

Why and how listen to children? A child rights
perspective. Comment on Maria Herczog's presentation.
Maria Kaisa Aula

VTL, YTT (h.c), Chair of the Family Federation of
Finland, Ombudsman for Children 2005 - 2014

Value-added of the CRC to the well-being of children in Finland?

Photo: Pori Centre for Children's Culture

- Human rights treaties should guide the decision makers to review their criterias for a good life
- Finland ratified the CRC in 1991
- The CRC has brought the **right of the child to be heard and to participate** to the political, legislative, professional, research and NGO-agenda

Process launched by the new Constitution of Finland 6§ 1995/1999 is still continuing

”Children shall be treated equally and as individuals and they shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development”

- > *Law on ombudsman for children (2005)*
- > *Youth act (2006)*
- > *Child Welfare Act (2007)*
- > *Basic education Act ...*
- > *Immigration Act*
- > *Municipality Act (2015)*
- > *Early education Act (2015)*

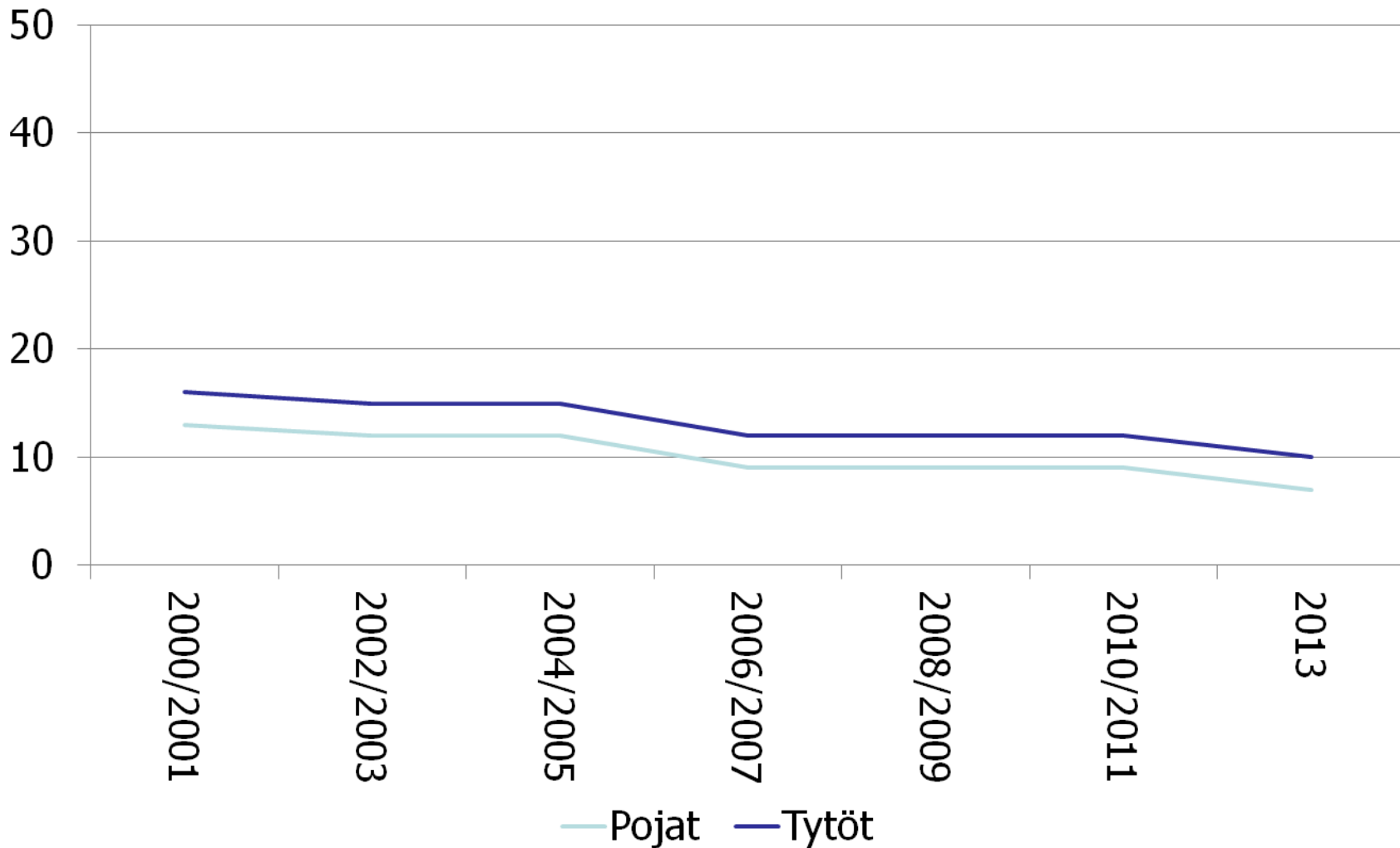


- At home/with parents
- At school
- At hospital/health/rehabilitation
- In youth work and NGO's
- In other municipal services
- In community planning
- In institutions and in alternative care; child protection
- In child's own ethnic or religious community/church
- In immigration services
- In decisions made in courts and administration about children (divorce, mediation of disputes, custody decisions)
- In informing about services and participation rights
- In media

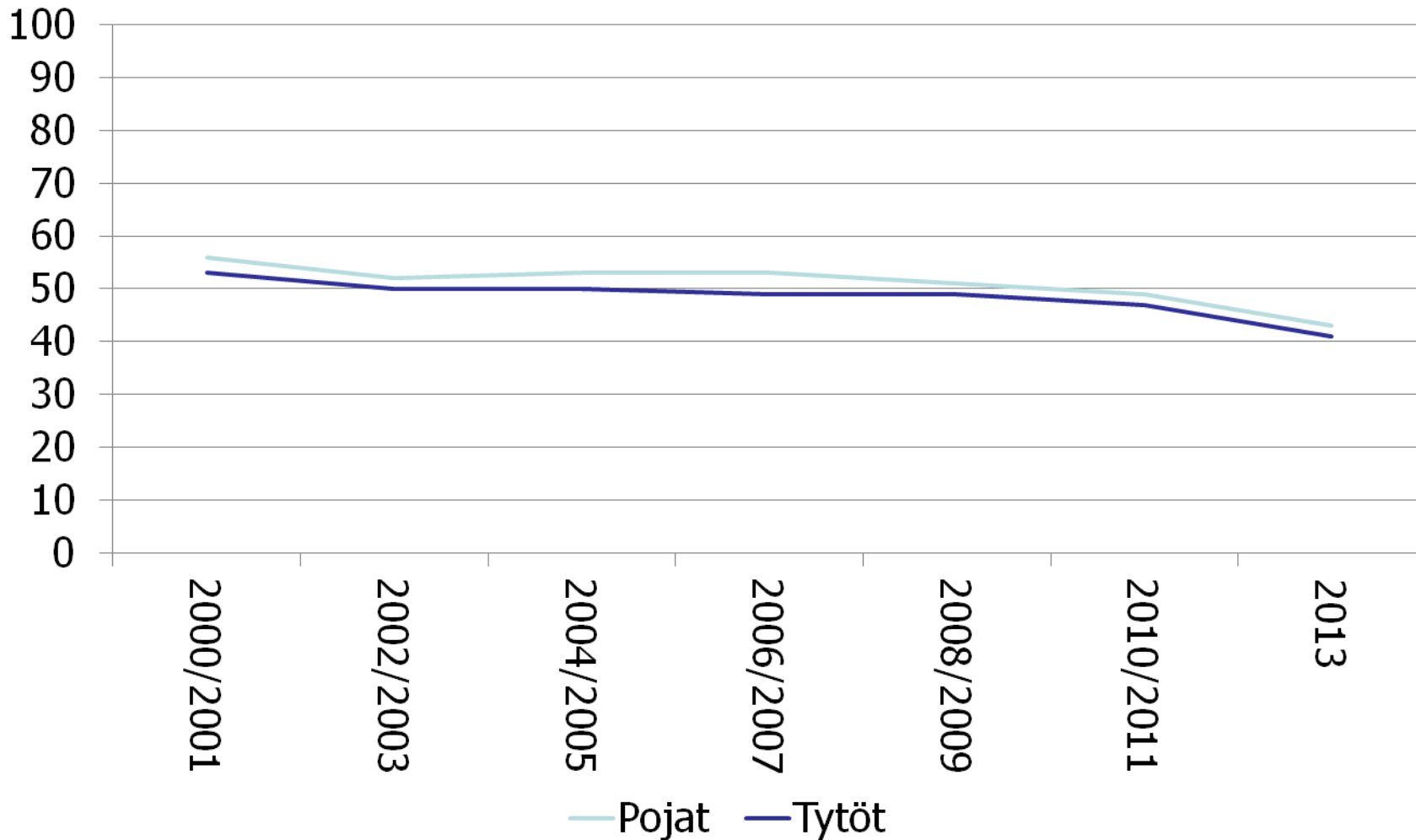
Does it work in practice?

- CoE pilot evaluation 2011
- Government human rights assessment (2014)
- Child well-being indicators (2014)

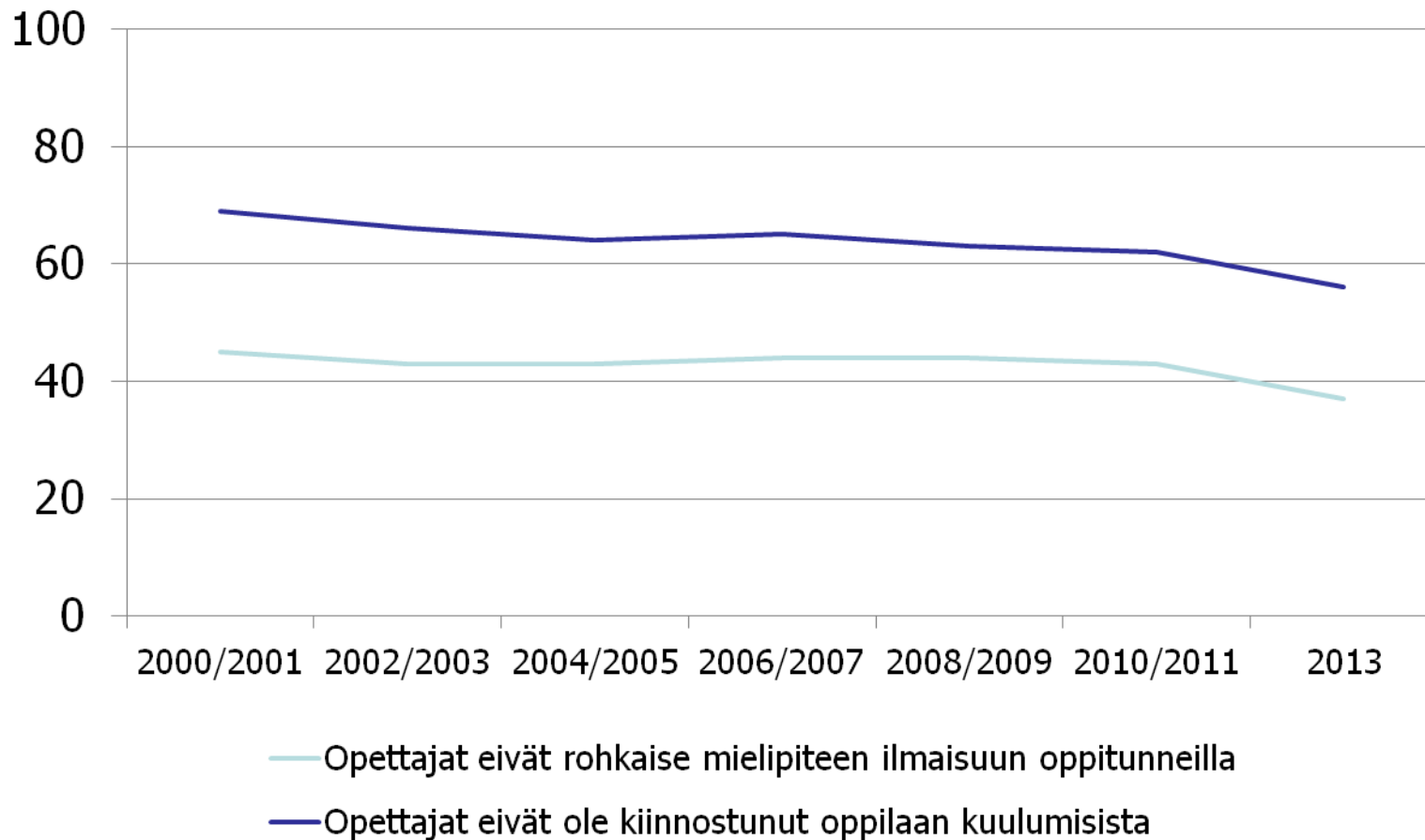
5.1 Perusopetuksen 8. ja 9. luokan pojat ja tytöt, jotka eivät pysty juuri koskaan keskustelemaan vanhempiensa kanssa omista asioistaan (%) vuosina 2000/2001–2013 (THL/Kouluterveyskysely).



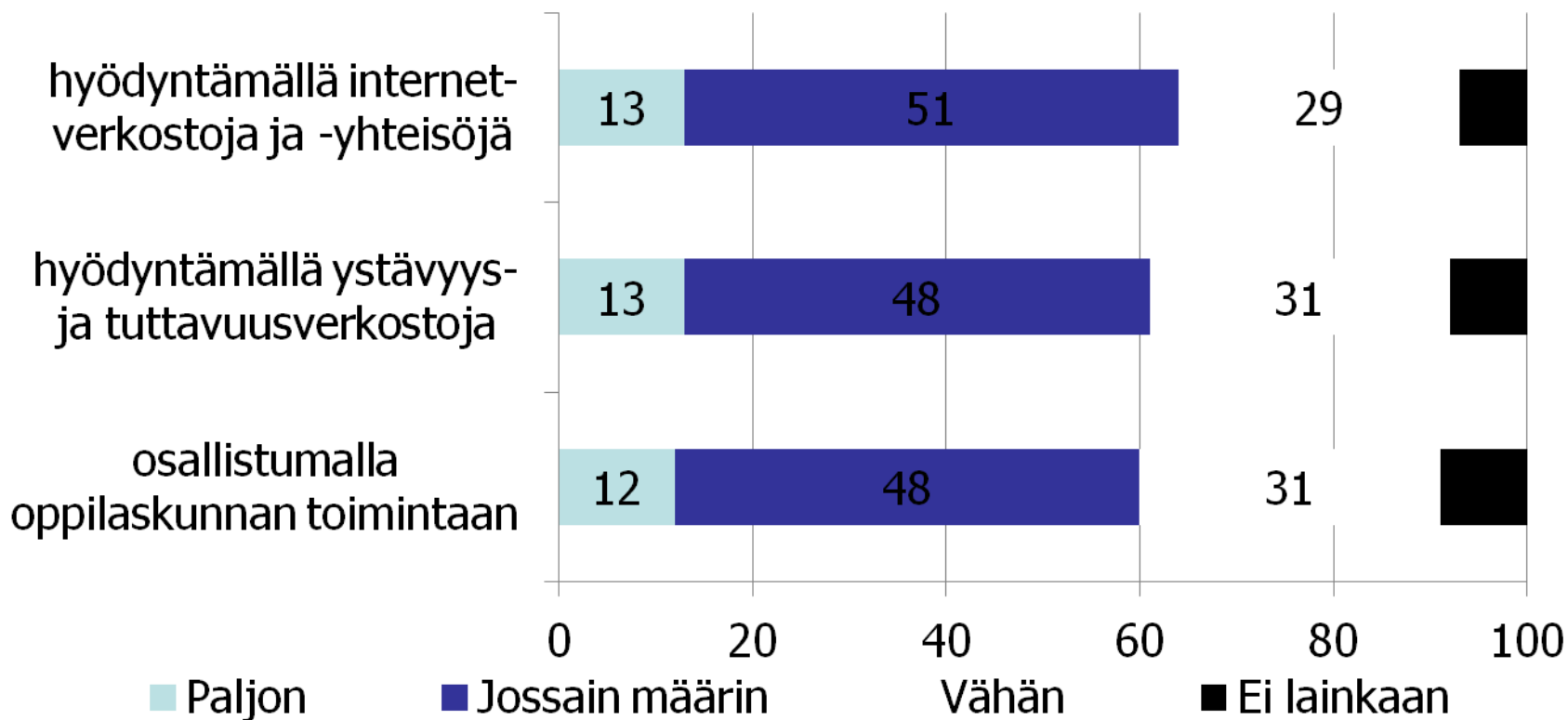
4.10 Perusopetuksen 8. ja 9. luokan pojat ja tytöt, jotka arvioivat ettei oppilaiden mielipiteitä huomioida koulutyön kehittämisessä vuosina 2006/2007–2013 (%) (THL/Kouluterveyskysely).



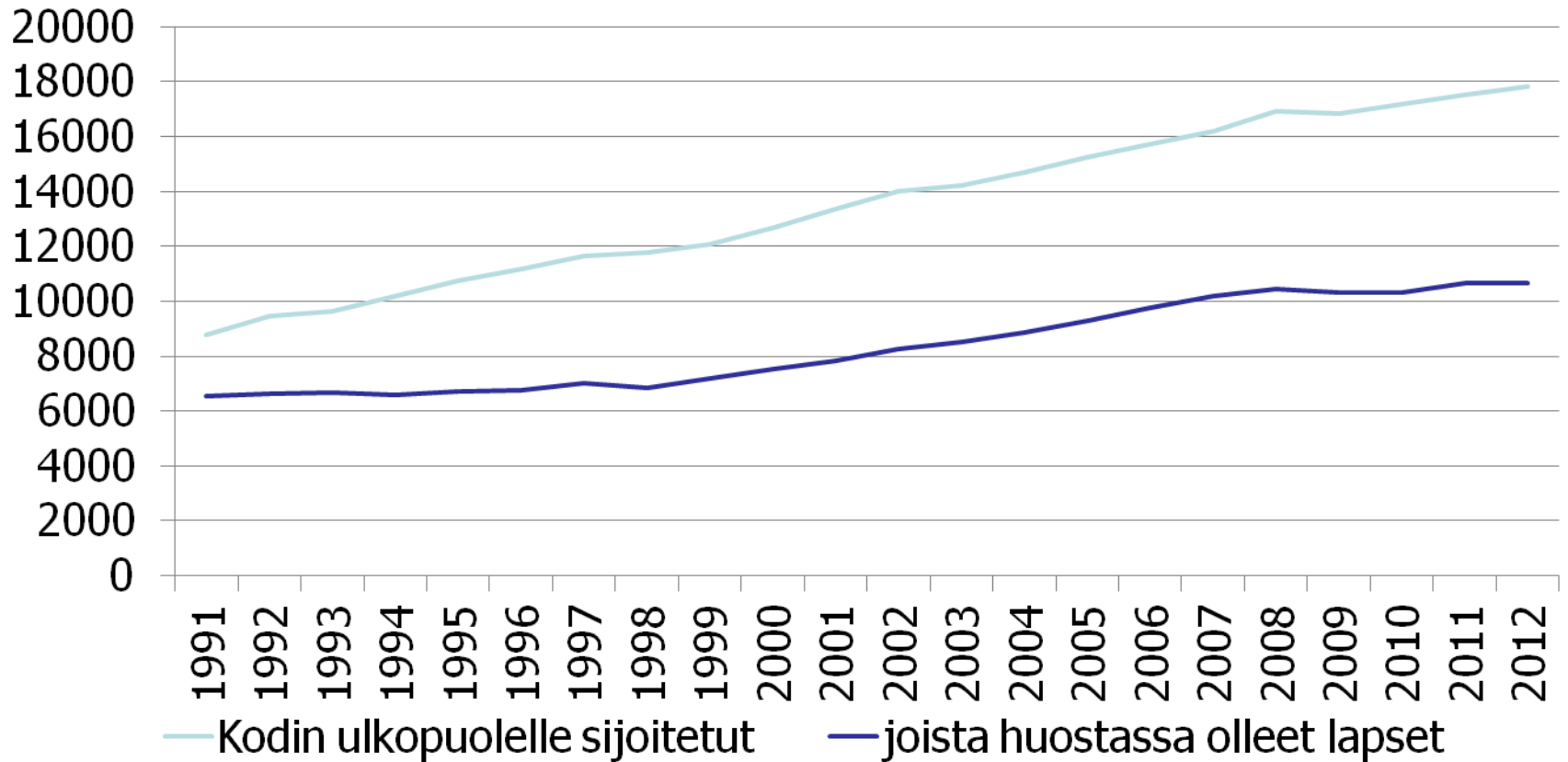
4.9 Perusopetuksen 8. ja 9. luokan oppilaat, jotka kokevat, etteivät opettajat rohkaise mielipiteen ilmaisuun oppitunnilla ja etteivät opettajat ole kiinnostuneita heidän kuulumisistaan (%) vuosina 2000/2001–2013 (THL/Kouluterveyskysely).



5.10 Kolme yleisintä keinoa, joilla nuoret arvioivat voivansa vaikuttaa ongelmien ratkaisemiseen (%) vuonna 2009 (Suoninen ym. 2010, 87-88).



Kuluneen vuoden aikana kaikkien kodin ulkopuolelle sijoitettujen sekä niistä huostaan otettujen 0–17-vuotiaiden lasten lukumäärä vuosina 1991–2012 . -> **No survey data available about children´s experiences about the quality of service; no participation structures in all institutions**



How should children participate?

1) **Children as individuals** => Good interaction with a child and adult - in family, service situation

2) **Children as "experience experts"** =>

Children's knowledge should be fed into improving the quality of services (surveys, peer support groups, focus groups) at school, child protection, health care , community planning etc

3) **As citizens/members of municipality** =>

Channeling and taking into attention the priorities of children in community and service development in general, interaction of children with decision-makers

(student bodies, children's parliaments, youth councils)

What does 'participation' mean from the adult point of view?

- Hearing the child
- Listening to the child
- Finding out the child's opinion
- Understanding the child
- Taking the child's opinion into account
- Interaction between the child and an adult
- Mutual learning, respect and appreciation

Obstacles to children's participation lie in adults' preconceptions, attitudes and deficient skills

- adults being in a hurry - lack of time; "This is a formality"
- adult lack interactive skills with children of different ages or different means of communication
- adults' preconceptions about children and the level of their capacities; adults do not realize the benefits of participation for their own work
- adults' suspicion that emphasising children's rights will erode adult authority or put power in the wrong hands
- Improving the children's right to be heard is in Finland more a question of creating a child friendly culture of intercourse and mutual learning than a lack of legislation-> training adults/professionals
- More emphasis on participation of all children and improving the practises in representative participation: let children have their say about the structures and practises

All children are equal

- Girls and boys
- Children and adolescents
- Children in alternative care
- Children in hospital
- Children with intellectual disabilities
- Children with long term illness
- Deaf or blind children
- Children whose parents are in prison
- Unaccompanied asylum seeking children
- Immigrant children
- Christian children
- Muslim children
- Unreligious
- Roma children
- Indigenous children
- Minority language speakers
- Sign language users
- Challenging children
- Well behaving children

In the best interests of the child?

- Human rights treaties such as CRC are revising the criterias for a good life
 - > **more demand** for participation of children, their opinions
- Listening to children's experiences transforms adults' perceptions and criterias we use to assess services



A good school, in the opinion of children!

"Food could be better. Potatoes could be cooked better" (primary school pupil)

"Breaks should be longer so there is enough time to play and move." (primary school pupil)

"Students are told off for not going outside during breaks, but there is nothing to do outside, so why would anyone want to go?" (secondary school pupil)

"Paint the school in brighter colours, so that it doesn't look like a hospital!" (secondary school pupil)

"There could be more activities with other classes, so that everyone would get to know each other better" (primary school pupil)

"I would like to have a say in what we do in crafts, because the teacher always decides this"

What are children's priorities for a good school (in Finland)?

- 1) A comfortable, beautiful, "home-like" physical environment: facilities and school yard
- 2) Quality of mealtimes and breaks during the school day
- 3) Good atmosphere in the school and supporting friendships - against bullying
- 4) Asking for the opinions of children and possibility to influence matters in everyday life at school

*"Learning goes fine but we are lacking footballs"
(small things matter!)*



Defining the criteria for the quality of school, hospital, alternative care: All should have a say.

Professionals

Parents

Children and young people



Child participation assessment tool by Council of Europe (2014)

- Legal protection
- Cross sectoral national CRC strategy exists
- Ombudsman institution
- Child friendly individual complaints procedures in place
- Administrative and judicial procedures are child friendly
- Children receive information about their right to participate
- Training for professionals
- Consultative governance bodies at local, regional and national level
- Child targeted public service feedback mechanisms in place
- Children and their organisations participate in monitoring the UNCRC

The benefits of children's participation

- empowerment
- attachment to the community -> feeling that " I matter!"
- produces better decisions and more effective services
- can be and is fun
- appreciates children and childhood

But it

- demands that adults change their attitudes to recognize that
- children are citizens already now and today and adults could benefit a lot by learning from children



Thank you!

