

STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN SPORT - STUDENTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE DECISION PROCESS ABOUT SPORTS ACTIVITIES

MARA SESAR,¹ BERNARDICA HORVAT PETRAVIĆ,²
VIOLETA VALJAN VUKIĆ³

¹ University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Zagreb, Croatia
mstojana@ffzg.unizg.hr

² Grigor Vitez Kindergarten, Samobor, Croatia
bernardica.petravic@gmail.com

³ University of Zadar, Department of Teachers' and Preschool Teachers' Education,
Zadar, Croatia
vvukic@unizd.hr

The topic of student participation in sport emphasises the importance of the student's role in choosing the sport of choice. The aim of this work is to determine the appearance of children's participation models in the choice of sports. For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire was created to answer questions about participation in sport, focussing on the choice of desired sport. The respondents were primary school pupils in seventh and eighth grade (N=107). The results of this survey confirm the pupils' positive attitude towards sport and a high degree of autonomy in choosing their favourite sport. No differences in participation were found in relation to gender. However, students were not informed about the intensity, dynamics and benefits that sport has for them. The student responses in this study prompted further reflection on the importance of student participation in choosing the sport of choice.

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PARTICIPACIJA UČENCEV V ŠPORTU- VKLJUČENOST UČENCEV V PROCES ODLOČANJA O ŠPORTNIH DEJAVNOSTIH

MARA SESAR,¹ BERNARDICA HORVAT PETRAVIĆ,²
VIOLETA VALJAN VUKIĆ³

¹ Univerza v Zagrebu, Filozofska fakulteta, Zagreb, Hrvatska
mstojana@ffzg.unizg.hr

² Vrtec Grigorja Viteza, Samobor, Hrvatska
bernardica.petrvacic@gmail.com

³ Univerza v Zadru, Oddelek za izobraževanje učiteljev in vzgojiteljev, Zadar, Hrvatska
vvukic@unizd.hr

Ključne besede:

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zdravje,
avtonomija

Tema participacija učencev v športu poudarja pomen vloge učencev pri izbiri zelenega športa. Namen tega dela je ugotoviti pojavnost modelov participacije otrok pri izbiri športa. Za namen študije je bil izdelan anketni vprašalnik, ki odgovarja na vprašanja o participaciji v športu, s poudarkom na izbiri zelenega športa. Anketiranci so bili osnovnošolci sedmega in osmega razreda (N=107). Rezultati ankete potrjujejo pozitiven odnos učencev do športa in visoko stopnjo avtonomije pri izbiri zelenega športa. Razlike v participaciji glede na spol niso bile ugotovljene. Dijaki niso bili obveščeni o intenzivnosti, dinamiki in koristih, ki jih ima šport zanje, kar je ena izmed predpostavk kvalitetne participacije. Odzivi učencev v tej študiji so spodbudili nadaljnji razmislek o pomenu participacije učencev pri izbiri zelenega športa.



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1 Introduction

In today's society, emphasis on student integrity is becoming more ubiquitous, and student participation in sports is a key component of that process. This work implies the importance of the active involvement of students in sports activities, that is, the importance of giving students a voice in the decision to participate in their desired sport and the importance of informing students on the sport they want to play is highlighted. Participation in sports activities does not only improve the physical health of students but they also acquire valuable experience that helps them in their emotional and social development.

1.1 Children's participation in decision making

Educational workers, trainers, managers of various activities in cooperating and conducting activities with children must think about the benefit and purpose of the participation of children. The purpose of society is to create conditions in which students develop into persons capable of making judgments, making rules, laws and adhering to them. At the beginning of the 20th century, the American educator, psychologist, reformer and philosopher John Dewey (1859 – 1952) gave importance to the creation of conditions for activating students as good citizens. Alexander Sutherland Neill (1999) considered that the happiness of a child was the starting point for making decisions on his upbringing, and that it was founded on the feeling of personal individual freedom. The goal of Summerhill was to develop the child's mental balance and to teach it that happiness takes first place in life, to use childhood in freedom, in order to create personal strength and self-initiative (Kosi, 2020). Janusz Korczak, his real name Henryk Goldszmit (1878 or 1879 – 1942), was the originator of the idea of promoting children's rights. As the headmaster of an orphanage, he established a court of honor of children before which the teachers were also accountable, and the children were the ones who considered and decided on the reported cases. He thus showed his faith in the children and young people he cared for. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) dedicated her entire life to the representation of children's rights and proving their exceptional capabilities. The child was at the center of her pedagogy, and the goal was to provide the child with an environment in which it would be able to develop into an independent and responsible person. She believed that little children are the greatest opportunity to contribute to the progress of humanity (Philipps, 1999). The upbringing goal of

Maria Montessori was that of a free man capable of managing his own life. Freedom was for Maria the foundation, condition and goal of pedagogy (Seitz & Hallwachs, 1996). These knowledge and attitudes already show that children's participation is not a philosophy, but an integral part of the legal acts of institutions and society, the basis of education, which is manifested in communication and work with children. Throughout the centuries of thinking about children, it is important to raise awareness among every adult who is in contact with the various activities of children (freedom, artistic, recreational, STEM fields...) on how participation is legal, practical and moral. When in 1989, the United Nations adopted the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, they classified the child as an active participant in the social environment; the child is an active citizen, and equal, an equal member of the community in which he grows up. Legal acts, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2016 – 2021), National Strategy for Children's Rights in the Republic of Croatia for the period from 2014 to 2020, The National Curriculum of the Republic of Croatia for early and preschool education, primary/elementary and secondary education - all of them prescribe the child's right to participation and active participation.

Expectations from today's society are better services in the community, better relations and progress of the community as a whole, and that society only progresses with the participation of children. Meaningful, inclusive, participatory and safe children's participation is needed. Children are ready and desiring to participate in all fields concerning their present as well as their future. Participation, as a complex concept, is realized through multiple forms that imply activity and independent action. One of the forms of participation is decision-making. The key to quality participation success lies in the models of children's participation in their communities. The offer of programs in the areas of culture, sports, free time in general, the involvement of quality staff in working with children, the diversity and availability of content to every child is fertile ground for the application and actualization of children's participation. Applicable children's participation in the local community is obtaining and sharing information about children and their life, upbringing and education, culture and free time. Children should be asked and consulted in matters concerning life in the community, realize the right to participate in decision-making on issues that are important for their life in the community.

According to General Comment No. 20 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016): “Adolescents' right to rest and free time and to freely participate in playing and recreational and artistic activities, on and off the Internet, is essential for the exploration of their identity because it enables them to explore their culture, shape new art forms, create relationships and develop as human beings. Leisure time, recreation and the arts provide adolescents with a sense of uniqueness that is fundamental to the right to human dignity, optimal development, freedom of expression, participation and privacy.” From this General Comment section (2016), it is evident that children's participation is important in recreational sports activities, from the very choice of activity/sport to the realization and method of implementation. How the child will choose an activity, how informed it is on the particularities of a particular activity/sport, the way of training and the dynamics of training - these are all segments that make up the complete growth and development of an individual. Participation is not only inclusion for authors branch participation into different types, steps, ladders. There are three ways of implementing the participation of children according to Lansdown (2010): consultative, in which adults seek the opinion of children, collaborative, which implies active engagement in various phases of a specific activity and participation initiated by children, where the adult is neutral, only helping and directing cooperation. According to Hart (1992), the ladder of children's participation consists of eight steps, the first step represents the manipulation of children and the highest eighth step represents participation initiated by children.

1.2 Sport and children

In 2022, the European Commission published the fifth Eurobarometer dedicated to sports and physical activity. It shows that 38% of Europeans do sports or exercise at least once a week or more, 17% of Europeans exercise less than once a week, and even up to 45% of Europeans currently never exercise or participate in any physical activity. (European Commission, 2022). The European Commission emphasizes that the results are stable compared to those of the previous year 2017. However, it is an indisputable fact that the promotion of sports and physical activity in general is still very much needed.

In today's society, when technology has occupied everyone, especially the youngest, it is refreshing to hear that someone is involved in sports. Some children start training from an early age, some when starting school and coordinating with their school obligations, some later to take care of their health. It is impossible to state all the reasons without some more comprehensive study, but the fact is that sports is recognized as a kind of *tool* for the improvement of physical health, but also for the advancement of capacities and skills. Sports is a *widespread and popular social phenomenon, the integral part of the culture of modern society* (Croatian Encyclopedia).

Boys and girls are equally interested in sports, but the motives for choosing sports are often different. According to previous research, sports attract students for different reasons: fun, games, a good coach and the influence of peers (Martinović, 2014). Allender et al. (2006) indicate in their research that social interactions, satisfaction, parental support and a safe environment are the most common reasons for participation in sports and physical activities and divide them according to the age of the respondents. Students refuse sports because of parental pressure, frequent injuries, lack of progress, ridicule and/or bullying. Parental pressure is one of the main motives of the present work. According to Hellstedt (1987), the degrees of parental involvement in their children's sports activities differ: on the one hand, there are over-involved parents, in the middle, moderately involved parents, and on the other hand, under-involved parents. Quite often, it is the overly involved parents who demand that their children start playing a certain sport. O'Sullivan (2013) emphasizes that those adults who supervise the sport have a huge influence on the child who plays the same sport. Used in a correct manner, that influence can bring exceptional benefit to the child. The best way to encourage a child to play sports is by personal example. Active parents make their children more active so that they themselves start playing sports (Kalish, 2000; Downward et al., 2014).

When it comes to students being informed about the sport they want to play, they most often get information from the presentation of clubs at school, by word of mouth among their peers, through the media, parents are informed about sports or similar. After the child starts training, it is important to be informed about his progress by the coach (Sindik, 2008) for the child to really improve his abilities and skills in sports. Sports activities should be available to every child, preferably in a closer location (Croatian Olympic Committee). At whatever age children start playing sports, it is important that the sport adapts to them, just as much as they

need to adapt to the sport. A child should have a positive experience at every training session, every game or performance.

Children's rights are also important in sports, they should feel safe and accepted, learn from mistakes, learn new things. Children should choose the sport they want to play.

2 Method

2.1 Objective

The aim of this work is to determine the appearance of children's participation models in choosing sports with the purpose of creating guidelines for increasing the active participation of students and indirectly influencing their mental and physical health. Information on the intensity, dynamics and advantages of sports for students is also indicated.

Four research questions were selected from the set research objective:

1. What direction of attitudes do students express towards the choice of sport in general?
2. How involved students are in choosing the desired sport?
3. Are students informed about the intensity, dynamics and benefits that sport has for them?
4. Are there differences among students in active participation for their inclusion in the desired sport (gender)?

Based on the research questions, the research hypotheses were set:

1. Students express a positive direction of attitudes related to playing sports.
2. Participation in the choice of the desired sport is visible among the research participants.
3. Students are informed on the intensity, dynamics and advantages that sport has for them.
4. There are differences in active participation for inclusion in the desired sport with regard to student gender.

2.2 Sample

The survey respondents were 7th and 8th grade students of two elementary schools and the approval of parents/guardians was collected prior to fulfilling the survey. 7th and 8th grade students were chosen according to Côtè's (1999; Côtè and Hay, 2002) model of athlete phase development in which the specialization stage, in which skills and performance improve with increased dedication to the sport, occurs between approximately 13 and 15 years of age. The sample was appropriate. A total of 107 students, 69 male and female 7th grade students and 38 male and female 8th grade students completed the survey. Their right to withdraw at any time and permission not to answer certain questions from the questionnaire was clearly emphasized. The principles of harmlessness, usefulness and, above all, confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized to the respondents of the research. As respondents in this research, students who play and do not play sports participated, regardless of the category of selective (top sport according to strictly defined criteria for athletes) or non-selective sport (sport for everyone) (Milanović, 2013).

2.3 Instrument and procedure

The research instrument for the set goal was a survey. The survey consisted of six questions. The first two questions were directed towards the structure of the samples (student gender and age). The third question offered a choice of whether the students played sports. The fourth question provided a deeper insight into the students' attitude towards playing sports, where a Likert-type assessment scale was used and classmates could choose on a scale from 1 to 5 (no sense at all, small, moderate, high, exceptionally high sense in playing sport). The fifth question had a single choice of seven offered answers for the question of whose decision it was to choose the sport that the student played (*my parents registered me in a sports activity without any question; my parents persuaded me to start practicing this sport because they themselves had been involved in it; prior to making the decision to start training, I spoke with my parents and we made a decision together; my parents initiated me to start training a certain sport, I chose the sport; I started training this sport because of my friends; the idea and decision were exclusively my own; other*). The last question offers multiple choice answers related to the information the students were familiar with before starting the sport training (*how many times a week do I train; how often do I have matches/performances; what the workouts look like; why that sport*

is good for me; what does sport bring me in the context of health; other) The last choice in the fifth and sixth questions was open-ended, which allowed the participants to express themselves freely and add to it in order to gain a deeper insight into the subject of the research. The data was collected through a student survey, and a degree of anonymity and privacy was ensured during the research.

2.4 Data analysis

Descriptive parameters were used for the first, second and third research questions. The results are shown in frequencies and percentages and some are additionally shown graphically for better clarity. For the last research question, a Chi-square test was conducted to check whether there were statistically significant differences in active participation for inclusion in the desired sport with regard to the gender of the student. The collected data were processed with statistical program SPSS 20.0.

3 Results

There are a total of 107 male and female 7th and 8th grade students from two elementary schools in this sample as respondents of the research. 51 of the 107 students were boys (47.7% of respondents), while 56 were girls (52.3% of respondents) (Table 1). Regarding the percentage, there is no visible greater willingness to participate in the trial by one or the other group.

Table 1: Pupil's gender

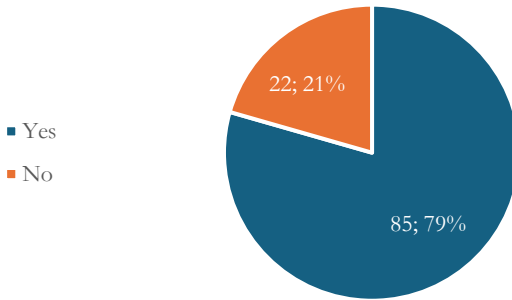
		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Boys	51	47,7%
	Girls	56	52,3%
	Total	107	100%

Due to the mentioned reason, 7th and 8th grade students were chosen from two elementary schools. The total was 69 female and male 7th grade students (64.5% of respondents) and 38 female and male 8th grade students (35.5% of respondents (Table 2).

Table 2: Age/Grade

		Frequency	Percent
Grade	7th grade	69	64,5%
	8th grade	38	35,5%
	Total	107	100%

Out of the total number of students, it is important to point out that a total of 85 respondents played sports (79.4%). This data is an excellent indicator that students are still aware of the benefits of sports because they choose them and engage in them (Graph 1). This result is an optimistic indicator that students are not only focused on screens, but also care about their physical health.



Graph 1: Students who play sport

The search for an answer to the first research question is focused on the expression of student attitudes related to the choice of sport. In the survey, students answered to the question whether they saw any sense in playing sports whereby they could choose on a scale from 1 to 5 (no sense at all, small, moderate, high, exceptionally high sense in playing sport). In this question, the answers were not separated according to the already known information about who practiced sports and who did not, precisely because of the fact that the general attitude of all students who participated in the research was to be examined. According to the acquired results (Table 3), 92 students (85.9%) showed that they saw great or extremely great meaning in playing sports. It would be interesting to investigate the reasons why they chose exactly those answers. That question would certainly provide better insight for further and deeper research. However, in this research, such a question that

would have detailed the answer was deliberately skipped, given that the goal of the research did not go in that direction.

Table 3: Do the students saw any sense in playing sports

		Frequency	Percentage
Point in doing	None = 1	3	2.8%
	Small = 2	1	0.9%
	Moderate = 3	11	10.3%
	High =4	40	37.4%
	Exceptionally high = 5	52	48.6%
	Total	107	100%

Furthermore, the data of students who stated that they practiced a certain sport were used for the second, third and fourth research questions. Further questions in the questionnaire were not mandatory for students who did not train, but some of them filled out the questionnaire to the end anyway. Not having an answer to why these students answered questions that did not apply to them, these data are not presented in this paper. As for the students who did train, when asked whose decision it was for the students to play that particular sport, the students chose one of the six answers offered, or they could add an answer that they considered missing among the ones offered. The results from Table 4 showed how for 32 students the idea of playing sports and the decision on training sports was of their own making (37.6%), 28 of students made the decision in agreement with their parents (32.9%), 17 of students were encouraged by their parents but the sport was of their own choosing (20%), 4 of students played sport due to the influence of their friends (4.7%), 2 of students played sport because their parents had played the same sport (2.4%), the same as the student who chose and wrote a similar answer under the other option (because it is a family member) – training because of their sister (1.2%), while one student's parents had enrolled him in sports without any question or agreement beforehand (1.2%).

From the answers received, it can be concluded that students showed a high degree of autonomy when choosing the desired sport they play, whether it was their choice explicitly or in cooperation and agreement with their parents. (70.5%). However, as pedagogues, we do not remain indifferent to the answers of students who state that their parents enrolled them in sports without any questions or only because of the

fact that their parents or friends were/are engaged in that sport. However, the fact that more sub-questions here might further clarify these student answers should also be taken into account.

Table 4: Whose decision was it to choose the sport they play

		Frequency	Percent
Decision to choose the sport they play	My parents enrolled me in a sports activity without any questions	1	1,2%
	My parents persuaded me to start training this sport because they played this sport before	2	2,4%
	Before making the decision to start training, I spoke with my parents and we made a decision together	28	32,9%
	My parents initiated me to start training a certain sport, but I chose the sport	17	20,0%
	I started training this sport because of my friends	4	4,7%
	The idea and decision were exclusively mine	32	37,6%
	Other	1	1,2%
Total		85	100,0%

Answers that are partially in favor of the students' autonomy and participation also show the answers to the question about what information the students encountered before starting sports training. To this question, they could choose more than one answer from those offered, and they could also add some information that was not listed. The results from Table 5 show how students are informed on determined information before starting training. Only one of 7 students (8.2% of students) answered that they did not know any information before training (written under the option other), while the remaining 6 repeated some information they could choose from the offered answers. Although the students chose the offered answers, only 8 students (9.4% of the entire number of students) stated that they were familiar with the information offered as possible answers.

Table 5: Information frequency

		Frequency	Percent
What information were they familiar with ^a	how many times a week do they train	69	81,1%
	how often they have matches/performances	29	34,1%
	what the training looks like	55	64,7%
	why that sport is good for them	49	57,6%
	what are the benefits of that sport for their health	44	57,7%
	other	7	8,2%

The fourth research question is aimed at determining the differences in active participation for inclusion in the desired sport with regard to the gender of the student (Table 6). Among the male and female students who stated that they played sports (85 students), it was determined how many of them, when asked whose decision it was to participate in a particular sport, answered that the idea and decision about sports was of their own making. The remaining answers to the decision resolution in this question were ignored because no other answer showed the full participation of the child.

Table 6: Participation for inclusion in the desired sport

Gender	N	Students who chose their sport	Percent
Boys	46	18	39,13%
Girls	39	14	35,89%

According to the obtained values from Table 6, a Chi-square test (to determine whether the samples differ in the observed properties) was performed (Table 7). Chi squared test equals $\chi^2 = 0.203 < 3.84$ ($p = 0.05$), which means that there are NO statistically significant differences in active participation for inclusion in the desired sport between boys and girls.

Table 7: Chi-square test results

Chi-square test	Students who chose their sport Observed (expected) frequencies	Students who did NOT choose their sport Observed (expected) frequencies	Total:	Chi-square test results χ^2 :
Boys	18 (17)	28 (29)	46	0.203
Girls	14 (15)	25 (24)	39	
Total:	32	53	85	

4 Discussion

In the empirical part of the paper, the first hypothesis (h1) is accepted because a positive direction of attitudes is visible, i.e. students express a positive direction of attitudes related to playing sports. This is supported by the fact that out of 107 students surveyed, 85 of them played sports (79.4% of respondents). There is no significant difference in playing sports between male and female students (there are 46 male and 39 female students who play sports). However, regardless of the

accepted hypothesis, space for improvement is visible in the methodology part in which more precise data could be looked for.

The same argument is suitable for the second hypothesis (h2) that participation in the choice of the desired sport is visible among the research participants. The hypothesis is partially accepted because, although students showed a high degree of autonomy in choosing the desired sport they played, either explicitly by their choice or in cooperation and agreement with their parents (70.5%), more detailed qualitative answers in, for example, a focus group, would have provided a deeper insight into their answers. Nevertheless, the promising percentage of more than 70% certainly raises pedagogical hope in the context of children's participation in sports, but at the same time it also raises pedagogical concern for those students who stated that their parents had enrolled them in sports without any questions or just because of the fact that their parents or friends were/are engaged in that sport. The fact that the majority of students will give up sports under pressure from their parents/teachers/coaches/... is enough of an alarm that children's participation in its highest degree should be seriously considered in this area as well.

The third hypothesis (h3) was how students are informed about the intensity, dynamics and benefits that sport has for them. This hypothesis is rejected. Although the students chose for answers the information they encountered before training (how many times a week the trainings take place, what do the trainings look like, what does sport mean for their health), only one student was familiar with all the information that assumed the intensity, dynamics and advantages. The aspiration is for students to have a wide range of information before engaging in an activity, rather than being partially informed. Being well informed presupposes high-quality in children's participation.

The fourth hypothesis (h4), which assumes the existence of differences in active participation for inclusion in the desired sport with regard to the gender of the student, is rejected. The implementation of the Chi-square test proved that there is no significant difference in the above.

5 Conclusion

After a detailed analysis, the need for further qualitative methodology is indicated in order to enrich the overall research, and also to obtain the full context of student responses. Besides the aforementioned limitation of the research, it is also important to mention the age and number of respondents and the possible giving of socially desirable answers. This research is certainly subject to further expansion, especially when analyzing the individual components of the Experimental Program *Elementary school as a full-day school* (Ministry of Education, 2023) in which one of the highlights of the program will be the sports field. The task of the education system is to develop skills, abilities and knowledge for life and work, to promote global and lifelong learning, to empower people to use the latest technologies and to raise awareness on the importance of physical and mental health, without neglecting the right to decide and choose, and the participation of children in choosing activities.

In addition to acknowledging the limitations of the research, it is crucial to underscore the significant scientific contribution it offers. Student participation in sports, especially through involvement in the decision-making process on sports activities, is one of the fundamental pillars in the design of comprehensive education. By participating in sports activities, students not only take care of their physical health, but also acquire invaluable experiences that enrich their character and develop key skills needed to successfully face the challenges of life. Moreover, by advocating for a democratic approach to decision-making in sports activities, this paper emphasizes the importance of empowering students and fostering a sense of belonging and significance within their communities because, as Korczak points out (2002, 191): "There are no insignificant symptoms. You have to record everything and think about everyone, reject what is random, explore what is close, look for the laws that govern." This understanding of the connection between student participation in sports and broader societal values serves as a cornerstone for shaping future educational reforms and guidelines. Through dialogue, cooperation and recognition of individual needs, sport promotes diversity and acceptance among students. Ultimately, this paper underscore the transformative potential of student participation in sports in shaping not only individual lives but also the collective fabric of society, thereby laying a solid foundation for future educational endeavors.

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