Cities and Social Participation: 
Social Inequalities from Children’s and Youth’s Point of View

Social participation, as far as children and youth are concerned, stands as one of the rights of children formalized by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The present work is an attempt to contribute to the discussion on the ways whereby this right can be implemented, by raising the issue that children and youth constructively interpret social differences as a main feature of cities by providing explanations of social inequalities and their remedial mechanisms. Three case studies based on an action research intervention in three different institutions are presented. The analysis of focal group discussions with children and youth highlight their perspectives about life in the city: the city that they lived in and the city as they would like it to be demonstrating how children’s and youth’s views can provide a deep and critical understanding of their own society and the ways to change it.

Introduction

Social participation has been since the Convention on the Rights of the Child, signed by 61 countries in the General Assembly of the United Nations on 20th November 1989, formalized as one of the rights of children among others such as the right to a name, to education, to access to information, to health and health services and so on. Article 12 of the Convention is the one which more approximately expresses the right to participate. It says: “State parties shall assure the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” Social participation is couched in terms of being able to express oneself and to be seriously listened to, although this situation is somewhat conditioned by the attributed capacity of the child to form his or her own views. The ambiguity of the legal statement therefore leaves room for misunderstandings, as it is not definite about the child’s rights about expressing his/her views, but presupposes the child’s competence of forming his/her views as prior to the right of expressing them. Here the fact that children form their views in the process of expressing them is seriously overlooked. On the other hand, social participation is somewhat restricted to expressing one’s views which, regarded as a form of social participation, will hopefully be given “due weight”. How, when, and where these views come to be expressed, and how they come to be taken into account is one issue at stake. The amplitude of the legal statement that children should express themselves about all matters that concern them needs further discussion as to what practical matters children’s views
should be given due consideration. Therefore, what concerns children’s and youth’s social participation in our present societies has not been so far thoroughly debated so as to bring about clearcut understandings about how children and young people should participate in matters that affect them.

One of the difficulties seems to be the ample scope of practices that such a right may subsume. Social participation might as well include both the child’s right to have a say about whether or not to learn English as a foreign language, and the child’s right to evaluate the performance of politicians concerning local urban improvements for the lives of children. Both situations reflect instances of children’s participation in matters that affect them directly, though the former is confined to the privacy of domestic life and the negotiation going on between parents and child, a somewhat simpler and more manageable situation than the latter which involves negotiating and establishing several procedures to secure a fair treatment for both children and politicians.

Children’s social participation can, thus, be related to a myriad of different social practices whereby children enact their right to express their views and be listened to, from a more peripheral acting under the surveillance of parents, teachers and significant adults to a more central role in the decisions and the construction of social life. Therefore, it becomes imperative to bring up the issue of children’s and youth’s social participation in order to enlarge the horizon of its possible actualizations.

The object of this paper is to contribute to this discussion by highlighting the importance of children’s and youth’s participation in the construction of social life in cities. The basic issue concerns the views held by children and youth as to their understanding about their own and others’ social position in the city. Different social positions highlight social differences as a main feature of city life and dynamics. Social differences can be experienced so as to encourage or hinder social relationships, as well as to arouse empathy or hostility towards those different others whom one comes across in the urban context. Social differences demand an explanation of what causes people to be in different social positions which allow different levels of access to the wealth of experiences that the city provides: culture, education, leisure and so on. Social differences can be understood as the result of human endeavour, and not as the outcome of a fateful destiny. Consequently, taken as a constructive aspect, it can be subject to change. Furthermore, social differences can be negatively evaluated, as they stand for unequal share of society’s symbolic and material goods by different social groups promoting social hostility and antagonism. Social differences can thus be figured out as social inequalities, a feature of social life in the cities that point at drawbacks and difficulties in the social contract.

Children and youth do talk about social inequalities, that is, how social differences are interpreted as to their causes and consequences, and the remedial mechanisms that are and should be put into effect to compensate and minimize them. Buck-Morss (1990) brings up a passage from Walter Benjamin in his Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehundert that most cogently describes the insight of a child before social inequalities in the landscape of the city. He says: “I remained prisoner of this district of the proprietor classes without knowing other districts. The poor – for rich children like myself – only existed as beggars. And it was a big progress as far as my knowledge was concerned, when, for the first time, it came to light to me the fact that poverty was the disgrace of badly paid workers.” (p. 26)