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'Children's genuine participation and generation of social capital in the school setting'

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Abstract

The concern of involving children in decision-making and activities related to their health and well-being in the school has increasingly becoming accepted politically as well as academically in line with the adoption of the UN Convention on the rights of the child. While formal and informal participation is viewed as an integral part of social capital generation according to Putnam, which has been found beneficial for health and wellbeing, little is known regarding how social capital is generated in relation to children and drawing on children as active participants. Drawing on children's perspective and the concept of participation, the aims of this study are therefore to explore children's experiences with their participation in everyday school situations and secondly, to contribute, theoretically, to the conceptualization of social capital in relation to children in the school setting. An abductive research strategy was used based on 10 focus groups interviews with 44 children aged 10-11 and participatory observation at two Danish public schools. We found three forms of participation: 'Child-directed', 'Adult/child-directed' and 'Adult-directed' that relate to different practises and different social capital types. While children actively contribute to the formation of bonding social capital practices as part of child-directed participation, 'adult/child-directed' participation with its focus on participatory democratic education tends to reinforce bonding as well as bridging social capital. In line with Putnam's focus on civic engagement the merged perspectives thus highlight the importance of stressing pupils' genuine participation as an active social pedagogical principle alongside structural changes at the whole school level.