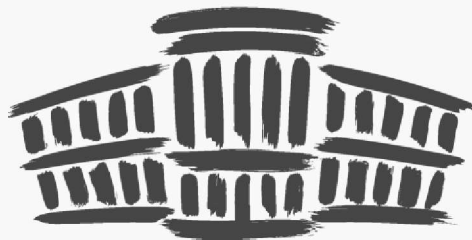


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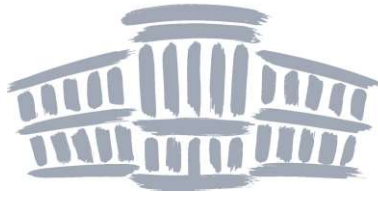
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## STUDENT PARLIAMENT - A PLACE WHERE STUDENTS ASK QUESTIONS AND INITIATE CHANGES<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

During the life, an individual belongs to various social groups. From the primary group – family, we belong to groups like preschool, clubs, informal groups, formal educational and work systems and many other groups. By active participation, in all these groups, we influence the development of the group as well as our personal development. We make different decisions, some very important and some less, some decisions make us less and some more happy. The democratic way, which we strive for, making collective decisions has an effect on the group and allows all group members to have equal rights in making them. The Student Parliament is a place, prescribed by law, which allows students a democratic way of association to represent the interests of all students in the school and student participation in making decisions that directly concern them. The Student Parliament is a place where students ask questions and make changes.

This article consists of three parts. First, we want to present the Student Parliament as a form or school body and its potential contribution in changing the school as a place for children and youth. Secondly, we will analyse the working methods of Student Parliaments and the attitudes among students regarding the work of student parliaments, in general. In the end, through conclusions and discussion, we would like to provide recommendations on the further work of the Student Parliament.

**Keywords:** *student parliament, youth voice, development of a democratic society*

### **1. Introduction**

#### *1.1 Student Parliament - meaning and role*

The Student Parliament is a legally prescribed school body, which provides students with a democratic way of association in order to represent the interests of all students in the school and student participation in making decisions that directly concern them. According to Article 88 of the Law, the Student Parliament provides opinions and proposals to professional bodies, the school board, the parents' council and the director. Student Parliament informs students about issues of special importance for their schooling and about the activities of the Student Parliament. It actively participates in the process of planning the development of the school and in the self-evaluation of the school and suggests students as members of the professional asset for development planning and the team for the prevention of peer violence among students (Zakon o osnovama sistema vaspitanja i obrazovanja, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> The research data and conclusions from the conference presented in the article are part of the project "Quality Education For All" "Rp./3 Democracy with a lot of listening, understanding and cooperation" Medical School "7<sup>th</sup> April" Novi Sad which was supported by the European Commission.

During their involvement in the Student Parliament, students consider topics such as: rules of conduct at school, safety measures, annual work plan, school development plan, school program, way of arranging the school space, choice of school literature, free activities, participation in sports and other competitions and organization of all manifestations for students in and out of school, etc.

The role of the Student Parliament is perceived in the development of competent citizens (Campbell 2008, Milliken, 2001). Studies related to projects and programs that develop civic education and are connected to Student Parliament participation can make citizens more informed about politics, more likely to engage in political activities and democratize their views. The Student Parliament is a form of participation for children and young people in the work of the school as one of the social institutions.

The Student Parliament functions through regular meetings and based on pre-agreed rules. Each parliament has a plan and program and can form its own bodies: president, vice president, administration or various working groups and teams that will concern various topics. During the annual work, regular meetings are holding, the decisions are making by election, at the end of the working year, a report is compiled, which is an integral part of the report on the work of the school in the working year. Each class has its elected representatives in the parliament. Class students are equally responsible for the election of their representatives. Parliament representatives are obliged to act in the spirit of democratic principles and to represent the interests of all students. The quality of the work of the Student Parliament depends on the character of the leadership, the good distribution of work and the efficiency of decision-making. The representatives of the Student Parliament are obliged to listen to each other, to present their views in a reasonable manner, and they are obliged to inform their class colleagues about the decisions made and to discuss with them all the issues that could be presented to the parliament.

Youth participation is the process of involving young people in institutions and decisions that affect their lives. It includes initiatives that emphasize education reform, juvenile justice, environmental quality, and other issues. As an expression of participation in the school, young parliamentarians are organized for social and political action, choosing and planning their own programs and representing their interests in the community. They also raise awareness by educating others about matters that concern them (Wang, 2006).

Willingness to participate in the community is part of the general political culture of young people. One of the expected effects of the Civic Education course is related to increased awareness of the importance of active participation of young people in community life and assuming an active role in their environment. Based on the research data obtained by the authors Džamonja-Ignjatović, Baucal & Radić-Dudić, it is concluded that about 40% of students regularly or occasionally openly complain to the teacher because of unfair treatment towards themselves or another student, while about 30% of students declare that they have never done so. Similar results were obtained when it comes to the involvement of students in decision-making within the school. According to these data, it can be seen that the involvement of students in school is less than in the case of family life, where their participation is estimated at 80%. Authors state that this is to be expected considering that the school is a formal institution, the family is based on close relationships. In a certain sense, these data suggest that a significant part of students who attended subject Civic Education will be more ready to express their disagreement with the unfair treatment of teachers towards students and to take an active role and fight for their rights (Džamonja-Ignjatović, Baucal & Radić-Dudić, 2009).

Apart from observing the democratic way of decision-making and active participation in their community, parliamentarians develop various personal skills such as teamwork. The ability to cooperate and work with others to achieve a common goal involves members of parliament being willing to communicate appropriately with each other. Parliamentarians demonstrate a variety of social skills such as problem solving, negotiation, and providing feedback that illustrate their ability to accept responsibilities (Lower, 2017). Opportunities to debate in the work of the parliament through active search for facts and true information, students develop the ability to think critically. The author Pešić, along with the importance of knowing the arguments, values debating as an innovation in the work of schools that develops critical thinking. The author notes a great motivational value in cooperative

learning, group work and debating are used (Pesic, 2003). The ability to negotiate, mediate, accept other people's points of view, respect diversity and willingness to listen are basic forms of human communication, which we often use even when we are not aware of it. The interactive process of communication between parliament and the environment during the active participation of parliamentarians empowers young people to take on an active role throughout their lives. Asking questions, searching for arguments, creatively finding solutions, examining assumptions are important elements that guarantee the basic freedoms of students, expression, freedom of association and freedom of expressing one's own opinion.

Young people are often just consumers of the services provided to them, they may not play a significant role in the process of creating those services, but we must not forget that children and young people have their own opinion and have the right to freely express their opinion (Milliken, 2001).

The Student Parliament contributes to the development of collective relationships and the building of partnerships with teachers, professional associates, directors and school authorities. Partnerships often can be formal and only on paper, rather than providing a real opportunity for participation. Empowering students to represent their ward in parliament empowers the entire community, school and other bodies where youth and adults participate together (Milliken, 2020).

### *1.2 Youth conference "Does a Student Parliament really exist?"<sup>2</sup>*

The conference "Does a Student Parliament really exist?" was held on May 9, 2022, with the aim of marking the Day of Democratic Culture. The conference was realized in cooperation with the Youth Alliance Association "Novi Sad Youth Capital of Europe - OPENS" and the Novi Sad Voluntary Service.

The goal of the conference "Does a Student Parliament really exist?" was to answer basic questions about participation in the Student Parliament, to determine how Student Parliaments function today and does their work correspond to the initial idea of Student Parliament.

During the conference, discussion groups discussed special topics: Activities of Student Parliaments, obstacles and challenges in the work of Student Parliaments; The role of the Student Parliament in preserving the mental health of young people; Support received by the Student Parliament from teachers, pedagogical and psychological counsellors and principals of the school; Visibility of Student Parliaments. In the continuation of the article, we will present part of the results of the work in the discussion groups concerning the topic of this article.

*The inclusion of the director, pedagogical and psychological counsellors and school teachers was positively evaluated.* Parliamentarians want adults to get involved in the work of parliaments, but this happens sporadically in schools. On the other hand, the inclusion of students in school boards is important for parliamentarians. They recognize an opportunity where students have contact with the school administration and professors as a fruitful cooperation.

*Part of the participants estimated that they have a good relationship with the coordinators who support the parliament itself because they allow freedom of expression of opinions and different ideas.* In some schools, freedom is not respected or fulfilled, even neglected. The participants stated that even in schools there is a general lack of respect and lack of interest in the demands, initiatives and opinions of Student Parliaments. It is noticeable that the school deals with various topics, but the topics necessary for students to meet their basic needs are neglected.

*There is a division of attitudes towards the work and importance of the Student Parliament.* The negative point about it is that some teachers do not understand what the Student Parliament can do in

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<sup>2</sup> conclusions from the conference presented in the article are part of the project "Quality Education For All" "Rp./3 Democracy with a lot of listening, understanding and cooperation" Medical School "7th April" Novi Sad which was supported by the European Commission.

collaboration with teachers and how they can improve the work of the school together. By including more professors, the parliament would be more active and efficient. It has been recorded that there is generally a weak financial or material support of resources in the Student Parliament.

*In most schools Student Parliaments do not have the practice of directing part of their activities to the preservation of mental health.* The proposal is that the Student Parliaments (at the free will of the school parliaments) establish an "external pedagogical-psychological service", which would be chosen and appointed by the parliament, and would consist of students or psychology interns under supervision, which would assist students in placing their trust in someone who is closer to their age.

## 2. Research methodology

The purpose of the research within this article is to improve the content and quality of the work of the Student Parliament based on the evaluation of the work of the Student Parliaments. For the purpose of evaluation, a survey was conducted with 171 representatives of Student Parliaments of 57 secondary schools in the territory of Novi Sad and surroundings. A specially prepared Google questionnaire with 15 questions on a five-point Likert scale, one multiple-choice question and one open question was used to collect relevant data. It covered several areas of work of Student Parliaments: students' information, knowledge of the work of Student Parliaments and students' attitudes towards the Student Parliament, transparency in the work of the Student Parliament, the involvement of teachers, counsellor services and directors in the work of Student Parliaments, the degree of political culture expressed through students' attitudes towards society and social readiness for civic participation.

## 3. Research results

On the first statement, *The Student Parliament advertises its activities in a clear and open manner*, 60,8% of students declared that they fully agree and 21,1% agree with the position that parliaments advertise their activities openly and clearly. Furthermore, 50,9% completely agree and 18,7% of respondents agree with the second statement *that students, teachers and parents are informed about the work of the parliament through the website, school documents, posters and information book.* Nevertheless, 19,3% say that they do not know that these interested groups are informed about the work of the parliament.

*In the elections for the Student Parliament, every student of the school has the right to participate* as much as 75, 4% completely agree with the statement (Table 1).

**Table 1**

In the elections for the Student Parliament, every student of the school has the right to participate.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
2,9%	6,5%	8,8%	9,4%	<b>75, 4%</b>

Only half of the respondents *have the impression that there is regular and open communication between members of parliament and students in the class.* However, 17,5% of respondents do not know whether they have open communication with the class they represent (Table 2).

**Table 2**

I have the impression that there is regular and open communication between members of parliament and students in the class				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
3,5%	4,1%	17,5%	17,5%	<b>57,3%</b>

65.5% of the surveyed parliamentarians have the impression that *representatives in the Student Parliament are elected through democratic decision-making* in their class (Table 3).

**Table 3**

I have the impression that representatives in the Student Parliament are elected through democratic decision-making in their class.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
4,1%	5,8%	12,9%	11,7%	<b>65,5%</b>

A question about are *activities of the Student Parliament are aimed to involve as many students as possible*, 48% completely agree with that statement. About 20% agree or are not aware, while one in ten respondents disagree that the activities are aimed to involve a larger number of students (Table 4).

**Table 4**

Activities of the Student Parliament are aimed to involve as many students as possible.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
2,3%	10,5%	19,3%	19,9%	<b>48%</b>

The answers are almost similar to the question of how to plan the work of Student Parliaments. On the claim that *the work of the Student Parliament is planned based on the proposals of students from all classes*, only 48% fully agree. In the numbers of respondents, 82 students out of 171 believe that the work of the parliament is planned at the suggestion of students from all classes (Table 5).

**Table 5**

The work of the Student Parliament is planned based on the proposals of students from all classes.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
2,3%	10,5%	18,1%	24,6%	<b>48%</b>

In this regard, 43,3% completely say that *I gladly participate in the activities organized by the Student Parliament*, 15,2% agree, and 21,6% do not know if they agree with that statement (Table 6).

**Table 6**

I gladly participate in the activities organized by the Student Parliament.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
8,8%	11,1%	21,6%	15,2%	<b>43,3%</b>

Multiple choice question about *the types of activities that the Student Parliament doing with*, members of parliament say that 26,3% student or school projects, 25,1% support the students issues, 20,5% analysis of the teaching process and 15,8% humanitarian actions.

59,6% of those surveyed fully believe that *the representatives in the Student Parliament have the opportunity to contribute with their proposals to making important decisions in the work of the school*. Also, 20,5% agree with this statement (Table 7).

**Table 7**

Representatives in the Student Parliament have the opportunity to contribute with their proposals to the making of important decisions in the work of the school.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
8,8%	11,1%	21,6%	20,5%	<b>59,6%</b>

As many as 61,4% of parliamentarians fully agree that *discussions and the expression of differences of opinion are encouraged in the work of the Student Parliament* (Table 8), while 52,6% fully agree that *Student Parliaments foster team spirit* (Table 9).

**Table 8**

In the work of the Student Parliament, discussions and the presentation of opinion differences are encouraged.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
2,3%	2,3%	17%	17%	<b>61,4%</b>

**Table 9**

The Student Parliament fosters good teamwork.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
1,2%	4,7%	18,1%	23,4%	<b>52,6%</b>

The next three questions refer to the cooperation of the school and other school bodies with the Student Parliament. Thus, 61,4% of respondents state that they fully agree that *the Student Parliament cooperates with the school administration and the principal with mutual respect* (Table 10).

**Table 10**

The Student Parliament cooperates with the school administration and the principal with mutual respect.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
2,3%	2,3%	16,4%	17,5%	<b>61,4%</b>

46,2% of the respondents have the impression that the majority of teachers encourage and support the work of the Student Parliament, 8,8% disagree with this statement and 2,9% strongly disagree with this statement. Numerically, 20 students out of 171 said that they did not have the impression that the teachers supported the work of the parliament (Table 11).

**Table 11**

Teachers encourage and support the work of the Student Parliament				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
2,9%	8,8%	19,3%	22,8%	<b>46,2%</b>

However, 47,4% say that the school provides the means and conditions for the work of the Student Parliament (Table 12).

**Table 12**

The school provides funds and conditions for the work of the Student Parliament.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
1,8%	7%	22,2%	21,6%	<b>47,4%</b>

In the end, the statement that gives the answer on is the parliament the place where we are nourishing youth activism and voluntary work, the amount of data is that 46.8% completely agree and 16,4% agree that through the Student Parliament it is possible to get involved in various forms of volunteering. 28,7% do not know if they can get involved in voluntary work (Table 13).

**Table 13**

Through the Student Parliament, it is possible to get involved in various forms of volunteering.				
completely disagree	disagree	don't know	agree	completely agree
4,1%	4,1%	28,7%	16,4%	<b>46,8%</b>

To the open and last question *What should Student Parliaments deal with*, the students stated: support in the work of students, humanitarian actions, arranging the school space, analyzing and improving the teaching process, state graduation, youth projects, improving the relationship between



students and professors, volunteering, rights and obligations, preventing peer violence, organizing excursions, motivating students, internal school policy and improving teaching and the work of the institution.

#### **4. Discussion and recommendations**

The research results presented in this article are straight forward. Students from 57 secondary schools in the city and schools from the surrounding area presented data that are significant in evaluating the work of Student Parliaments, a so-called recording of how Student Parliaments currently function. Furthermore, the data could be used to improve practice and certainly for further research on this topic.

Students understand their needs, recognize their problems and the problems of their peers. In this sense, the revealed data can enable the school to meet these needs as best as possible. The Student Parliament provides the opportunity for all students to participate, to share their opinion, needs, knowledge and skills, regardless of race, religion, nationality, property or gender. Through the Student Parliament, the voice of all groups and subgroups of young people in the school can be heard more easily.

Significant research data tells us important information and raises several crucial questions regarding the work of Student Parliaments.

First, parliamentarians have the impression that the representatives in the Student Parliaments are elected through democratic decision-making in their class. We concluded that the representatives of the class thereby gained legitimacy to represent their class colleagues. On the other hand, it is also significant that half of the respondents have the impression that there is no open communication between members of parliament and students in the class, or at least they are not aware of it.

Second, the activities of the Student Parliament are aimed to involve in parliament activities as many students as possible. About 20% agree that they are not familiar are activities involve large number of students. The encouraging fact we established in this research is that the majority see the Student Parliament as a place where discussions and differences of opinion are encouraged and where team spirit is fostered.

Also, respondents expressed positive views on the statements related to the cooperation of the Student Parliament with teachers, the counselling (pedagogical-psychological) service and the school director. We concluded that the Student Parliaments cooperate well with the school administration and the principal with mutual respect. However, we should not forget the data obtained in the discussion groups during the conference that tell us that some professors are not aware of what the Student Parliament can do together with the professors and how they can improve the work of the school together. Students believe that by including more professors, the parliament would be more active and efficient.

Finally, the respondents' proposals are interesting regarding what should Student Parliaments be dealing with. These are very realistic suggestions and it is important to state them. They mention the activities of providing support to students in existing problem situations, improving the relationship between professors and students, and improving the teaching process. Followed by the activities of arranging the school space, humanitarian activities, projects and referring to volunteer work within the school or outside it.

The data obtained in this study confirm largely that the existence of Student Parliaments is justified. They invite us to create an even more stimulating environment and to provide greater support to students in the work of School Parliaments.

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