

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### **Practical Examples of Children's Participation in Freie Schule Frankfurt: Children's Self-Regulation and the Role of the Teachers** Dirk Eiermann, Freie Schule Frankfurt

This essay is about the learning opportunities and experiences available to children at the Freie Schule Frankfurt. The school exists for 40 years. It includes kindergarten, primary school and orientation stage in grades one to six. There are 55 children in the school in an age range from three to thirteen years.<sup>1</sup> Opening hours of the school are from 7.30 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The basis for our educational practice is the concept of children's self-regulation, as described in Eiermann, 2015 (this issue). This has consequences for the role of the staff members. I will come back to this issue at the end of the essay in a section where I will attend to the idea of (children's) self-regulation and (adult's) participation. First I wish to explain the theoretical concept. Three examples will be used to explicate its practical implementation.

#### **The difference lies in the image of the child**

Our way of interacting with children is anchored in our views on childhood. It is no longer a novelty to strive for partnership with children in their

education. Many parents and educators put emphasis on a dialogue at "eye level." Children are afforded a voice.

This is mirrored quite clearly in the area of commercial advertising. Children's desires are targeted. Be it the new furniture, a new car, the next family holiday: advertising agencies count on children's participation. Socially mediated interests (in a neoliberal world) and individual interests of adults, parents, teachers are in negotiation with children's interests.

Adults are easily prone to project onto children their own desires, needs, but also their existential anxieties, denial and withdrawal. Children on the other hand take on these projections easily, irrespective of how close they are to the children's self. In our view then participation as a child's right becomes a challenge for the adults. They are requested to take children's needs and wishes seriously, accept them to be just as valid as their own. On this basis we aim to provide an educational space in which participation is understood as a *constant process of reflective negotiation* between adults and children.

Our view of childhood builds on trust. We are confident that human beings will find their own way and their individual success, and that there are a lot of different routes to do so (FSF, 2004, p. 14). Only with this background can a space for genuine and free development of all participants be generated. Since its earliest days the Freie Schule Frankfurt has allowed for a "flow" in the negotiations between adults and children. Decision making power is not invested in adults due to their formal role, but similarly not in children simply because of their status.

Children are invited to take part. This is reflected in the communication processes and the daily structure. And children do take part. They express what they want, and also what they don't want, what they like and what annoys them. They say it bluntly. They stay away from what they feel is too much for them, and also from everything that is of no interest to them. If they want something particular they are quite demanding. They get involved to the degree that suits them.<sup>2</sup>

What does all that mean for our everyday practice?

### **Rules and rituals**

Children at the Freie Schule Frankfurt can play with their portable play stations. Unregulated playing times were a reason for unrest. Adults said that children were not approachable any more. Children themselves were upset because some of their peers were completely absorbed by the video-games and would not play with them any more.

Hence the playing time was reduced by the school assembly to an hour on Tuesday and Thursday only. For some time this regulation was accepted by everyone.

Then some children started to play their video-games secretly. Other children complained about this. They felt it was unfair.

So the assembly decided that every morning all portable devices would be collected. Two girls came up with this suggestion. They also volunteered to take on the role of collecting every morning. They built a box into which they put all the game devices of the other children. In the afternoon they handed them out again.

After a week the assembly had to discuss the issue again. Some children defied the collecting of the games. And the two girls found their task bothersome.

Some children advocated for more and longer playing times. Some adults had concerns which they raised. They found that the computer games were potentially addictive, and also that children would become aggressive after playing for longer periods. They also brought up the issue of playing games that were by law prohibited for children.

One child suggested to serve the interests of adults and children in turns. The suggestion was to have a six-weeks cycle. In week one there was one hour playing time on the Monday, in week two one hour on the Monday and the Tuesday, etc. In week five there would be an hour every day, but in week six there would be no playing time at all. Then the cycle should start again.

The suggestion was accepted. Yet it transpired after a few weeks that the system was too complicated. Children and adults got constantly confused. Eventually another discussion brought an agreement that there would be one hour playing time everyday for a trial period. That is the

status quo at the time of writing this report.

At the Freie Schule Frankfurt decisions on rules, regulations, exemptions are mostly made collectively. The negotiations happen either in specifically scheduled meetings with elected chairpersons, or else more or less unconsciously on the basis of the dynamics within such a social group. This means that a rule can be explicitly agreed. Yet, it is also possible that routines are gradually established and the children treat them with the same respect as a rule. An example is the race for the schoolbus, the first child to reach the door is allowed to pick a seat. For dessert after lunch the children queue up. There are also individual rituals and rules, or some that apply to a group of children only. As adults we are oblivious to many of these agreements.

Things become interesting at moments of conflict. Then it is possible that a rule is agreed that is meant to solve the conflict; some rules need to be thought of completely new, others need review, some may have been forgotten over time.

Children question rules, they resist rules and undermine their application, they realise when others resist and refuse rules. Children step over boundaries as well as they look for boundaries and set them for others.

Often children don't stick to agreed arrangements because they see a threat to their interests, or also because they do not have a "theory of mind" yet and it is difficult for them to take the standpoint of others. Rules however that serve the interests of the children are not questioned, like the rule that children can eat at any time at the school, or the rule that allows children to be naked in the school.

The "Stop it" rule stipulates that a child can stop another child or an adult in case of a transgression. Sometimes this is the most often ignored rule amongst the children. When they do so, the children try to get something they need or they show that they are unhappy and want to change this. Slowly but surely they learn how this is possible in a constructive and socially acceptable manner in relationships with others and the group—if their desire or unhappiness is rooted in relationships within the school at all.

We understand rules and rituals as constructions. They can be coined by the interests of individual persons, but also by the wishes of the entire group. We do not write down rules. Thus children are always asked to revise and review their actions. They are continuously asked to position themselves in relation to the negotiation and concrete implementation of rules.

This is a challenging demand. At the same time it is a chance to learn moral judgement and gain competence in verbal communication. At the Freie Schule Frankfurt we strive to make decisions on the basis of consensus, and to consider minority positions. This principle is also a guideline for the cooperation of adults. In some ways the good relationships generate a wish for consensus already. Human beings have an interest in the well-being of those to whom they have a good relationship. In large groups it can be difficult to make decisions, or on occasions even impossible for the time being. However, in terms of democracy the process of negotiation is more meaningful than the actual end result. Only by going through such a process is it possible to constitute a relationship based

on true partnership, even if social roles are defined differently.

On the other hand children like to use the means of voting because as a form of organising life within a group it fits in with their image of justice. Especially in bigger groups voting is a useful instrument for children. It counters the difficulty of organising debate and leads to a temporary solution. Every arm raised for a poll is a personal decision. It is requested. It is important and has an immediate influence. Whoever wants something in or from the group can not only be heard, but also seen. Taking a vote on an issue can also modify the influence of adults and thus allow for experimental and unconventional solutions which for the children's learning may bring up decisive experiences. Whoever is not happy with the result of a poll is always afforded the opportunity to bring up the topic again, or else to break the rule. Breaking the rule is another way to bring up a topic again.

The school must not be an institution that stands in opposition to the children, where they are left in a powerless position. At the Freie Schule Frankfurt children are able to experience: *My opinion is welcome, necessary and influential, my wishes are taken serious, I can influence changes* (FSF, 2004, p. 28). Participation in decision making and joint responsibility of children are essential in the school.

### **Complaints**

A gang of four boys aged five to seven frequently acts out fierce conflicts amongst themselves. They also draw in other children and adults, demanding them to be arbitrators, or sometimes simply an audience. These others are entirely unhappy about the boys' behaviour.

Furthermore the gang annoys others and regularly expresses obvious satisfaction about their success.

One morning two adults and a couple of the older boys in the school are angry about the gang's behaviour. They decide to bring up the gang as a topic in the school assembly. All children and adults in the house are called together, a chairperson is chosen and a discussion ensues. The complainants allege that the boys of the gang behave in far too disorderly a way and on top of that act as completely unapproachable. Different persons comment on their experiences, take a position, ask for more information, try to understand. The gang does not appear overly impressed and seems to give little value to the collective complaint. In search for a solution one child suggests foster relationships. The members of the gang agree and pick a child each from the group of the 10-12 year old children as a kind of "boss." From now on they must listen to this boss. The assembly accepts this solution.

Some days later the topic is brought up again in the school assembly. One of the bosses has quit the job. He has had enough of it, feels it is too much of a task. Tears roll down his cheeks. There is great excitement, it is quite noisy, the chairpersons in the assembly have difficulties to calm down the group, the adults can only console the children who feel particularly upset. The assembly dissolves without having found a solution yet. The topic remains open. This will not be the last assembly to deal with it...

Conflicts in relationships are part of our lives. They express the wish for personal ties. They are offers for relationships. We start from the premiss

that all forms of expression are legitimate on the basis of the respective socialisation background, whether we like them or not. At any rate conflicts demand our conflict-competence, on an initial level: remaining present (not controlling) whilst tolerating tension and disharmony.

We do not as adults sanction children's behaviour, or systematically develop catalogues of measurements, or scare children. We point this out specifically because we distance ourselves explicitly from the pedagogical consequences of threats like "if—then," e.g., placing children on the "silent chair." for talking during a lesson. In a system that relies on such practices it is impossible to establish the true participation of children. Even the introduction of a "consultation meeting" or a "class council" does not help here because the atmosphere is burdened with asymmetry from the outset.

Complaints come up in a space that is structurally free of fear. It is necessary that adults deal with the expression of emotion calmly (not routinely and detached). Particularly small children often have not developed a vocabulary yet for such expressions. At the Freie Schule Frankfurt complaints can take different forms:

- A child may act in a diffusely destructive manner. This may be an obstacle for getting a clear picture of the underlying problem, it may make a solution temporarily impossible. The complaint is voiceless. Children and adults who are attentive towards others will sense the complaint of others, talk to them and function as "door openers" for them.
- A child complains directly to another child or an adult.
- A child complains at home about another child or an adult. The parents are

advised to encourage the child to bring the complaint back to the school. The complaint is made public in a school assembly. This is the case mostly where other approaches did not bear satisfactory results, or in cases of urgency and severe conflicts.

At the Freie Schule Frankfurt all rooms are accessible and all children and adults are in principle approachable at all times. Children initiate relationships to persons in the house whom they find interesting. Thus in cases where they have a complaint they can always talk to those people whom they trust most.

Adults are also answerable to children, e. g., in cases where adults did not follow a certain rule because they felt it appropriate to be exempt from it, or because they lost track of it due to the amount of different agreements at any given time.

Children get annoyed with adults in situations where adults act against the children's sense of justice. In these cases adults can be confronted quite harshly and they have to deal with it. Adults can also be challenged in a school assembly, albeit that this happens rarely.

Our school concept says: "At the Freie Schule Frankfurt it is normal that the actions of pedagogues are critically commented on by children. The adults take seriously the children's critique. The children do not need to fear any sort of backlash from expressing criticism. Of course the pedagogues also express criticism about the actions of children." (FSF 2004, p. 20)

### **Using time, space, rooms**

Self-regulation at the Freie Schule Frankfurt implies that children can decide freely how to spend their time at the

school, where they want to be in the school (and on the basis of agreement also outside the school), and they can decide how to use a particular room. And here the same applies: if there is a conflict a solution has to be found through communication. Currently a rule is in place that stipulates a right for children to “kick others out” from certain rooms if they feel constantly disturbed. Another rule is that adults don't want children to access their office. The school opening times can not be randomly changed, although even such a change can potentially be discussed.

Children spend their time doing things that are of interest to them. Participation therefore does not start with educational preferences of adults. It is based on the ideas and requests of the children. Nevertheless the adults also formulate their suggestions. For example, as far as reading and writing is concerned the adults intervene more with the older children who are gearing towards the transition to a state run secondary school. They are less likely to do the same in relation to the learning of tying shoe-laces or riding a seesaw.

In the institutions that surround us we find that the roles of adults are defined with reference to the children's future. There are only limited possibilities to take

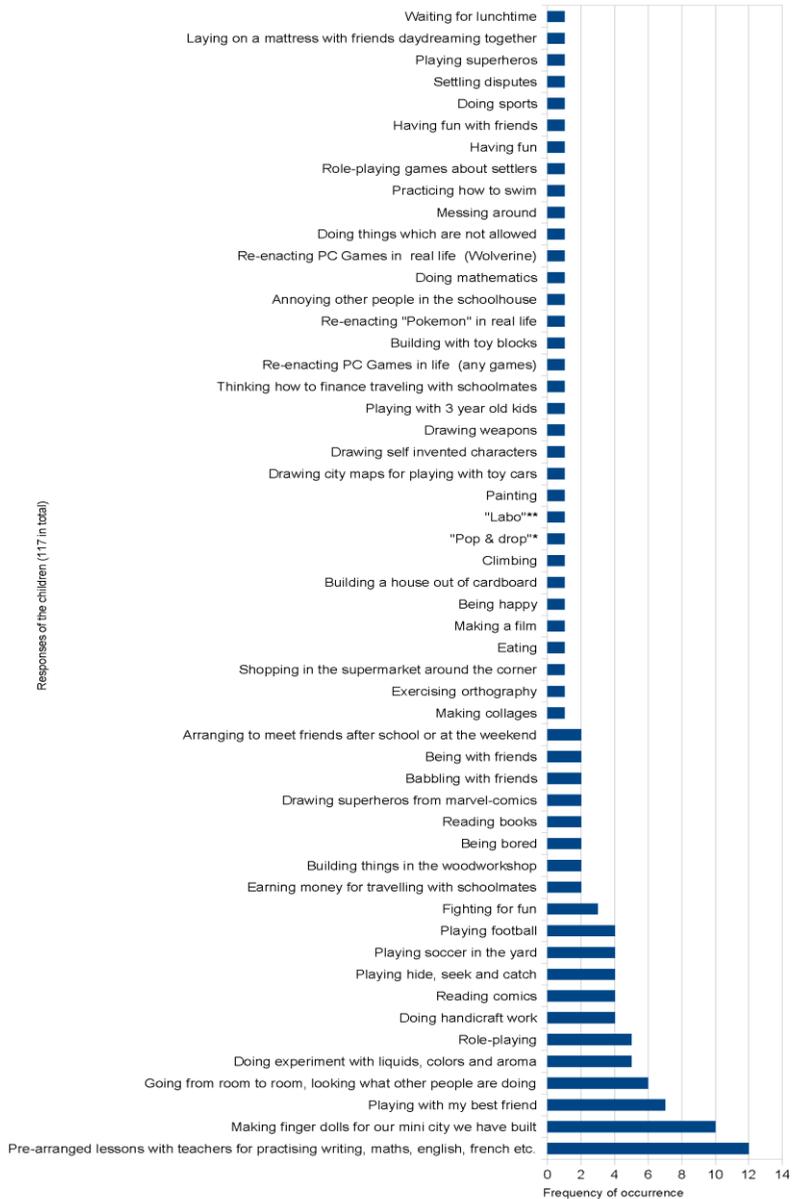
into account the children's present. In our conceptual paper we state: “We (...) are of the opinion that children at any stage of development can be responsible for themselves, be it individually or together with others. For adults that means that they need to understand learning as a process of communication on all levels. Thus the motives for, and forms of learning of a given topic as purported by the teacher must be seen as learning.” (FSF, 2004, p. 14)

The richness of activities that the children's self-regulation brings about can be seen from a survey that we conducted in the school in 2014. The children were asked about the activities with which they spent most of their time. The resulting overview is not more, but not less than a snapshot of a given week in the school based on the children's self-assessment.

*Survey is on the next page*

**How do children at FSF spend most of their time?**

A self-assessment of 37 children from 5 to 12 years of age with multiple responses.



In the course of a school year certain trends can be observed in the school. Currently the construction of a miniature town takes up immense space and time. For the last two weeks a (larger) group of girls has been building this model for which they have taken over a number of tables. They have created apartments with beds, wardrobes, kitchens etc. From time to time they also animate the scene with little figurines.

For some time skateboards and inline-skates were "in." Children built ramps, went to the local skater-park to watch teenagers do their tricks, and spent a lot of time practicing their own skills. They taught each other whatever skill they had acquired.

Prior to Christmas children invested a lot of time in planning and practicing stage plays for Christmas. They built the stage decoration and sewed their costumes.

For a while many children played a kind of martial game which they called "Pop & Drop." For this purpose they built elaborate wooden guns. In the game a person being "shot" had to fall to the ground, and was allowed to get up after a short time again. Some boys ended this period by smashing their guns to pieces. They explained that they were fed up of the game.

Another popular game is "Labo," a pen-and-paper role play. Here the actions are coordinated by a (play) master, but the players exert significant influence on the course of the game. Imaginary landscapes and game elements support and inspire the game.

### **Self-regulation and participation**

Being conscious of the manifold competences, interests and learning

opportunities of children creates space for many possibilities for participation. Once this space is opened up for all interests, needs, wishes and desires to be valued and taken into account, and self-regulation is the guiding principle of pedagogy, the question arises what role the participation of adults plays. At the Freie Schule Frankfurt adults in the first place do not act a particular *role* (educators who protect, offer a program, establish harmony, etc.). They are rather whole persons with whom genuine relationships are possible, and persons who have a genuine interest in the children and in themselves.

A child at the Freie Schule Frankfurt has a choice of contact with different adults. And an adult is not under constraint to deal with a particular child because there are 10 to 15 members of staff. Not all children and all adults get equally close to each other.

The activities in which children and adults engage together are not judged for their educational value, they rather serve the genuine interests of children and adults. Children can follow their interests, and they experience adult attention and support. They are also able to take part in all deliberations that are important for the adults. Thus they take part in real life instead of being occupied with educationalised trivia (Finkbeiner 1977, p. 212).

Children take part in a trip to the D.I.Y. shop to buy a new glass panel for a window; they are hooked by the passion of an adult for jogging; they help the chef in the kitchen to prepare the meals; they go to see an exhibition that is of interest for an adult; they join adults when they play

music; they collect the post and answer the phone.

At times it can be rather boisterous in the school. Harmony is not a conceptual focus for us. We emphasize exchange of opinion and communication processes that are not pre-structured in terms of topic, script and result. We aim to allow genuine exchange.

The participation of adults includes the active structuring of the school day and the involvement as approachable persons offering genuine relationships. In regularly scheduled meetings with adults the older children express their wishes concerning learning opportunities, they plan their projects and reflect on their development. They enjoy the honest feedback of the adults and the chance to grow with it.

For adults at the Freie Schule Frankfurt it is an essential part of their involvement that they deal occasionally with situations that seem chaotic, and that they delegate the formulation of normative standards to the school community.

Children realise that they are asked to contribute, think, work, be responsible, especially because many processes of the everyday life in the school remain imperfect and coarse without the children's participation. We entrust the children with a lot. We are convinced that this is exactly what allows them to grow.

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### Notes

1: The Freie Schule Frankfurt opened a second branch in 2013. Here children from the age of one are catered for.

2: Like all images of childhood this describes a phenomenon that can be observed, and also pedagogical desire. At one time it is more a reflection, at another time more a transference. If an image is so strong that the exemptions can not be perceived and accepted any longer, it becomes a problem of alienation. This makes empathy difficult and hinders the development of individual children. Consequently it is necessary to reflect upon exactly such idealistic images of childhood. From time to time they need to be scrutinised against lived reality. In my essay I attend only to a description of the observable and perceptible tendency.

### References

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