THE RIGHT OF CHILDREN TO PARTICIPATE AND ITS PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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PREFACE

Children are not merely individuals who need protection; they are thinking, speaking, and interpreting beings. Child participation refers to a child expressing their opinions, particularly on matters concerning themselves, and actively participating in decision-making processes within the institutions they are part of (family, school, social services, etc.). In this book, I have attempted to evaluate children's right to participation by addressing its legal, administrative, social, and educational dimensions. I hope this work will raise awareness among all adults and parents and foster the necessary sense of responsibility. A world where children's thoughts are taken into account and their voices are heard will be both more democratic and more beautiful. With respect and affection...

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Dr. Mehmet DEMİRHAN

CONTENTS

4

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1. CHILD PARTICIPATION

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, approved by the United Nations in 1989 and implemented by Turkey in 1995, is based on the principles of 'the best interests of the child, the right to life and development, non-discrimination, and the right to participation'. These principles are as follows: The best interests of the child means that social stakeholders must do what is best for the child; the right to life and development means that all stakeholders must protect the right of all children to life and development; non-discrimination means that all children are equal and cannot be discriminated against; participation means that children have a say in decisions that affect them (UN CRC, 2005). Children's participation has resulted in their inclusion in decision-making processes by social institutions (Pekince, 2022).

Children's rights emerged with the recognition of human rights and fundamental rights based on the constitution for children as well. In this respect, it is not correct to consider children's rights independently of universal human rights. This is because the negative developments and rights violations in the field of human rights around the world affect children in the same way (Mamur Işıkçı, 2018). Child

participation is defined as children being involved in decision-making processes on issues that concern them directly or indirectly (Pekince and Avcı, 2018). Although participation in decision-making processes is generally attributed to adults, adults' decision-making processes are fundamentally based on their childhood experiences (Grolnick, Gurland, Jacob, and Decourcey, 2002). It is known that children can make decisions on issues such as nutrition and clothing, but they are not included in the process by their parents on relatively more important issues such as school choice, and their parents also believe that children cannot make the right decisions on these issues (Pekince and Avcı, 2018).

Adults' thoughts about children's decision-making process are related to the social perspective (Pekince and Avcı, 2018). Conceptually, childhood is a phenomenon created by society to describe the first period of human life (Sorin, 2005). The phenomenon of childhood implies a state of being behind, or inferior, compared to adults (Edwards, 1996). This perception excludes children from decision-making processes (Hart, 2016).

The inclusion of children in decision-making processes is expressed as the right to participation and is guaranteed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 2009). This convention obliges signatory states to prioritize and monitor children's right to participation. Although children's right to participation has been defined at a theoretical level, differences arise in its application. These

differences stem from the social, cultural, and economic structure of the society in question (Coleman, 2000).

In conclusion, it can be said that the active participation of children in decision-making processes is their right. This is also a process that increases children's contribution to social life. However, for this participation to occur, children's opinions must be taken seriously, and social awareness must be increased. Adults' and parents' perspectives on children's decision-making abilities are shaped by traditional norms existing in society. Since childhood is often perceived by society as a period of deficiency and inadequacy, children are often excluded from decision-making processes. This situation can prevent children from becoming active members of social life and can also be interpreted as a violation of children's rights. Although children's right to participation is guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, various difficulties are encountered in practice. It is important to remember that children's right to participation is a legal responsibility and that children must be involved in all areas of social life.

2. BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION

Children's direct involvement in decision-making processes that affect them has a positive impact on them, fostering a sense of responsibility and helping them become confident and enterprising adults, while also positively reflecting on the functioning of society (Hart, 2016). Children who participate learn democracy by experiencing it, become aware of their rights and responsibilities, and can become active

citizens (Pekince, 2022). At the same time, children's empathy develops and they form a sense of belonging (UNICEF, 2010).

Interest in children's participation has gradually led to a focus on their well-being (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005). According to Cleaver and Cockburn (2009), indicators of children's well-being are linked to their level of being listened to, their active involvement in decision-making processes, and their ability to make their voices heard. Since it is known that children become more competent in life when they have opportunities to participate in educational processes, it is essential to support children's participation starting from the preschool period (Simovska, 2004).

Children must be given the opportunity to participate in all areas of life, and participation must be encouraged. If children are not encouraged to make their own decisions, they will not gain any experience in this regard. If children are encouraged, they will show greater development on the path to becoming active individuals. It is very important to give children a voice in the areas where they live and to see life from their perspective (Coşgun, 2019). Children can be included in family decisions in daily choices within the family (e.g., food, clothing), activities (e.g., which movie to watch), or more serious matters (e.g., health care, custody). Participation within the family involves explaining why children's wishes are not always accommodated and showing a high degree of warmth and compassion. Being consistent with children's participation rights leads to positive

outcomes such as increased self-esteem, self-control, peer acceptance, and decision-making skills (Covell, 2008).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (2009) published General Comment No. 12 on the right of the child to participate in response to problems encountered in participation processes, inadequacies in participation levels, and insufficiently explanatory participation models. According to this publication, it has expressed the areas where children's right to participation exists in eleven environments: family, alternative care, health, school/education, play, recreation, sports/culture, workplace, situations of violence, development of preventive activities, migration/asylum situations, emergencies, and national/international environments. For participation to occur in these environments, certain qualities are required: transparency and information, voluntariness, respect, child-friendliness, inclusiveness, support through education, safety and sensitivity to risk, and accountability.

Therefore, expanding children's right to participation supports their individual development and facilitates the construction of a conscious and democratic society. However, as is well known, there are also some problems regarding children's participation. The most prominent of these is the insufficient level of participation. The United Nations has published General Comment No. 12 to find solutions to these problems. Here, it has identified eleven different environments necessary for ensuring child participation. These environments cover a wide range of areas of life (such as family, school, playgrounds,

health, etc.). These environments are expected to be safe, healthy, respectful, and child-friendly. Only then can the desired level of participation be expected to be effective. In order to ensure effective participation, participation processes must be structured in an inclusive and transparent manner. In this sense, it can be said that involving children in decision-making processes is a critical step.

3. QUALITIES OF PARTICIPATION

The characteristics of participation provide an opportunity to assess how participatory existing participation-related efforts truly are. For activities carried out under the name of 'participation' to be truly participatory, they must have the following characteristics according to UN CRC General Comment No. 12 (2009):

• Transparent and informative

• Voluntary

• Respectful

• Relevant

• Child-friendly

• Inclusive

• Supported by education

• Safe and sensitive to risks

• Accountable

Legal regulations are necessary for children's participation processes to be meaningful and at the expected level. However, participation processes must be implemented in a qualified manner. Child participation not only contributes to children's individual development but also contributes to the formation of a more just, transparent, and equal social structure. In this context, the active participation of children in decision-making processes is a right for them and a necessity for society.

4. PARTICIPATION AND FAMILY

Children's experiences of participation begin within their families (Martin et al., 2018; Pekince, 2022). According to Hayes (2000), families shape children's lives in terms of rights and well-being, but they do not fully embrace the idea that children have rights as adults. Families do not allow children to participate in more serious matters, believing that participation will put them at risk and negatively affect them (Lansdown, 2011) (Avcı and Pekince, 2018). The categorical view of children as weak and passive (Oswell, 2013) has been replaced today by a socio-cultural context in which children are not only exposed but also active agents (Horgan et al., 2017). It can be said that children have risen to a more adult-like position. It has been reported that when participation is ensured in the family environment, children develop a positive self-image, their level of autonomy increases, their self-confidence increases, positive developments are seen in their social skills, and their self-control mechanisms develop (Hart, 2016; Simovska, 2004).

The attitudes of adults/parents also complicate the task of correctly defining the boundaries of child participation. Sometimes adults fail to establish the framework for supporting children correctly. This is because adult support sometimes becomes a mechanism for making decisions on behalf of children (Bektaş et al., 2018). It is important for adults and parents to strike a balance between protecting children and providing them with opportunities for participation and decision-making. However, achieving this balance can be difficult. Adults need to understand the opportunities required to facilitate the child's current abilities and development. Furthermore, this balance should be dynamic over time in response to the child's development. Adults should adjust participation opportunities and guidance as the child's abilities increase. Difficulties in finding this balance can create tension in the implementation of participation rights (Campbell & Rose Krasnor, 2007).

Participation is an informal structure that fosters respect for children's preferences and representations within the family environment (Alderson, 2010). Participation within the family environment can be decisive in children's participation in daily life (Percy Smith and Thomas, 2010). According to Thomas, when children can exercise their right to participation in the family environment, their decision-making skills develop (2002). Martin and colleagues (2018) state that participation should be examined in its social and cultural context. Therefore, they indicate that children's participation is influenced by

factors such as their age, family structure, number of siblings, and their family's socioeconomic status.

Factors such as children's ages, family structures, number of siblings, and their families' socioeconomic status determine the degree of children's participation in decision-making processes and shape how effective that participation will be. For example, in families with low socioeconomic status, children's participation is often limited because families typically face more external pressures and economic difficulties. Differences in family structure (single-parent families, extended family structures, etc.) can also affect the nature and degree of children's participation. Ultimately, child participation that begins in the family is an important first step in terms of the child's personal development and social role. Supporting participation processes within the family in a healthy manner increases children's self-confidence, making them more conscious, responsible, and socially skilled individuals. However, for this participation to be successful, the social and cultural environment in which the child lives must be taken into account; furthermore, it must be shaped in accordance with each child's individual circumstances.

5. FACTORS THAT INCREASE THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILD PARTICIPATION

Factors that have increased the importance of child participation include the greater prominence of child participation on the agenda, developments in children's rights, the emergence of children as competent and active subjects in scientific research, and the growing

importance of consumers (Sinclair, 2004). Consumers' preferences regarding the services and goods offered to them affect the quality of products and services, as well as the structures that provide services and create products (Braye, 2000). Structures that provide services and create products, especially those providing public services, increasingly assign children the role of consumers (Sinclair, 2004). This consumer role ensures children's participation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child presents children as individuals with rights, just like adults. In particular, Article 12 guarantees children's right to participation. Lansdown states that children's right to participation is overshadowed by their need for protection and care (1995). When accepting responsibility for a child, the idea of taking responsibility away from them is outdated; it is clear that children's other rights cannot be exercised without their participation (Willow, 2002). With the realization that children are more influential in shaping their environment than previously thought, our perceptions of their participatory skills are changing positively (Clarck and Moss, 2001). For the reasons stated above, the importance of children's participation is increasing.

As is well known, the primary condition for ensuring participation is the establishment of equality. For this reason, ensuring that each individual has a place in the social structure as equal citizens, with a democratic understanding, is an indispensable condition for participation (Karataş & Acar, 2008). Today, children's participation is becoming increasingly important for their individual development

and the healthy functioning of society. The active participation of children requires seeing them both as individuals exercising their rights and as part of social change. It can be said that involving children in decision-making processes is a critical step towards building a more just and egalitarian society. Therefore, removing barriers to child participation and supporting participation more broadly is an important need for the future of societies.

6. COMPONENTS OF CHILD PARTICIPATION

Participation is a multidimensional construct. The core components of this construct are the level, quality, focus, and children who participate (Kirby et al., 2003). The level of participation refers to the degree to which children are active in participating (Sinclair, 2004). The focus of child participation concentrates on whether decisions affecting children are specific (directly related to the child, their family, and their environment) or related to public services, and whether they concern individual children or children as a group (Sinclair, 2004). In general, children are less involved in specific issues at the core of participation (Morrow, 1998). The nature of participation activities varies: one-off meetings, forums or consultation groups with long-term consultations, youth councils, youth participation in management boards, and continuous participation in governance processes (Cutler, 2002; Sinclair, 2004). The concept of children participating in participation encompasses not only personal characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, special needs, culture, and socio-economic conditions, but also includes very

different groups with different interests and abilities, alongside a dynamic characteristic that is evolving day by day (Sinclair, 2004). Therefore, what is good for one group may not be good for another, so it is necessary to design participation processes with the child at the center (Lancaster and Broadbent, 2003).

In conclusion, it can be said that participation cannot be grouped under a single heading, that it has many different dimensions, and that these dimensions must be taken into account. It is expected that the creation of groups covering the developmental characteristics and different aspects of children will increase the scope of participation. In this context, participation processes should be designed with a flexible, child-centered model rather than a uniform model.

7. PARTICIPATION PRACTICES AND PROCESSES

Participation is implemented to enable children to influence decision-making processes in relation to individuals, decision-making structures, services, adult-child relationships, or organizational culture, and should be based on children's preferences and consent (Sinclair, 2004). When planning, implementing, and evaluating participation practices, the following issues should be considered (Sinclair, 2004):

• Clarity of purpose

• Children's characteristics

• How we interpret what children say

• Evaluating children's views alongside those of other stakeholders

• Making participation more meaningful

• Evaluating the impact of children's participation

• Appropriate ethical standards

Environments that positively influence participation processes should be established. Participation processes can be developed according to certain stages. These stages can be described as creating qualified environments, conducting recognition and evaluation activities for children, making adjustments based on children's feedback, and developing participation (Kangas et al., 2016).

Pekince (2022, p. 18) has developed a framework considering the qualities of participation in family and school environments. This framework explains children's participation, its theoretical basis, and its relationship with the relevant articles of the CRC in Table 1:

Tablo 1

Katılımcı Uygulamalar Çerçevesinin İçeriği

	Çocuk Katılımı	Teorik Altyapısı	Diğer ÇHS maddeleriyle ilişkisi
Kim için?	-Bütün çocuklar	Özbelirleme Kuramı	Çocuğun yüksek yararı Ayrım Gözetmeme Çocuğun görüşlerine saygı GY. No: 7, 9, 12
Kim Sağlar?	-Ebeveynler -Öğretmenler -Araştırmacılar (Çocukla çalışan bütün uzmanlar)	Bronfenbrenner'in Ekolojik Modeli Sosyokültürel Öğrenme	Çocuğun yüksek yararı Ayrım Gözetmeme GY. No: 7, 9, 12
Ne zaman?	-Doğumdan itibaren çocuğun gelişim düzeyine uygun olarak hayata geçirilir.	Bronfenbrenner'in Ekolojik Modeli Sosyokültürel Öğrenme Özbelirleme Kuramı	Çocuğun yüksek yararı Ayrım Gözetmeme GY. No: 7, 9, 12
Nerede?	-Çocuğun evde, okulda ve toplumdaki günlük hayatında olmalıdır -Çocuğu etkileyen erken çocukluk hizmetleri, politikaları, adli ve idari işlemlerin tamamında yer almalıdır -Çocukların dahil olduğu araştırmalar	Bronfenbrenner'in Ekolojik Modeli Sosyokültürel Öğrenme	Çocuğun yüksek yararı Ayrım Gözetmeme GY. No: 7, 9, 12
Nasıl?	-Araştırmalar çocuklar üzerine değil çocuklarla beraber yapılır -Çocukların farklı iletişim biçimleri çeşitli medya araçlarıyla tanınır ve etkinleştirilir -Çocuk merkezlidir -Çocukları dinlemeyi içerir -Çocuk dostu yollar kullanılır	Çocuk Dostu Yöntemler Mozaik Yaklaşımı Reggio Emilia Yaklaşımı Evrensel Tasarım High Scope Yaklaşımı Hart'ın Katılım Merdiveni	Çocuğun yüksek yararı Ayrım Gözetmeme Çocuğun görüşlerine saygı GY. No: 7, 9, 12

In summary, the framework for participation must be defined and clarified in environments where children spend a significant amount of time and are directly involved, such as school and home. Participation processes should not be limited to children passively participating or merely expressing their opinions. Children's active role in decision-making and shaping decisions and seeing their ideas implemented will make them feel more empowered. In this context, organizing environments that will positively influence children's participation processes is of critical importance.

8. PARTICIPATION MODELS

8.1. Ecological Model (Gal)

This model specifies children's abilities and adults' responsibilities. Children's abilities, adults' perspectives, perceptions, and attitudes, and motivation levels are factors that influence participation (Pekince, 2022). The model considers children's participation in their family, school, and neighborhood separately. Children's participation in the planning of their streets is included in this model.
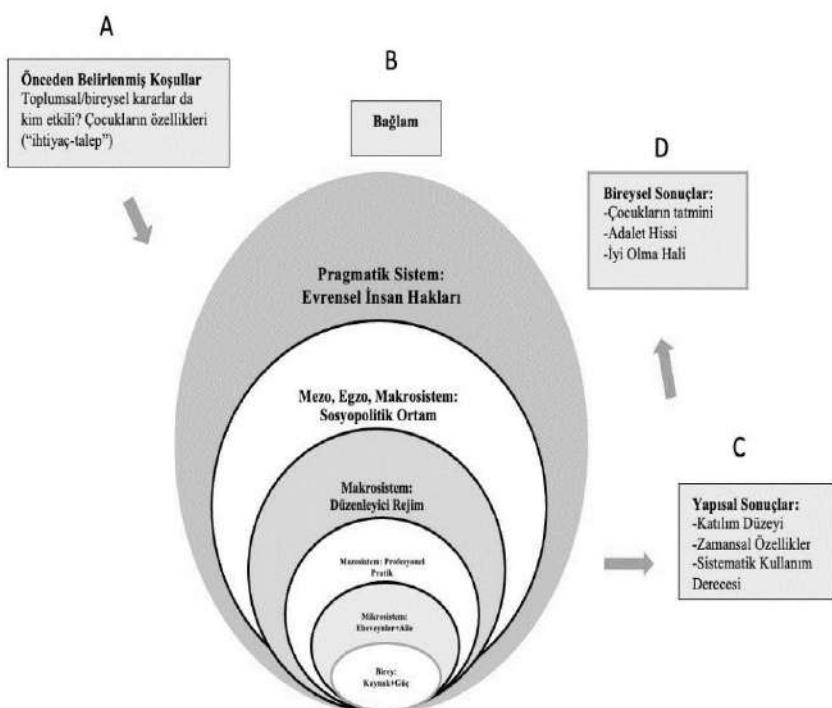

Figure 1. Ecological Model (Pekince, 2022).

8.2.Citizen Participation Ladder Model (Arnstein)

It has been developed in a step-by-step manner to determine the levels of adult participation in government administration. At the steps where there is no participation, adults are not included in the planning processes. At the steps where token participation exists, adults' opinions are sought but not taken into account in the decision-making stage. At the steps where citizen participation exists, participation is shaped according to its degree and power (Pekince, 2022). We can think of this ladder as a democracy scale.
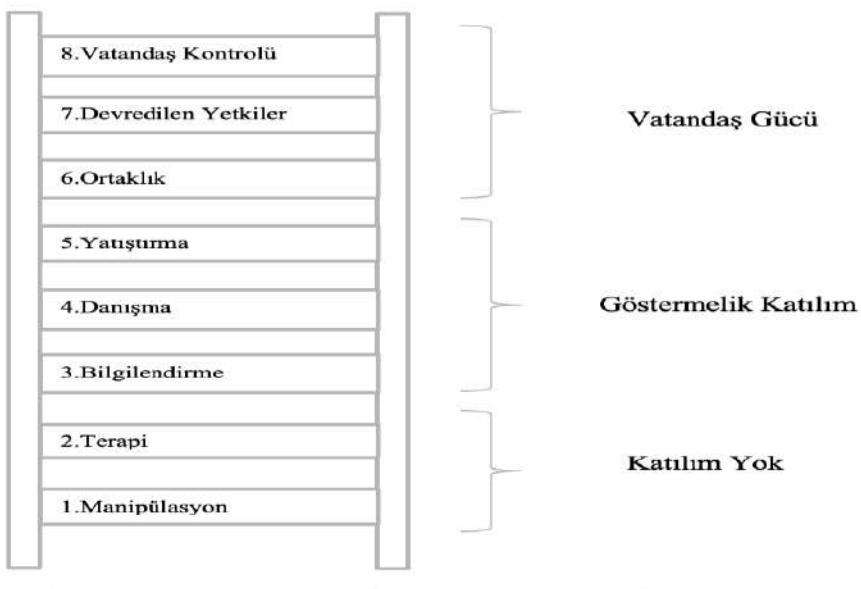

Figure 2. Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein,1969)

8.3.The Ladder of Participation Model (Hart)

The ladder of participation model developed by Hart (1992) can be considered an adaptation of the ladder of participation model developed by Arnstein (1969) for children. In this model, the first three steps are anti-participatory, while the next five steps are pro-participatory, with the amount of participation increasing as the steps increase.
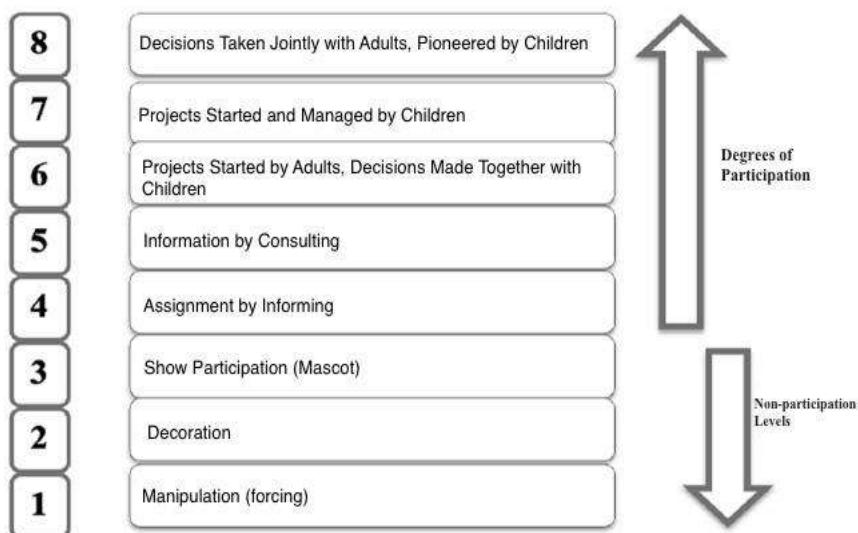

Figure 3. The Ladder of Participation Model (Hart, 1992)

8.4. The Degrees of Participation Model (Treseder)

The participation levels model emerged based on the premise that children must first be informed in order to ensure their participation. However, taking into account that participation should not be a step-

by-step process, a new model was developed. In this model, voluntary participation is fundamental (Kanyal, 2014).
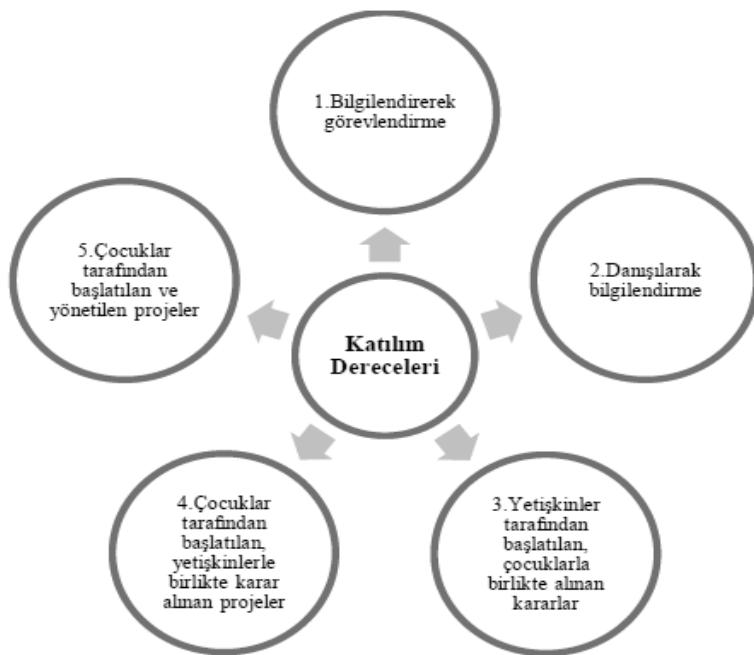
Figure 4. Degrees of Participation Model (Kanyal, 2014)

8.5. Pathways to Participation Model (Shier)

This model, developed by Shier (2001), assigns adults the task of guiding children's participation. This model is shaped by five principles and three responsibilities. These principles and responsibilities are as follows: Principles: Children are actively listened to, supported by taking their views into account, and share responsibility by being involved in decision-making processes.

Responsibilities: These take the form of initiation, opportunity, and tasks.

In conclusion, each of these models developed regarding child participation offers a different perspective, and their main purpose is to involve children in decision-making processes.

9. DIMENSIONS OF CHILD PARTICIPATION

Child participation consists of three dimensions: legal, socio-cultural, and spatial/territorial. The legal dimension is the legal aspect of participation. It can be evaluated by the attention given to participation at the local/central level. The socio-cultural dimension is the social and cultural aspect of participation. It can be evaluated by the participation of children in social life and cultural activities. The spatial/geographical dimension refers to the participation of children in their city, neighborhood, and street. It can be evaluated in terms of participation in city management (Akyürek, 2020). The dimensions of child participation must also be examined at the institutional level. In this context, this study addresses the dimensions of child participation at certain institutional levels (such as municipalities and schools) and makes some recommendations.

10. CHILD PARTICIPATION AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

The concept of participatory democracy is becoming increasingly important today, and this requires the direct participation of children (Karataş and Acar, 2016). It is known that children's participation in

institutional structures such as the family and school is very low (ÇOÇA, 2013). However, according to Lansdown (2001), children who participate can voice their problems (primarily neglect and abuse) and solutions can be found to their problems. In this context, it is necessary to examine child participation in the family, school, lawmaking, health institutions, media, and local governments/municipalities. Examining child participation at the institutional level is important and valuable both in terms of revealing existing problems and indicating possible solutions and recommendations.

11. CHILD PARTICIPATION IN MUNICIPALITIES

Municipalities are also one of the actors in solving childhood-related problems. Municipalities are known to pay more attention to relatively vulnerable people (women, the elderly, children, and individuals with special needs) within their boundaries (Aka and Güngör, 2018). The distorted urbanization experienced in cities and excessive and dangerous traffic are narrowing children's living spaces and, together with the increasingly smaller family type, causing children to increasingly withdraw into their own shells through the virtual world.

The National Child Rights Strategy Document has tasked municipalities with identifying and preventing child labor and creating healthy spaces and activities for children to spend their free time (Akyürek, 2020). In addition, municipalities should establish and operationalize youth councils to foster democratic awareness (Erbay, 2013; Yüksel, 2014). Furthermore, city councils should develop and

monitor policies aimed at ensuring the participation of all segments of society (especially children, disadvantaged groups, women, and the elderly) (Mamur Işıkçı, 2019).

Municipalities carry out certain activities in the areas of physical environment, culture-arts, sports, and health as services for children (Aka and Güngör, 2018). In this context, the municipalities of Ankara and Istanbul stand out with their work in Turkey (Akyürek, 2020). A decision-making guide can be created and used with children to ensure participation in municipalities. These guides can enable direct participation by placing children in a position of genuine partnership and ensuring their equality with adults within the framework of rights (Koca, 2022). There are certain structures that enable children's participation in municipalities. These structures are outlined in the Municipalities Law No. 5393. According to this law, the participation mechanisms are: neighborhood councils, citizen rights, specialized commissions, city councils, children's councils, voluntary participation, and strategic planning (Akyürek, 2020, p. 80). The mechanisms mentioned above can gather children's ideas and convey them to municipal decision-making bodies. This will ensure children's participation, albeit indirectly. However, the literature generally examines child participation in municipalities through child-friendly cities, playgrounds, and children's councils.

11.1. Child-Friendly Cities

The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children's right to life and integrity (mental and physical) must be protected. Based on

these rights, children must have access to environments that support their development. Local governments are among the actors responsible for meeting these requirements. Therefore, in order to ensure children's participation, local governments must identify the needs of children within their boundaries (Çakırer Özservet, 2015).

There are two important elements in the emergence of child-friendly cities. The first is the creation of the city's structure and fabric according to the requirements and needs of children, i.e., according to the child. The second is the participation of children in the design of the city's fabric and structure, i.e., their ideas are taken into account, and they are given an active role in the decision-making process (Oktay and Pekküçükşen, 2017).

When we look at Northern European countries, which are at an advanced stage in terms of education, we see that education is largely under the authority and responsibility of municipalities. This situation shows us that municipalities need to be more active in terms of child participation. Furthermore, since local governments are considered to have a better understanding of the cultural characteristics and needs of children within their boundaries, it is thought that they can support child participation more than the central government. Legally, UNICEF carries out the duties of local governments, with reference to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, through 'child-friendly cities'. UNICEF supports municipalities in creating child-friendly spaces. Child-friendly cities are cities where children participate in city management (Çakırer Özservet, 2015).

In child-friendly cities, the responsibilities of municipalities regarding children are expressed as follows (Çakırer and Özservet, 2015; Karakuzu and Aksu, 2022):

- Ensure children's participation and remove barriers to it
- Develop child-friendly legal regulations
- Establish and support mandatory/voluntary units working on children's rights
- Conduct awareness-raising activities on children's rights
- Allocate a special share from the municipal budget for children
- Conduct regular evaluation activities related to children's rights
- Facilitate children's access to basic needs (healthy food/water/air and education)
- Create safe spaces against neglect and abuse
- Create quality spaces (such as parks) where they can socialize while playing
- Creating areas where they can interact with nature (plants/animals)
- Organizing sociocultural activities and encouraging participation

Municipalities are the fundamental builders of child-friendly cities. Municipalities are the primary institutions responsible for serving the people within their boundaries and are the main organs of local government. They are the primary responsible body for the design and creation of playgrounds for children and with their participation, the

creation of parks and gardens, and the reduction of traffic and the risks it poses (Akyürek, 2020).

11.2. Play Areas

Participation by municipalities and children is primarily evaluated in terms of play, as outlined in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This right can only be exercised healthily in areas that are safe, relatively free, and rich in stimuli and materials. In this context, play areas should be considered not only as parks but also as streets and gardens. Senda (1992) defines children's play areas as follows: natural areas, open spaces, streets, adventure parks, secret areas, and children's playgrounds.

People living in cities have the right to benefit equally from that city. This situation is expressed by the concept of 'right to the city' (Memiş and Gülcan, 2020). Children living in cities should also benefit from this right equally with adults (Akkoyunlu, 2014). In this process of equal benefit, children's requirements, needs, interests, and desires should be taken into account, that is, their participation should be ensured.

Playgrounds are among the primary areas where children can socialize outside the home. Playgrounds should be designed with various materials, in a safe manner, and to appeal to different age groups. The primary responsibility for the design and construction of playgrounds lies with municipalities (Memiş and Gülcan, 2020). When designing play areas, it is mandatory to allocate a certain amount of space per

child. In Turkey, play areas are considered green spaces, and the average space per child is set at 3 m² (Şimşek, 2010, p.171). According to Memiş and Gülcan (2020, p.638), the characteristics that a quality playground should have are as follows: Location-accessibility, suitability for age groups, meeting basic needs, safety, inclusiveness, uniqueness, inviting environment, relationship with nature, flexibility, risk-taking and experimentation, and variety of play.

The 'Grandparent-Grandchild Center', implemented for the first time by Esenler Municipality, is an exemplary application for cultural transfer between generations and the healthy development of children.

Figure 5. Grandparent-Grandchild Life Center

(https://esenler.bel.tr/projeler/dede-torun-yasam-merkezi/)

11.3. Children's Councils

Childhood is a period of rapid change and transformation in an individual's life. This period is one in which every individual has rights arising from their different needs, and these rights are guaranteed and sought to be developed. First established within the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, children's councils are considered a milestone in Turkey in the context of children's rights, as they have decision-making authority (Hareket et al., 2016).

Özer (2013) states that children's councils should be established in every city, increasing their functionality and impact. Erbay (2012) states that the perception of children's rights in municipalities is not healthy and that children's councils have a passive structure. Karaman Kepenekçi and Baydık (2009) found that training on children's rights was successful, increasing awareness and sensitivity to children's rights among individuals. Kırcan (2019) states that children's council practices remain visible prominent in sociocultural activities and should take on a more participatory structure, with children directly involved in decision-making. Akyürek (2020) states that children's councils need to be developed, especially in terms of adopting democratic principles and internalizing children's rights.

In summary, child participation is not only a matter of rights related to processes involving children. It is also a necessity for democratic and inclusive cities and municipalities. The digital environment brought

about by technology and rapid urbanization further increases the responsibilities of local governments towards children. In many local governments and municipalities, symbolic practices such as children's councils and city councils need to be transformed into real decision-making processes.

12. CHILD PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOLS

After the family, one of the most important socialization institutions is school. A significant part of children's lives takes place in schools. Therefore, schools are among the institutions where children's participation should be questioned (Erbay, 2013). When the approaches guiding early childhood education are examined, it is seen that children are valued as "individuals" and their participation is supported. These approaches foresee the participation of children in decision-making processes in educational environments and respect for their opinions. Adults, by guiding children, contribute to the development of their autonomy (İçli, 2024).

Educational settings can be said to be appropriate environments for developing, implementing, and encouraging children's participation rights. Schools can be said to be relatively protected environments where children can learn and apply decision-making skills in areas that affect their lives. Educators, more so than other adults, can be said to have the necessary skills and daily opportunities to support children's participation in an age-appropriate manner. Indeed, these opportunities to promote development through participation are already naturally aligned with the educational mission of schools.

Along with this, student participation can help provide valuable sources of information for educators' educational policy and planning (Campbell & Rose Krasnor, 2007).

It is crucial for children to have a place in the management of the institutions/schools they are involved in, to be able to establish basic rules in a process or project they participate in, and to have their experiences, knowledge, and opinions heard. This can be achieved by organizing the environments in which children find themselves in line with these principles (Şahin & Polat, 2012). Child participation is a system that emerges in educational environments through the efforts and dedication of all stakeholders. Participation is achieved not only through policies but also through the cooperation of administrators, teachers, and all other staff. Children should be able to express their opinions on any issue that concerns them and voice their ideas on matters such as improving educational standards, developing programs, and determining teaching methods. They can also provide support services for younger children and express their opinions about the general physical structure of their schools and playgrounds (Lansdown et al., 2014). John and Osborn (1992) found that in democratic schools where participation occurs and children find more freedom to express themselves, students gain significantly stronger democratic attitudes.

The CRC states that it is an obligation for adults to encourage students' active participation with appropriate environments and tools. In this context, schools are one of the fundamental institutions that

offer students the opportunity to experience democracy and respect for human rights, as well as active citizenship, in a practical way. Students' participation at school is closely related to the democratic attitudes of families and teachers and their provision of a safe environment where students can express themselves. In this regard, for students to be active citizens in their families, schools, and communities and to develop democratic attitudes and behaviors, all adults involved with children need to be aware of this (Koçak, 2025).

Although there are opinions that child participation is limited in schools, there are many areas such as committees, commissions, and teams, teaching-learning processes, social activities, planning playgrounds, creating school bulletin boards, establishing school and classroom rules, planning free activity lessons, homework, creating weekly lesson schedules, and planning ceremonies These areas are suitable for implementing child participation and must be actively operated to establish a democratic school culture in the school environment.

In conclusion, children's rights and participation must become part of the school culture. Children should actively participate in decision-making processes and play a key role in projects. It should not be forgotten that child participation gains meaning not through structural arrangements but through the attitudes of adults. Schools, consisting of highly educated teachers and administrators who demonstrate this attitude, should be the ideal places for child participation. In a school environment where administrators, teachers, and other school staff do

not adopt democratic and fair approaches, child participation will remain symbolic.

13. CONCLUSIONS

In order to ensure the child's right to participation, it is necessary to be knowledgeable about the child's age and developmental characteristics and to create opportunities for the initiatives of children with creative ideas. It is very important for children to feel that they are treated equally, regardless of their age, ethnic origin, abilities, skills, and other factors. It is important to listen to what children say with a serious attitude, to be able to recognize their experiences, and to understand their ideas and interests, and this is a requirement for the protection of children's rights. This requirement is the responsibility of adults/parents because children are not aware of their own rights and cannot defend themselves on their own (Şahin & Polat, 2012).

Ensuring that children's rights are upheld in every area of their lives, that these rights are enforceable, and that they are recognized by all segments of society will enable children to recognize their rights and live in accordance with them. Therefore, the views and practices of professionals working with children regarding child participation are important. In addition, public institutions and educational environments where children recognize and can exercise their own rights will also contribute to child development (İçli, 2024). Creating spaces for children in cities is not an expensive undertaking that requires local governments to spend large amounts of money from their budgets. The main issue here is spending money in the right

place and in a healthy way (Erbay, 2016). At this point, local governments should do their part and act collectively with central governments. This is because responsibilities towards children cannot be fully realized with only the support of central governments without the support of local governments (Çakırer Özservet, 2015). The perception that municipalities are merely public structures with duties such as building infrastructure, sewage systems, water systems, sanitation, and playgrounds must be changed, and they must develop solution policies for problems within their service boundaries, regardless of the area (Çakırer Özservet, 2015).

By providing opportunities for children to exercise their right to participate, they should also be given the right to have a say in all decisions that concern them. Putting knowledge into practice, along with teaching it, can make what is taught valuable and contribute to preparing children for the future in a solid manner. In education and teaching environments, work can begin by creating environments that respect children's rights to participation and development, rather than merely transferring knowledge. Children who develop healthy self-confidence, feel valued, and are able to take responsibility will play an active role in the development of societies (Buğday & Küçükoğlu, 2017). Taking responsibility for the decisions children make and the choices they make will ensure that they are prepared for the future on a more solid foundation. It is their natural right to freely express their opinions, play an active role in matters that concern them, and have their opinions taken seriously. Children, who are part of social life,

will feel happier and more peaceful in society if they are raised with this awareness from an early age (Coşgun, 2019). For this reason, it is essential that children know their rights regarding children's rights and the right to child participation. At this point, awareness-raising activities should be carried out, and children should be encouraged to embrace their rights and freedoms through practical activities. It can be said that teachers play an important role in raising children to become more conscious individuals (Kozikoğlu, 2019).

Municipalities must design playgrounds that are suitable for children to socialize and play in a meaningful way, taking into account children's ideas and needs (Karakuzu and Aksu, 2022). It should also be remembered that play materials suitable for traditional games should be provided in playgrounds (Memiş and Gülcan, 2020). Studies have shown that children who participate in children's councils experience positive effects on their self-esteem and life skills (Hareket et al., 2016).

In conclusion, child participation is a holistic and multi-stakeholder responsibility. Participation is not a process constructed at a desk or symbolically implemented on paper. First and foremost, society, administrators, and families must change their perspective on the issue and address it with an inclusive approach. Teachers, local administrators, lawmakers, and all adults and parents should see this as a duty and take the necessary responsibility to bring about the required changes. Since it is not easy for children to recognize and

defend their rights on their own, all stakeholders must take on a long-term responsibility.

14. RECOMMENDATIONS

- For participation, the thoughts and feelings of the children who are the subjects of participation should be considered and prioritized (Karakuzu and Aksu, 2022), and democratic and free environments should be provided for children to express these (Çakırer and Özservet, 2015).

- Cities should be filled with the sounds of children not only in warm weather but also in cold weather. To achieve this, children should have access to areas where they can play and socialize in winter (Çakırer and Özservet, 2015; Memiş and Gülcan, 2020).

- Play materials in playgrounds should be inspected at regular intervals, and those that are no longer usable for children should be removed from the playground to avoid posing a risk (Memiş and Gülcan, 2020).

- Applications such as Children's Street and Grandparent-Grandchild Centers should be promoted throughout Turkey (Aka and Güngör, 2018).

- School administrators and teachers may be advised to involve students in management processes by taking their ideas into account and to create democratic, egalitarian, and inclusive classrooms and schools where students can express themselves freely.

- Parents, who play one of the most important roles in shaping a child's personality and character, may be provided with various trainings on children's rights and child participation.

- It may be recommended that textbooks be organized within the framework of children's right to participation.

- "Children's rights" and "child participation" boards, corners, etc. may be created in institutions, social service organizations, and schools so that children can freely express their ideas.

- It is recommended that the participation rights of children with special needs, refugee children, and disadvantaged children be taken into consideration by political, local, and community leaders.

- Parents must remember to clearly define the limits of their support for their children, otherwise they may find themselves in a position where they make decisions on behalf of their children.

- When determining classroom rules, school projects, and activities, processes should be managed by taking children's interests, needs, and expectations into account, and children's opinions should be consulted.

- In the school and classroom environment, teaching methods such as group work and discussions should be used to create settings where students can comfortably express their ideas.

- Informative conferences on children's rights and child participation should be organized for students, teachers, and parents.

- Projects that increase children's participation should be prepared and implemented within urban planning carried out by local governments.

- Digital environments where children can comfortably express their ideas should be created; however, the maximum level of security for these environments should be ensured.

- In the process of organizing children's playgrounds, planning should be carried out by taking the needs of students with special requirements into consideration, and children's developmental characteristics should be taken into account.

- Educational conferences on child participation and children's rights should be provided for employees, planners, and administrators of local governments.

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THE RIGHT OF CHILDREN TO PARTICIPATE AND ITS PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS