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## **Participation as the neuralgic point of children's rights and subjectification as an important goal of education**

### **Abstract:**

The biggest problem of understanding the positive role of children's participation in terms of psychology is that we presuppose an adult mediator to decide where, when and how a child should participate in educational activity. The best example of this kind of view is the psychological view on education as 'developmentally appropriate practice'. We can call this model 'participation with adult mediator'. But in terms of a democratic political view on participation as one of children's basic rights, this model should be recognized as improper understanding. 'Participation with adult mediator' is just another form of governmentality, since proper participation begins when we recognize a child as intelligent being capable of speaking and decision making on his own, and according to subjectification function of education we prepare him a space and encourage him for such an active role in educational setting and wider society. In the end of this article I will present my idea on subjectification of a child through one example of education through artistic experience as an inductive practice.

**Key words:** children's rights, participation, subjectification, education through artistic experience, inductive educational approach

## Introduction

*Convention on the rights of the children* is built on the concept of three clusters of children's needs: for protection, provision and participation (Crimers 2003, Lee 2009). The accomplishment of the central goal of education in the spirit of children's rights, that is "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society" (Convention... 1989, article 29, 1 d), is strongly connected with searching for the balance between the protection and participation, and provision of stimulative educational environment for "the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (ibid., article 29, 1 a). According to my opinion, rights to full participation of the child in "in all matters affecting the child" (ibid., article 12) are the most important part of the convention for her/his optimal development and living. They are based on the recognition of the child as capable, "rich being" who needs to be protected from paternalistic oppression of children's freedom and liberal incentive to the child for making free choices without the support of traditional 'social stabilizers' (family, friends, school, church) (Kroflič 2012).

But to find a balance between the child's free choices and our protection, the biggest problem in terms of psychology is that we presuppose an adult mediator to decide where, when and how a child should participate in educational activity. The best example of this kind of view is the psychological view on education as 'developmentally appropriate practice' (Bredekamp 1996). We can call this model 'participation with adult mediator' (Rutar 2013). But in terms of democratic political view on participation as one of children's basic rights this model should be recognized as a form of improper participation or even non-participation (Hart 1992). 'Participation with adult mediator' is just another form of governmentality (Foucault 1991), since proper participation begins when we recognize a child as intelligent being capable of speaking and decision making on his own (Ranciere 1991) and according to subjectification function of education (Biesta 2014) we prepare him a space and encourage him for such an active role in educational setting add wider society.

In this article I would like to oppose psychological views on the child's well-being that are strongly connected with notion on the importance of security and adult's governance, with the concept of subjectification that arouse from the political philosophy and post-structuralist critique of forms of political oppression. Ranciere's provoking thesis of the child as equally intelligent being as his teacher and concept of political subjectification was upgraded by Biesta's idea on subjectification as one of three main educational goals (the two other are qualification and socialization). Since subjectification focuses on the child's stepping into the world as the subject of her/his decisions, I will show that especially in education through artistic experience there are plenty of possibilities to achieve this subjectification goal of education.

## How to define real participation in education?

After affirmation of the *Convention on the rights of the children* there were plenty of theorists who have tried to define children's right to participation, especially in the educational setting. Hart (1992, p. 8) proposed an eight-level ladder of participation, which consists from three levels of non-participation (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) and five degrees of real participation. According to Hart, the main criteria of participative educational practice, is: who propose and lead children's activities. Children should at least know the goals of activities and adults should consult the children about their activities, but the ultimate goal of participative practice is the situation, in which activities are led by the children, and adults and children are equal partners in decision-making

(ibid.). Similar classification of the levels of real participation can be found in the works of Shier and Lansdown (Kodele and Lesar 2015, p. 47).

Since the whole twentieth century was recognized as “the century of the child” by the anthropologist E. Key (1909), it is interesting to follow ideas, how the child was slowly recognized as a capable, “rich being”, who can be an empowered partner in all elements of educational projects. At the beginning of this process, the child was recognized as “the child in need” (Moss, Dillon and Statham 2000) and it was the role of adults to plan educational activities with children’s best interests in mind, but it was normally that adults have defined what these best interests of the child were (Bredekamp 1996). S. Rutar (2013) calls this model “participation with an agent” and according to Hart’s criteria it can be described as the model of improper participation or even non-participation.

It was Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia who finished with the discourse of “child in need” by the following ideas:

“Our image of children no longer considers them as isolated and egocentric, does not see them only engaged in action with objects, does not emphasize only the cognitive aspects, does not belittle feelings or what is not logical and does not consider with ambiguity the role of the affective domain. Instead our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children.” (Malaguzzi 1993, p.10)

This shift in recognition of the child has led the research of new concepts of education where a competent child will get more opportunities for full participation in educational activities. Since we saw that Malaguzzi described the child as a capable, intelligent being who is from the beginning of his development searching for meaning (Rinaldi 2006), in the following lines I would like to describe a genesis of pedagogical concept of subjectification which Ranciere and Biesta described from the same starting point as Malaguzzi – from the image of the child as equally intelligent being as an adult person.

### **Subjectification as an ultimate goal of education**

In his famous work on the ignorant schoolmaster Ranciere (1991) proposed an axiom on equal intelligences of a teacher and student as a starting point of emancipatory pedagogy and education:

Since “...the axiom of inequality is an axiom that underwrites inequalities operating on a societal scale ...the distinction between ‘stultification’ and ‘emancipation’ is not a distinction between methods of instruction... The axiom of equality of intelligences ... simply affirms that there is only one sort of intelligence at work in all intellectual training. It is always a matter of relating what one ignores to what one knows; a matter of observing and comparing, of speaking and verifying. The student is always a seeker. And, the teacher is first of all a person who speaks to another, who tells stories and returns the authority of knowledge to the poetic condition of all spoken interaction. The philosophical distinction thus understood is, at the same time, a political distinction... It concerns the very conception of the relation between equality and inequality.” (Ranciere 2010, p. 6)

According to Ranciere (1991, pp. 6-7), it was the basic myth of oppressive pedagogy which announced a child/student to be incapable of independent learning, so we adults could empower

her/him for emancipation. “Oppressive pedagogy” is just an echo of societal politics of inequality that can be exceeded by a different view on a learner and educative role of a teacher. We should recognize a learner as a (capable) “seeker, who always observe, compare, speaks and verify” (Ranciere 2010, p. 6), and a teacher who “speaks to another, tells stories” and “prepares the poetic condition on spoken interactions” (ibid.).

According to Ranciere, the presupposed axiom on equal intelligences of a teacher and a student does not mean that we should live the children alone to experiment and learn without the help of adults. The “new teacher” has to be emancipated first: “To emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and one need only be, emancipated oneself, that is to say, conscious of the true power of the human mind. The ignorant person will learn by himself what the master doesn’t know if the master believes he can and obliges him to realize his capacity...” (Ranciere 1991, p. 15) This opening request demands from teachers to find a new active role in the educational relationship. First of all, the teacher should not be a “master explicator” (Ranciere 1991, p. 6), since “to explain something to one who is ignorant is, first and foremost, to explain that which would not be understood if it were not explained. It is to demonstrate an incapacity.» (Biesta, Bingham and Ranciere 2010, p. 3) And second, the emancipatory teacher “...forbids the supposed ignorant one the satisfaction of what is known, the satisfaction of admitting that one is incapable of knowing more. Such a teacher forces the student to prove his or her capacity, to continue the intellectual journey the same way it began. This logic, operating under the presupposition of equality and requiring its verification, this logic deserves the name ‘intellectual emancipation’.» (Ibid., p. 6)

Although the new emancipatory education, built on the axiom of an intelligent child, is primarily not a question of methods of instruction but a political request for “preparing the poetic condition on spoken interactions” (ibid., p. 6), it is obvious that it demands such activities that emphasize full bodily and intellectual participation of children and teacher who listen to children and motivate them for the inquiry of the world: “He *interrogates*, he demands speech, that is to say, the manifestation of an intelligence that wasn’t aware of itself or that had given up. And he *verifies* that the work of the intelligence is done with attention, that the words don’t say just anything in order to escape from the constraint.» (Ranciere 1991, p. 29)

The second important idea of Ranciere is his emphasis on subjectification as an ultimate goal of emancipated person. Subjectification is the process that ensures person’s emancipation by her/his full engagement/participation in mental and/or physical activities that ensure new knowledge and/or experiences of the learner. It is a process leaded by the will of a teacher, who supports a learner’s experimentation and intellectual activities to “reconfigure the field of previous experiences” (Biesta, Bingham and Ranciere 2010, p. 33).

It was G. Biesta who later specified subjectification as an important set of educational goals which define emancipated education. If classical education leads primarily to the goals of socialization and qualification, it is new education which should add to this list of goals an emphasis on subjectification. If the domain of qualification “...has to do with the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions” and the domain of socialization “with the ways in which, through education, we become part of existing traditions and ways of doing and being”, it is subjectification, which has

to do “with the interest of education in the subjectivity or ‘subject-ness’ of those we educate. It has to do with the emancipation and freedom...” (Biesta 2013, p. 4).

But according to the same author, we have to be aware that freedom is not something that can be educationally produced; it can only be politically achieved (Biesta 2010). Subjectification is therefore not something we adults have to teach the child, but is the ability of the child to produce new meanings, experiences and knowledge, and adults have to assure her/him an opportunity to do this. “Preparing the poetic condition on spoken interactions” (Biesta, Bingham and Ranciere 2010, p. 6) practically means to prepare an educational situation where the child is motivated for independent, autonomous learning and inquiry of reality together with her/his teacher. If we compare this pedagogical idea with the ideas on children’s rights, it is the obligation of the adult person that assures to every child the possibilities for a real participation in producing new knowledge and experiences which are not in a function of reproduction of societal values, norms and routines. Although goals of socialization and qualification are a legitimate part of public education, they should not be the only goals, when we take the idea on emancipatory education seriously.

The last warning that Ranciere and Biesta for a better understanding of emancipative character of subjectification is that independent bodily or intellectual acting of a subject always means a rupture to existing societal order (ibid., p. 33), a kind of dissensus with the existing police order of societal expectations. To be subjected (emancipated) in a society or in a social institution like school which always demonstrates a certain level of subordination, it necessary means a disagreement with the existing order and searching for a new meaning. This is the point where the domain of subjectification goals of education exceeds identification of the learner with existing order of values, norms (socialization), truths and skills (qualification). And since we have already emphasized that socialization and qualification are two legitimate domains of educational goals, and a public school is a part of societal order of institutions, the demand for subjectification of children in public school needs to be concretized as an example of full participative form of learning.

### **Subjectification goals of education through artistic experience**

To concretize an example of full participative form of learning, it means to find an example of educational activity where a teacher is preparing the condition for it. If Ranciere illustrated this kind of teaching by an odd example of Jacotot who has taught his pupils a foreign language that he didn’t know by using a bilingual book and motivating students for independent learning (Ranciere 1991), what could not happen in a contemporary school setting, in his interesting book *The Emancipated Spectator* (Ranciere 2009) he has illustrated the meaning of subjectification by an example of artistic event. And because Malaguzzi proved that artistic languages are one of the best tools for children’s participative learning (Vechii 2010) I will try to show why the specific form of the artistic event is one of the best poetic conditions for autonomous learning.

When Ranciere compares a theatre experience with an educational situation, he writes:

“Emancipation begins when we ... understand that viewing is also an action... The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kind of places. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in

the performance by refashioning it in her own way – by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented... This is the crucial point: spectators see, feel and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers... Performance ... is not the transmission of the artist's knowledge or inspiration to the spectator. It is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any form of transmission, any identity of cause and effect." (Ranciere 2009, p. 13-15)

If artists therefore want to emancipate spectators, this task is not connected with the transmission of their knowledge, but with their ability to invite spectators in the role of "...active interpreters, who develop their own translation in order to appropriate the 'story' and make their own story. An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators." (Ibid., p. 22) And what is the basic political activity of this community of narrators and listeners? According to Ranciere, it is breaking of police order, "...when those who were destined to remain in the domestic and invisible territory of work and reproduction, and prevented from doing 'anything else', take the time that they 'have not' in order to affirm that they belong to a common world. It begins when they make the invisible visible, and make what was deemed to be the mere noise of suffering bodies heard as a discourse concerning the 'common' of the community." (Ranciere 2010, p. 139) But this commonsense, connected with our ideal of emancipated subjectification, creates a new form – a form of dissensus (ibid.), which can be interpreted as a free imagination of societal meanings, created by narrators and listeners/translators, and embodied in the artistic event.

There is a lot of arguments why education through artistic experience can be such a noble tool of participative education and therefore subjectification. First of all, artistic experience is in it's basic form a relational phenomenon and therefore a communicative process (McCarthy and others 2004, p. 40), what simply means that anyone who is engaged in the experience of art – to be a creator, or co-creator (musician playing a piece of music that was written by another artist) of artistic expression, or just a person enjoying the piece of art, is active in a process of meaning-making. That is why R. Kearney (2002) in his work *On Stories* writes:

"I think that stories make possible the ethical sharing of a common world with others in that they are invariably a mode of *discourse*. Every act of storytelling involves someone (a teller) telling something (a story) to someone (a listener) about something (a real or imaginary world). Different approaches to narrative emphasize one or other of these roles, sometimes to the point of exclusivity... So that when we engage with a story we are simultaneously aware of a narrator (telling the story), narrated characters (acting in the story) and a narrative interpreter (receiving the story and relating it back to a life-world of action and suffering). Without this interplay of agency I believe that we would no longer possess that sense of narrative *identity* which provides us with a particular experience of *selfhood* indispensable to any kind of moral responsibility." (Ibid., p. 150-151)

Using narrative language of art, creative capacity of mimesis, artistic imagination that leads to compassionate imagination with a suffering of fellow person and even cathartic release of internalized unresolvable conflicts are qualities of art that can be hardly replaced by any other

educational setting or activity (Kroflič 2011). Beside these arguments, we can emphasize the inductive character of meaning-making process typical for artistic languages that is the best entrance for the child to produce meaning from her/his educational experiences (ibid.), which ensures an educational space for participative learning.

### **Participation as emancipation**

Interpreting Ranciere and Biesta's ideas on subjectification as a form of emancipation we saw that a real participation of a child in all elements of educational activity (in choosing the goals, content, methods of the activity and being an active creator in the activity of meaning making) is the ultimate condition of emancipation. Emancipation and subjectification is not something we can learn from the teacher explication, as Freire and other representatives of critical pedagogy proposed by a concept of empowerment (see critics of the concept of empowerment in Elsworth 1989). It is the ultimate condition of the educational process. And if we hardly presuppose such an emancipated form of learning in the classic school setting, it is the model of learning through artistic experiences which enables such an active role of the child, to be an emancipated spectator/listener (Ranciere 2009) or (co)creator of art or a story (Kearney 2002). The peculiarity of many contemporary arts like performance, street art etc. is that they erase classic clear distinction between the spectator/listener and creator. This feature of contemporary art can be of great importance for education that leads to subjectification and emancipation of children.

I would like to conclude this article by a description of an example of such a subjectificative educational work in a kindergarten Vodmat, Ljubljana, Slovenija, using street art (graffiti) as an artistic media.

In the project on *Street art* children in kindergarten Vodmat were informed about different artistic approaches of urban artists and possibilities, how to express engaged statements in the public space. Children were motivated to select the topics of their creations by themselves and Slovenian graffiti artist Miha Artnak has shown them different artistic techniques and teach them to recognize the difference between socially engaged artistic graffiti and vandalism. When children have created the first graffiti at the kindergarten playground, one group of them, which was not satisfied with their art work, proposed to express their statements about the balance between urban and natural environment with the "real graffiti" in the city. Their idea was to paint "virtual gardens" in the most urban environments. Project leaders liked their proposal and enabled them to make three very beautiful graffiti at the edge of the city squat, called Metelkova mesto (see the graffiti works in Kroflič 2013, pp. 50-51).

Because one of the graffiti was made on the facade of the house (that was already damaged by vandalistic graffiti), someone called authorities and announced "illegal activity" of children. The authorities have ordered to remove a graffiti, but the responses from critical and also professional public were extremely positive: highly artistic advanced and social engaged activity of children was unfortunately recognized as vandalism! The story had a happy end: kindergarten Vodmat later achieved the highest national prize for special achievements on the field of pre-school education.

It was once again obvious that even though we usually support general idea on the importance of children's participation, when it happens in the real societal (public) space, we have big problems to identify with it in a positive way.

Graffiti work of children was enabled because children were recognized as intelligent, capable beings and because their ontological engagement (to announce to the public in what environment they want to live; see Matusov 2009) was respected. In this activity they achieved a position of subjects which is the ultimate goal of subjectification and emancipation.

Since Hart (1992) proposed questions who is proposing and who is leading children's activities as the main criteria of participative education, we can conclude that learning in the *Street art project* can be recognized as learning at the highest level of participation.



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