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Lifelong Learning and Civic Participation: The Student's Perspective

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Abstract

The article presents the discourse of civic participation and ideas about overcoming civic passiveness through life long learning, with case studies on the civic activity of Lithuanian students. Active citizenship is described as being connected to lifelong learning through the main components of civic activeness: cognitive, affective and practical. The activeness of Lithuanian youth is presented as having strong relations with these practical aspects. And reasons for passiveness are identified with relation to lifelong learning on the basis of theoretical insights and empirical researches. On the basis of data analyses some conclusions are drawn up.

Keywords: *lifelong learning, civic participation, models of social participation*

Introduction

In the last decade, in scientific texts, public discussions, and various other contexts, much more active discourse of participation of citizens has been observed, which is understood and used in this article as communication that creates ideas or processes of knowing, that helps to discuss citizens' motivation, possibilities and real practice that has influence on social, political environment and decisions. Participation in general is discussed in philosophical texts (Bauman, 2002; Mažeikis, 2007), participation of individual groups is named as one of the most important preconditions and factors of social integration (Ruškus, Mažeikis, 2006), pedagogues try to discuss role of education in stimulating civic participation of youth (Campbell, 2006; Zaleskienė, 2007).

European education politicians, when defining (European Qualifications Framework, 2006) areas of competences (knowing and understanding, the ability to act in a team and to be together) of studying youth, give major attention also to the creation of indicators of active citizenship, and development of special participation programs (Hoskins, 2006). Furthermore, attempts are made to formulate definition of actively participating citizen which would be understood in various cultural and educational contexts.

The aim of this article is to investigate levels of civic activity among students. This aim is concretized by the following objectives: 1) with reference to the theoretical insights of Lithuanian and foreign authors, to discuss concepts of citizenship in the context of social changes and lifelong learning with educational possibilities for upbringing of a citizen; 2) to describe models of social participation.

Civic competence for a lifelong learning society

The new challenges in the ever changing labor market, economic and cultural changes, have shaped a different attitude of the Lithuanian population towards lifelong learning. Today, learning is perceived as an opportunity to develop individual competencies and skills, a presumption of acquiring relevant skills to meet the requirements of the labor market, as well as a prerequisite for the successful and full-fledged participation in the life of modern society.

After Lithuania became a member of the European Union, the development of civic competence as a precondition for lifelong learning has become a priority of the Lithuanian Educational Policy. Importance of civic competence is defined in laws regulating the National Educational System and the Strategy for Ensuring Lifelong Learning (2004 and 2008- renewed strategy) devoting great attention to the development of adult education in the regions of the country. One of the most significant objectives of the strategy for ensuring lifelong learning is to create adequate conditions for increasing the number of learning adults and improving the quality of the activities of educational establishments. In 2008 Lifelong Learning Strategy in Lithuania was renewed with a greater emphasis towards civic competencies and citizenship itself. The Strategy aims to implement the provisions safeguarded in several national legal documents. The main objectives of Lifelong Learning Strategy are concentrated on the establishment of the fully developed model of the formal and non-formal adult education in the all types of institutions all over the country.

Civic competences in the context of life long learning is understood as part of general skills and social competencies. General skills as important for all levels of qualification as an assumption to develop and expand other competencies. The significance of general skills, no matter the qualification level achieved, manifests itself in the context of life-long learning. Civic competencies form main part of social competencies which are described in Lithuanian National Qualification framework (2007): *Social competencies encompass ones skills*: to be communicative, tolerant, to be able to be a partner, to communicate in a politically correct manner, to be socially active, to have civic skills to be able to demonstrate civic participation, to be able to work in a large group, to be able to control transactional relationships, to be able to manage, etc¹.

Therefore, the types of competencies, i.e. functional, cognitive, and general competencies, manifest themselves as criteria of the second parameter of qualification level establishment. The development of the post-modernistic world encourages the exchange of knowledge and raises the need for a lifelong learning, supposing the variety of education and gaining of qualifications.

Social context of the development of active citizenship and models of social participation

Researchers of modern society (Bauman, 2000; Castells, 2001) treat many issues in their own way, but they agree unanimously on consequences of globalization for societies, naming them as a) limitless *migration* (of resources, capital, people, etc.); b) *alienation* (among people and their groups; among citizens and their elected government; among

nations; among states; etc.); c) *increasing scale of social exclusion* (in every society appear increasingly more people and groups that are separated from the main possibilities to utilise their rights and freedoms, social benefits, means of communication, etc.). It is obvious that societies seek ways to try to create and implement various social projects to mitigate these consequences. Strengthening of horizontal indicators of social cohesion is named as one of such ways (Zepa, 2000). Comprehensive experience of development of citizenship in various countries of the world (Torney-Purta, Schwille, Amadeo, 1999) revealed that one of the priority aims of development of citizenship is to develop values and competences that enable persons to establish and strengthen social relations, help each other, trust each other, etc. We can assume that citizenship in a modern-day world is not an aim for itself. It becomes a means for solving problems created by globalization (for example, to strengthen social cohesion that we have discussed). Yet development of citizenship as an education process, being a means to reduce consequences of globalization, is itself being influenced by globalization. We will discuss only some of the challenges that must be fought off by “development of citizenship” that claims to take one of the most important places in trajectories of contemporary education:

- The main element of citizenship gradually disappears: a relationship between a concrete citizen and the state. Nobody ever doubted that citizenship is a certain relation between a citizen and a state. It was cherishing this relationship that was considered to be the main aim of development of citizenship. But these days, boundaries between states vanish, new integration structures appear (Castells, 2001). Inhabitants of these structures (e.g., the European Union) acquire status of citizens. But what does a citizen of the European Union mean in this context if the European Union is not a state? And what aim is raised for development of citizenship in this case?
- Citizens’ increasing distrust in government and the institutions of government. Sociologists (Bauman, 2000; Castells, 2001) fix increasing extent of this phenomenon all over the world, i.e., distrust on one or another level, manifests itself in all modern states. The authors stress that under conditions of globalization, gap (in senses of identification of interests, feeling of time, geographical (physical distance), and others) of authority between government and citizens who elected (delegated their authorizations) it increases. Being far removed, in Brussels for example, the government cannot know needs of its electors anymore, and cannot, therefore, properly represent them. Electors do not recognize anymore who and why they elected, cannot meet frequently and control how mandates of electors are implemented and thus disappears interest in these institutions and their activities in general. This way, subjects of civic society distance from each other. But one of the main aims of civic education for a long time was constant analysis of activity of institutions, actions of officials and decisions made by politicians. So what should be analyzed by the maturing citizen, if it is no longer clear neither who proposed and made one or another decision, nor who is responsible for what?
- Changing conceptions of citizenship. For many hundreds of years, conception of citizenship was steady and clear. It is so-called *traditional (conventional) citizenship*: efforts to create and conserve one’s own state, obeying the laws, participation in elections, in activities of various political parties, political discussions, announcement of petitions, proclamations, etc. But already for

some decades in social and educational contexts *conception of socially-oriented citizenship* (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, 2001) is being used more and more often. It is the honest fulfilling of one's own duties, faithfulness to own family, nation, and participation in social organizations, in charitable or other community activities. And as contrastive researches of the mentioned authors show, it is this citizenship that is valued in more and more countries (Lithuania itself also belongs in such a category).

The three challenges briefly discussed above, encourage radically correcting our understanding of the development of citizenship, motivating us to direct more attention to the development of practical citizenship besides the cognitive and affective dimension that has dominated until the present day, in recent-decade literature on issues of civic education (Whiteley, 2005).

In literature on psychology and pedagogy, activeness of a person is usually described by his participation in activity of some kind. For this reason when carrying out research whose aim was to investigate the social activeness of youth, we analyzed theoretical conceptions of participation and measured various manifestations of participation of youth and their frequency.

The concepts "*participation in a society*"; "*political participation*", "*civic participation*" are attributed to the area of political sciences and often used as synonyms in Lithuanian context (Whiteley, 2004; Rekašius, 2004) without disclosing their contents. Therefore, when theoretically substantiating the research, a certain problem of defining the concept of participation came up, especially with youth younger than 18 years, who are not full citizens in political/civic sense.

Importance of participation of citizens has already been emphasized in ancient democracy, where politics was considered to be natural social activity, and process of participation – a mandatory action of giving sense to this activity. Though contemporary literature does not give a monosemous understanding of civic participation, cumulatively it can be said that participation of citizens is certain actions aimed to influence social environment, political decisions, or as citizens' activities when pursuing certain aims. To put that differently, it seems that it makes sense in modern educational contexts to replace the concept of *civic participation* by a concept of *social participation*, by applying theoretical models of social participation (Whiteley, 2005). These were the models referred to when constructing and theoretically substantiating indicators of participation and creating instruments for the research, therefore we will briefly present:

1. Cognitive model. Youngsters choose a certain activity if they have knowledge in that area and want to broaden it. Their motive for selection of activity is cognitive, and expectations from such activity are related to development of their intellect.
2. Rational model of selection. Often, youth make decisions in advance that they will participate in such an activity from which a certain benefit can be expected. That is, she chooses by rationally thinking over everything, sometimes even smallest details.

3. Model of voluntarism. Sometimes activity is chosen when certain resources (time, competences, money, material ones, etc.) are possessed and there is desire to share them.
4. Model of social justice. Many youngsters, who have strongly expressed feelings of social justice and solidarity, choose activity in which they can take care how to better satisfy economic, social, cultural and political needs, not their own, but of friends, family members, neighbours as well.
5. Model of accumulation of social capital. For majority of youth it is very important to establish and maintain as many social contacts as possible. Therefore, they choose activity that is based on reciprocal understanding, friendliness and other shared values.

On the basis of analysis of data of international researches, an especially important conclusion was made that if youth participates in life, self-government, various organizations and associations of their institution or community, a strong possibility exists that in the future it will encourage them to become active citizens in usual civic activities as well: voting, social movements, communal activities. When constructing research model, we basically referred to the generalized and used in international researches Oktagonu model (Torney- Purta et al., 2001), according to conception of which, youth's thinking and activity in social context is regarded as the basis of their everyday life. That is, youth lives in a family, a circle of friends, discourse of discussion of civic ideas and perennial problems that takes place in the media, at school it is being influenced by contents of education related to values, aims and practices of citizenship. Therefore, personal youth's decision to strengthen personal relations (i.e., participate) with organizations of youth, community, or public, is enormously important, because it offers a possibility to non-unilaterally overview, think over and evaluate own role in social life. In the conducted research we distinguished three areas of expression of civic participation: cognitive, affective, and practical.

Research methodology

Selection and respondents

A representative survey of youth of 16-24 year old was conducted. Its results have reliability of 95 % and error is not more than 2 %. The results reflect the opinions of people of this age group. According to data of Department of Statistics, in the beginning of year 2006, 476848 people of 16 - 24 years old lived in Lithuania, of them, 315091 participate in system of education. Respondents were selected taking into consideration place of educational institution (all districts were represented), size of locality (city, centre of district/region); type of educational institution (comprehensive secondary and vocational schools, universities and colleges were represented).

1360 pupils of forms 10-12 of secondary schools (comprehensive and vocational ones) and 1135 students of higher schools (universities and colleges) participated in the research. The selection was made in a nested, random-cluster way. It means that geographical clusters were selected, 10 districts in our case, and randomly selected not

individual research objects, but their entire groups (school class, course or group of a certain speciality).

In addition, 76 experts were interviewed in all districts of Lithuania. Persons defined and selected as experts in research were those working with youth directly (organizers and heads of out-of-school work, class educators and group tutors, leaders of non-government organizations; persons who organize social activity of youth and represent interests of youth (members of Board of Lithuanian Youth Organizations, representatives of students' union, members of pupils' parliament), workers of ministries and municipalities who form and implement youth politics. Thus it can be stated that research geography includes all regions of Lithuania.

Data for research were collected using the following methods:

I. *Analysis of literature sources* helped to prepare theoretical model of research, analysis of legal documents allowed to determine constitutional possibilities of participation of citizens of Republic of Lithuania.

II. In order to collect the main data array, *questionnaires* were prepared for pupils of secondary (*comprehensive and vocational*) schools and students of higher schools (*universities and colleges*). They consisted of 27 questions. Most of questions were the same in both questionnaires (it enabled the researchers to analyze and compare most of data in entire sample). Some specific questions were different, for example, about participation in activity of political parties, about self-government institutions in education establishments, etc. Questions in questionnaire were grouped into several conditional parts: participation, motives, reasons, expectations of participation/non-participation, environment favourable/not favourable for participation, characteristics of an active citizen and conditions for his expression in Lithuania, youth and government relations.

The survey helped to determine activeness of 16-24 year old youth: motivation for participation, frequency and reasons of participation, characteristics (from youth's point of view) of an active citizen; *interview with experts* helped to determine possibilities and conditions of more active participation of youth, effectiveness of self-government of educational institutions, possibilities for cooperation between educational institutions in creating conditions for activeness of youth, etc.

III. For collection of supplemental information, *benchmarks of structured interview* consisting of 16 questions were created. They were divided into two parts: questions that help to uncover reasons of participation/non-participation of youth and directions to make participation more effective.

Expression of students' social civic activeness

When analyzing answers of respondents, three areas of expression of activeness were distinguished: 1) cognitive (being informed, identification of reasons and consequences, providing for perspectives, evaluation of conditions); 2) affective (expression of attitudes and standpoints, spread of values, self-identification); 3) practical behaviour (real participation in activity).

When analyzing knowledge and participation of pupils, with reference to models of civic participation that were described in theoretical part, we singled out some types of organizations (political, children and youth, charitable, religious). Image 1 reflects what part of respondents knows at least one non-government organization operating in area they learn (by the way, youth organizations are known best (26.2 %) and religious organizations are known worst (12.9 %). An assumption can be made not only about pupils' disinterest in organizations in area they learn, but also about activeness of these organizations and attractiveness of activity for youth.

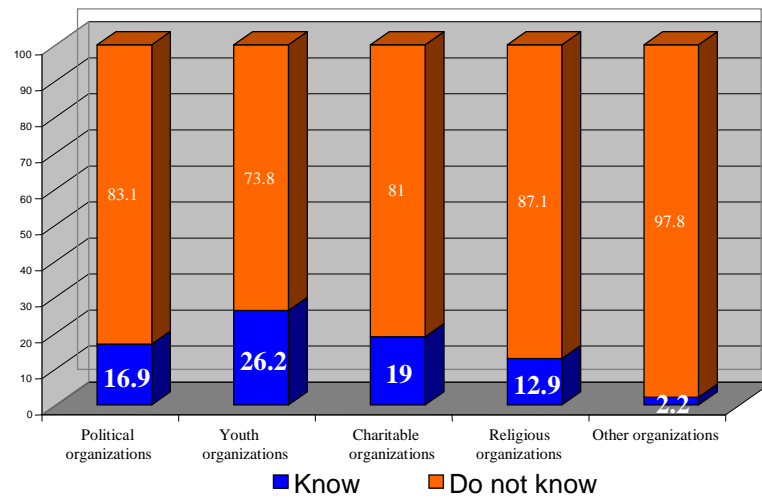


Image 1. Proportion of students who know at least one organization operating in area they learn

Furthermore, only 27 % of students participate in any activity of any non-government organization. Distributions of motivation for participation are shown in Image 2.

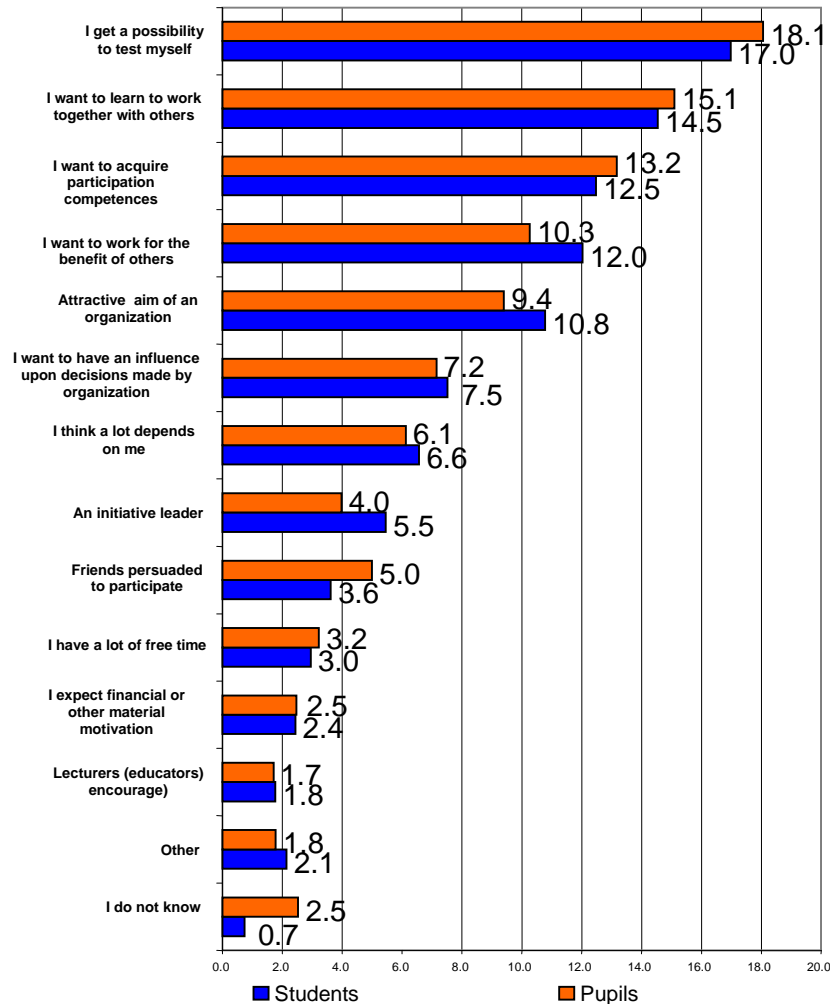


Image 2. Distribution of opinions on motivation for participation

It is interesting to note that the main students' (17 %) motive to participate is "testing themselves"; the second place (14.5%) is taken by desire to learn to work with others. This indicator also allows making an assumption that participation of respondents is oriented towards or has connection with socially-oriented models.

Meanwhile reasons for non-participation that are named as "I have no information about organizations" (13.1 % of respondents) could be related to cognitive aspect of social passiveness, i.e., to not taking interest in or not searching for information about non-government organization. This was also confirmed by data of our research, discussed above. Moreover, statistical data analysis has shown that statistically reliable dependence between students' age and their participation in activities of a political party

exists ($\chi^2 = 13.87$, $df=3$, $p<0.005$). For example, the older the student, the more often he indicated his activeness in a political party.

When determining differences between students' participation in a community activities and place they live in, a statistically reliable difference has been observed ($\chi^2=11.57$; $df=3$, $p<0.01$). Students who study in educational institutions located in the centre of a district/region participate in activities of this type most actively (14.1 %). And it stands to reason, because it is likely that community life is expressed stronger in small towns. Furthermore, statistically reliable difference between students' participation in a community activities and their study progress was observed ($\chi^2 = 11.87$, $df=3$, $p<0.01$). For example, 7.8 % of students who always pass exams in time participate in community activities; and only 1 % those who often do not pass participate in community activities. Participation in civic actions and elections are universally recognized as main forms of civic involvement. Images 5 and 6 present results of students; participation in civic actions and last elections (municipalities in 2002; Seimas (The Parliament) in 2004; President in 2004; Europarlament). When analyzing data, it is seen that proportion of participating students never exceeded 32.2 %. In the last extraordinary presidential elections in 2004, activeness of youth was the highest (62.6 %). But in Europarlament elections activeness was significantly lower (23.7 %).

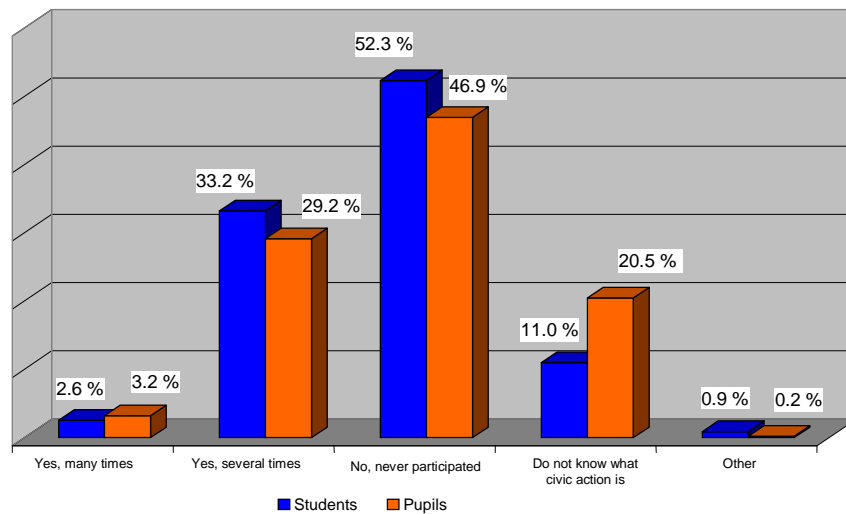


Image 3. Distribution of respondents' answers about participation in civic actions in percents

Data analysis revealed statistically reliable difference between participation in civic actions and students' opinion on that citizens are encouraged to criticize bad decisions of government ($\chi^2 = 10.05$, $df=4$, $p<0.05$). I.e., those who participated in civic actions many times believe that citizens are encouraged to criticize actions of government (48.3 %).

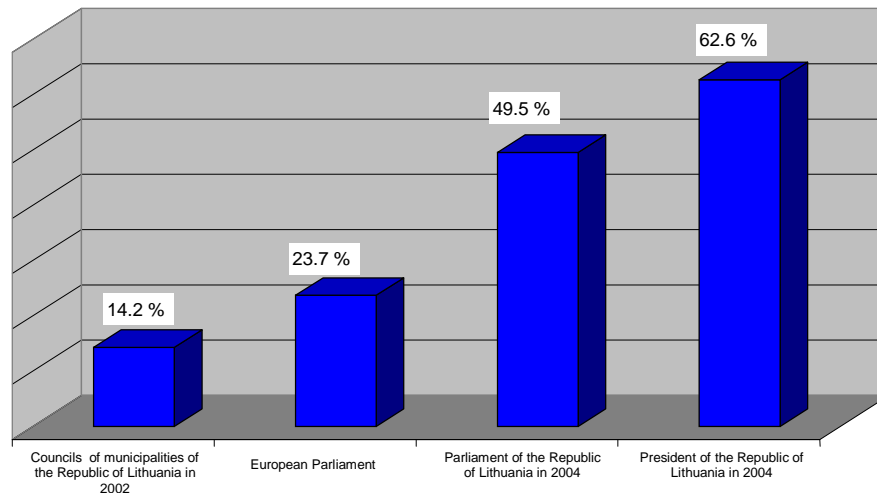


Image 4. Students' activeness in the last elections

Statistically reliable differences between students' participation in elections of Seimas (The Parliament) of the Republic of Lithuania in 2004 and type of higher school ($\chi^2 = 20.75$, $df=2$, $p<0.000$), i.e., students from universities were more active (55.7 %) than those from colleges (43 %); between students' participation in elections of Councils of municipalities of the Republic of Lithuania in 2002 and locality where educational institution was established ($\chi^2 = 9.04$, $df=3$, $p<0.05$), i.e., students from educational institutions in cities (15.1 %) were more active than those from institutions in towns (2.7 %). It is a very important indicator which shows that matters of local community are less important for students.

Additional information given by survey of experts on reasons of passiveness of youth being grouped, two main reasons can be observed:

1. Absence of civic consciousness of youth, lack of appropriate education in family and school:

“Do not care about future of Lithuania”
(one of the heads of institutions, Kaunas county).

2. Problems of an organization itself:

“No traditions exist; there is a lack of professional leaders...”
(Lecturer, Vilnius county).

In addition, experts name insufficient funding as one of the biggest problems for activeness of youth. For instance, experts' opinion on the reasons why some youth organizations are established, but later disband, is one: problem of funding. For example:

“Organizations lack funding. Writing projects takes a lot of time and not every project wins. Motivation is lost”

(teacher/lecturer, Šiauliai county);

“... because of poorness of material facilities...” (teacher/lecturer, Tauragė county);

“because of lack of funding...” (Leader of a non-government organization, Alytus county).

Conclusions

1. Research data allow us to make an assumption that students do not take sufficient interest in self-government institutions and organizations that function in their nearest environment (educational institution or place it is established in). It indicates both cognitive passiveness of participation of youth and insufficiently high level of sociability of activities of these organizations (i.e., their activities are not widely known in society).

2. It was established during representative research that about one third of (31 %) of youth of 16-24 years old participates in activities of associations (non-government organization) and self-government. Research data collected by bringing in experts helped to disclose main types of problems (or, in other words, what help the youth needs to stimulate its participation):

- problems related to personal qualities of youth (passiveness, absence of motivation, non-identification of their own interests and needs) and education (insufficient influence of education);
- problems related to youth organizations (absence of attractive forms of activity, lack of competences of leaders, and similar).
- financial problems. This problem is named most often and is slightly related to the above mentioned ones (ignorance of leaders and youth, inability to seek necessary support, and similar). This is also indicated by research data about that even 45 % of pupils and 41.6 % of students have never received necessary support and do not even know where to search for it.

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