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## What to Change – How to Have Influence? Children’s Ideas About Exercising Power and Participating

Interest in children’s voice in society has been increasing gradually. This implies both the creation of new channels for participation, and also in the intensification of the research on children’s citizenship. This article asks what ideas twelve-year-old children have about using power and about their own opportunities of having influence in their schools. The study is based on qualitative questionnaires, in which the respondents were asked questions about how they would use power to make improvements in different spheres, starting from their classroom and ending up to the world. The questionnaire also asked about their experience of agency in schools. According to the responses, the children’s suggestions for changes were focused on the physical environment. As to their class and school, it was the informal level of the school that was important. In the global level, the children wished that the world would be safe. As to their agency in school, they mainly depended on adults who organize students’ participation.

### Keywords:

Children’s agency; children’s concerns, children’s citizenship, citizenship education

### 1 Introduction

Childhood has traditionally had a label of an apolitical or non-political part of human life, and children have been quite invisible and passive in society and politics. Their opinions or their knowledge have not been recognized, neither has society offered them many real opportunities for participation. Large-scale studies on adolescents’ knowledge, skills, attitudes and participation have been focusing on the age groups of 14 years and older (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr & Losito, 2010), but there is not much research on what children younger than that think or know about politics and society, nor about their political agency, although research of childhood has increased during the recent few decades. Childhood is not an isolated category, but children are observing the same social reality as adults, although their opinions have, to a great degree, been neglected as naive and inadequate. They are, however, as much a part of society as adults, and as Näsman and von Gerber (2002, p. 8) express it, “children’s accounts are a necessary part of our knowledge of society” (cf. McAuley, Morgan & Rose, 2010, p. 39; Cockburn, 2013, p. 3). Children are living in the middle of the same societal and political processes as adults, and much of the “political background noise” (Moss, 2013) in society is filtered also to them, often including strong emotional aspects, such as fear, sorrow and empathy, and therefore they can also have concerns about their society and their futures.

In Finland, the question about children and society is topical, because the new national core curriculum for the compulsory education that will be implemented in

schools from 2016 on will emphasize children’s participation and skills needed for citizenship. Also the status of social studies is strengthened as it will become a subject for lower grades 4 through 6. This will create more opportunities for discussion of society with children, compared to the National Core Curriculum 2004 and preceding years, according to which civic education normally has not been taught until grade nine, for 15-year-old students. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014.) However, questions of citizenship, society and participation are not only confined to specific subject studies but they are also a concern for the whole school curriculum, and embedded in the cultures in schools, and the way of living in the schools.

The purpose of this study is to examine children’s ideas of the exercising of power: they had to think what they would do to make improvements, if they had a great deal of power. Another purpose of the study dealt with their possibilities of participating in decision-making at the school. The question that was posed to them involved discussing what improvements they would do in different contexts, starting from their closest surroundings and broadening to the global level. The answers about the changes children would do, if they had power, are also indications about what they experience as problems in their surroundings, in society or in a broader context, at the micro and macro levels.

### 2 Key concepts

‘Power’ is a debated and multi-faceted concept. In short, it can be defined as a person’s or group’s capacity to have influence on the actions of others, and make them act in a way that is desired. For instance Oppenheim (1981, p. 10–11) makes a distinction between the ideas of exercising power and having power. In our study, we had both aspects: the participants were posed a question “If you had a great deal of power how would you use it?” In this study, we were not interested in children’s definitions of the word ‘power’, but more about how they understand the concept ‘power’ in the process of changing or improving conditions. Here, the idea of power refers mainly to social or political power, not power as force or coercion, nor the individual’s ability or economic resources. Focus is here on the object of power; object that should be improved, not on the

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channels or methods of using power.

Another key term in the study is 'participation'. It is a concept that is, in general, broadly discussed also in childhood studies. Participation can be understood as involvement in a process of having influence – using power. According to Percy-Smith (2012, p. 19) participation is "about the exercise of power to act in relation to the roles and values of others". According to him, children's agency, as a matter of fact, is related to negotiation of power in relation with adults. This sense of power refers to a relationship of interaction.

Children's participation can be seen very broadly, not only in terms of traditional politics, but instead, how it is expressed in everyday life, and how children have observed and experienced it. It is, thus, related to children's agency in everyday life and the political processes and power relations that are relevant for them (Kallio & Häkli, 2011; cf. Baraldi & Iervese, 2012). It is also situated in a social context. In our study, children's participation is asked in the question in reference to their school context.

### 3 Children as citizens

In many societies there are signs of an increasing interest in children's role as citizens. This is mainly due to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that emphasizes that children should be heard in issues concerning them, as present and not only as future citizens (Sinclair, 2004; Invernizzi & Williams, 2008, 2–3; Salo, 2010, 420; Kallio & Häkli, 2011). This interest has been expressed, during the past few years, both in academic research and in the efforts to create more opportunities for children's participation (cf. Baraldi, 2012; Cockburn, 2013). Children's roles in society and politics have been studied in a number of fields, such as sociology, political science, education and geography. In many countries, there have been national projects, which aim at enhancing children's and adolescents' engagement in politics and skills of participation. However, these pursuits and projects are as a rule designed from the adults' point of view, controlled by them and also modelling adults' modes of participation, which children are expected to follow (Lewis, 2010; Percy-Smith, 2012; Fleming, 2013). Their relation to society has been considered from the adults' perspective, framed with adults' terminology, and mediated, regulated and controlled by adults (Wyness, 2009; Salo, 2010; Baraldi & Iervese, 2012). Thus, the purpose can be that of socializing children to the existing models of participation. The focus is also generally more on children's role as future citizens, than in their existing situation and concerns as citizens, which was underlined in the UNCRC (Weller, 2007; Wyness, 2009). This way of thinking is also partly based on developmental psychology, underlining that their competence is developing, not finished.

Wood (2010) characterizes children's position in society, and also in school, with the expression liminality: they are in a kind of liminal space, as citizens without full rights of participation, but at the same time being and

becoming citizens (cf. Verhellen, 2000; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Weller, 2007; Biesta, Lawy & Kelly, 2009). Although the interest in children's roles as citizens has arisen gradually, this strand of research is still rather thin. One can also ask why children's voices are not heard more often in society. One justification for the view of a passive child is the purpose to protect children from the risks in society, and therefore focus has more often been on how they should be controlled. Children are seen more as objects than subjects; their role is not active, and they are lacking political power (James, Curtis & Birch, 2008). Furthermore, the new channels of participation are often available to a small minority of children, those who are most active and enthusiastic. What is seen to be more challenging, is to engage all children, and therefore the emphasis has turned more and more on the spheres of life in which children normally interact and meet in everyday life and to situations that children themselves see as meaningful (Sinclair, 2004; Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Percy-Smith 2012, 12–14).

What also is crucial is how the concepts of politics and participation are defined. Children's political engagement has been underestimated, because it is often defined from a narrow perspective of formal social and political participation, and if the emphasis is there, children can be seen as politically apathetic, disinterested and ignorant (Weller, 2007, 30–31; Moss, 2013).

### 4 Learning about society and participation

One reason, why children's opinions of society are often ignored as being underdeveloped, can be their lack of exact terminology. They can, nevertheless, have an understanding of society long before they have acquired abstract concepts or political terminology, and before they are able to express their opinions with abstract terminology. For instance, Cullingford (1992) approached in his study children's understanding of politics in their own sphere of life, without using for instance the actual word politics, and according to his findings children had actually a rather multifaceted understanding of political questions.

There are several studies on children's conceptual understanding with reference to economy and politics, such as power, state, economy and political institutions. These studies indicate that there are vast individual differences as to the level of understanding (Berti, 2002; Furnham, 2002). However, there are also great differences between adults, and not nearly all adults have developed a solid knowledge basis or deep level conceptual understanding of abstract concepts (Elo & Rapeli, 2008; Rapeli, 2010). So, children are not alone with their fragmentary, often naive concepts.

Vygotsky (1978) understands children's interpretations of society as social constructs, largely dependent on adults' constructs of the world. Children's understanding of society can partly be based on what they learn or hear from adults or media (Cullingford, 1992, 2; Näsman & von Gerber, 2002, p. 7; Gill & Howard, 2009, p. 8–9). However, it cannot be taken for granted that children adopt their ideas about society, as such, from, for

instance, school or adults around them, although this mediation is inevitably significant. Children start constructing their opinions and frameworks for understanding society from very early years, in their closest contexts, including families, kindergartens, playground, and schools, and they are also influenced by the media. They make observations, for instance, about hierarchies and power relations, about the importance of cooperation, and about different roles in society. There are also indications that children at an early age can have coherent theories that they believe in very consistently. Their perspectives become gradually broader. Children are “enmeshed in power relations of various kinds and with various different power agents right from the beginning – their experience of power is direct and lived” (Gill & Howard, 2009, p. 28). Their learning is not only formal but also informal, and they try to understand their experiences. According to this view, children are active in their learning about society, and only children themselves can speak about their experiences, also those experiences related to the society.

As to the formal learning about society, the key area is citizenship education, or civic education. Its status can be highly different across countries. There has been during the recent few years, much discussion about the purpose and orientation of citizenship education. One criticism has been that the focus is too much on the traditional, compliant roles of citizens, instead of educating adolescents to act and participate. For instance, Bennett (2007; Bennet, Wells & Rank, 2009) distinguishes between two ideal types of citizens: the dutiful citizen and the actualizing citizen. According to him, the traditional citizenship education carries on an old-fashioned model of citizenship, based on formal structures and institutions, instead of recognizing the informal networks, new media and new models of participation, which are more relevant for new generations. Another focus is on educating citizens who would be able, not only to participate, but also to appreciate human rights and social justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Llewellyn, Cook & Molina, 2010). The effectiveness of civic education is not either seen as self-evident. For instance, in Warwick, Cremin, Harrison and Mason’s (2012) study, some adolescents experienced formal civic education as enhancing their motivation to participate in community, while others felt that they were not listened to and schools were undemocratic institutions.

Children do not learn only what they are taught but also from what they observe, and they may very well make observations about hierarchies, power structures and also undemocratic practices in their schools. This has been pointed out by several authors (e.g. Biesta, 2006; Lockyer, 2008; Munn, 2010; Wood, 2010; Rowe, 2011; Warming, 2012). Biesta and his co-authors (2009; cf. Biesta, 2006) claim that the formal citizenship education needs to be complemented by informal participation alternatives. The school as such can be a microcosm, reflecting the society and teaching about society by its very structure and through its hidden curriculum. Children learn about society both formally at schools and

informally - inside and outside their schools - and the role of informal learning is no doubt significant. Power structures can be observed and exercised for instance in the playground (Weller, 2007). Learning citizenship models and roles, as well as constructing one’s image of society, can thus be a highly complex process.

## 5 The study

The main questions of this study deal with children’s ideas of two approaches to power: how they would exercise power, and how they experience their own possibilities of participating and having influence. We did not ask how children understand the theoretical concept of power, but instead, what they would do and how they would exercise power, if they had much power and could improve conditions. Using power for change or improvement also reveals what children thought was wrong and what they were worried about. Another question is to analyze how children saw their opportunities of having influence in their schools. In accordance with the phenomenological approach, the study dealt with questions that were related to children’s ideas and experiences of different contexts of their lives.

The data for the present study was collected as part of the evaluation of an Interreg project Safe and Active School Day (SAS). The SAS project was a common effort between the cities of Turku (Finland) and Tallinn (Estonia), aiming at enhancing students’ participation and experience of a safe school. In both cities, the evaluation was conducted separately and with different methods.

The target group that was selected to answer the questions about using power and having influence were pupils from grade six (twelve years old), with the thought that their capacity for answering these kinds of questions would be better than that of younger students.

The number of respondents was 204 (99 girls, 105 boys), from six primary schools, altogether eight classes. Different parts of the city were represented, however, no school was from the city centre, but from different urban areas. The data was anonymous. No personal questions were asked about children’s families or socioeconomic background. These variables would perhaps have enabled a more sophisticated analysis and explanation. It was not considered necessary, because the purpose was just exploratory.

The data were collected in schools by the contact teachers who participated in the SAS project in the city. The teachers had clear instructions for data collection. The instrument of data collection was a semi-structured questionnaire that consisted of open-ended questions. The form included the following questions:

*Let’s imagine that you have a great deal of power, and you could make improvements. How would you use your power? What would you improve and what would you do*

- *in your own class*
- *in your school*
- *in the area you live in*
- *in your home city*

- *in Finland*
- *in the world*

*How can pupils in your school participate in decisions of common issues, for instance, rules, parties, events, excursions or the schoolyard? How could pupils better be involved to participate and have a say in common issues in the school, such as mentioned above*

The analysis is qualitative, based on the interpretation of the contents of each response. The basic unit of analysis is an idea, or more precisely, an expression of an idea. To get an overview of the structure and emphases of data, the ideas expressed in the responses have been divided into groups according to their contents. In this phase, the frequencies of expressions were counted. A respondent may mention more than one issue in one item of the questionnaire, and therefore each expression, including an independent point of view or topic, was counted separately. For instance, one student would improve her home city in this way: "If I had power in my home city, all would be equal and the city clean". This was classified to the categories labelled as "social structure" and "physical environment".

Thus quantifying the open-ended data is challenging, but this procedure gives structure to the data and illustrates what topics these children saw that require improvement. While reviewing the data, an attempt was made to go beyond the direct expressions and find out what the respondent really means. The pupils used different expressions for the same phenomenon, and these have been combined to a common category, to form broader groups of concepts. For instance, when dealing with the improvements they would make in the school class, the students can refer to furniture, cleanliness, cosiness and need for renovation, and these expressions have been combined under the topic "physical space". The category labelled as "working in the classroom" is including different aspects that deal with classroom situations (teaching, learning, school subjects, students' order of sitting, teaching methods, teachers, homework and exams).

Each respondent had a code that is used for identification. (Schools were marked with letters A-F, and school classes with numbers; students had a letter b (boy), g (girl) and a number. The data was classified by two researchers, which enhances the reliability of the analysis, and the classifications were very similar.

Most responses were rather short. It might have been possible to get deeper reflections if the task had been an assignment about one limited topic, but the strength of this form was that it describes systematically children's ideas about a number of objects and levels, proceeding from a rather familiar and near sphere toward more remote spheres. A longer written response might have been difficult for some students, who seemed to have difficulties even with the short responses.

Doing research on children's ideas about society or politics can be complicated. Children may be lacking the relevant concepts, or not be used to expressing themselves in an abstract code, although they have ideas and opinions. Kallio and Häkli (2011) refer to metho-

dological and conceptual constraints in collecting data, but also emphasize that researchers cannot be sure about a child's agency in issues that concern them, if they do not know what is significant for the child.

A problem in interpretation is that children may understand some words in different ways than they are used by adults in general. For instance Sinclair (2004, 113) mentioned that the word 'protection' might be understood by children as 'over-protection and restrictions, while the phrase 'being safe' had a positive tone.

Some of the respondents seemingly had difficulties in producing answers in clear Finnish – there were also non-native Finnish speakers in the classes, although their first language and ethnicity were not asked on the form. In some cases, it was difficult for the pupils to think about what improvements would be needed in the country or the world, and the answers are, to a great deal, on a very general level. The unclear or general answers also tell something about the concerns or problems that children have in their minds, but, on the whole, this data can give a fairly multifaceted cross-section of twelve-year-old pupils' thinking about their worlds.

Some expressions in the responses were difficult to interpret. Completely unclear expressions have been omitted from the analysis. All pupils who were at school completed the forms during their lessons, and the contact teachers of the SAS project took care of collecting the forms. The drop-out problem is more about the unclear answers than about the absence of students. In some cases pupils wrote "[I would improve] nothing", or "I do not know". The answer "nothing" may mean that the pupil is satisfied, and "I do not know" that she/he does not know – referring to that she/he does not know enough or is happy with the situation, but another interpretation is that they are bored with writing. If these types of responses are interpreted as drop-out, their proportion was not very large. There were also some naïve, joking, and improper (for instance racist) answers, and also some indication of misunderstanding. The majority of the answers clearly told about the objects the child wanted to change to the better or was worried about.

## **6 Findings I: How children would exercise power for making improvements?**

The following Table 1 presents the main topics that the pupils wanted to improve in each sphere. Only those categories of answers that were mentioned most often are included in the discussion. Included are only those objects that were mentioned most often, in about 20 forms, or by ten percent of respondents. In some items of the questionnaire, there was a large variation in the topics and they were scattered, and therefore, exceptionally, some smaller frequencies are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: The main issues that grade six pupils want to



improve (number of respondents = 204, frequency refers to topics)

OBJECT TO BE IMPROVED	Frequency (number of students who address this topic)
<i>I would improve in my own class</i>	
physical space (furniture, cleanliness)	45
atmosphere, belongingness	30
peace to work, stopping disturbing behaviour	20
working in the classroom (amount of homework, order of sitting, teaching equipment, subjects)	19
<i>I would improve in my school</i>	
food	58
physical space in the schoolhouse (cosiness, practicality, shape, furniture)	32
schoolyard, sport areas, equipment	26
safety, atmosphere (e.g. preventing harassment)	23
<i>I would improve in the area I live in</i>	
environment, the view of the area (cleanness)	53
better opportunities for leisure, hobbies (culture, sports)	45
safety and peacefulness (stopping violence and crimes, misuse of alcohol)	29
services (e.g. transportation and shopping)	22
<i>I would improve in my home city</i>	
environment, view of the city (cleanness)	42
better opportunities for leisure, hobbies (culture, sports)	34
safety and peacefulness (stopping violence and crimes, misuse of alcohol)	25
services (e.g. transportation and shopping)	19
<i>I would improve in my home country</i>	
environmental questions	37
issues related to equality, social justice	26
issues related to politics and economy	16
<i>I would improve in the world</i>	
a better and safer world: peace, no wars	65
stopping poverty, hunger, inequality; solving the problems of poor countries	57
issues related to environment and nature: climate change, ecological way of living; recycling, the rights of animals	55

### 6.1 Using power to improve the class and the school

The class, classroom and school are the direct environments for pupils, and therefore it is relevant to study their agency in those spheres. What the respondents most often wanted to improve there, could be categorized as various perspectives to physical environment, and the micropolitics of the school and the classroom.

As to the class and life in the classroom, many of the pupils wanted to improve the working conditions the classroom should be cleaner, more cosy and comfortable, better arranged or perhaps renovated. Many of the children wished to get better desks and stools, or better boards or computers. They also wanted to improve the social atmosphere among the class-mates, they wanted to have less noise, less disturbing behaviour from their classmates. They wanted that the school rules should be better followed up. For the studies as such, they expected better equipment (computers, but also equipment for sports and gymnastics). There were only a few items dealing with school subjects, the contents or teaching methods, and some more dealt with the

amount of homework and the order in which students were sitting in the classroom.

Some of them did not want to change anything: "Nothing. It is a nice place to study" (C6/g2), but more typical were answers like this: "If I had power in my own class, all would feel themselves safe and no one would be teased" (B4/g4). "There is nothing else to be improved in my class, except that it could be a little bigger, the desks should be bigger. Everybody should get a computer" (A3b7).

As to the school, the most common problem seemed to be food: the quality of meals, the cosiness of the dining room and arrangements. Some students wished that their school could have a kitchen, instead of the food being made in a central kitchen from where it was taken to the school. Dissatisfaction with food is interesting, because school meals have been seen as one of the benefits of the Finnish school. It seems to be important for children's feeling of well-being in the school, and an easy object to express their wishes. Very often the students mentioned improvements they would do in the physical environment, either inside or outside of the schoolhouse. The schoolyard and possibilities for sports and exercise were important to many of them. Safety was important, as it was in the classroom.

The topics related to school and class/classroom resembled each other fairly much, leaving out the school food. Otherwise, it was the physical environment, the physical school, that was the most common topic, and another in the top was the "informal school", which includes peer-networks, relations with other pupils, in addition to the unofficial discourses that are not related to teaching and studying as such (Gordon, 2001; Munn, 2010). These two emphases can be understood against the background of previous research on children's pedagogical well-being (Pietarinen, Soini & Pyhältö, 2008). Horne Martin (2006) underlines the variety of functions that schools and classrooms can have for students, as environments for learning but as well, for instance, for social interaction, growth of personal identity or sense of trust and security. As to the physical environments, there is evidence that the organization of classroom settings, noise, colours and lights among other things can have an influence on students' learning and well-being (Horne Martin, 2006). In many schoolyards, the main problems are that they are not inspiring, are covered with grey asphalt and have broken, dysfunctional play equipment (cf. Nuikkinen, 2009, 242-244).

Teachers were not mentioned in the class level responses, but concerning the schools, some students wished they could know the teachers better or that they could be more equal with them. The emphasis on the physical school and unofficial school (students' interactions during and outside lessons) have been found as more significant than the formal school, that is, teaching and learning the school subjects (Gordon, 2001, 101; Paju, 2011, 20; cf. Munn, 2010). Peer relations are important for children, in addition to the physical scene, where the students are living and what is also restricting

them and adapting them to certain rules. This unofficial field can be very important in the micropolitics of school and, especially for pupils, has not perhaps received enough attention in educational research (Gellin et al., 2012, 97). Another approach to these findings can be that the scarcity of school and city finances is reflected in the children's experiences of the problems in their environment and resources of the schools.

## 6.2 Changes needed in the local community

The local area that students live in, and the city as a whole, also belong to their close sphere of life. As to the improvements the children would do, the main topics, and the frequencies, were fairly similar in both. Also in these spheres, the twelve-year-old informants emphasized the shape of the environment: it should be clean, there should not be so much rubbish, the city should be kept in better order. The safety of the environment was also experienced as important, and to this category belong the responses dealing with violence, drinking and drugs. Obviously some children were very aware if there was problematic behaviour, violence and social problems in their area.

The respondents also wished for a better infrastructure for their hobbies, sports, playing, and so on: there should be better sport halls and playgrounds, better libraries and more concerts. Often the wishes were typical of children, or directly connected to their hobbies and interests. They also wished for better transportation from their suburb to the city centre and better service to their area.

In addition to the above mentioned approaches, there were a few interesting responses (11) that dealt with equality among inhabitants, tolerance and equal opportunities for earning their living for all. Nobody should be discriminated or harassed.

"The environment is in an awful shape. Itäkeskus [Eastcenter] was probably planned for drunks, as it is full of pubs. Families with children have been neglected" (D4/g8). "I would renovate the ball hall and build more common houses, for instance Youth House" (E2/g3). "Less car driving or other vehicles destroying the climate. No racism. All colours should be accepted" (B4/b7).

These findings have a strong resemblance with those of Holden (2007), who studied eleven-year-old British children's fears and hopes. In two sets of data, from 1994 and 2004, the main hopes and also fears concerning the local community included crime and violence, local amenities, environmental issues, poverty, jobs and housing, community relations and traffic. These children were also concerned about homelessness, poverty and unemployment. Similar themes have been reported by, for instance, McAuley and Rose (2010) and Elsley (2004). In another project in the 1990s, about 1000 Italian elementary and middle school students described their visions about "child-friendly cities". The result of this project (Children's manifesto: 'How to Win Back Our Cities', 1994) indicated a number of ideas, such as meeting places for children in their neighbourhoods, places where to play and interact, and green places. They

saw traffic as a problem, and also wished for better organization of public transport. (Francis & Lorenzo, 2006, p. 227-229.) These results, as well as the present study, show that young children experience the unsafety of their neighbourhood, but also have ideas about the changes that are needed.

## 6.3 What children would improve in Finland and in the world?

In the national and global sphere, the pupils paid much attention to environmental problems. As to Finland, 37 respondents mentioned them. Otherwise the improvements the children wished for were not easy to classify around a common theme. It is possible that national politics and issues regarding society are not so familiar, because social studies/civic education does not belong in the curriculum of the lower grades, but comes as late as in grade nine. One of the children felt it was difficult to answer: "I cannot think about such a big area. In Finland, everything is fairly well" (C7/b8).

There were some aspects of society, economy and politics that the pupils pointed out in their responses: such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, racism, and expensive food and living. There were 26 answers that dealt with different approaches to societal and economic situation and inequality in Finland: "I would improve and create more jobs for people and would take care of the environment" (C6/g4). "I would try to help in the economic depression (if possible), and give more power to the President" (C6/b5). "Away poverty and homelessness. Let's not cast rubbish in nature" (D6/g12).

At the global level, children's worries could be classified under three main topics: peace and safety, poverty and the environment – more than 25 percent of the children mentioned one or more of these. They wished to have a world in which all people would have satisfactory conditions of living. More than 60 children wrote about the importance of ending wars or mentioned some other topic related to violence. People in poor countries should get food and water, and poor children should have the possibility for education. Environmental issues were important also at the global level: "No war. Food for all. Water for all. Basic rights to all. Home for all. Equality for all. = Peace in the world" (A3/g10). "No war. No racism. No alcohol. No drugs. Prevent climate change. You have the right to do good things" (B4/b7).

Interestingly, both in national and global approaches, there were only a few responses dealing with children directly. Among the few examples related to the global level, there were some requiring better opportunities for education and condemning the use of children as a labour force or as soldiers. These findings resemble the topics that adolescents were concerned in Warwick and his co-authors' study (2012): war, global economic recession, climate change, poverty and homelessness. Also Holden (2007, p. 35), in her study of eleven-year-old children's concerns in Great Britain, got similar results as to the global level: their thoughts about the future dealt mostly with war and peace, environmental issues and poverty, and concerns for the environment were

relatively strong in the data from 2004 compared to that from 1994. Typically, children were more worried about global concerns than local futures. The children had similar concerns in an international comparative study that was conducted in England, South Africa and Kyrgyzstan (Holden, Joldoshalieva & Shamatov, 2008).

Primary school children were informed about current problems at the local and global levels.

A question is why the children had obviously clearer answers to global than national problems. One reason might be that the global problems, in addition to environmental catastrophes and crises, are so commonly presented in the media (cf. Bennett, 2007). Children follow the streams of communication, and as a matter of fact cannot escape information about environmental problems. Environmental issues are certainly dealt with in the school science lessons.

### 7 Findings II: Children's agency at school

Children's existing and desired possibilities for agency were asked with two questions: How can pupils in your school participate in decisions of common issues, for instance rules, parties, events, excursions or the schoolyard? How could pupils better be involved to participate and have a say in common issues in the school, such as mentioned above? Table 2 summarizes the main types of responses in the first of these questions, about children's existing possibilities to have influence in their schools.

Table 2. The ways children can have influence in their schools (number of respondents 204; most common types of answers are collected in the table)

HOW CHILDREN CAN HAVE INFLUENCE	Frequency (number of students who mentioned it)
<i>Requirements for students</i>	
obedience, good behaviour	30
enthusiasm, capacity, motivation	21
<i>Requirements for the school and the teachers</i>	
involving children, asking them to participate	22
organizing events, campaigns, projects etc.	14
listening to the students	11
<i>Specific forms and channels of students' participation</i>	
school council, students' parliament	15
co-operation with teachers	12

When asked about what opportunities they had in practice to have influence in decisions in their schools, the responses were fairly often like this: "By being quiet, listening, not breaking against the rules. Not teasing other people" (B4/g3). "We obey the rules, we behave ourselves in events, we behave ourselves at school" (B4/b7).

Misunderstanding can partly explain this type of answers, and in some responses the style revealed that Finnish was not the respondent's first language. Another explanation is that the pupils perhaps saw that it was the easiest and most diplomatic strategy to obey, and to survive at school. These kind of responses suggest also that children had interpreted the messages of the hidden

curriculum (cf. Munn, 2010).

Still another explanation is that the culture in Finnish schools has not enabled students to have a say in decisions, and that there have not been channels for student participation. Children have not perhaps seen alternatives and have no models for anything else. For instance, the recent international study on adolescents' civic knowledge, attitudes and engagement, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 (Schulz et al., 2010; Suoninen, Kupari & Törmäkangas, 2010) indicates that 14-year-old Finnish lower secondary school students did not participate very much in the civic activities and did not feel that their voice was heard. Discussion about society or politics is not very common either in the school culture (Suutarinen, 2006). It is contradictory, in principle, that the modern notions of learning emphasize students' active role in the process of learning, but in other parts of school life children are not, in general, heard.

For the students, participation was thus largely based on requirements set for themselves. Another approach to these requirements was expressed by students, who thought that their opportunity for participation largely depended on their own enthusiasm and other qualities and attitudes, including behaviour towards other students, like in these examples: "We should be more enthusiastic and take on our own initiatives" (A4/t8), "They [students] can prove that they are prepared to have responsibility, and they can make suggestions to these issues" (B4/g9).

Many children in the present study understood their participation as directed by adults, who listen to children's wishes and suggestions (cf. Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Wood, 2012; Fleming, 2013). Many of them also defined their opportunities for participation with a strong reference to adults, the teachers, who plan and organize the events, opportunities and channels for participation.

However, there were also direct suggestions for the adults in the school about giving more space for children: "Well, teachers should discuss more and tell the students about issues" (D2 / t2); "They should ask what kind of things we would like to do" (A3/t4); "You have got to have a teacher who lets students decide about things" (B4/p17).

There were also many respondents who were happy with their possibilities of having influence at their schools. Fifteen responses dealt with existing channels, which recently have been established for children's participation, such as Youth Parliament or Children's Parliament, or the school councils, or projects that had been organized in the schools. These answers came from students of three schools, where this activity obviously was organized earlier than in the other ones, and the respondents were therefore more conscious of it. A look at all the responses given in the survey by these fifteen students suggests that they in other respects resembled very much the average respondents. They were focussing on the informal and physical school, students' mutual relations and the cosiness of the environment, as well as

in the global approach most often on questions of peace and war, climate and environment. Some of these respondents, however, pointed out that it is very few pupils who get the opportunity to act through for instance school councils. The responses that dealt with specific events or projects that had been organized in schools, activating the children, included often examples related to the environment, such as recycling, collecting rubbish, cleaning the schoolyard. This may be related to the high frequency of responses related to the physical environment of the school and classroom in the first part of the questionnaire.

In the question about having influence, about ten percent of responses were either "I do not know" or "no possibilities". However, during recent years, the opportunities to have an influence have been strengthened, in order to support students' participatory skills (Gellin et al., 2012; Kallio & Häkli, 2011). A new law was passed about school councils for primary level, and these are mandatory in all schools since the beginning of 2014. When the data was collected, these forms of participation were not yet established in all schools. Today these alternatives would perhaps be better known by students than a couple of years ago.

How to enhance the students' participation? The main line in the answers was that participation should be fun, interesting and joyful. There should be events, projects or campaigns. Also in this question, most respondents left the responsibility to teachers for arranging ways to participate. They suggested that their ideas should be collected; they should be listened to and asked to participate. They should be encouraged, activated and persuaded. There were also a few interesting responses where the pupil wrote that they would participate, if they get evidence that convinces them that they really can have an effect in decisions – and yes, if they are given training for participation. Although these were single answers, this indicates clearly young children's capacity for critical thinking.

## 8 Conclusions

The data gives evidence of different approaches: how children would exercise power and understand the targets of exercising power at different levels, and how they see their own possibilities of having influence. The question about how the respondents would exercise power gives information about issues they are worried about and would improve.

The data is fairly small and does not enable broad generalizations. The responses may have been dependent on the context and the timing. The responses are perhaps typical of the age of the respondents, not in-depth, and not expressed in clear abstract terminology. However, even in this form they indicate that children can have consistent ideas about society, power relations and the world around them. The fact that the responses were written can have limited the quality of the data, but it is not likely that oral responses in interviews or group interviews would have been remarkably more in-depth. Similar conceptual and expressive limitations would

certainly have appeared in oral data also.

In almost all levels, from the school class to the global issues, the biggest problems for children are related to environment. In their closest level, they pay much attention to the physical environment, and on a more general level, to the climate change and safeguarding sustainable development. It may very well be, as Furnham (2002) comments, that social and economic understanding "lags behind the understanding of the physical world" (p. 56). That may partly explain the strong focus on physical space instead of social and political questions. In all levels, children wrote, also, about questions related to safety and peace, and especially concerning the city, country and global level, and about equality. The problems were in the same dimension, in the same axis, but on different scales.

These contents of the responses may be due to the fact that children are already at a relatively young age conscious about for instance environmental problems and questions of safety, peace and war (Bennett, 2007). To a great degree, the children's ideas can be based on observations and experience of their own close contexts and on discussions with adults and school. About global issues they have certainly heard of, for instance, in science lessons, but also through news and images, delivered effectively by the media. The problems, "the background noise" (Moss, 2013) is certainly filtered through the media to children also. It can be concluded that these responses reflect not only the children's experience or images, but also the problems that the children live among. These responses can also be interpreted as children's reactions to the problems around them, in different spheres. The problems in the micro level, in the classroom, can in a small scale be an indication of economic problems in a broader context.

The problems children have experienced can also be dependent on the nature of the area. In this study, no comparison was made between the answers from different urban areas. Some of the areas where the respondents came from were ordinary middle-class suburbs with small houses, others were densely populated apartment house areas, with social problems. In the group of 204 children in the study, many of them certainly had their own experience about poverty or unemployment in their families. So the knowledge of the problems is not based on academic knowledge.

Although the evidence is small and fragmentary, it can give indications of the thoughts that children in their early teens have on their minds about challenges in their present life and world. When writing about improvements, the children in the present study expressed some idealism and unrealism, they were not asked to consider what is possible or realistic – only about the target of improvement. Children do not necessarily understand how vast and multilayered the problems can be, and how complicated it is to improve conditions and how complicated and slow decision making can be. The verb form was conditional ("if you had power"), including the idea that the children did not have much power. This may lead their thoughts to the idea that they really do



not have power. That, of course, depends on the level they are thinking about. The global issues may be experienced as remote, but on the school level they could have some influence, in principle.

However, fairly many students described their own agency by reference to requirements for themselves, primarily to their obedience, following the rules, or coming on time, and also pointed out the adults' role in organizing activities and listening. These responses suggest that children in the present study tended to see the schools as hierarchical organizations, in which they were expected to obey and behave themselves. These findings are supported by previous research, according to which children tend to accept hierarchical power structures, clear-cut rules, order and discipline, and expect that the rules are followed consistently, but also tend to see these power relations as benevolent and paternalistic (Cullingford, 1992, p. 2; Gill & Howard, 2009, p. 19–18, p. 40–41). The respondents in this study obviously also felt that peer relations, the informal school, and the physical school is important – more important than the curriculum and studies. Children's focus on the physical contexts of their classroom, school and neighbourhood is not irrelevant, and if they can get opportunities to participate in the development in these spheres, it can enhance their motivation for learning, civic engagement and active attitude for environment (Horne Martin, 2006, 100–101). This data did include examples of such activities that had been organized in the schools.

At the same time, this study reinforces the view of previous studies that pupils' participation opportunities are largely controlled and organized by adults (cf. Weller, 2007; Hulme & Hulme, 2011), and that is what the children also seem to expect, perhaps due to lacking experience of alternatives. Some single respondents underlined the necessity of getting training in skills of participation. Some also saw the limitations of representative participation through a school council or children's parliament.

Furthermore, the great number of responses referring to obedience as agency suggests that these children are on their way to developing traditional and dutiful citizen roles, not so much the role of active citizens (cf. Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Bennett et al., 2007; Llewellyn et al., 2010). The respondents were however quite young, and therefore strong conclusions should not be made about their future roles, at least on the basis of this limited data. There are also some signs of emerging social justice orientation, and of consciousness of the environment. This can be observed especially in the responses related to global and local issues in which the children are writing about peace, well-being and tolerance to indicate that they would like to get a safer world.

As to a proposition for future research and practice, it would be important to continue the work that already has been started in many countries in order to create more opportunities for children to practice and implement skills of participation and discussion. More

discussion is certainly needed about children's roles as citizens (Weller, 2007; Lockyer, 2008; Salo, 2010; Cockburn, 2013). One important dimension is formal civic and citizenship. Adolescents need conceptual tools for discussion and participation (Fleming, 2013), but attention should also be directed to practices, processes and structures that are undemocratic in children's lives. More research is also needed about children's agency and participation in schools but also through the more formal channels created especially for children's participation. The impact of background variables (area, class, gender and ethnicity) was not analyzed in the present study, but it would also be interesting, provided that the study would be conducted on a broader basis.

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