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Citizenship education in non-formal contexts: The role of city councils

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Abstract

This paper analyses the important role that city councils can play in the development of citizenship and social justice when working with children and adolescents in non-formal contexts of education. The study describes the specific work that has been carried out in the municipality of Rivas in Madrid for the promotion and development of active citizenship and participation in children and adolescents. Since 2004, the city council of Rivas has developed the "Program for the promotion of children's rights and child participation". The basic objective of this program is to develop citizen awareness and knowledge about children's rights, and especially with regard to their right to participation. This paper describes and analyses the work developed specifically in the Children's Forum, designed as a forum of participation for children of primary education (6 to 12 years), in which they meet regularly for discussing and working on different themes related with children's rights and their own lives in the community. Finally, children propose measures to the city council in order to improve or solve the problems or issues that they have been working on together in the forum. We discuss the social, political and educational implications related with the importance of promoting citizenship education in non-formal contexts.

Keywords: *citizenship education, children's rights, participation, social justice, human rights*

Introduction

For some time very interesting and enriching educational experiences have been in place with the aim to promote children's democratic participation. These educational experiences are designed to enhance not only the knowledge that children have about their own rights, but also seek to promote their active participation, executing their rights and responsibilities as citizens in different contexts.

This situation is especially important if you consider that nowadays there are many voices being raised in favour of a vision of childhood according to the concept of citizenship related to the CDN (Convention on the Rights of the Child). Thus, in recent years, multiple experiences of child and youth participation are emerging around the globe, from children's forums or councils (most common formulas in Spain), unions of child and adolescent workers (NATs) and radio programs focus to children (highly valued in Latin America).

Children's participation could be defined as the process by which children are developing their own skills needed for full development, while they acquire the basic

skills needed to fully and actively participate in their society, becoming full citizens as they recognize the CDN. We don't want to establish any limit to the legal concept of participation, but we understand the right to participate as a present need in every human being from the moment of his birth (Ochaíta and Espinosa, 1997, 2001, 2004).

Moreover, as noted by Crowley (1998), that participation should be regarded as a key guiding principle. This means that this right has to be understood rather as a "facilitator" to the extent that compliance helps to ensure the fulfilment of other rights. From this perspective, it is not only a means to reach an end, but it is also a civil and political right basic to all children, so it is also an end in itself.

According to what we have said, the Program for Promotion of Child Rights and Child Participation was born in 2004 at Rivas Vaciamadrid. The basic objective of this programme is to develop an awareness and knowledge in all citizens about the rights of children, especially the right to participation.

Included within this framework several projects were launched, among them it is remarkable the Children's Forum. This is an instrument of participation implemented by children aged 1 to 6 studying at primary education (6 to 12 years), that have regular meetings (every 15 days or so) in order to discuss, analyze and question themselves those aspects that concern or interest to their own group.

Being supervised by a team of counsellors, during the entire school year, the children choose a topic related to child rights to work on. They do research, they ask themselves, they debate and finally they propose measures to enhance the situation and to publicise in order to solve the issue in question. The Children's Forum hasn't got any representatives; all decisions are made by an assembly.

Each session of the Children's Forum has the following structure:

- Assembly: reminder of the work done to date and presentation of what is planned to do.
- Working time: time to work doing dynamic activities in order to develop the theme you have chosen
- Leisure "self-managed" at the beginning of the course the children decide what to do in their spare time, some groups are responsible preparing it (design activities, buy materials, being counsellors, and so on.)

After two years of work, those children who reached age 13 pass successfully the ESO school level, requested the creation of a location similar to the Children's Forum, but adapted to them. Thus, the Youth Forum programme was born in 2006. There were specific objectives, methodology and operation similar to the Children's Forum, but for boys and girls ages 13 to 17 years.

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