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Elected children's views on school elections and students councils in Greece

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to highlight and investigate children's perspectives on the ordinance of students' elections and students' councils in the country of Greece. This study is motivated by the huge lack of research on the topic in Greece and aim to seek student's views in regards to students' councils. This qualitative research endeavors to find how students decide to enter the school elections as candidates, what they hope to achieve through their candidacy and how they perceive democratization in education via these elections. Finally, it is asked from them to evaluate the utility of the whole ordinance of students' communities. Six students, aged from 15 to 18, who are attending the Greek public High School (the name in Greek is *Lykeio*) were interviewed; three boys and three girls. The researcher chose one boy and one girl from each of the three years of High School. In order to hear children's voice and allow them space and time to express their perceptions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with open ended questions while at the same time encouraging them to give clarifications on their answers. A thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed material of the interviews and four primary themes were emerged: I) *being candidates as a personal decision*, II) *aspirations for being candidates*, III) *Significance of the ordinance on school elections and on students' councils* and IV) *democratization of children through school elections*. In conclusion, this paper, by closely examining students' perspectives and beliefs, seeks to shed new light on the neglected issue of students' elections and councils in the country of Greece.

Key words: children perspectives, students' elections, students' councils, democratization, Greece



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Introduction

In Greece, not to vote in National elections is considered illegal and people who do not vote have to justify their absence or they face consequences, such as being held by police. According to the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs (1986), the Greek school seeks to educate and prepare children to join a democratic society. Every year in Greek schools, during the month of October, students' elections are conducted in order for a fifteen-member students' council to be formed. This council is formed only by the elected children and represents all the students while seeking to communicate students' problems to the teachers. Therefore, this ministry has introduced the ordinance of students' elections and the formation of students' councils and communities. Students' councils are the 15-member councils that are formed from the elected students after the election has taken place, while students' communities are all the students who participate either as voters or as candidates in the elections. Every student has the possibility to be a candidate in these elections. Children, from the beginning of the school year in September, start to discuss school's problem and endeavor to convince their classmates to vote for them in the upcoming elections. Students for a number of reasons decide to put candidacy while a number of challenges wait for the ones that succeed to get elected. These challenges vary; from the effort of communication among the students themselves and between them and their teachers to the organizing of weekly field trips outside the country and many more. It is necessary here, for a better understanding of this paper to clarify what is a students' council and its importance, to introduce how education seeks to democratize students and finally how the Greek school and the students' councils in Greece are formed. Thus, it is vital to familiarize the reader with the following concepts: a) significance of students' councils b) children's agency and democratization via education and c) the education system in Greece and the function of Greek students' councils.

Significance of students' councils

In article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) is stated that the children have the right to freely express their views in matters that directly or indirectly affect them. School matters can surely fall into this category. Therefore, it is a state's responsibility to act upon article 12 of the UNCRC and

invigorate children's voice in school operations. In addition, it is also argued that this article enables teachers to "ensure that children voices are heard and acted upon" (Davis et al 2015, p.35). It is a very strong argument that when it comes to important decisions that affects school and students, children should themselves have a saying. Sherman (2018, p.5) denotes that students' representatives in School Councils in Victoria, Australia, ensure that children's voice will be heard when vital decisions for the proper function of school, are to be taken.

Schools should presume upon students' voices and view these voices as a very useful tool for its better function. The reasons vary; first and foremost, via the students' councils, children express their views on matters that they first experience and add extremely important insights, such as teachers and principals ones, from an inside perspective. Furthermore, children in school councils, not only discuss future goals but "offer direct feedback about how present-day policies are affecting students" (Sherman 2018, p.5). This means that councils offer a unique opportunity to realize first-hand how students can alter the school or even the state's policies about school. Decisions for possible changes on a school's function should be taken based on children's feedback since they are the ones that will experience these changes on school functions or the school curriculum.

Furlong (2010 cited in Avieson 2012, pp.33-34) mentions that students who are willing to take part in students councils express an initiative to shape their learning process and experience. Also Furlong (2010 cited in Avieson 2012, pp.33-34) states that this student's decision may lead to a development of their self-esteem, their confidence and finally their talents. This conclusion may well represent reality since making decisions and taking initiatives is always an effective way to promote one's self-esteem and confidence. Children, that endeavor to shape their school's function in a way that better fits their purposes, are very possible to improve their performance in school's subject too. Gaining confidence in their ability to make decisions and act for the good of their school and their classmates, learners may well develop their learning skills too. It is argued that by participating actively in school elections and student's councils, "student's outcomes will improve and school reform will be more successful" (Mitra 2004, p. 652). This notion can be rationalized since it argues that if the ones that will experience a reform are given voice on this reform, then the outcome will probably be beneficial for both the students and the school.

To sum up, students' council are considered of great significance since they offer opportunities for developments not only to students but to the school too. Children are given the opportunity to exercise their right to decide on matters that affect them and the school is reformed in a more effective way. In addition, it is argued that students that participate in these councils obtain self-esteem and confidence while their school performance may be enhanced via this participation. On the other hand, schools can only benefit from this ordinance since students, principals and teachers can share their insights and experiences of the school's function and contribute to the school's improvement.

Children's agency and democratization via education

In Greek society there is a prevailing notion that democratization of the human being is constructed into the Greek school, via its education. Characteristically, the word democratic society is referred in the states act for *Students' Communities 1986*. In the first article of *Students' Communities 1986* on students' councils it is mentioned that school is responsible to educate its students and prepare them to join the democratic society. In article 2 of the same act (*Students' Communities 1986*) the concept, the purposes and the character of the students' elections and councils are provided. The word democratic is mentioned six times in this article. More specifically it is stated that students' communities are considered a "cell of democratic life" (*Students' Communities 1986*) in which students, through dialogue and participation in elections and councils are exercised for the state's democratic process since they study, decide and offer solutions on matters that concerns them.

Furthermore, in the same article of the act for students communities (*Students' Communities 1986*) is explicitly stated that anti-democratic actions are not allowed while this school ordinance should promote the democratic dialogue and cooperation in the students' lives. In addition, school communities should aim to promote free exchange of ideas and the freedom of expression and speech. These all are core aspects of a democratic constitution. It is clear that the state aims to create a democratic basis on children via these elections and councils. It seeks to motivate democratic participation through participation in this democratic ordinance. In addition state's aim

is to familiarize children with the election processes while enabling them to work in councils, deciding collectively and cooperatively.

The education system in Greece and the function of Greek students' councils

Greek educational system is a well-founded system that pays attention on the mental and physical development of its students. The main ministry for Greek education is called Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs and comprises a wide range of laws and decrees about the Greek education. Despite the many downsides of the educational system, Greeks seem to prefer the free, public education since the high majority of Greek students attend public schools. The private schools are located exclusively in Greece's big cities with most of them being in the capital Athens and the second biggest city in Greece, Thessaloniki. Therefore, the notion of democratization via public education has been given weight by the Greek State through its act on *Students Communities* (1986).

In Greece there are twelve years of compulsory school attendance. The Greek school is divided, mainly, in three layers. In the first compulsory level lies the six-year Primary School (Dimotiko). Children from the age of six enter the compulsory education in Primary Schools all over the country. Secondary education comprises two stages: the first is a three-year school, the Junior High School (Gimnasio) which prepares students to enter the High School. Gimnasio is considered a transitional school which connects the Primary education with the last stage of the Secondary education, the High School. In this last stage of the obligatory education lies the Greek High School (Lykeio) which necessitates three years of attendance, too. In their last year in High School students sit Panhellenic exams through which they may enter the Higher Tertiary education. The term Panhellenic means that all students, all over the country, that have successfully finished their third year of High School sit exams in selected subjects which are the same for all the students. According to how well their results are, students can then decide which university they wish to attend. It is common for children in students' councils to discuss and make suggestions on this matter too. For example, in the past children's councils had asked, many times, to be examined in less subjects.

The act about school communities (*Students' Communities 1986*) is addressed to all the compulsory stages of Greek education. However, school elections are rarely conducted

in the Primary school and even if they happen, a students' council is never formed. In Primary schools, students may conduct elections only in their classrooms and they may elect a president but no responsibilities are assigned to him or her. On the other hand, students' elections are conducted in all Greek Junior High Schools and High Schools every October. Students from the beginning of the school year in September begin to talk with their classmates and friends about the possibility to be candidates in the upcoming elections. Through these contacts and dialogues children familiarize themselves with some of the democratic's constitution procedures, such as the endeavor to convince voters, vote, agree or disagree with other children and finally reaching on collective and cooperative decisions.

Stages of Greek educational system	Greek name of schools	English name of schools	Approximate Age of students	Compulsory?
I	Νηπιαγωγείο ή Παιδικός Σταθμός	Kindergarten or Preschool	0-5	No
II	Δημοτικό Σχολείο	Primary School or Elementary School	6-12	Yes
III	Γυμνάσιο Σχολείο	Junior High School	12-15	Yes
IV	Λύκειο Σχολείο	High School	15-18	Yes
V	Πανεπιστήμιο	University	18-	No

Figure 1: Education system in Greece



High school is the School where students' elections and students' councils are considered a very useful ordinance which students can use to demand or ask for alterations in school's function. Students have already familiarized themselves with the elections procedures and the function of students' councils in Junior High School. In Lykeio then students seek to use the fifteen-member students' council in order to communicate with the teachers and exchange ideas which aim to enhance school's operations. This research paper have focused its study on High School students for the above reasons.

After the elections have taken place, fifteen candidates who have received the highest number of votes are elected and form the fifteen-member students' council of the school. The week following the elections these fifteen students gather together and vote to elect the students' president, vice president and secretary. It is more than common these three students, who achieve to get elected and receive these three positions, come from the third year of High School.

The greatest reason for this is that the President is responsible for organizing a weekly field trip for the students that attend their third year in Lykeio. Also, he or she is obliged to meet with the teachers and convey his or her classmates' propositions. In other words the President is the connecting link between the students and the teachers. Vice President is responsible for taking the place and responsibilities of the President when the President is absent. The secretary of the council has the responsibility for keeping the minutes of the council's meetings. Finally the other members of the council have to try and convey their classmates concerns or preposition into the council. The council gathers to decide which propositions should be heard by the teachers. Each member including the ones that have taken the positions have the right of one vote (see figure 2).

Position in Students' Council	Main Responsibilities
President	Organize a weekly field trip, communicate with teachers and convey students' propositions
Vice-President	Substitute the President and take his or her responsibilities when the President is absent
Secretary	Responsible for keeping the minutes of the council's meetings
Members	Responsible for bringing their classmates' concerns and propositions to the council's meetings.

Figure 2: Students' council main responsibilities

Research Motivation, Questions and Aims

As it is illuminated in the introduction, children's elections and participation in students' councils can be considered one of the most significant aspects of children's democratization in Greek schools. However, there are only a very few researches that have been conducted in the past on this topic. This research paper seeks to fill this gap by applying a qualitative research. Qualitative research of semi-structured interviews were formed in order to hear children's perspectives on this school ordinance. This kind of research was applied because it is of significant importance to hear children's voices on this subject since it is argued that "children play an active role in their own enculturation and contribute on their own to the shaping of cultural discourse" (Clark 2011, p.9).

Initial motivation for this research paper to be conducted, was the immensely gap on this topic. In addition, to conduct research on a subject like elections can be of great

importance since children are given voice on a matter that affects all their following adult life. Through their answers, readers may understand and answer the following questions:

- A) What are children's views on this democratic ordinance?
- B) How and why do they decide to take part as candidates in the election process?
- C) How do they view the function of students' councils?

In other words this research seeks to find how the democratic self is created from a young age in school ordinances. By listening to students' voice, it is aimed to understand their views and perspectives. Since there is not much research on this topic in Greece, this study seeks to explore children's perspectives on this subject. The research's aim is to give voice to children and then analyze this voice following a thematic analysis of searching for codes and then for patterns in students' answers.

Previous Research

As it has already been mentioned, there is not much previous qualitative research in Greece about school elections, councils or general communities. This study endeavor to fill a part of the gap about this topic since it is not a general study on a big basis of students but rather seeks to indicate some patterns on the selected students' answers. A quantitative research that has been conducted in the neighbor country of Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) seeks to explore what students believe about the democratization of students via their educational system. Murati (2015), the author of FYROM's research, applies surveys and questionnaires to draw students' perception on their agency, voice and their beliefs about democratization in education. Children possessing agency means that they are now viewed as social agents that "through their actions can make a difference to a relationship, a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints" (Mayall 2002 cited in James 2009, p.34). Murati (2015, p.180) illustrates that the highest majority of the participants, perceive democratization in schools as a tool to develop trust and respect for different opinions as well as accepting and learning about cultural values. In addition, Murati's (2015, p.180) adds that many students answered about democratization that it enhances the feeling of responsibility and discipline while at the same time it offers equal

opportunities for learning to all the children, no matter their ethnicity, gender or colour of skin.

In Greece the only official research that has been conducted for students' communities took place last year and was conducted by an independent authority called *Sinigoros tou Politi* (En. *Ombudsman*). This independent authority is the connecting link between the Greek community and the state. Its main concern is to seek, explore, research and then present to the state the problems that children and other groups that viewed as vulnerable face in Greece's communities. Ombudsman is an independent authority which means that it is not come under any states' refereeing. However, its most common actions is to conduct researches and move them forward to the relevant ministry.

Sinigoros tou Politi (2017, p.1) research on students' communities aim was to explore children's views on these communities and propose alterations to the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. A quantitative research was applied to seek children's perspective via surveys and questionnaires. Numerous schools and students took part in the research (*Sinigoros tou Politi* 2017, p.1) from all over the country. An 88% of the students asked believe that "students' communities need to be more extensively refreshed and supported" (*Sinigoros tou Politi* 2017, p.2). This illustrates the situation that children perceive students elections and councils as a significant part of the school process. However, in *Sinigoros tou Politi* (2017, p.3) research students massively agreed that at least one hour, at the beginning of the school year, must be devoted on discussing about the function of students' councils. Furthermore, it is expressed in *Sinigoros tou Politi* (2017, p.5) a need for a more frequent contact between the students and the teachers in regards to students' problems. In the two last pages of the study (2017, pp.6-7) are presented students own comments, something that reveals the need to hear children's perspectives in qualitative research. Students express striking views on the function of students' councils; one striking example is that many of them argued that students' councils should "take initiatives for extracurricular activities such as the participation in volunteering programs" (*Sinigoros tou Politi* 2017, p.7). This paper seeks to add on previous researches, the children's voice and perspectives without the limitation of surveys and questionnaires.

Ethical Considerations

This research study was reviewed and approved by the Child's Studies Ethical Vetting Board of Linköping University, Sweden. The ethical vetting board examined the research plan and aims of this study and determined the actions that the researcher take for the ethical clearance. Since the interviews in this study were conducted with children outside the school's environment no consent was necessary to be acquired from the schools committees. However, this paper seeks to research a topic that involves school's ordinances and as a result, an informative paper (see appendix 5) was distributed to the Principals of the schools that the participants attend. Informed consent was distributed to both students that took part (see appendix 4), and to their guardians (see appendix 2 and 3). The informative paper informs the Principals of schools about the aim and the purpose of the study while stating that students' from the school took part in interviews. The informative paper and the child's informed consent were written in English. All participants stated that they understand the paper and the need not have to read it in Greek too. In contrast all the parents signed the informed consent in Greek. However the researcher provides in the appendix space, the translated in English consent too.

As Farrell (2005, p31) states, despite the approval of the Ethical Vetting Board the researcher continuously sought to inform both parents and students that they could withdraw their participation any time they wanted. However, not one of the participants or their guardians decided not to participate in the study. Furthermore, as Bryman (2016, p.133) states, both parents and children have been fully informed about the topic of the research while the researcher avoided to let ambiguities exist when asked, namely endeavored not to deceit the participants about the purpose and the aims of the study. Also, weight was given on the important aspect of privacy and confidentiality as far as the participants are concerned.

All the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. As Dell (2011, p.29) mentions children feel more comfortable being interviewed in their environment as well as more equal to the interviewer. The researcher chose to interview the children in their private bedrooms with semi closed doors in order to avoid unwanted noise or distractions. Bryman (2016, p.471) argues that the setting should be quiet and private

in order for the interviewee to be comfortable and not afraid that someone will overhear. However, from the first moment the researcher emphasized that both the child and the parents could intervene and stop the interview if felt uncomfortable. All parents chose to leave their children alone with the researcher for the minutes of the interview but also to stay in a close proximity, being in another room such as the kitchen of the house or more commonly in the home's living room. In addition, no problem were occurred during the interviews and all the children seemed to understand what the researcher was expecting from them. No child seemed to feel uncomfortable while no participant expressed a willing to stop the interview or withdraw their participation.

Moreover, the researcher also endeavored to be ethically sensitive and make sure that the interviewee "appreciates what the research is about, its purposes, and that his or her answers will be treated confidentially" (Kvale 1996 cited in Bryman 2016, p.473). Confidentiality is a very sensitive matter when interviewing children since they are considered a vulnerable group in society. Furthermore, as Bryman (2016, p.131) argues, the researcher was prepared about the fact that interviewees may feel that their privacy is being invaded and he was aware about the questions that he has formed. Additionally, he was prepared to accept a child's refusal to answer a question. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms are used and not the real names of the participants. Also, only the wider area of the cities or villages where the interviews took place are mentioned and not the names of the specific places.

Despite informing both parents and children that they may wish to withdraw their participation from the interview process whenever the like, the researcher following Farrell's (2005, p.34) advice, was continuously searching for cues to see if the participants are feeling comfortable. No discomfort were made evident either directly or indirectly. Farrell (2005, p.34) also proposes that questions should be addressed to participants on what they believe this research is about. Following this advice all the interviewees expressed their personal perception of the current research and showed that they do comprehend why this research takes place and which its purposes and aims are. Additionally, all the participants were made aware that as Farrell (2005, p.31) states, the only people who will benefit from this study is the researcher and the future students if the research will be given to the public.

The study was done in accordance with the ethical rules set up by the University of Linköping, Sweden. Unfortunately, no official act or law exists in Greece about conducting research with children. However, universities or the authorities that conduct research with children or research on children follow some ethical rules. These rules do not differ from the ones of the Linköping's University Ethical Vetting Board. Finally, the importance of confidentiality and privacy was stressed. All in all, all these ethical rules and the more specific ethical considerations of the Linköping's University Ethical Vetting Board, were followed by the researcher.

Data Collection Methods

Since my main purpose was to obtain children's perspectives on the democratic tool of children's school elections, the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews was chosen. As Bryman (2016, p.466) states, in qualitative interviewing the emphasis is given on the interviewees' perspective and point of view. Therefore, I conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in order for children's perspective to be heard. These students have already chosen to be candidates in school elections and have been elected in their schools students' council by their classmates. The interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes to allow children express their personal opinion on school elections and on school councils as well as what has motivated them to be candidates. In addition, the students were asked on the democratic connotations of school elections and whether they believe that these elections adequately prepare them for the democratic constitution. All the interviews were digitally, audio recorded and then explicitly transcribed. No notes were kept during the interviews in order not to distract children's responses as well as for a better observation and engagement between the researcher and the interviewees. However, as soon as the interviews were over, notes were kept to help the researcher remember key aspects, such as facial expressions and hesitation to answer.

Since this study seeks to report "experiences, meanings and the realities of participants" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p.81) an essentialist/realist approach to gathering data was followed. This means that this research does not seek to understand how children's perspectives are constructed within a society but struggles to listen to children's experience during the school elections period and during the function of students

councils. The interviews consisted of two main parts: 1) Interview questions and 2) Assessment of the school elections and of the function of students' councils.

Limitations of the study

This study cannot be considered a study that represents the voice of all Greek students since it represents the voice of a small sample of children in a region of north Greece. Interviews of six children can be viewed as a basis for further research, but the findings should not be overgeneralized neither to all students in Greece nor to the ones in the northern part of the country. In addition, this research was conducted in the very short time of two months. Having more time and more space to conduct such research, would have produced a clearer view of children's perspectives. However, despite these limitations, this research investigates and highlights the participants' perspectives and seeks to produce outcomes that may serve as a basis for possible further research.

Selection of Informants

Six students from high school were interviewed for this study. All of the participants were from the region of Central Macedonia in Greece, representing two different public schools. To explore both sexes' perspectives, three girls and three boys were chosen, one girl and one boy from each of the three age-classes of the Greek High School. All of the participants were contacted via personal acquaintances, so the researcher had previously some mutual contact with the participants. This means that all the participants' parents were acquainted of the researcher. Therefore, the interviewees seemed relaxed from the first minute of the interview while the researcher tried to maintain the positive and relaxed atmosphere. Additionally, all the participants have been elected in their school's councils. This is considered of great importance since the elected students have experienced the function of students' councils.

Since all the participants were found through personal acquaintances, the researcher first contacted the parents of the participants. Parents were informed of the aim and all the aspects of the study and after they agreed to allow their children to participate they were given to sign informed consent in their native language. Thus, the recruitment took place outside the school environment while the interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants. As a result, participants showed no stress and seemed to

enjoy the process of the interview. As Dell (2011, p.29) mentions children feel more comfortable being interviewed in their environment as well as more equal to the interviewer. Therefore, the fact that the interviews were conducted at a home environment may have helped to create a friendly and comfortable atmosphere since the participants were on a familiar place. Both parents and their children were informed, via the interviewer and via informed consents, for the purpose and the aim of the study during the phase of recruitment. All children chose to take part in this study voluntarily and did not forced by their parents or guardians. Of primary importance for parents to give their consent and for children to feel even more relaxed, was the fact that no real names or exact locations will be referred in the research.

The Interview Questions

Since the aim of this study is to investigate, comprehend and analyze children's views, a qualitative approach of individual, semi-structured interviews of students that have already been elected in students' councils in high school was chosen. Bryman (2016, p.483) suggests that researchers should not turn the semi-structured interview into a structured one but researchers should always pose open-ended questions. Therefore, all the questions were open-ended and when at times the interviewees answered with "Yes" or "No" follow-up questions such as "Why" or "Why do you think that" were posed to seek clarification. In instances that a deviation from the interview guide was needed the researcher tried to explain or paraphrase the question.

Through the form of an open-ended interview, children might have felt more relaxed or even important since their voice and their opinion was asked to be heard while at the same time they had to answer in their own way. This kind of interviewing seemed more than appropriate for this study since this study seeks to investigate and highlight children's personal perspectives and views on the school elections and the students' councils. Thus, the following questions was chosen in the interview guide to assist the process of interviewing:

- 1) *Can you tell me why did you decide to take part in the school elections?*

The purpose of the first question was to elicit conversation rather than elicit specific results. As Bryman (2016, p.473) suggest this is an introduction question. Through this

question the researcher wanted to introduce the main topic of the interview while at the same time enabling the interviewees to start thinking about this subject in a broader way. A general question such as this sets the tone for the subject of the interview and gives the child the opportunity to reflect on and speak about the topic and the general reasons of his or her taking part as a candidate in the school elections. It was expected from this question that the interviewee will start elaborating on the reasons of his candidacy.

Sub-questions: Was it a personal choice or your decision was motivated by friends and family? What was your intention? To help your classmates or a personal ambition? Why do you think that was?

Since the concept of the school elections lacks of research in Greece, it was thought that the participants might need some clarifications on the first question. These sub-questions were not posed altogether but separately when the answer on the introductory question deemed to need further explanation. It is important to stress that the sub-questions were posed only when participants seemed to hesitate or feel unsure about what to answer. It was avoided to help them answer or to put words in their mouth. These sub-questions were given as examples to help the conversation flow. In addition, in order to avoid yes/no answers or just a single one-word answer, explanation was asked via the questions “Why”, “Why do you think was?” and “Can you tell me more about this?”.

2) Do you consider school elections and the students’ council a useful tool that help the school function properly? Why? Why not?

This question was posed in this way in order to allow the child to reflect on school elections and express his or her personal opinion on the topic of the research. It was expected that through this question students’ views and voice will be heard on the ordinance of school elections and the students’ council. In addition, via this question weight was given on the connection between school councils and the proper function of school. In other words participants expected to elaborate on the importance of school elections and students’ council and on how important they consider this ordinance for the proper function of the school.

3) *Having been elected and experienced this process, can you tell me your personal opinion of this ordinance?*

All the participants of this study have been candidates and then members of the students' councils. They have experienced this process both as voters and as candidates, while they have successfully been elected in their school's councils. It was deemed necessary, by the researcher, that their general opinion on this experience should be asked. Asking for their personal opinion, children were expected to speak on their own terms and freely express any view they hold. In other words, the researcher seek to explore his interviewee's perspective on his or her personal experience.

4) *Do you believe that school elections prepare children for their future participation in the democratic constitution (i.e. Municipality's, National, European Union's election or motivate students to become active members of the society? Why? Why not? How?*

Having already been familiar with the topic of the interview and having already expressed their personal view on it, this question was chosen to enable children to convey their views on the democratic aspect of school elections and students' councils. Interviewees were asked to express if they have made this connection between school and their future, adult life elections. The question was addressed directly to the participants' personal view and then explanation was asked in order to allow them develop their thinking. Democratic connotations of school elections was expected to unfold via this question while at the same time their personal view on if or how these elections motivate children to become active members in society was asked.

5) *Do you consider school elections a student's right or a student's responsibility? Why?*

This question's aim was to generate a discussion on children's rights on the topic of school elections and students' councils. Explanation and clarifications were given when asked by the participants. Children were given the opportunity to speak about how they view the ordinance of school elections and the form of student's council. Do they consider it as a responsibility they have to fulfil or do they perceive it as their right to

have them? Interviewees then was asked to give explanation on why do they view this ordinance such as that. In addition it was expected via this question to express their personal opinion on the concept of children's rights.

Before, during and after the interviews had finished, interviewees were continually being reminded that there is not a correct or a wrong answer but the study requested from them only their personal opinion. Therefore, it was intended to create a positive atmosphere for the children and at the same time to feel free to express their views whatever these views were. Moreover, the aim to conduct these interviews outside the school environment was to initiate discussion about school matters but avoiding feelings of stress or anxiety that may have been produced if the interviews were conducted into the school limits.

Assessment of the school elections and of the function of students' councils by the interviewees

As a final step of the interviews the researcher asked all the participants to assess both the school elections process and the function of students' councils. One being the lowest point and ten the highest participants were asked to number this ordinance and explain their grading. This system of assessment is common in Greece since from Primary School, the excellent mark is '10'. Additionally, this intended to give children power and confidence, since it aimed to reverse school's function in which children are expected to be graded and not rate school's operations. In school students write tests and exams and they are graded from their teachers, while in this part of the study it is expected from them to grade a school's ordinance. Given this opportunity participants were asked to explain their grade and then to give their opinion on what should be changed in order for this ordinance to function better. Since this study seeks to explore children's views on this democratic ordinance, this process of assessment seemed extremely important for the proper completion of the research.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the results of the interview and of the interviewees' evaluation of the school elections and function of students' councils. Through thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79) suggest, the researcher tried to seek, analyze and report patterns (themes) in the interviews. Therefore, the interviews were first digitally recorded via a recording device and then transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to seek and find patterns within this transcribed text. Thus, themes in data material that represents children's experience and views on the ordinance of school elections and students' councils are first named and then analyzed. This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87) step-by-step analysis of the transcribed material:

- 1) First the transcribed material were thoroughly read many times, in order for the researcher to familiarize himself with the data.
- 2) The second step was to find codes within the data set (coding) and associate relevant data throughout the transcribed text.
- 3) These relevant codes then collected and formed potential themes.
- 4) Then it was checked if these themes are connected with the coded extract and the whole data set and a thematic map of the analysis was created.
- 5) The next step was to continue the thorough analysis of the themes and subthemes and then name them.
- 6) Finally the report was produced by selecting characteristic examples of the interview process.

These steps were not followed one by one rather the researcher was going back and forth in order for a continuous analysis and check to be followed. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p.86) clarify thematic analysis is not a step by step analysis by simply moving from one step to the next but it is an analysis that movement back and forth throughout the phases, when needed, is required.

Thematic analysis was followed in order to extract interviewees' perception of the school elections process and the function of the fifteenth-member students' councils. Through the research questions codes and themes were searched in order to explore children's views on this democratic ordinance.

Four primary themes emerged during the analysis of the subscribed text. The first theme is that the children mentioned *being candidates as a personal decision*. Two subthemes are evident in this theme, the one of a *uniquely personal choice* and the other illustrates candidates *being motivated by friends*. A second theme that emerged is that the students expressed their *aspirations for being candidates in school elections*. This theme has two sub-themes: a) *to help classmates and the school*, b) *for fun or to miss school time*. *Significance of the ordinance on school elections and on students' councils* is the third theme that became apparent throughout all of the interviews. Two subthemes that rooted in this theme are school elections and students councils are of *principal importance for the school's function* and of *an important ordinance that needs transformation*. Finally, the last theme is the *democratization of children through school elections*. Here, two other subthemes apply. The first one is that children view these *elections as a right* while the second one is that they view these *elections as a responsibility*. For ethical purposes and confidentiality the following pseudonyms are assigned to the six children of the research: Maria (15), Aggeliki (16), Anna (17), Kostas (15), George (16) and Dimitris (17).

Results

Theme 1: being candidates as a personal decision

Throughout the discussion children expressed their willingness to take part in the ordinance of school elections and students' council. Through their answers all of the participants stressed that their decision was not affected by adults, neither from their parents or teachers, and in the end it was their choice to take part in the election. However, their answers differed on who motivated them to take part as candidates. Therefore, two main subthemes were chosen; three children stated that it was their

personal opinion and being candidates was a uniquely *personal choice* while the rest of them referred *being motivated by their friends*.

Subtheme 1: a uniquely personal choice

Maria, a 15-year old girl that is attending the first year of the Greek public high-school expresses emphatically that being a candidate was her personal opinion. Both early in the interview and throughout it, the girl seemed rather confident and relaxed to state that she did not consult anyone before the elections.

Researcher: *How did you decide to take part in the elections?*

Maria: *I just thought about it by myself and I decided to take part.*

Researcher: *Was it a personal choice or somebody motivated you?*

Maria: *No, no! I chose it. I did not think a lot about it. It was my choice. When they asked I just answered that I want to be (a candidate).*

Her answers indicate that not only had she decided by herself but when asked for clarification she uses the personal pronoun “I” many times in order to emphasize her choice. Later in the interview she also expresses her personal decision to be a candidate since she rejects that her parents had to do anything with this ordinance.

Researcher: *Have your parents encouraged you to take part?*

Maria: (Interrupts) *No, no. I don't even know if they know it (that she has been elected). Neither teachers. I just decided to.*

Anna, a 17-year old girl that is at the last year of the Greek high school, when asked about who motivated her to be a candidate she also denies any outside interference and states that it was a personal choice.

Researcher: *Ok. Was it a personal choice or were you motivated by friends?*

Anna: *No, it was clearly a personal choice, because I had thought about it before school starts and did not ask anyone.*

Anna uses the adverb “clearly” to illustrate how much a personal choice it was. She was expected from herself to be a candidate as she had thought it long before. When she is asked about her friend or adults she also answers in the same tone.

Researcher: *Did your friends or any adults help you to finalize your decision?*

Anna: *Well my friends helped with the votes but after I had told them what I had decided. Adults no. I just told my parents the results.*

As she continues, Anna mentions that her friends did not help her decide to be a candidate but their only help was to help her gain votes. In regards to Anna’s answers, adults did not play an important role for the decision either.

Dimitris is a 17-year old boy who is preparing for the PanHellenic exams for the transition from the high school to the university. His answers also indicate a personal choice for taking part as a candidate in the school elections.

Researcher: *Ok, was it a personal choice or were you motivated by others?*

Dimitris: *Yes. It was a personal choice and I had said that I would be a candidate long before. I wanted it and I didn’t need to ask neither a friend nor my parents.*

As Anna, Dimitris mentions that his decision had been taken in the past, before the elections took place. He states that he was sure for his decision and did not need to ask anyone to take part. It was too a personal choice.

Subtheme 2: being motivated by friends

This second subtheme includes those children who answered that they have been motivated by friends or classmates in order to be candidates in the school elections or they themselves motivated other children to take part in this ordinance. All of the children in this subtheme, have stated that the final decision was their choice too. However, two of the three children whose answers belong in this theme mentions being motivated by others and this may have affected their final decision to be candidates while one states that he was also motivated by his classmates but at the same time he motivated other children to take part as candidate too.

Kostas, a 15-year old boy who attends the first year of Greek high school when asked who motivated him to take part as a candidate, directly answered that he had been motivated by his friends but he also motivated others to be candidates.

Researcher: *Who motivated you to take part? Was it a personal choice?*

Kostas: *Well, look. I decided it but...then, my friends told me that it would be a good idea and I decided to be a candidate. But... I motivated them also to be candidates with me and this way two of us...got elected.*

Kostas illustrates that in his company of boys, they motivated each other to take part as candidates. However, he explains that it was his choice to take and he tried to convince others that being a candidate was a wise choice.

George and Aggeliki gave almost the same answer when asked who motivated them to be candidates. They both state that their decision was primarily theirs but they had also been motivated by friends and classmates.

Researcher: *Was it a personal choice or were you motivated by others?*

George: *Well mine of course. But we said, that we should be candidates all together. Our group of friends. That is why, I mostly decided this.*

Aggeliki (at the same question): *Well... In the end it was my decision but I had been motivated by my friends, because my friend told me it was a good idea and just like that I put candidacy too.*

They both illustrate how their friends motivated and influenced their thinking in order for them to take part in the process of elections. George, even though states that it was his decision then he alters his answers and refers that his decision was mainly affected by his friends. Aggeliki, also mentions that it was her decision in the end, but it was affected by her friend's choice to be candidate too.

Thus, all children that belong to the second subtheme states that their choice despite being personal in the end, was affected by friends or classmates. When asked about adults all the interviewees simply mention that adults such as parents or teachers do not play an important role in the decision-making process and that these adults does not seem to being interested about this democratic school ordinance.

Theme 2: Aspirations for being candidates in school elections

During the discussion with the children, they all expressed some aspirations on why they had decided to be candidates in the school elections. The children speak about what they intended to do after they had been elected in the schools 15-member students' council. Two categories that form the sub-themes of this theme are found during the analysis of the transcribed text. The first one is that they intended to *help their classmates and the school* via their actions as members of the students' council. The second sub-theme was that their aspiration from their election as members was to *have fun or to lose school time*.

Subtheme 1: helping classmates and the school

All the boys utters that they had in mind to help both their classmates and their school when deciding to take part in the elections. All of them mention that they had in mind to help the school in order to function properly or to try to fulfil their classmates' desires. The boys in this study seems more self-conscious than the girls when describing their aspirations about being candidates. Characteristically:

Researcher: *What was your intention? Why did you decide to sign up (as a candidate)?*

Dimitris: *Look. I wanted to help the school's activities. I wanted to make them better. (...) Hmm... To help also my classmates with their demands even though sometimes they are irrational.*

Here, Dimitris expresses his willingness to help both the school and his classmates via the elections. Not only help, but also to improve schools' operations when able. This seems to say something about democracy, even though he finds these demands irrational he wants to make them heard. George also express this intention.

Researcher: *And what was your intention? What did you want to achieve?*

George: *I wanted to be the voice of the other children and improve the school conditions. (...) Well, to help my classmates more.*

George's aspiration was also to help the school improve its function but mainly to be his friends or classmates voice into the students' council. In other words, to represent their demands to the council as well to the teachers. The third boy, Kostas, even though

at first he states that there is not a specific aspiration to fulfil, he then expresses his obligation to help the school to function in a better way.

Researcher: *And what was your intention? Why...?*

Kostas: *(Interrupts): Look. I did not have a specific aspiration at all... but ... Ok, we had to help at least the school. I personally... I see it this way at least.*

Kostas seems eager to help school function better. This eagerness probably came with his election at the 15-member council. Something which means that at first there was not a specific intention but he got elected he felt a sense of obligation towards his school or classmates to help. Anna and Kostas seems to connect these subthemes. Anna is the only girl who expresses an intention to help the function of the classroom but also mentions that her main aim was to have a legitimate reason to miss school time.

Researcher: *Why did you take part at the elections?*

Anna: *To miss lessons' time of course (laughter). To discuss and vote we use you know... We do this during school time.*

Researcher: *Was that your intention? Any aspiration?*

Anna: *No, no... I wanted very much to help... not so much my classmates but the proper function of school and the classroom.*

Subtheme 2: have fun or to miss school time.

In this subtheme it is obvious that some children do not feel obligated from their election or they do not intend so much to help the school but to enjoy the process of election or the students' council time. Children such as Anna and Kostas mention that their only aspiration was to miss school time during the gatherings within the 15-member councils.

Aggeliki's intention for being a candidate was clearly to have fun and to miss lesson's time. She does not express willingness to help the school or her classmates but she jovially describes her intention to have fun outside the classroom environment.

Researcher: *Why did you take part in the elections as a candidate?*

Aggeliki: *(laughter) mainly... to be with my friends outside the classroom. You know, to have fun.*

Researcher: *So... what was your aspiration? What you intended to achieve?*

Aggeliki: *Hmm... Nothing. There are kids you know who want to help... But we (laughter) we just want to miss some school time. We do vote but our main intention is to miss lesson time.*

Aggeliki does not have the intention to help but only to miss school time or to have fun. She uses the pronoun “we” and not “I” even though throughout her interview she uses “I” quite often. The use of “we” might be used in order to rationalize her actions since she might feel a sense of guilt about her intention to miss school time. In other words, to say that she is not the only one that acts like this. Aggeliki, however, laughs a lot since she thinks it is a common secret that children uses their councils to lose school time. Maria’s intention is also to miss school time.

Researcher: *What was your intention?*

Maria: *Well... I don't know. I just wanted... You know to spend my time outside the classroom. To have fun...*

Researcher: *Didn't you want to help the school function?*

Maria: *No... I think we couldn't (help the function of school).*

Maria seems pessimistic about what the students’ council can achieve. So, she explains why she just want to have fun during the gatherings and not any specific aspiration.

Theme 3: Significance of the ordinance on school elections and on students’ councils

One idea that is evident in all interviews, is that the children perceive the ordinance of school elections and the students’ council as a very important tool. All children express that this school’s function is an important tool that enhances the communication between the teachers and the students. Two subthemes emerges from this theme. Some students perceive this ordinance as of *principal importance for the school’s function* while others of *an important ordinance that needs transformation*.

Subtheme 1: an ordinance of principal importance for the school's function

Most of the students see school elections and students' councils as an integral part of school. They express views that without this ordinance chaos would prevail in schools since children demands would never be heard while teachers' complaints would never reach students ears. Of striking importance is the fact that all children in their evaluation of this ordinance process grade school elections between 7 and 10. Even the ones that have stated that they have applied for the school's council in order to miss school time, evaluate with high grade the significance of the students' elections and councils.

Aggeliki, Kostas, George and Maria perceive students' election and students' council of principal importance for proper function of school.

Researcher: *Do you consider it a useful tool that helps school function properly?*

Aggeliki: *Yes. Because... Any problem there is, they (classmates) address it to us and we try to solve it. It can't be done without it (the council). We address the problems to the teachers' and they help us. If there weren't the council everyone would go to the teachers and...*

Researcher: *And?*

Aggeliki: *There would be chaos. Imagine!*

Aggeliki, even though, she had already confided that her only aim was to miss school time, she perceive school elections as of principal importance for the school function. She explains how the council works and even thinking that there would not be a council she expresses that this would lead to chaos. Aggeliki evaluated the ordinance with a 9. She explains her rating:

Aggeliki: *9. I would say 10 but 9 because some children just want to spend their time during the council... while others want to help the school. So... it is really important, because they help school with handling the money and general... with the teachers, we come closer. For example with those who helps us.*

Aggeliki here seems to rate with 9 because some children such as her, just want to spend their time when being in the council. However, she thinks of it as of principal importance. Similarly, George speaks of the importance of the council:

Researcher: *So what do you think about it? Is it a useful tool? Why?*

George: *Of course it is! It helps because the voice of all the children is heard through the children that has been elected. Teachers hear the children's demands.*

George base his opinion on the fact that the voice of children in school is heard via the council. He may imply that it is important since children's voice is heard through other children and not through adults. In the evaluation process he rates the ordinance with 9 to 10.

George: *I believe that is a 9 to 10, since as I have already said, is the voice (of children) and without it (the ordinance) it can't be done. Teachers and students couldn't co-exist. If there wasn't the council each child would go to the teachers' office and demand...it would be a bunch of children every day in there and the school couldn't function.*

George believes that if student's council did not exist, teachers and students could not harmonically co-exist. Children have wants which are fulfilled or even heard through the students' council. So without it students would feel frustrated. Kostas, also connotes the council with the proper function of school:

Researcher: *Do you perceive the council as a tool that helps the school? Why?*

Kostas: *Yes. Because... Teachers shouldn't be the only ones that decide for school matters. Hmm... and children must take decisions too. So yes... It helps a lot. Also, it helps the communication between the teachers and the children.*

Kostas cannot imagine a school without students' councils. He states that a school like that would be unfair to the children. It is implied by Kostas that adults, such as teachers, are not suitable to decide for students' matters. He seems to consider children more suitable to decide on matters that affects them. He evaluates the ordinance with a 9.

Kostas: *9. Because as I have said you need someone to represent you and care about you and to try for the better. For your classmates and generally the proper function of school. Namely, someone to talk and co-operate with the teachers. So, 9 because I believe that without it (the council) it can't be done, anything.*

As the two previous children, Kostas also expresses a strong need for this ordinance to exist. He bases this need on the fact that children need representatives who care about them and help fulfilling their desires. Maria even though she had expressed that she put

candidacy just to have fun, she considers students' council as an integral part of the school.

Researcher: *So, do you consider school elections and students' councils as an important tool for the school?*

Maria: *I don't know... hmm... Well basically, yes. Children have representatives other children and their opinion matters to the teachers. So, in some way it is the voice of children to the teachers and it (the councils) must exist.*

Maria considers the function of councils as a students' tool which students use to accomplish to be heard. When asked to evaluate the process and the function of councils she responded:

Maria: *I would say 9. Because considering that we do something seriously, then we help. We represent our classmates to the teachers. Without it (the council) children wouldn't have representatives.*

Maria also illustrates the great importance of students' councils. She perceives them as an ordinance that helps students to have their voice heard.

Subtheme 2: an important ordinance that needs transformation.

The opinion that, even though the ordinance is a useful tool for the proper function of school, changes should be made in order for this process to be more functional were heard. Two of the kids express objection for the way the elections are conducted while they propose alternations to be made in the function of the school council. Despite this they too consider the ordinance as a very key tool for the proper function of school.

Dimitris expresses his opinion on how important this school process is but problematizes the process of election as well as the function of students' council.

Researcher: *Do you consider it a useful tool that helps the school function properly?*

Dimitris: *Yes. Because it helps teacher and students to communicate better. But there are problems too.*

Researcher: *What do you mean?*

Dimitris: *Well, in the council there are conflicts between the students. For example many times we disagree, we argue and even after we vote there may be arguments about the decision. Also, the election process is problematic. Even adulterations happen.*

Dimitris explain that even though it is an important ordinance, arguments that occur during the gatherings and adulterations during the election process make this ordinance less important. Arguments is part of politics in a democratic society, so these arguments may enhance the democratization via the education. When he asked to evaluate the ordinance he rates it with 7 and repeats the same reasons as above. In addition he says:

Dimitris: *Teachers find what we ask illogical and sometimes they disregard as. Also, many times what children demand, is in fact irrational. For example, the other day a classmate of mine came and told me that toilets do not have toilet paper and we should occupy the school for that. Irrational.*

Dimitris concludes that children should not have irrational demands in order for this ordinance to function properly. According to Dimitris, councils are not operate in the right way and many times teachers disregard students' demands even though these demands are quite feasible. This way he may say something about power. Power to change, power to occupy the school as part of being a member of 'students'. Even though the students might be joking, he still gives it importance. By dividing it into a 'fight' of us/them he may also strengthen his membership as student.

Anna also refers to adulteration during the elections. She explains how some candidates ask from their friends who count the votes to add votes to them.

Anna: *Well, the process of elections is not done properly since adulterations happen etc. But it should be done better and should be controlled better because indeed it is very useful tool for the function of school.*

Anna does think that it is a very important tool but she reasons in order for the elections and the councils to function more properly changes should be done. She explains these changes when asked to evaluate school elections and the function of students' council.

Anna: *I would say an 8... Because even though it really important all this and all the process... but unfortunately it does not function properly. It should be controlled better. For example, teachers or some adults should be there in the counting of votes and when the council meets in order to supervise all this...all the process.*

Anna thinks of this ordinance of great importance and that is why she proposes alteration to be made. It is striking that she proposes that adults should supervise the process in order to avoid adulterations or arguments between the children. Therefore, the teachers' function will be to keep order so the system does not get corrupted.

Theme 4: Democratization of children through school elections

During the discussion about how democratic this school ordinance is, this theme was chosen to illustrate the democratization via education. All the children refer to student's elections and councils as something that promotes the democratic self. Most of the times they mention how similar school elections are to the national, European or municipal elections. The notion of democratization through the school elections are evident in the answers of the participants. Some students even consider this school function as something that prepares them to take part as candidates in adults' election in the future. In addition, they refer that through the elections at school and through the function of students' council they become more active members since they interact not only with other students but with other adults too. The three following examples clearly illustrate participants' views on the subject:

Researcher: *Ok. Do you believe that school elections prepare children for their future participation in the democratic constitution? And please explain to me your answer.*

Kostas: *Yes, of course. Because it is an imitation the fact that you vote in real and you choose your candidate. You take decisions generally. So this helps you in the future. This prepares you for the future elections.*

Researcher: *Now a different question. Do you believe that school elections prepare children for their future participation in the democratic constitution?*

George: *Of course! Because from this (the school elections) you start from something small and you may end up a member of the Parliament. I mean mostly for the ones who are candidates you can experience this process. You may like it and then put candidacy for adults' elections too.*

Researcher: *Ok. Well, do you believe that school elections prepare children for their future participation in the democratic constitution?*

Anna: *Yes, of course it helps because it is a way to... understand the process (of the elections) either the ones who have put candidacy or the others who just vote. And... all this struggle to collect votes etc. But also what follows... you are going to have responsibilities as a member of the 15-member council.*

All these examples show how children perceive the school elections. Kostas refers that these elections are an imitation of the adults' elections in the way they are accomplished. So, he concludes that school elections prepare children for the future. Kostas connotes students' election to children's participation as candidates in future elections. He depicts these elections as something that may help children to become more active social members when they become adults. The democratization of self through students' election is evident in Anna's responses too. She perceives school elections as something that help the children understand how the elections are conducted. So she concludes all the children that take part, either as candidates or as voters, end up understanding the process of elections which is the foundation stone of the democratic constitution.

Two subthemes were chosen from this theme. Interviewees were asked to give their personal opinion on if they perceive school *elections as their right* or more *as their responsibility*.

Subtheme 1: elections as a children's right

In article 12 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is stated that:

1. *“States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight” (1989)*

This part of article 12 emphasizes that children have and should be given voice. Children need to express their views freely in all matters including elections. Taking part in school elections may be considered a way of children expressing their views freely in their own right. Maria, Kostas and George when asked, answer categorically that these elections are children's rights. An example that illustrate these children's perception is the following:

Researcher: *Now, can you tell me if you think that these elections are more of a children's right or a children's responsibility?*

Kostas: *Look. It is our right. We need to have some children to represent all the other ones. We need someone to speak for the children. As it is a right to have representatives in the Parliament, it is our right to have our views heard.*

This example shows what the children in this study believe about their rights. They feel the need for their voice to be heard. So, they consider school elections as their right that should be assigned to them.

Subtheme 2: elections as a children's responsibility

Anna, Dimitris and Aggeliki answer that they see elections more as a responsibility. This means that they view elections as something that they must do and not fight for it to happen. In Greece, voting on National elections are compulsory and people that avoid to vote face some consequences, such as held in a police station to justify their absence. This may have led some children to view these elections more as their responsibility and not as their right. This, though, does not mean that they do not perceive them as their right too. For example:

Researcher: *Now, can you tell me if you think that these elections are more of a children's right or a children's responsibility? Why do you believe that?*

Anna: *It is a responsibility and an obligation. Not from others but it is our obligation to vote and to have 15 representatives that will express our views. Ok, however it is our right to conduct elections too. For example, it is the children's right to put candidacy and get elected. Nevertheless, I see it more as a... responsibility.*

Anna and the other two children that perceive elections as a responsibility that students have to fulfil, mention that it is their right also. However they more see this process as something that they have to conduct and not as something they have to fight for. From their answers we can understand that since they regard this ordinance as a gained right that is impossible to lose, they now perceive school elections more as a responsibility.

Conclusion

This research paper aim is to fill a gap in the field of the school's election and students' councils and to understand students' perspectives on this important school ordinance. Qualitative research was conducted by interviewing six children in the region of Central Macedonia in Greece. All the interviewees are attending the Greek public High School, which consists three years of studies. All the participants had decided to put candidacy in their school's elections and succeeded to get elected in their students' councils. After the interviews took place a thematic analysis was assigned on the transcribed material with a view to find and analyze patterns on the answers of the students.

Since the aim of this study is to investigate children's perspectives, a qualitative research of conducting one to one interviews with the children were selected. Interviews enabled the students' voice to be freely heard, something that questionnaires and surveys of a quantitative research would have limited. If time had permitted it, a participant observation (observing and keeping field notes) of students' councils would probably add extra insights about how children function in these councils. In addition, interviewing in focus groups, which as Bryman (2016, p.500) states is interviewing three to four people together, may have helped to shape an overall view about what children believe and see how children exchange their ideas and opinions about students' elections and councils. However, as Bryman (2016, p.521) states, in focus groups there is the danger of some people talking more than others or at the same time, something that is avoided on one-to-one interviews.

Considering that students' elections and students' councils promote the democratization of children in education this research endeavors to find children's opinions and perspectives on this school ordinance. Children's views on students' communities and the importance of these communities were shown in a last year's study which was conducted by the Greek independent authority of Sinigoros tou Politi (Συνήγορος του Πολίτη). This research was also conducted with the aim of listening children's voice on this democratic school ordinance and with a view to contact the Greek Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs. This research depicted the need for enhancing students' communities. After, the Sinigoros tou Politi's study the above ministry had decided this year to bring in Greek Parliament some of the proposals of the study for dialogue. Despite the agreement of the Greek ministry, this

act has not yet been voted and added in the existing act *Students' Communities (1986)*, that concerns the students' communities and had been voted in 1986.

The findings of this study illustrates the importance that students lie on the school elections and students' councils in general. All students in this study express views that enhance the consideration that students' communities are significant in a student's life. Students seem to view students' communities as a place where they are allowed to express their opinion, to share ideas and to communicate these ideas with other students or with the teachers. Participants argue that school councils enhance the communication between students and children and give them voice to express their concerns.

This study seems to agree with the quantitative research that was conducted by the Greek authority of Sinigoros tou Politi. Students, on both researches, express their opinion that these communities should be given more weight. Also, in both studies students express a desire to get involved more in school's operation and a need to be heard more by teachers and Principals. Finally, the majority of students in both studies stress the significance of this school ordinance.

The themes that are evident in the answers of the interviewees depict how the decisions of students are made and show how they, collectively, take their decisions. All the interviewees stressed that in the end, the majority's decision is acquired. Additionally, their opinion that democratization takes place in education via the students' councils is illustrated. Students' seem to decide personally on their candidacy while some encourage other children to take part as candidates too. Moreover, interviewees express their aspirations on their decision to be candidates and participate in students' councils. These aspirations vary. Almost all the children of the study argue that they aim at helping the school and their classmates through their participation on the elections. However, there is the acceptance from some of the participants, that the fact that they miss some school time was a factor to put their candidacy. Finally, students also stress the significance of students' communities while at the same time some of them express a view that this ordinance requires alterations in order to improve its function and give children more voice.

To conclude, this research paper seeks to highlight and investigate students' voice. It is really important to stress the need for further research on this topic. As it has already been mentioned, there is a huge gap in this field that further research should endeavor



to fill. This paper may well be the basis for a further research on students' communities, not only in Greece where there is not much qualitative research on this topic, but also in all countries that students' communities exists.

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Appendix 1

Interview Guide

I. Interview Questions

1) Why did you decide to take part in the school elections?

Sub questions: Was it a personal choice or your decision was motivated by friends and family? What was your intention? To help your classmates or a personal ambition? Why do you think that was?

2) Do you consider school elections and the students' council a useful tool that help the school function properly? Why? Why not?

3) Having been elected and experienced this process, can you tell me your personal opinion of this ordinance?

4) Do you believe that school elections prepare children for their future participation in the democratic constitution (i.e. Municipality's, National, European Union's election or motivate students to become active members of the society? Why? Why not? How?

5) Do you consider school elections a student's right or a student's responsibility? Why?

II) Evaluation by the interviewees

If you had to evaluate the utility of students' councils, what would your grade be? From 1 the worst and 10 the best. Please explain your grade.

Appendix 2

Informed Consent (Parent/Guardian)

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am Georgios Avramidis, a student in the child studies master's programme at Linköping University, Sweden. I request permission for your child's participation in the following research study that I am conducting for my master thesis:

Elected children's views on school elections and students' councils in Greece

The study is seeking to find what motivates children to take part as candidates in the school elections and what do they intend to achieve through this school ordinance. I hope the findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of children's views on the democratic tool of school elections.

I will ask your child to participate in an interview where he/she will have the opportunity to talk about what motivated him/her to participate on the school elections and his/her general opinion of this democratic ordinance. This interview will last about 30 minutes and I will ask open-ended questions to find out about what motivated them to take part in the school elections, what they hoped to achieve through their participation as candidates and their general opinion on this ordinance. Furthermore one questions will seek to find if they think school elections prepare children for their future participation in the democratic constitution while the final one seeks to find if they consider elections a right or a responsibility.

In order to hear your child's personal perspective, I believe it is best to conduct the interview alone with your child with you in the close proximity. However, you may sit in during the interview or enter at any time. The interview will be audio recorded to allow for a further analysis and assessment of what your child said after the interview has been conducted.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw your child's participation in this study at any time.

The purpose of the study and the interview process will also be clearly explained to your child and he/she will participate only if he/she is willing to do so. You may decide to end your child's participation at any time either before or during the interview. The same applies to your child and I will personally inform him/her of this possibility.

The study is completely anonymous. Names will not be used in any of the documents. Moreover, the only geographical reference to the participants will be Greece, while no name of a local city or school will be mentioned in the findings.

At the conclusion of this study, the final thesis that discusses the findings will be made available. Please contact me if you wish to have a copy of this thesis.

If you have any questions about this research project, you may contact me at any time at:

geoav330@student.liu.se

Please indicate whether or not you wish to allow your child to participate in this project by checking one of the statements below and signing your name.

I do grant permission for my child to participate in the *Elected children's views on the school elections in Greece; how have they decided to take part in the school elections and what do they hope to achieve through this democratic tool?*

I do not grant permission for my child to participate in the *Elected children's views on the school elections in Greece; how have they decided to take part in the school elections and what do they hope to achieve through this democratic tool?*

Printed Parent/Guardian Name

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Appendix 3

Informed Consent (Parent/Guardian) in Greek

Αγαπητέ γονέα ή κηδεμόνα,

Είμαι ο Γεώργιος Αβραμίδης, μαθητής στο μεταπτυχιακό πρόγραμμα σπουδών child studies στο Πανεπιστήμιο του Λίνσεπιν στη Σουηδία. Ζητώ την άδεια σας για την συμμετοχή του παιδιού σας στην ακόλουθη έρευνα που εγώ διεξάγω με θέμα:

Οι απόψεις των εκλεγμένων παιδιών πάνω στις σχολικές εκλογές και στα μαθητικά συμβούλια στην Ελλάδα

Η έρευνα αποζητά να βρει τι ωθεί τα παιδιά να συμμετέχουν ως υποψήφιοι στις σχολικές εκλογές και τι στοχεύουν να επιτύχουν μέσω αυτού του δημοκρατικού θεσμού. Ευελπιστώ τα ευρήματα αυτής της έρευνας θα συνεισφέρουν στο να κατανοηθούν καλύτερα οι απόψεις των παιδιών πάνω στο δημοκρατικό εργαλείο των σχολικών εκλογών.

Θα ζητήσω από το παιδί σας να συμμετέχει σε μία συνέντευξη όπου θα έχει την ευκαιρία να μιλήσει για το τι τον/την ώθησε να συμμετέχει ως υποψήφιος/α στις σχολικές εκλογές και την γενικότερη άποψη του/της για αυτόν τον δημοκρατικό θεσμό. Αυτή η συνέντευξη θα κρατήσει περίπου 30 λεπτά και θα θέσω ανοιχτές ερωτήσεις ώστε να βρω τι τους ώθησε να συμμετέχουν ως υποψήφιοι στις σχολικές εκλογές, τι ελπίζουν να πετύχουν μέσω αυτής της συμμετοχής καθώς επίσης και την γενική τους άποψη πάνω σε αυτό τον δημοκρατικό θεσμό. Επιπλέον, μία ερώτηση θα αποζητά να βρει εάν πιστεύουν πως οι σχολικές εκλογές προετοιμάζουν τα παιδιά για την μελλοντική τους συμμετοχή στο δημοκρατικό καθεστώς ενώ η τελευταία ερώτηση αποζητά να βρει εάν θεωρούν τις εκλογές δικαίωμα ή ευθύνη τους.

Για να ακούσω την προσωπική άποψη του παιδιού σας πάνω στο θέμα, πιστεύω θα ήταν καλύτερο να είμαστε μόνοι κατά την διάρκεια της συνέντευξης με εσάς σε κοντινή απόσταση. Ωστόσο, μπορείτε να καθίσετε κατά τη διάρκεια τις συνέντευξης ή να μπειτε οποιαδήποτε στιγμή το επιθυμείτε. Η συνέντευξη θα ηχογραφηθεί για περαιτέρω ανάλυση των λεγομένων του παιδιού σας, μετά το τέλος της συνέντευξης.

Η συμμετοχή στην έρευνα είναι απολύτως εθελοντική. Μπορείτε να αποσύρεται τη συμμετοχή του παιδιού σας οποιαδήποτε στιγμή το επιθυμήσετε.

Ο σκοπός και η διαδικασία της συνέντευξης θα επεξηγηθεί πλήρως και στο παιδί σας και αυτός/η θα συμμετέχει μόνο εφόσον το επιθυμεί. Έχετε τη δυνατότητα να τελειώσετε τη συμμετοχή του παιδιού σας είτε πριν είτε κατά την διάρκεια της συνέντευξης. Το ίδιο ισχύει και για το παιδί σας και εγώ προσωπικά θα το ενημερώσω για αυτή την δυνατότητα.

Η έρευνα είναι τελείως ανώνυμη. Ονόματα δεν θα χρησιμοποιηθούν σε κανένα έγγραφο. Επιπλέον, η μόνη γεωγραφική αναφορά για τους συμμετέχοντες θα είναι η Ελλάδα, ενώ κανένα όνομα τοπικής πόλης ή σχολείου δεν θα αναφερθεί στα ευρήματα.

Με το τέλος της έρευνας, η τελική έρευνα που συζητά τα ευρήματα θα είναι διαθέσιμη. Παρακαλώ να έρθετε σε επαφή μαζί μου εάν επιθυμείτε αντίγραφο της έρευνάς μου.

Εάν έχετε οποιαδήποτε ερώτηση για την διπλωματική μου έρευνα, παρακαλώ επικοινωνήστε μαζί μου οποιαδήποτε ώρα επιθυμείτε στο:

geoav330@student.liu.se

Παρακαλώ δείξτε το αν επιτρέπετε στο παιδί σας να συμμετέχει σε αυτή την εργασία τσεκάροντας μία από τις παρακάτω προτάσεις και υπογράφοντας με το όνομά σας και την υπογραφή σας.

- Δίνω την άδεια μου ώστε το παιδί μου να συμμετέχει στην έρευνα: *Οι απόψεις των εκλεγμένων παιδιών πάνω στις σχολικές εκλογές στην Ελλάδα· πως πήραν την απόφαση να συμμετέχουν στις εκλογές ως υποψήφιοι και τι ελπίζουν να πετύχουν μέσω αυτού του δημοκρατικού εργαλείου;*
- Δε δίνω την άδεια μου ώστε το παιδί μου να συμμετέχει στην έρευνα: *Οι απόψεις των εκλεγμένων παιδιών πάνω στις σχολικές εκλογές στην Ελλάδα· πως πήραν την απόφαση να συμμετέχουν στις εκλογές ως υποψήφιοι και τι ελπίζουν να πετύχουν μέσω αυτού του δημοκρατικού εργαλείου;*

Εκτυπωμένο Όνομα Γονέα/Κηδεμόνα

Υπογραφή Γονέα/Κηδεμόνα

Appendix 4

Informed Consent (Child)

My name is Georgios Avramidis and I am a student at Linköping University in Sweden.

I am asking you to take part in a research study I am doing because I am trying to better understand how you have decided to participate as candidates in the school elections as well as your views on the democratic tool of elections. The purpose of my study is to hear what you have to say. The name of the study is:

Elected children's views on school elections and students' councils in Greece

If you agree to participate in this study, I will give you an opportunity to talk about what motivated you to take part as a candidate in the school elections as well as what you hope to achieve through your election. I will also give you an opportunity to share your experiences and views on this democratic ordinance. Finally, I will give you an opportunity to express your opinion if these elections are viewed as a right or as a responsibility. Your participation will help me better understand what kids like you experience during this elections. The whole interview will last about 30 minutes.

If you don't want to participate in this study, you do not have to. If you decide to say no, no one will be upset or disappointed. If you agree to participate now but later change your mind, you are free not to participate. I would like to interview you on your own, but if you prefer to have your parent there with you when you are interviewed, there is no problem. You can just ask.

Also, you may not answer questions that you do not want to. Also, if at any time you want to stop the interview, just say so.

If you have any questions about the study, feel free to ask.

Signing your name at the bottom means that you agree to be in this study.

Thank for your help!

Signature of Informant

Appendix 5

Informative Paper (Principals)

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Georgios Avramidis and I am a student in the child studies master's programme at Linköping University, Sweden. I am currently conducting research on the school's ordinance of students' elections and students' councils. The name of my research is:

Elected children's views on school elections and students' councils in Greece

The study is seeking to find what motivates children to take part as candidates in the school elections and what do they intend to achieve through this school ordinance. I hope the findings of this study will contribute to a better understanding of children's views on the democratic tool of school elections.

Children from your school will take part in semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Informed consent has been asked and given from students' parents and the students themselves.

The research will entirely take place outside the school environment. However, since this research studies a school's ordinance, it was considered appropriate for the Principals of all the schools that the interviewees attend, to be informed of their students' participation.

Kind regards,

Avramidis Georgios