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Representation of primary students and their families about children's rights and their participation in different social contexts

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Abstract

The main objectives of this study are to analyze children's and adolescents' knowledge of their rights, and also of their families, with particular emphasis on participation rights. In all educational levels, there were two groups of students: those who had experience receiving specific training in children rights and taking active part in participatory structures and those who were not receiving any specific training.

For this purpose, a questionnaire was applied to a sample of 314 students, from 3rd grade of primary education to 2th grade of secondary education, and 73 parents. Half of the participants (parents and children) were part of participation structures promoted by the city council in different Spanish cities: Seville, Alcobendas, Leganés and Rivas Vaciamadrid. In this paper we focus only on the study of the families. Results indicate that although there are no major differences in the concepts of childhood, children's participation and rights, we can find differences, some significant, in areas such as decision-making in the home, or capabilities that they pose to children of different ages.

Keywords: *participation, children's rights, citizenship.*

Introduction

The Convention of the Rights of Children (CRC) recognizes the child not only as object of protection and assistance measures but as subject that has his or her own rights, as subject of his/her own life and development, and as such, being capable to take her own decision making on those issues that concerns her. According to this complex concept of what it means being a girl or boy, there have been established special rights groups, which are generally called rights of protection, provision and participation. We must remember that the CRC in Article 1 provides that a person is a boy or girl from birth until he or she reached adulthood. However, despite the significant advance that has led to the adoption of the CRC, which highlights the importance of children's rights, and even bearing in mind that they are all equally important and essential to adequately address the needs of children, the fact is that, at the social level, both the protection and provision rights have a higher social support than participation rights.

This fact is closely related to their concept of childhood. In general, we see children, not as citizens with full rights, but as citizens for the future, even sometimes denying their status as a social group (Smith, 2007; Lansdown 2005, Lundy 2007) with their own ideas

and concerns. In parallel, we must be aware that if we consider children and youth are not ready yet to act as citizens, we will behave in a manner consistent with these ideas, leaving them apart in the decision-making processes, and thus preventing the exercise of their rights and responsibilities to participate in family, social, school, etc.

Thus, both the representation we have of children, as well as the capabilities attributed to them, along with the ideas that underlie on children's participation, will determine, in a clear and concise way which spaces and times, as families, we offer to our sons and daughters to exercise their right to citizenship.

Objectives

Regarding families, our objectives are: 1) To analyze and study the knowledge that families have regarding the concept of children and their rights, 2) analyze whether there are differences between the conceptions of families whose children are part of participatory structures, and those whose children are not part of these structures on issues such as childhood, rights and participation. And also we want to know how much influence have the active participation of families in associations, NGOs, etc. 3) To know their perception about the level of application, implementation and enforcement of these rights, especially those related to children participation in three different areas: family, school and municipality.

Hypothesis

Regarding families, we expect to find that those families who have their sons/daughters in participatory structures will have a concept of childhood that is closer of the vision that considers children as citizens having their own rights, and will also have a better knowledge of their rights.

We also believe that these families not only will know better children rights, but will be more conducive to facilitating the participation of their sons/daughters in different social areas (school, family and municipality), and thus having a more positive view of participation in childhood.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were 74 parents of children in the city of Rivas Vaciamadrid. Half of them had children that were taking part in child/youth participating structures. 55 participants were women, while the remaining 18 were men. The 55% of them have university studies. The average age of mothers and fathers was 43 years old.

The questionnaires were given to both families who had their children in urban camps and families with their children belonging to participation structure of the municipality (Children's Forum). Along with the questionnaire, a letter was handed in which it was explained the study's objectives. The questionnaire was designed by two experts, one on education for citizenship and social development the other one in children participation. The questionnaire consisted of 12 common questions and was organized into different blocks focused on the following aspects:

- * Parents' conception of childhood as well as their skills and capabilities
- * Their knowledge of children's rights
- * Their conceptions they had about the participation of children and adolescents in different scenarios (school, family, community)

Results

Concepts about Childhood

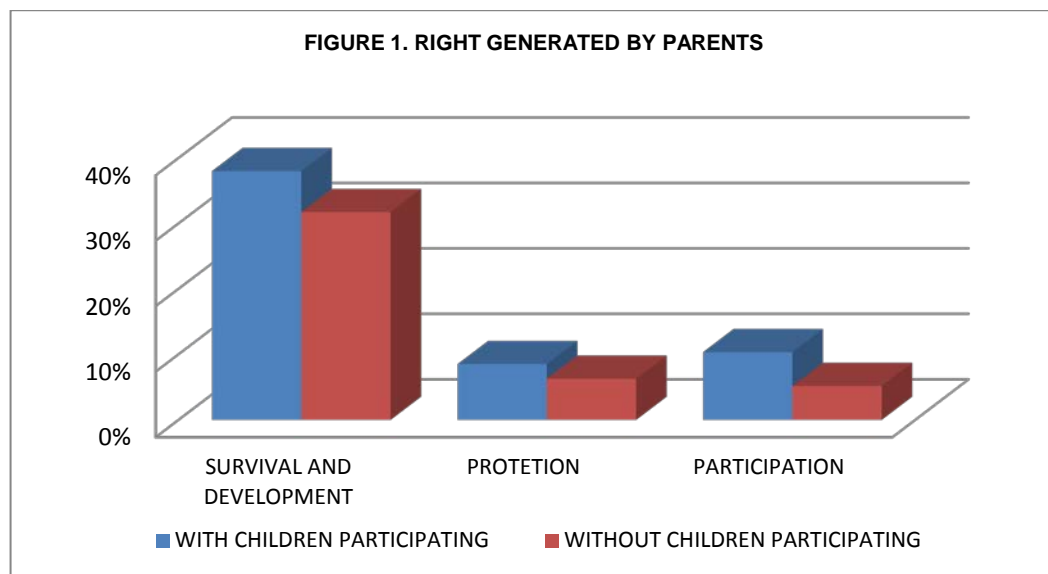
There are no significant differences in both groups with respect their representation of childhood (question 1). In this case, all families, including those families with children in participation structures and those that do not have children in participation structures share the same vision of childhood that described children as incapable, being as future citizens, unprotected, and that can be manipulated by other people. Curiously, also most of them think children are progressively developing as citizens acquiring skills and decision making skills.

With respect specific skills attributed to children of different ages (question 7), significant differences were between the two groups of parents. In this case, families with children in organs of participation, understand that children are prepared to do certain activities before the families without children in participatory bodies, on issues such as: b) Being part of the school board and decision and vote ($X^2(1) = 7,663$, $p = 0.006$), d) Meet with friends to bring the council proposals or complaints about aspects that can be improved or changed ($X^2(2) = 9.988$, $p = 0.007$), g) Having or creating a newspaper, radio or in the college website to enable them to express and disseminate their own ideas with those of their partner ($X^2(3) = 8,420$, $p = 0.03$), j) to elect municipal representatives ($X^2(2) = 7.386$, $p = 0.025$), m) Perform the necessary to ask the council to put lights on a sports field without the help of adults ($X^2(2) = 6.403$, $p = 0.041$), q) belong to a sports club, cultural or freely chosen leisure ($X^2(2) = 7.737$, $p = 0.02$),.

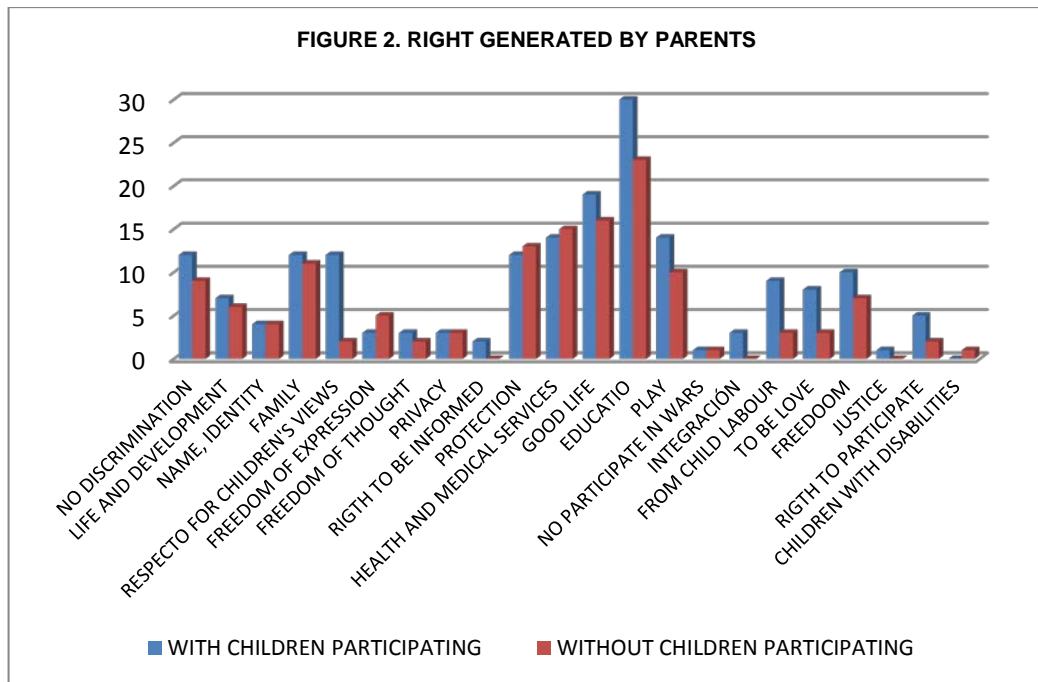
It is also noteworthy that, although there are no significant differences on issues like choosing the vacation spot, choosing extracurricular activities, putting the house rules by consensus, choosing the delegate class, choosing the school or college to go or assisting in the chores, those families with children with experience in participation consider children as having those skills at an earlier age that families whose children were not in participatory bodies.

Parents' Knowledge on the Rights of the Child

Both families with children in participatory bodies as families whose children are not in participatory bodies, named the same kind of rights (see Figure 1).



If we analyze the rights listed, we can see that there are significant differences only in the right to freedom of opinion ($\chi^2 (1) = 8.504, p = 0.047$), but it can be observed that most of the rights are mentioned by those families with children with experience of participation than those who do not have it (see Figure 2).



As for the ideas that parents have about participation in childhood (their desirability, necessity, possibilities offered by adults, etc.) there are no significant differences in both groups.

In contrast, there are differences when asked about the effects of participation in children (Question 8). Within this question, there were claims that included both positive and negative aspects of participation in early childhood. Some of the negative effects, in which significant differences were found, have been appointed by families without children in structures of participation. These were: g) to assume responsibilities for which they (children) are not yet ready, and you should not assume ($X^2(3) = 9.405$, $p = 0.024$), and h) are liable to lose sight that adults are really the most competent to make decisions that affect them in children lives (family, school ...) ($X^2(3) = 8.018$, $p = 0.046$). By contrast, with respect those issues that relate to positive effects of participation, we can find significant differences with families that have children in participation structures: a) develop better self-esteem and increased self-confidence ($X^2(1) = 6.914$, $p = 0.009$), c) Further develop communication skills and conflict resolution dialog ($X^2(1) = 4.377$, $p = 0.036$), d) Be more supportive and having more developed democratic values ($X^2(2) = 7.172$, $p = 0.028$); i) Learn to take into consideration, respect and contrast different points of view ($X^2(1) = 7.951$, $p = 0.005$).

Regarding the real opportunities for participation at home (question 9), there were found significant differences in: e) choose the vacation spot ($X^2(2) = 6.572$, $p = 0.037$), and l) using social networks ($X^2(3) = 10.947$, $p = 0.012$).

Again, here we can also see, by grouping the questions by category, that decision-making in all aspects is more valued by parents/mothers and children, and even by their own sons/daughters in families with children participating in those that do not have experience in participation (see Table 1).

Table 1: At home, with regard to your son/daughter who decides the following issues...?

LEISURE	Parents	Son/daughter	Parents and Son/Daughter	Not Answered
PARTICIPACIÓN	30%	8%	57%	4%
NO PARTICIPACIÓN	40%	7%	46%	7%
EDUCATION	Parents	Son/daughter	Parents and Son/Daughter	Not Answered
PARTICIPACIÓN	47%	14%	39%	0%
NO PARTICIPACIÓN	54%	11%	29%	6%
FAMILY	Parents	Son/daughter	Parents and Son/Daughter	Not Answered
PARTICIPACIÓN	40%	7%	52%	1%
NO PARTICIPACIÓN	58%	4%	34%	4%

Conclusions

Regarding the representation of childhood, we can observe, as pointed out by many authors (Ferran Casas, 2010; Flail, 2000, Morrow, 1999, Smith, 2007) that currently coexist different social representations of children, some of them contradictory, but that in general tend to view children as people "not yet" prepared to be citizens, as "victims or dangerous", or as being "influenced", etc..

Inevitably, these representations define how we interact with children. But not only that, but, based on our interpretation of the reality of what is happening, we will establish a way to face reality and will raise solutions based on these representations. That is, not only we are socially representing childhood (and with them their skills and capacities), but also we are interpreting and representing what children do, and can do, which are their problems, and this is what will determine the way we build relationships with them and propose solutions to their problems.

But as we have seen, despite there is broad agreement on the concept of childhood, this not occurs with the capabilities attributed by parents, if we take into account that those

families with children in participatory structures see their sons and daughters more prepared at younger ages for certain issues, activities and decision-making than those families without children in participatory structures.

Regarding parents' knowledge of children's Rights, although there are almost no significant differences in the number of rights listed by the two groups, we can see that those families with sons and daughters in participatory structures named more rights than the other families. Here again, we see that these results agree with those of other authors who also note that the most frequently mentioned rights by families are those related with survival and development rights (provision rights) (Peterson-Badali et al, 2004; Ruck , Peterson-Badali, & Day, 2002)

Regarding the concept of participation, it is clear that those families that have children in participation structures tend to have a more positive view with respect the fact that children participate in diverse activities and decision-making, and in their effects caused by this participation experiences in children's lives. Also, it can be observed that these families not only have a more positive view, but are slightly more likely to facilitate decision-making in the family.

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