

Exploring the Potential of a Co-Creation Platform for Children and Youth

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Abstract: We present a project in its initial phase, a partnership between a Norwegian municipality, teachers, students, and researchers. We explore two interconnected concerns: First, the need for new ways of involving young citizens in co-creation processes in public sector when approaching the transition to a low-emission society. Second, within education, there is a need for more arenas for practical involvement of students in authentic democratic processes and more teaching for and through democratic processes.

Introduction

Co-creation in the public sector has gained increased prominence due to problems that call for new forms of governance. The public sector is facing serious challenges, growing expectations, a scarcity of resources, and citizens who expect to be more involved than merely as voters and consumers (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). Recent literature argues that a turn towards co-creation will help resolve a few of these issues (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). Co-creation can be defined as “a distributed and collaborative pattern of creative problem-solving that proactively mobilizes public and private resources to jointly define problems and design and implement solutions that are emergent and seek to generate public value” (Ansell & Torfing, 2021, s. 55). There is a specific responsibility in policy documents to include children and youth in democratic arenas. Research on youth participation has demonstrated that there is an immense potential of involving innovative youth for solving societal changes at a local level (e.g., Hagen et al., 2021). When initiatives aim to include youth in co-creation, there is a danger of participation fatigue, resistance, and disengagement, particularly when youth and children are not taken seriously as citizens with experience, knowledge, and collaborative skills (Hegna et al., 2018). While education on democratic processes is an important aspect of becoming an adult, involving young citizens in co-creation processes should not be limited to training or building qualifications, but be more oriented towards participating as active citizens with the opportunity to have actual influence (Hegna et al., 2018). Moreover, studies demonstrate that young people have valuable knowledge regarding their local communities, which leads to learning and creation of new knowledge for all of those involved (Hagen et al., 2021).

A new curriculum was introduced in Norway in 2020. *Democracy and citizenship* and *sustainable development* were included as two interdisciplinary topics. The fact that these issues are relevant at all levels of society bears a potential for students and teachers to engage in authentic problems, potentially also in collaboration with actors outside of school, such as local policymakers or non-government organizations. While there is agreement in the literature that education on democracy and citizenship must be imparted in the form of teaching about, for, and through democracy (Hegna et al., 2018), the teaching is mostly *about* the interdisciplinary topics—for example, theoretical knowledge regarding the electoral system, political parties, and knowledge of climate change (Ødegård & Svagård, 2018). We need more research in education that focuses on education *for* and *through* democracy and citizenship, which should include aspects such as critical thinking and action competency and provide students authentic experiences of democracy in practice. Hence, it is crucial to establish a closer association with local processes outside of school through participation in and experience with practical democratic processes (Ødegård & Svagård, 2018).

Research context

The research project builds on the design-based research (DBR) tradition (Collins, 2004), with an objective of developing and refining the design of tools, arenas, and curricula as well as to advance existing theories that can create a deeper understanding of co-creation with young people in the public sector.

The project will be implemented in the medium-sized Norwegian municipality, Springwater. Springwater is currently working on a new strategy which states that the municipality should be leading actors in the ongoing work on transitioning to a low-emission society. It is widely recognized that climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our times. In Norway, the urgent need for change is addressed in both national and local policy documents, with the expectation of a joint effort towards creating a sustainable future. At the local level, municipalities play a central role in the transition process. Springwater’s strategy urges the municipality to

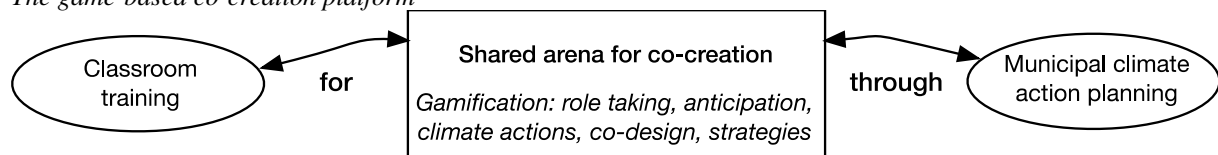
develop new forms of collaboration for local citizens and to engage citizens in the transition process—for example, through the exploration of new forms of co-creation and involvement of citizens. Co-creation with youth and children is highlighted in Springwater’s climate strategy. Springwater’s strategy for transitioning to a society that prevents further climate change is highly relevant for children and youth, both as an interdisciplinary curriculum topic and because climate change issues directly impact their future.

In the Fall of 2021, municipal staff at Springwater and the authors initiated a small-scale exploratory project that was supported by the local politicians investigating new arenas for the co-creation with youth and children in the context of the urgent need for new solutions. In the first phase of this project, an idea of a ‘climate game’ was born. The use of games and various forms of gamification has a long history in education, and researchers have demonstrated that certain games have many characteristics that could provide good opportunities for learning and engagement (Galeote et al., 2021). As such, games may have the potential of creating an arena for youth participation, and there are several examples of games that aim to engage and teach students about democratic processes as well as climate change and sustainability issues (Galeote et al. 2021). However, there is sparse knowledge regarding opportunities for using games and game-based engagement as an arena for both learning *about*, *for*, and *through* participation in democratic processes.

Therefore, in this project, we seek to explore how the design and development of a game-based digital platform can serve as arenas (Figure 1) for 1) critical thinking about future sustainability concerns and mitigations in the local community – building knowledge that connects curricular demands with situated knowledge building (Smørðal et al. 2016), 2) training for participation through exploratory dialogue and role-taking in the classroom to understand dilemmas and value conflicts in climate work, and 3) involvement of youth and children in authentic climate work where municipal staff is present and has responsibility for preparing the work, i.e., describing challenges and possible mitigations, visualising concerns, allowing the participants to develop their views and arguments, and to systematically collect the results for further use by the municipality.

Figure 1

The game-based co-creation platform



Research questions and data collection

Thus, the research aim is twofold: 1) What characterizes the potential benefits and challenges associated with the participation of young people in authentic democratic processes and co-creation in the public sector? 2) Can a game-based digital platform about climate change issues serve as an arena for co-creation in municipalities transitioning to a low-emission society? If yes, how can this happen? We will derive the research data for this project from interviews and video recordings of design workshops with children, youth, teachers, and administrators from the municipality, and harvest digital logs from the platform. Moreover, we will also involve schoolteachers and conduct classroom studies in different phases of the project.

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