evaluation was implemented with the help of quantitative questionnaires, and a qualitative sub-project “Pupil’s Voice”. This sub-project included empathy-based essays about students’ experiences of lessons and breaks, and the form that this article is based on.

In the present study, we did not ask how children understand the theoretical concept of power, but instead, what they would do and how they would use the power, if they had it and could improve conditions. Using power for change also reveals what children thought was wrong and what they were worried about. Another question is to analyze how children saw their opportunities of having influence.

The form was designed, focusing on children’s opinions on different spheres of their life-worlds:

Let’s imagine that you have much power, and you could make improvements. How would you use your power? What would you improve and what would you do

* in your own class
* in your school
* in the area you live in
* in your home city
* in Finland
* in the world

How can pupils in your school participate in decisions of common issues, for instance rules, parties, events, excursions or the schoolyard? How could pupils better be involved to participate and have a say in common issues in the school, such as mentioned above

The data was anonymous. No personal questions were asked about children’s families or socioeconomic background. These variables would perhaps have enabled a more sophisticated analysis and explanation. It was not considered necessary, because the purpose was just exploratory. The data was collected in schools by the contact teachers who participated in the SAS project in the cities of Turku and Tallinn. The teachers had clear instructions for data collection.

The data

The target group that was selected to answer the questions about using power and having influence were pupils form grade six (twelve years old), with the thought that their capacity for answering these kinds of questions would be better than that of younger students.

The number of respondents was 204 (99 girls, 105 boys), from six primary schools, altogether eight classes. Different parts of the city were represented, however, no school was from the city centre, but from different urban areas.

The questionnaire was semi-structured and consisted of short open-ended items and most responses were rather short. The data was qualitative by character. It might have been possible to get deeper reflections if the task had been an assignment about one limited topic, but the strength of the form was that researchers could get student’s thought modes systematically about a number of objects and more spheres or levels, and to proceed from a rather familiar and near sphere toward more remote spheres. A longer written response might have been difficult for some students, who seemed to have difficulties even with the short responses.

Some of the respondents seemingly had difficulties in producing answers in clear Finnish – there were also non-native Finnish speakers in the classes, although first language and ethnicity were not asked on the form. In some cases, it was difficult for the pupils to think about what improvements would be needed in the country or the world, and the answers are, to a great deal, on a very general level. The unclear or general answers also tell something about the concerns or problems that children have on their minds and, on the whole, this data can give a fairly multifaceted cross-section of twelve-year-old pupils’ thinking about their life-worlds.

Some expressions in the responses were difficult to interpret. Totally unclear expressions have been omitted from the analysis. All pupils who were at school completed the forms during their lessons, and the contact teachers of the SAS project took care of collecting the forms. The drop-out problem is more about the unclear answers. In some cases pupils wrote “[I would improve] nothing”, or “I do not know”. The answer “nothing” may mean that the pupil is satisfied, and “I do not know” that she/he does not know – referring to that she/he does not know enough or is happy with the situation, but another interpretation is that they are bored with writing. If these types of responses are interpreted as dropout, their proportion was not very large. There were also some naïve, joking, and improper (for instance racist) answers, and also some indication of misunderstanding. The majority of the answers very clearly told about the objects the child wanted to change to the better or was worried about.

To get an overview of the structure and emphases of data, the responses have been categorized so that each expression, including an independent point of view or topic, has been classified separately. Quantifying this open-ended data is challenging, and there are certainly several alternatives to do it, but it gives structure to this data and illustrates what topics these children saw that require improvement. While reviewing the data, an attempt was made to go beyond the direct expressions and look for the meaning of the response. The pupils used different expressions for the same phenomenon, and these have been combined to a common category, to form broader groups of concepts. For instance, when dealing with the school class, the students can refer to furniture, cleanliness, cosiness and need for renovation, and these items have been combined under the topic “physical space”. The category “working in the classroom” is including different aspects that deal with classroom situations (teaching, learning, school subjects, students’ order of sitting, teaching methods, teachers, homework and exams).

The pupils’ responses to one item often included more than one topic. For instance, one student would improve her home city in this way: “If I had power in my home city, all would be equal and the city clean”. This was classified to the categories “social structure” and “physical environment”. Each respondent had a code that is used for identification. (Schools were marked with letters A-F, and school classes with numbers; students had a letter b (boy), g (girl) and a number. The data was classified by two researchers, which enhances the reliability of the analysis, and the classifications were very similar.

5 Findings

The following table is presenting the main topics that the pupils wanted to improve in each sphere. Only those categories of answers that were mentioned most often are included in the discussion. In Table 1, there is an overview of the topics that pupils mentioned most often. Included are only those objects that were mentioned in about 20 forms, or by ten percent of respondents. In some items, there was a large variation in the topics and they were very different and scattered and only smaller frequencies are mentioned.

TABLE 1. The main issues that grade six pupils want to improve (number of respondents = 204, frequency refers to topics)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| OBJECT TO BE IMPROVED | Frequency  (number of  students who  mention it) |
| *I would improve in my own class* |  |
| physical space, furniture, cleanliness | 45 |
| atmosphere, belongingness | 30 |
| peace to work, stopping disturbing behaviour | 20 |
| working and studying: amount of homework, order we are sitting, teaching equipment | 19 |
| *I would improve in my school* |  |
| food | 58 |
| physical space in the schoolhouse: cosiness, practicality, shape, furniture | 32 |
| schoolyard, sport areas: equipment | 26 |
| safety, atmosphere (preventing harassment) | 23 |
| *I would improve in the area I live in* |  |
| environment, the view of the area (cleanness) | 53 |
| better opportunities for leisure, hobbies (culture, sports) | 45 |
| safety and peacefulness (stopping violence and crimes, misuse of alcohol) | 29 |
| services, including transportation and shopping | 22 |
| *I would improve in my home city* |  |
| environment, view of the city (cleanness) | 42 |
| better opportunities for leisure, hobbies (culture, sports) | 34 |
| safety and peacefulness (stopping violence and crimes, misuse of alcohol) | 25 |
| services, including transportation and shopping | 19 |
| *I would improve in my home country* |  |
| environmental questions | 37 |
| issues related to equality, social justice | 26 |
| issues related to politics and economy | 16 |
| *I would improve in the world* |  |
| a better and safer world: peace, no wars | 65 |
| stopping poverty, hunger, inequality; solving the problems of poor countries | 57 |
| issues related to environment and nature: climate change, ecological way of living; recycling, the rights of animals | 55 |

Class and school

The class, classroom and school are the direct environments for pupils, and therefore it is relevant to study their agency in those spheres. What the respondents most often wanted to improve there, could be categorized as various perspectives to physical environment, and the micropolitics of the school and the classroom.

As to the class and life in the classroom, many of the pupils wanted to improve the conditions of working: the classroom should be cleaner, more cosy and comfortable, it should be better arranged or perhaps renovated. Many of the children wished to get better desks and stools, or better boards or computers. They also wanted to improve the social atmosphere among the classmates, they wanted to have less noise, less disturbing behaviour from their classmates. They wanted that the school rules should be better followed up. For the studies, as such, they expected better equipment (computers, but also equipment for sports and gymnastics). There were only a few items dealing with school subjects, the contents or teaching methods, and more about the amount of homework and the order in which students were sitting in the classroom.

Some of them did not want to change anything: “Nothing. It is a nice place to study” (C6/g2), but more typical were answers like this: “If I had power in my own class, all would feel themselves safe and no one would be teased” (B4/g4). “There is nothing else to be improved in my class, except that it could be a little bigger, the desks should be bigger. Everybody should get a computer” (A3b7).

As to the school, the most common problem seemed to be food: the quality of meals, the cosiness of the dining room and arrangements. Some students wished that their school could have a kitchen, instead of that the food was made in a central kitchen from where it was taken to the school. School meals, however, have been seen as one of the benefits of the Finnish school. It seems to be important for children’s feeling of well-being in the school, and an easy object to express their wishes. Very often the students mentioned improvements they would do in the physical environment, either inside or outside of the schoolhouse. The schoolyard and possibilities for sports and motion were important to many of them. Safety was important, as it was in the classroom.

The topics related to school and class/classroom resembled each other fairly much, leaving out the school food. Otherwise, it was the physical environment, the physical school, that was the most common topic, and another in the top was the “informal school”, which includes peer-networks, relations with other pupils, in addition to the unofficial discourses that are not related to teaching and studying as such (Gordon 2001). In many schoolyards, the main problems are that they are not inspiring, covered with grey asphalt and have broken, dysfunctional play equipment (Nuikkinen 2009, 242-244).These two emphases can also be understood against the background of previous research on children’s pedagogical well-being and what contributes to it (Pietarinen, Soini & Pyhältö 2008).

Teachers were not mentioned in the class level responses, but concerning the schools, some students wished they could know the teachers better or that they could be more equal with them. The emphasis on the physical school and unofficial school (students’ interactions during and outside lessons) (Gordon 2001, 101; Paju 2011, 20) have been found as more significant than the formal school, that is, teaching and learning the school subjects. Peer relations are important for children, in addition to the physical scene, where the students are living and what is also restricting them and adapting them to certain rules. This unofficial field can be very important in the micropolitics of school and, especially for pupils, has not perhaps received enough attention in educational research (Gellin et al. 2012, 97). Another approach to these findings can be that the scarcity of school and city finances is reflected in the children’s experiences of the problems in their environment and resources of the schools.

The local community

The local area that students live in, and the city as a whole, also belong to their close life-world. The main topics, and the frequencies, were fairly similar in both. Also in these spheres, the twelve-year-old informants emphasized the shape of the environment: it should be clean, there should not be so much rubbish, the city should be kept in better order. The safety of the environment was also experienced as important, and to this category belong the responses dealing with violence, drinking and drugs. Obviously some children were very aware if there was problematic behaviour, violence and social problems, in their area.

The respondents also wished for a better infrastructure for their hobbies, sports, playing, and so on: there should be better sport halls and playgrounds, better libraries and more concerts. Often the wishes were typical of children. They also wished better transportation from their suburb to the city centre and better service to their area.

In addition to the above mentioned approaches, there were a few interesting responses (11) that dealt with the equality among inhabitants, tolerance and equal opportunities for earning their living for all. Nobody should be discriminated or harassed.

*“*The environment is in an awful shape. Itäkeskus [Eastcenter] was probably planned for drunk, as it is full of pubs. Families with children have been neglected” (D4/g8). “I would renovate the ball hall and build more common houses, for instance Youth House” (E2/g3). “Less car driving or other vehicles destroying the climate. No racism. All colors should be accepted” (B4/b7).

These findings have a strong resemblance with those of Holden (2007), who studied eleven-year-old British children’s fears and hopes. In two sets of data, from 1994 and 2004, the main hopes and also fears concerning the local community included crime and violence, local amenities, environmental issues, poverty, jobs and housing, community relations and traffic. These children were also concerned about homelessness, poverty and unemployment.

What should be improved in Finland and in the world?

In the national and global sphere, the pupils paid much attention to environmental problems. As to Finland, 37 respondents mentioned it. Otherwise the approaches were not easy to classify around a common theme. It is possible that national politics and issues regarding society are not so familiar, they are perhaps not so exciting. Social studies/civic education does not belong in the curriculum of the lower grades, it comes as late as in grade nine. One of the children felt it was difficult to answer: “I cannot think about such a big area. In Finland, everything is fairly well” (C7/b8).

There were some aspects of society, economy and politics that the pupils pointed out in their responses: such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, racism, and expensive food and living. There were 26 answers that dealt with different approaches to societal and economic situation and inequality in Finland: “I would improve and create more jobs for people and would take care of the environment” (C6/g4). “I would try to help in the economic depression (if possible), and give more power to the President” (C6/b5). “Away poverty and homelessness. Let’s not cast rubbish in nature” (D6/g12).

At the global level, children’s worries could be classified under three main topics: peace and safety, poverty and environment – more than 25 percent of the children mentioned one or more of these. They wished to have a world in which all people would have satisfactory conditions of living. More than 60 children wrote about the importance of ending wars or mentioned some other topic related to violence. People in poor countries should get food and water, and poor children should have the possibility for education. Environmental issues were important also at the global level: “No war. Food for all. Water for all. Basic rights to all. Home for all. Equality for all. = Peace in the world” (A3/g10). “No war. No racism. No alcohol. No drugs. Prevent climate change. You have right to do good things” (B4/b7).

Interestingly, both in national and global approaches, there were only a few responses dealing with children directly. Among the few examples, related to the global level, there were some requiring better opportunities for education and condemning the use of children as a labour force or as soldiers.

These findings resemble the topics that adolescents were concerned in Warwick and his coauthors’ study (2012): war, global economic recession, climate change, poverty and homelessness. Also Holden (2007, 35) in her study of eleven-year-old children’s concerns in Great Britain got similar results as to the global level: their thoughts about the future dealt mostly with war and peace, environmental issues and poverty, and concerns for the environment were relative strong in the data from 2004 compared to that from 1994. Typically, children were more worried about global concerns than local futures. The children had similar concerns in an international comparative study that was conducted in England, South African and Kyrgyzstan ( Holden, Joldoshalieva & Shamatov 2008).

Primary school children were informed about current problems at the local and global levels.

A question is why the children had obviously clearer answers to global than national problems. One reason might be that the global problems, in addition to environmental catastrophes and crises, are so commonly presented in the media. Children follow the streams of communication, and as a matter of fact cannot escape information about environmental problems. Environmental issues are certainly dealt with in the school science lessons.

Children’s agency in the schools

Children’s existing and desired possibilities for agency were asked with two questions: How can pupils in your school participate in decisions of common issues, for instance rules, parties, events, excursions or the schoolyard? How could pupils better be involved to participate and have a say in common issues in the school, such as mentioned above?

When asked about what opportunities they have in practice to have influence in decisions in their schools, the responses were often like this: “By being quiet, listening, not breaking against the rules. Not teasing other people” (B4/g3). “We obey the rules, we behave ourselves in events, we behave ourselves at school” (B4/b7).

It is surprising how many students described their own agency by reference to requirements for themselves, primarily to their obedience, following the rules, or coming on time. Misunderstanding can partly explain these answers, and in some responses the style revealed that Finnish was not the respondent’s first language. Another explanation is that the cultures in Finnish schools have not enabled students to have a say in decisions, and that there are not channels for student participation. Children have not perhaps seen alternatives and have no models for anything else. For instance, in the recent international study on adolescents’ civic knowledge, attitudes and engagement, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 (Schulz et al. 2010; Suoninen et al. 2010) indicate that 14-year-old Finnish lower secondary school students did not participate very much in the civic activities and did not feel that their voice was heard. Discussion about society or politics is not very common either in the school culture (Suutarinen 2006). Still another explanation is that the pupils perhaps saw that it was the easiest and most diplomatic strategy to obey, and so to survive at school. For the students, participation was largely based on requirements set to themselves. Similarly, some of them thought that their opportunity for participation largely depended on their own enthusiasm and other qualities. “They can prove that they are prepared to have responsibility, and they can make suggestions to these issues” (B4/g9).

What is also striking, is that in most cases the children defined their opportunities for participation with a strong reference to adults, the teachers, who plan and organize the opportunities and channels for participation. All in all, many children in the present study understood their participation as directed by adults, who listen to children’s wishes and suggestions (see also Kallio & Häkli 2011; Wood 2012; Fleming 2013). It is contradictory, as some scholars have pointed out, that the modern notions of learning emphasize students’ active role in the process of learning, but in other parts of school life children are not in general heard at all. The school requires adaptation, obedience and attending to the rules—and children have accepted this, as professional students (Gellin et al. 2012, 115-116).

Some responses dealt with existing channels, which recently have been established for children’s participation, such as Youth Parliament or Children’s Parliament, or the school councils, or projects such as Children’s Voice and Youth Voice. Some respondents, however, pointed out that it is very few pupils who get the opportunity to act through these channels.

In the question about having influence, about ten percent of responses were either “I do not know” or “no possibilities”. However, during recent years, the opportunities to have an influence have been strengthened, in order to support students’ participatory skills (Gellin et al. 2012; Kallio & Häkli 2011). A new law was passed about school councils for primary level. When the data was collected, these forms of participation were not yet established in all schools. Today these alternatives would perhaps be better known by students than a couple of years ago.

How to enhance the students’ participation? The main line in the answers was that participation should be fun, interesting and joyful. There should be events, projects or campaigns. Also in this question, most respondents left the responsibility to teachers for arranging ways to participate. They suggested that their ideas should be collected; they should be listened and asked to participate. They should be encouraged, activated and persuaded. There were also a few interesting responses where the pupil wrote that they would participate, if they get evidence that convinces them that they really can have an effect in decisions—and yes, if they are given training for participation. Although these were single answers, this indicates clearly young children’s capacity for critical thinking.

6 Conclusions

The data gives evidence of different approaches: how children understand power and agency at different levels, and what questions they are worried about. In almost all levels, from the school class to the global issues, the biggest problems for children are related to environment: climate change and safeguarding sustainable development. It may very well be, as Furnham (2002) comments that social and economic understanding “lags behind the understanding of the physical world” (p. 56) – that may partly explain the strong focus on physical space instead of social and political questions. In all levels, also, children wrote about safety and peace, and concerning the city, country and global level, equality. The problems were in same dimension, in the same axis but on different scales. It can be concluded that these responses reflect not only the children’s experience or images, but also the problems that the children live among. These responses can also be interpreted as children’s reactions to the problems around them, in different spheres. The problems in the micro level, in the classroom, can in a small scale be an indication of economic problems in a broader context.

What are these thoughts based on? To a great degree, it can be on observations and experience in the child’s own life-world, discussions with adults, news in media, and school. It is possible that concerns about the national level are filtered to children through their experiences in the local community. It can also be dependent on the nature of the area. In this study, researchers did not make a difference among the urban areas. Some of the areas where the respondents came from were ordinary middle-class suburbs with small houses, others were densely populated apartment house areas, with social problems. In the group of 204 children in the study, many of them certainly had their own experience about poverty or unemployment in their families. So the problems are not based on academic knowledge. Global issues, then, have certainly been heard both through media and, for instance, science lessons.

Although the evidence is small and fragmentary, it can give indications of the thoughts that children in their early teens have on their minds about challenges in their present life and world. When writing about improvements, the children in the present study expressed some idealism and perhaps unrealism. It was not asked for them to consider what is possible or realistic – only about the target of improvement. Children do not perhaps often understand how vast and multilayered the problems can be, and how complicated it is to improve conditions and how complicated and slow decision making can be.

These responses may be quite typical for children in general. Children in the present study tended to see the schools as hierarchical organizations, in which they were expected to obey and behave themselves, but they obviously also felt that peer relations, the informal school, and the physical school is important. Previous research has also found that children tend to accept clear-cut rules, order and discipline, and expect that the rules are followed consistently and also tend to understand that power structures are hierarchical (Cullingford 1992, 2; Gill & Howard 2008, 40-41). At the same time, this study reinforces the view of previous studies that pupils’ participation opportunities are largely controlled and organized by adults, and that is what the children also seem to expect. Some single respondents underlined the necessity of getting training in skills of participation. Some also saw the limitations of representative participation through a school council or children’s parliament.

The great number of responses paradoxically referring to obedience as agency suggests that these children are on their way to developing traditional and dutiful citizen roles, not so much the role of active citizens. These respondents were however quite young, and therefore strong conclusions should not be made about their future roles, at least on the basis of this small and fragmentary data. There are some signs of traditional citizenship, but especially the items related to global and local issues lead us to think that children have also adopted a social justice orientation while writing about peace and well-being and tolerance to indicate that they would like to get a safer world (Holden 2007; Llewellyn et al. 2010; Westheimer & Kahne 2004).

The data is fairly small and does not enable broad generalizations. The responses may have been dependent on the context and the timing. The responses are perhaps typical of the age of respondents, not very deep, and not expressed in clear abstract terminology. However, even in this form they indicate that children can have consistent ideas about society, power relations and the world around them. The fact that the responses were written can have limited the quality of the data, but it is not likely that oral responses in interviews or group interviews would have been remarkably deeper. Similar conceptual and expressive limitations would certainly have appeared in oral data also.

Implications for research and practice

It would be important to continue the work that already has been started in many countries in order to create for children more opportunities for practicing and implementing skills of participation and discussion. More discussion is certainly needed about children’s roles as citizens (Weller 2007; Lockyer 2008; Salo 2010). One important dimension is formal education abut civic and citizenship issues. Adolescents need conceptual tools for discussion and participation (Fleming 2013), but attention should also be directed to practices, processes and structures that are undemocratic in children’s life-worlds. More research is also needed about children’s agency and their participation in the schools but also through the more formal channels created especially for children’s participation. The impact of background variables (area, class, gender and ethnicity) was not analyzed in the present study, but it would also be interesting, given that the study would be conducted on a broader basis.

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