

Tulin Sener

Civic Engagement of Turkish Youth in Germany

Abstract

The recent growth of interest in children's participation in civic life, partly reflected in and stimulated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), has led to concerns about how to facilitate the involvement and participation of young people in public life and in the public policy process. Young people are fully capable of involvement in community assessment, planning and decision making. Research around the world shows that they gravitate naturally to a purposeful engagement with their surroundings and have strong feelings about the local environments they use everyday. Particularly, living in a foreign cultural context requires more involvement in order to accommodate to the culture. Turkish children and young people living in Germany are dealing with many problems, including their civic engagements. In this research, 40 pre-adolescents were interviewed in order to investigate their cultural participation in Germany. In-depth-interviews are done and analysed. Results show that the young people have a strong wish to be listened, particularly on issues directly affecting their daily lives and activities, their education, school and the environment they live. In this article the results will be discussed and examples will be given.

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Keywords

Participation, civic engagement, Turkish youth, cultural integration, youth involvement

Introduction

The years of adolescence is the time when young people try to figure out the complexity of the external world and begin to form their identities. However, one of the most important issues in adolescence is questioning one's future life. Most of the regulations are made without getting their views and young people have very little opportunity to say what they want and need most. Research around the world (e.g. Mayall 1994; Goncu 1999) shows that young people gravitate naturally to a purposeful engagement with their surroundings and have strong feelings about the local environments they use everyday. Though more research is needed, there is already a growing body of research suggesting that the participation of young people in genuine decision making in school and neighborhood has many positive outcomes (Matthews and Limb 2000; Alderson 1999; Freeman and others 1999). On the other hand, research on the development of the identity of migrant children has developed more differentiated approaches (Boos-Nünning, 1994; Hoffmann, 1990, von Gostomski, 2003). Usually, the physical and cultural environments that they face everyday do not satisfy the needs of young people, especially if they are living in a foreign country.

Particularly, living in a foreign cultural context requires more involvement in order to accommodate to the culture. Turkish children and young people living in Germany are dealing with many problems, including their civic engagements.

There are some basic requirements that a society must meet in order to 'give young people a voice'. It is important that adolescents can take responsibility for some aspects of city life such as keeping the neighborhood clean, designing a playground or painting the walls of the schoolyard. Besides, there should be some mechanisms involving young people in policy development, such as city councils, which should offer advice on target setting, developing an action plan, monitoring and evaluation. Bartlett and Hart (2002) argue that children are fully capable of involvement in community assessment, planning and decision making, and that schools are the best places for children's participation. This value of participation also needs to be seen in the context of young people's disengagement from public institutions.

Large populations of foreigners live in Germany, and thus German cities have a distinct multicultural character. Consequently, it is quite popular that there are Turkish neighborhoods and streets where there are a lot of Turkish restaurants, shops, patisseries, coiffeurs, and so on. Those streets give an impression that one is walking in the streets of Turkey, such as in Istanbul or Ankara. The people living in those neighborhoods have some kind of isolation. It can be considered from two different perspectives: on the one hand, it is believed that they prefer not to be involved in the wider German community, so that they can be among themselves and protect their own culture and traditions. On the other hand, it can reflect that it is better for German people that Turks live isolated because they are already everywhere and German people do not want to see them at least around their home yard. There is a tendency to label migrants with an assumed culture and cultural identity, based on presumptions about the culture in the countries of origin. Such presumptions also often fail to take into account developments in these countries: it is simplistic to define 'Turkish culture' as the village culture of Eastern Turkey, as is often the case even in school textbooks or teacher training (Çaglar 1990). It is the underlying idea of a static culture that leads to such misinterpretations and denials of modern Turkish culture — similar examples can be found for other migrant groups in Germany. Furthermore, the assumption of a static culture supports the widespread conflict-of-cultures hypothesis, according to which cultures clash in migration contexts, though this is only one context humans with different cultural ties may meet. A possible explanation for the simplistic labeling of migrants and stigmatization from outside lies in the reluctance of many to accept plurality and diversity in their societies and the consequent denial of variety and access to different cultural components for migrants, which is then often interpreted as a 'contradictory' or even a 'damaged' identity — even in educational literature. Boos-Nünning (1984) argues that the national identity of Turkish adolescents in Germany is not Turkish, but migrant Turkish, and this is equally true of other national and ethnic groups. According to Luchtenberg (1998, 52), though migrants 'are linked to the cultures both of the homeland and of the country of origin' and thus develop 'personal identities' with 'complex new transcultural elements', they are often regarded as representatives of their culture of origin, or even of their national culture of origin. For migrants to express such 'transcultural' components in their identity may not always be acceptable. The development of identity in migrant children has been an important topic from the very beginning of multicultural education in Germany. The discussion focuses especially on the difficulties and failures which are presumed to result from participation in two, often contradictory, cultures. The role of biculturalism and bilingualism within ethnic, social and cultural identity has been analyzed, in order to describe the challenges posed with regard to the development of identity. Migrant children are often regarded as "the problematic part" of the education system in Germany. One of the reasons for this is their low socio-economic status, which, as PISA Research by OECD (2003) showed that the school success of children is strongly

correlates with the socio-economic structure of the family. All these studies show that there is a strong need for adolescents to be involved in the mechanisms related to them. However, no research on the participation of Turkish youth living in Germany has been done up to date. There are some cross-cultural projects going on especially about the civic engagement of migrated people, and they are usually treating the mechanisms of integration into society. There have been just some implementations so far, but there is still a lack of investigation in what children think, what they dream and what they complain about. It is believed that the qualitative research is important for more effective implementations with children.

The purpose of this study is to determine the level of participation of Turkish adolescents living in Germany. More specifically, it aims to investigate whether Turkish youths are involved in activities related to them, whether they have civic rights and engage both in Turkish and German society, if they have a voice in the community and how they solve the problems they are faced with.

Method

Research Group:

In this research, 40 pre-adolescents (10–13 years olds) were interviewed in order to investigate their cultural participation in Germany. Of the 40 adolescents, 24 were boys (%60) and 16 (%40) were girls. All the adolescents were living in the city of Cologne and most of them were living in Turkish neighborhoods where there is a wide Turkish community. The research was conducted both at the interviewee's homes and at schools where there are many Turkish students. The age of the children ranged between 10–13 years but most of them (n:22 % 55) were 12 years old.

Process:

Data was gathered by interviews between May-July 2005. The researcher lived in Germany for six months in order to get wider knowledge about the situation of Turkish people, particularly of the Turkish youth, and spent a lot of time with them. She lived with a Turkish family in a neighborhood where there are many other Turkish people... Although it was not a "Turkish street" or a neighborhood, it gave a rough idea about how Turkish people live and spend their time. It was also useful for the researcher that all those Turkish families have at least one or two relatives or friends who live in Turkish streets. Before the interviews, group meetings and focus group interviews were done to shape the questions of the interview. As most of the Turkish children and adolescents have difficulties in speaking the Turkish language, focus group interviews were important to simplify the items. There are 15 questions in the interview, evaluating particularly the cultural participation of Turkish youths in Germany. The items were chosen from an item-pool and were evaluated by five judges in terms of appropriateness of the items for the age of subjects and also for the assessment, clarity, and easiness to answer. A pilot study was done with ten children to see if the instrument were working properly. Interviews were done usually at interviewees' homes or in school counselor offices individually with the adolescents. All adolescents who participated in the interviews gave informed consent. Interviews were tape-recorded, and each interview lasted almost 45 minutes. When needed, extra explanations were given, and/or a translator (usually a mother or an older sibling) were used.

The purpose was to understand how children are solving the problems they are dealing with in the community. On the other hand, they were asked to tell about their "dream community" and whether it is similar to the one they are recently living in.

Results

The interview results show that the young people have a strong wish to be listened, particularly on issues directly affecting their daily lives and activities, their education, school and the environment they live in.

One of the questions in the interview was important due to the participation level of adolescents at school. As schools are the places where children spend most of their time during the day, it is essential that they have a voice at school. They were asked about who makes the rules at their school, and most of them (n: 24, % 60) told that it is the teachers and the principal who make the rules, and some of them believed that it is only the principal (n:10, %25). It was interesting that only two adolescents claimed that a council, which also consists of students, makes the rules of the school. They were also asked whether they were involved in making the rules and only one student answered as his school give students the opportunity to discuss about the rules at the school. When they were asked if they have a Turkish students' representative at their school, most of them informed that they do not have a representative for Turkish students (Table 1). Besides, most of them mentioned that it would be nice to have one because they have some problems different from those of German students, especially in terms of language and cultural traditions. Therefore, sometimes they are in conflict with the administration and/or with other students because they think that sometimes it is really difficult to show what you are really like.

Table 1

| Question | Answer | Frequency | Percent |
|--|---------|-----------|---------|
| Do you have a Turkish representative at your school? | Yes | 6 | 15,0 |
| | No | 34 | 85,0 |
| | Total | 40 | 100,0 |
| Do you want one? | Yes | 31 | 77,5 |
| | No | 5 | 12,5 |
| | No idea | 4 | 10,0 |
| | Total | 40 | 100,0 |

Besides school, they were asked about their neighborhood because it is important to know what young people are doing in the environment they live in. First, it was asked if there is a place where they do sport, play or hang out in/close to their neighborhood, and almost all of them (n:36, % 90) said yes and that they like it there (n: 33, % 82,5). The ones who said that they do not like it claimed that it is because the adults always think that they are doing something bad when they hang out there.

The adolescents were asked to speak about the things that they do not like most in the community that they are living in, and most of them said that they do not like the youth policies against foreigners (n: 29, % 72,5). The meaning of youth policies against foreigners is not depending on a governmental basis, rather they mentioned the stereotypes of German youngsters against foreigners. It can be said that Turkish young migrants feel disadvantaged in society in general (also in school and work) because of an "educational bias". The rest said that they do not like the streets, transportation, laws and regulations and so on. They were asked whether they ever told their complaints to anyone, and the majority said no (n: 31; % 77,5) because they believe that nothing is going to change even if they tell their complaints and/or wills. The ones who answered yes added that they always talk about the youth policies against foreigners that they do not like, especially to their teachers, but nothing has changed so far (Table 2)

Table 2: The things that the Turkish adolescents do not like in the community they live

| | Frequency | Percent |
|---|-----------|---------|
| Blank | 1 | 2,5 |
| Streets | 3 | 7,5 |
| physical conditions of the city/neighbourhood | 1 | 2,5 |
| Youth policies against foreigners | 29 | 72,5 |
| Transportation | 1 | 2,5 |
| Laws and regulations | 1 | 2,5 |
| Cultural and free-time activities | 2 | 5,0 |
| Other | 2 | 5,0 |
| Total | 40 | 100,0 |

It was important to define whether the Turkish pre-adolescents were involved in any civic action (Table 3). Although the adolescents claimed that they have very limited opportunities of participation in civic actions, most of them (n: 34; % 85) claimed that he/she has engaged in a civic action at least once. Mainly they were involved in actions (n: 30, % 75) regarding civic rights of the Turkish community or actions to preserve traditions and/or religious values.

Table 3: The activity types that Turkish adolescents have engaged

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--|-----------|---------|
| I participated into an action research | 30 | 75,0 |
| I participate into projects in an Organization/Trust | 6 | 15,0 |
| I've designed a project about Turkish youth | 1 | 2,5 |
| I helped to a friend/relative | 2 | 5,0 |
| other | 1 | 2,5 |
| Total | 40 | 100,0 |

It was important to determine if the adolescents were participating in those actions by free will or if they were forced to participate. The most regular answer was that it is important to own cultural values and traditions in a foreign country and that it is natural that your parents/relatives/neighbors or friends are involved in such an action. "If my parents do, I will definitely do it!" Other than participating in an action, six adolescents said that he/she has participated in projects of an Organization or a Trust, and only one adolescent said that she has designed and organized a project about Turkish children with her peers in a Turkish Association.

When the adolescents were asked whether they do any community-related work, almost all of them (n: 36, % 90) answered "no" (Table 4). However, the ones who are involved in such a work said that they themselves wanted to be involved and that they are happy with it. The interview consisted of a question asking whether the young people in the study ever took part in designing and/or engaging in their neighborhood, schoolyard/garden or anywhere else, and what they dislike the most and want to be changed/reorganized. Most of the children said that he/she did not participate in any kind of designing (n: 25, % 62,5). A wider question followed the previous question such as whether they have ever been involved in community planning actions or services, and 35 of the adolescents (% 87,5) said no. The ones who said yes explained that their work was helping to fill in the questionnaires of a community center, working for a Turkish Day campaign, helping in collecting money for the Tsunami in Taiwan, collecting money for a Mosque and helping to collect signatures for a community service. All these five adolescents claimed that they themselves wanted to do so and that nobody forced them.

Table 4: Community-related work

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-------|-----------|---------|
| no | 36 | 90,0 |
| yes | 4 | 10,0 |
| Total | 40 | 100,0 |

The last question of the interview was about the dream community of the adolescents, and they expressed what they want from society. All of them claimed that they want equal rights and freedom. They want more access to public places, and they strongly mentioned the need to be listened. Asked how similar this dream community is to the one they are living in, the majority answered that it is not similar at all (Table 5).

Table 5: How similar is your dream community to the one you are living in?

| | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------|-----------|---------|
| very similar | 1 | 2,5 |
| quite similar | 1 | 2,5 |
| a little similar | 20 | 50,0 |
| not at all | 18 | 45,0 |
| Total | 40 | 100,0 |

Discussion

Generally speaking, it is important to note that the participation of Turkish adolescents living in Germany is very limited. Young people even do not express their complaints and/or wills because they say that when they tried to do so, nobody listened to them and they got bored of speaking for nothing. For example, most of the adolescents complain that they have only limited access to cultural activities and that they want to change their lives, but they do not tell their parents because they believe that nothing is going to change. They felt there should be more recognition given to what they want from community. This included cleaner/more hygienic environment, playgrounds and recreation parks, cheaper, more artistic and more athletic activities. They wanted a voice in the decision-making process of all facilities including the rules in the family. Most of the children told said that they have "a place to play or hang out" in the neighborhood, and usually they like it there. However, they wanted greater access to athletic and artistic activities and youth clubs. The answers of the children concerning their "dream-community" are interesting.

Most of the adolescents said that they are engaging in athletic activities but these are not organized activities, and they usually do them in PE classes at school. However, the ones who said that he/she is a member of an organized sports activity are usually engaging with TeakWando or Kick Boxing. It is interesting that some adolescents claimed that they feel stronger and/or more confident when they do these kinds of defense sports. Most of them said, "I prefer Kick Boxing to other sports such as swimming or basketball because this helps me to protect my self against "strangers" and if a fight occurs, I can defense myself!" The percentage of adolescents engaging in artistic activities is limited, and they are usually girls taking arts and crafts courses such as knitting especially in their Turkish community.

Results also revealed that most of the adolescents think that they do not have a Turkish representative in the school administration, and that it is very necessary to

have one in order to tell their teachers about their wills and complains. School/class councils and other representative structures were much appreciated by the students and recognized by some teachers as one means of achieving an orderly school. In this respect students argued that involvement in decision-making increased their motivation to achieve and made them feel part of the school. However school councils were often seen as structures set by teachers and the administrative board of the children, which actually reminds us of the non-participatory levels of Hart's (1992) participation ladder. Although the children varied in their experiences of participation in civic action, it was obvious that they all made a strong impact to be given opportunities for participation and the realization of effective systems of decision making processes. Most of the adolescents in this study expressed a strong wish to take a more active role in family and at school as well as in society in general. Whatever the specific structures and mechanisms provided, participation needs to be part of the overall management strategy. There is a lot to think about how to make organizations more participatory and how to engage children in different settings and how to make participation practices appropriate and effective. Children will have a greater sense of belonging when they realise that the adults listen to them and are in contact with them. The CRC states that we –adults, educators, facilitators, parents, etc. – should give children the freedom of thinking and expressing themselves in accordance with their age and capability. Giving them a voice about the subjects affecting them in their daily lives is important to make them develop a sense of responsibility and awareness. However, the most important thing is to carry out implementations according to these research findings and to conduct action research in which children take part and show their capacities. This way, it is easier to develop strategies to find solutions to their problems and to take responsibilities for their lives.

Summing up what we have been discussing so far, it has become obvious that Turkish adolescents in Germany *do not feel* that they have the same opportunities as the majority of the youth population. The programmes and measures should be designed to aid and promote foreign youths to find their place in life, in society and on the job market. The most important result for policy and practice to emerge from this research is that societies should have a clear and realistic idea of what young people's participation means, and that this definition is shared at all levels. The definition should acknowledge the limitations and obstacles that exist within the community. Schools and youth clubs should be effectively in contact with local authorities and NGOs, so that a detailed guidance and support at the local program level should be developed to discuss how the community can encourage adolescent participation as well as monitor and evaluate outcomes.

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