GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE SPACES AS AN INSTRUMENT PROMOTING YOUTH INTEGRATION AND PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL COMMUNITY

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Insufficient analysis of green infrastructure spaces benefit to youth activity promotion in Lithuanian social sciences discourse enabled to formulate scientific problem – what can be possibilities of using green infrastructure spaces while strengthening youth integration and participation in local community? The aim of the article – after analyzing social benefit of green infrastructure spaces to youth, to determine their usage possibilities for strengthening youth integration and participation in local community. Research methods: scientific literature, document analysis and synthesis, abstraction and comparison methods. Šiauliai district Kuršėnai town environmentally directed school’s projects were analysed for the case study. For youth, green infrastructure spaces are the areas for environmental education, health improvement, strengthening of their integration and participation in local community through various activities. Youth gradually become involved into social activity where their status of a passive participant changes into the status of an active participant. Case study can be used by various local actors (other schools, community, teachers, parents etc.) strengthening integration and participation of youth in local community by using GI spaces.

Key words: green infrastructure spaces, youth, integration, participation, local community.

JEL Codes: I20, O18, Q57.

1. Introduction

Green infrastructure (further GI) spaces and its preservation are topical not only in the sustainable development discussions among environmental enthusiasts and policy makers, but also in social sciences, where interplay between GI and residents and potential resultant effects, i.e. potential benefit or damage, are explored increasingly deeper. Traditional approach to GI spaces is considered to bring the social benefit of enhancing the process of connecting people and the natural green environment. Under the mentioned approach, connectivity and ability to link different groups of people across various physical and implied boundaries and natural nature are significant. Social benefit of GI spaces has not been analysed deeply by Lithuanian social researchers, so this paper is highlighting just social benefit of GI rather than other aspects.
Possibilities for youth integration and promotion of youth participation in benefiting from GI spaces are a relatively recent and quite novel niche for scientific research providing conditions for assessment of potential application of natural environment to addressing youth issues. The novelty of this article is based on the lack of analysis and clarification of promotion of youth integration and participation in local community by taking advantage of the GI spaces. The role of linking people and GI in the living area could be viewed as the prime motivator in promoting youth integration and participation in local community.

The case selected for empirical research combines two mentioned elements of local area: local GI spaces and local school. The case analysis is based on projects analysis involving use of GI spaces implemented under the framework of promotion of youth integration and participation at Šiauliai district Kuršėnų Daugėlių lower secondary school (hereinafter – the School) which takes part in the Environmental schools programme in Lithuania under Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). Furthermore, the authors consciously abstracted from analysing additional to environment (GI related) activities (cultural, literature, sports, arts, etc.) which are also a part of youth activities at school and they are analysed more frequently.

Considering the topicality of the analysed topic such scientific problem was formulated – what can be possibilities of using green infrastructure spaces while strengthening youth integration and participation in local community? Research object: youth integration and participation in local community through GI spaces. Research aim: after analyzing social benefit of green infrastructure spaces to youth, to determine their usage possibilities for strengthening youth integration and participation in local community. Research objectives: 1) to conceptualise the GI spaces social benefit; 2) to justify the importance of GI in youth integration and participation in local community; 3) to explore the possibilities offered by GI spaces in youth integration and participation using the good practice example. Research methods: scientific literature, document analysis and synthesis, abstraction, case study analysis and method of comparison.

2. Theoretical Insights

The concept of GI has a series of different dimensions, it varies according to researchers’ goals, activities and interests. GI is often attributed to sustainable development environmental dimension and focuses on rational use and preservation of natural resources. GI parallels are drawn between such concepts as environmental infrastructure, landscape, civic spaces, open spaces etc. (Lewis, 2000; Mell, 2010; M’Ikiugu, 2012). Literature on use of GI for environmental, economic, social goals (Benedict, 2006; EPA, 2012; Capaldi, 2015) reveal that GI spaces should be accessible and used on the individual, local, regional, national, international levels – it plays an important role at any level.

I. C. Mell (2010) has identified main GI principles which are comprehensively related to the social dimension of GI: accessibility, concept and resources, connectivi-
ty and networks, integration of different cross-boundary ideas (people, places and policy), multifunctionality, multiple benefits, planning, scale (territorial level), sustainability. The following natural and semi-natural (man-made/influenced) GI elements, various open natural spaces related to humans’ daily lives are usually mentioned for the local level (within and between cities, towns and villages) (Benedict, 2006; Sustainable..., 2010; The Multifuncionality..., 2012; Natural..., 2014): open countryside, parks, waterways, gardens, streets, green corridors, garden squares, shared yards, community forests, woodlands, walking trails, natural monuments, playgrounds, architectural structures, school yards, etc. Accordingly GI spaces can be classified into formal and informal (Mell, 2010). Formal using of GI spaces includes formal requirements, rules and standards for the officially organised activities (whether to keep safety, particular level of interaction or prevention of nature), while informal using of GI spaces is related to the informal recreation actions which are not planned for specific purposes for the target groups, or simply it can be understood just being and using the nature (as general public or open spaces). Following this view, GI spaces may even represent a network of various natural spaces which can be used for satisfaction of human needs and their activities. GI spaces are obviously a part of human’s daily life, and use of GI does not always attain special attention, and is rather viewed as a natural given.

N. Green (1995) explored that social environment a person develops within (i.e. physically and psychologically) influences his or her perception. A. Lewis, G. Lindsay (2000) have applied it to physical and psychological health of youth, when landscape can be viewed as a living room, classroom, or a play area, due to the diversity in use to some extent has been viewed as commodities. C. C. Konijnendijk (2003) revealed that at the local level GI spaces act as a connector of people and places in development of functional spaces that span pre-existing boundaries or could be used to actively engage population with their environment through recreation and good planning. Recreational GI spaces could, however, be viewed as providing possibilities for social interaction, social inclusion and exercise as vital elements in developing sustainable communities. F. J. Escobedo (2006) noted that the role of GI which implies connecting people and places is subject to external (i.e. societal) pressures. GI spaces can help reduce these negative influences (like exclusion, social risk etc.), but it must be explored in relation to the overarching forces affecting a place. S. J. Wake (2007), I. C. Mell (2010) suggested that innovative GI spaces provide both amenities and landscape diversity that aid discovery learning and promote use of environmental education (understanding that GI spaces that youth live and play in are of equal importance to their education). Mentioned positive aspects of GI not only shape a living environment, promote fostering of the surrounding nature, but also demonstrate the goods, services which could be drawn from GI. Scientific literature (Green, 1995; Lewis, 2000; Sustainable..., 2010; Kramer, 2014; Capaldi, 2015) emphasizes the following GI spaces social benefit:
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- proper use of GI spaces creates conditions for promotion of engagement and social interaction within a local community what enhance healthy lifestyle and improves the quality of life;
- forms an attractive living environment;
- offers environmental education promoting nature learning, pupils’ field trips, cooperation between researchers in GI;
- promote recreation, outdoor activities (outdoor sports, horseback riding etc.);
- fosters cultural and historical heritage across different generations of residents;
- creates aesthetics of the landscape;
- reduces the costs of public infrastructure etc.

Although social benefit of GI spaces is multidimensional and manifests itself differently at different territorial levels, the main purpose is to satisfy human needs at their living place. From the general perspective on the social aspect of GI, it could be asserted that people are the ones who hold primary responsibility for preservation of GI through connectivity between different community members, participation of different generations in joint activity by building on the GI benefits.

3. Research methods

Methodology of the research is focused on analysis and synthesis of scientific literature and documents, abstraction method, qualitative method (case study). Research question is provided by such logical stages:

1 stage: Theoretical conceptualisation of GI social benefit.
2 stage: Defining problem of youth integration and participation in local community.
3 stage: Defining projects and their elements, and applying GI functions on the selected case.
4 stage: Summarizing theoretical and empirical research results findings.

Stages 2 and 3 were realized using twofold approaches in the results part. Firstly, applying further presented M. Levasseur (2010) suggested model for integration and participation of a particular social group – it was adopted to the existing situation of young people in the analysed School. In the Figure part „Examples of youth roles in relation to involvement in local community“ were identified the transformation processes of youth integration and participation at the School. Secondly, there were described environment based activities and persons which are the main actors who participate in them. As well there were explored functions which were implemented in the environment based projects.

Various GI-related studies are built on case studies from various scientific areas where local people plus place based approaches are integrated. Case study method enables to identify the specific characteristics of local GI in relation to local community, as in this case, the emphasis is put on youth. The school which was chosen as a case study is Šiauliai district Kuršėnų Daujėlių lower secondary school which is one of the environmentally orientated schools, because it is surrounded by various local green spaces and has potential for promoting youth participation through environ-
The selected School represents the case study of small town and can be followed by other schools which have similar environment. Giving more arguments focusing on the School case analysis (Strategic…, 2013; Environmental…, 2016) they are:

- the School largely is surrounded by open green places such as school yard, stadium, playground, forest, river Venta with its meadows and pinewood;
- School mission is commitment to provision of education in safe environment enhancing relations and cooperation with local community;
- strategic priorities (development of safe, healthy and cultured environment);
- School values (respecting all groups as they are etc.);
- pupils’ proactive approach contributes to implementation of environmental programmes;
- the School has been awarded with the Green Flag Award already for 8 years supporting environmental ideas.

Composition of School community as in 2016 was the following: 236 pupils, 32 teachers, 18 children from social risk families, 19 children from Kuršėnų Orphanage. These numbers show that different social economic background young people attend this school and the need to enhance their integration and mutual participation is like a challenge not only for local school, but also for local community. Interest of the School in environmentally friendly use of GI spaces, active participation in environmental activity also encourages young people to join their environmental efforts. Joint teachers – pupils activities are aimed at increasing pupils’ environmental consciousness, drawing attention of the young generation to negative consequences of economic development; development of an environmental management system conductive to better situation at School and its environment through coordination of class, school and community actions.

The authors have followed M. Levasseur (2010) suggested model, which has identified several levels of integration and participation based on the respective activities (1) individual proximity of involvement with others and 2) the goals of the activity):

1) individual proximity of involvement with others (level 1: alone, level 2: in parallel, levels 3 to 6: in interaction);

2) goals of the activity (levels 1 and 2: basic needs oriented, level 3: socially oriented, level 4: task oriented, level 5: oriented toward helping others, and level 6: society oriented).

3) also it is seen in the figure that activities can be performed for oneself (levels 1 and 2), with others (levels 4 and 5) or for others (levels 5 and 6).

Figure provides examples of youth participation in various activities and the functions which were reached following the suggested scheme by M. Levasseur on the basis of specific example of the case of youth integration.

This study was based on the analysis of the following School documents have been studied for identification of key characteristics of role of the School in protecting local GI spaces and promoting youth integration and participation: Strategic Plan of the School 2014–2016, Environmental Report 2016, Environmental School Action
Plan 2016–2017. Recent environmental activities under the mentioned documents suggest that not only pupils and teachers, staff at the school, but also family members are engaged in the activities. Information from different sources enabled to explore how through already implemented different environmental projects young people are encouraged to be active in the future. Integration of various actors promotes cooperation between different generations, social groups what encourage pupils to undertake key (active) role, thus assuming proactive position rather than an observer’s role.

4. Results
4.1. Importance of Youth Integration and Participation in Local Community

Participation of the society and its individual members is one of the main principles of sustainable development and one of the main human rights. According to A. Lewis (2000), S. J. Wake (2007), A. Jociūte (2012), promotion of integration into society and assurance of participation in various activities are important in reducing social disparities and increasing social integration. WHO (2002) emphasized that the degree of integration and participation depends on its level and may range from the sense of “participation” to “being a part of” or “sharing something”. Ability to be with people and among people rather than acting individually strengthens manifestations of individualism, alienation or even leads to social exclusion— is viewed as the key factor under this concept. A. Jociūte (2012) and B. Piškur (2014) mentioned that participation is when people are empowered to be active and truly involved into particular processes concerning their lives. This demonstrates that the degree of participation may differ depending on whether the participant’s status is passive or active.

Social participation is seen as an important factor for youth development, as they accumulate knowledge and develop social skills while being, acting and interacting with other people (Levasseur, 2010; Piškur, 2014). Different social activities that take place with friends or groups in GI spaces, involvement in voluntary activities, events within local community strengthen the sense of belonging to living place, promote self-confidence. When youth participates actively in the processes of health enhancement, nature fostering in their immediate environment, they have the potential of becoming certain agents on the level of local community, in particular, when they face real-life issues and provided with support (Simovska, 2012).

Challenges for youth participation arise when it integrates different categories of young people. Following S. J. Wake (2007), R. Tijūnaitė and M. Damkuvienė (2010) some of the challenges towards better participation are common to youth due to their specific age of life and sociodemographic categories. The mentioned categories have significant impact in attempts to promote the role of each young person in social activity, in particular, of those who experience inclusion of “excluded youth”, notably, those from poorer socio-economic background or social risk groups.

In addition to mentioned and following the model suggested by M. Levasseur (2010) (see Figure) who identified levels of integration and participation (as the main principles of local community organization) of social groups, there was seen the
transformation of youth (in the analysed School) moving from position before being (levels 1, 2) in the environmental (GI) related projects/activities and gradually being involved in the projects/activities (levels 3 to 6 maintaining the mutual interaction with teachers and other youth). Separate levels of this model revealed how the status and role of young people have changed: from being alone, with yourself, then going and being with others, finally performing GI related activities for others. It was done by providing different awareness forms (meetings, discussions, chats through social networks etc.) to youth how environmental (GI) related projects/activities can strengthen them as personalities not only among School community but also being a member of local community. Good practice of the School showed integration processes rather start with the teachers and their ability to draw insights and promote the youth to participate in certain activities. When a young person feels being supported is he/she capable of doing something useful, and the following time he/she will feel the desire to engage in the same or similar activity. The feeling of usefulness, the role of “self”, his/her similarity to others is very important for a young person in the process of his/her socialization. Nature is therefore one of the best environments offering youth the space to manifest themselves and show their abilities. Figure below presents levels of gradual youth involvement in social activities (following M. Levasseur et al. (2010) and B. Piškur (2014)) adopting it to the analysed case.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels</th>
<th>Description of the levels of involvement</th>
<th>Examples of youth roles in relation to involvement in local community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>Performing an activity in preparation for connecting with other people</td>
<td>The youth learned about possible activities and spaces related to GI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>Being surrounded by others’</td>
<td>Youth meetings were arranged for discussion about future activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3</td>
<td>Interacting with others without physical contact</td>
<td>Discussion, chat on social networks about social benefit of GI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4</td>
<td>Performing an activity with others</td>
<td>Discussion, chat on social networks about social benefit of GI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 5</td>
<td>Helping others</td>
<td>Encouragement of those who have not participated yet to become involved into future activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 6</td>
<td>Contributing to a community</td>
<td>Becoming an active community member (e.g. not only at school, but also in local community)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. Levels of youth involvement in social activities

From the Figure can be concluded that gradually growing participation of youth (following the detailed levels) and its promotion can be the basis for formation
of a strong, conscious and responsible personality. In this regard, GI spaces offer a
great opportunity for the youth to satisfy the need for nature learning, develop the
qualities of responsibility and volunteering, seeking personal goals in the various ac-
tivities.

4.2. Social Benefit of GI Spaces in Promotion of Youth Integration and Participation

In assessment of the possibilities for youth integration and participation in GI
spaces, the WHO (2002) suggests that it would be reasonable to consider the forms of
participation, social demographic youth characteristics and social economic status of
the family, possible areas of activity (not concrete social benefit evaluation numbers,
models etc.). Projects implemented by the School in relation to use of GI spaces for
cognitive, educational, health fostering, environmental activities are presented below.
According to M. Levasseur (2010) model, participation of youth can be described
like condition for personal goals attainment. Youth goals (satisfying needs (1–2 le-
vels), wish for socialising or helping others (3–5 levels), society oriented (level 6) in
any activity were realised through GI spaces related functions implemented in the na-
ture (see Table below).

Table. Projects by Kuršėnų Daugėlių lower secondary school related to GI spaces and
promotion of youth integration and participation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>Social activities</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>GI spaces</th>
<th>Implemented function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthy and Safe Lifestyle is Fun</td>
<td>Outdoor physical workout, discussion about safe conduct in nature, orienteering</td>
<td>Pupils, kindergarteners, pupils’ parents, grandparents and teachers</td>
<td>Pine forest</td>
<td>Promotion of healthy lifestyle, cognitive-learning, educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tasks, mushroom picking contests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| We Care!                           | Waste collection, adorning the environment                                        | Teachers, pupils, employees, school administrative staff               | Pine forest   | Nature protection, educational, promotion of healthy life-
|                                    |                                                                                 |                                                                        |               | style                                                   |
| We Travelled                       | Hiking trip, marathon                                                             | Young school journalists, several teachers                            | Pinewood, Venta river banks, meadows | Promotion of healthy lifestyle, nature protection          |
| We Can Help Too                    | Designing posters on consequences of climate change to nature, watching films,    | Teachers, pupils, employees, school administrative staff, local       | School territory, kindergarten yards | Nature protection, cognitive-learning, climate change      |
|                                    | discussions, communication with kindergarteners                                   | community                                                             |               | prevention                                               |

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unconventional Language Day at School – Using Green Spaces</td>
<td>Lessons of Lithuanian and foreign languages, taking pictures of the landscape</td>
<td>Pupils, teachers of Lithuanian and foreign languages</td>
<td>Pine forest, Venta river banks</td>
<td>Cognitive-learning, educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Day of Bird Feeders in the pinewood</td>
<td>Tiding of green spaces, mounting, repair of bird feeders in the trees, waste collection</td>
<td>Pupils, teachers, social educator, Kuršėnų forestry</td>
<td>Pinewood, Venta river banks</td>
<td>Nature protection, cognitive-learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest Festival for all the Little Ones</td>
<td>Bringing local community members closer to each other, familiarisation to forest fauna and flora</td>
<td>Pupils, kindergarteners, parents, school teachers, kindergarten teachers</td>
<td>Pine forest</td>
<td>Cognitive-learning, educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Area for Education</td>
<td>Orienteering tasks, familiarisation to forest fauna and flora, education of safe conduct in forest</td>
<td>Pupils, parents, teachers, preparatory group kindergarteners, local police</td>
<td>School sportsground, pine forest</td>
<td>Cognitive-learning, educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camp “Growing Healthy”</td>
<td>Physical exercises, relay races, drawing, making crafts of materials from the nature, fashion show using secondary raw materials, familiarisation to medicinal herbs</td>
<td>Pupils, teachers</td>
<td>School sportsground, pine forest, pinewood</td>
<td>Cognitive-learning, educational, promotion of healthy lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Environmental School Activity Week in Daugėliai</td>
<td>Making crafts of secondary raw materials, discussion about sustainable consumption, environment cleaning action</td>
<td>Pupils, class masters, employees, school administrative staff</td>
<td>School territory, pine forest</td>
<td>Learning, educational, nature protection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Information about projects and documents is available on the School website.

In this case in the concrete project there were distinguished particular functions which were implemented by various School related actors in particular activity. Various forms of activities were useful for youth whether to see where she/he can participate. These who do not know where to realise themselves, can see it like opportunities for future integration and participation. Analysis of the projects has suggested the importance of the role to be assumed by the teachers in attempts to build and maintain closer relationship with the youth. The identified activities in various GI spaces under the projects implemented clearly demonstrate that both the School community...
and the entire local community have been provided with favourable conditions for using the available public GI spaces.

However, analysis of the projects shows insufficient engagement of the local community and parents in school projects. According to R. Tijūnaite and M. Damišiūnienė (2010), the positive aspect of participation manifests is in the shift from being a beneficiary to becoming the client. Hence, by using GI spaces, the youth not only learns about natural resources, becomes more physically sound, but also becomes the client of these spaces and gains access to space of leisure, other activities. The relationship between youth and other people fostering participation through joint activity are defined pursuant to the levels identified. Those who find it too difficult to participate in the activities, lack sufficient knowledge, skills or desire, can assume the role of observers and those who have already participated in specific activities may serve as an example to others. Thereby, no one remains outside, and people become gradually involved into the joint activity, i.e. the status of a passive participant (observer) gradually changes into the status of an active participant.

The theoretical and case analysis insights have suggested the following supporting aspects of the importance of youth involvement and participation in fostering of GI and gaining the respective social benefit: youth is secured with the right to contribute to adorning and preservation of their living environment; the sense of responsibility to local community is developed; youth is provided with the opportunity to act directly and make a difference in preserving local natural resources; joint activity encompasses youth of different social and economic statuses (e.g. children from families at risk, youth are engaged in common activity together with their peers); the role of “self” becomes stronger among the peers and in the local community (e.g. I can help too, I can do the same work as you); the idea of voluntary effort is reinforced etc.

Summarizing, it could be asserted that awareness, education and consciousness of young people are the prerequisites for active participation in the local community. The skills of communication and cooperation are developed and commitments related to nature preservation, healthier lifestyle are formed by implementation of various activities in GI spaces and establishment of relationship with the nature.

5. Conclusions

1. Although the concept of GI spaces and its social benefit has a number of different aspects, its benefit in promoting youth integration and participation in local community becomes increasingly acknowledged for not only promotion of human-nature relationship, but also contribution to mutual interaction between people.

2. The presented research results enable to highlight that disclosing GI relations with different social sphere elements in local level can be an important input to this field theoretical and practical research. As the notion of GI spaces is still new and not strongly substantiated the findings from various social researches can significantly contribute developing conceptualization of GI in social context.
3. Promotion and maintenance of youth integration and participation using GI spaces offer excellent opportunity for the youth to express themselves, strengthen their own “selves”, build the sense of being important to the school community, and acquire new skills and experience. Social benefit provided by GI spaces both to the youth and to the local community is clear, in particular, when it concerns public spaces. Participation of the youth in various activities in GI spaces strengthens their values, expands the boundaries of knowledge in nature, develops the healthy lifestyle approach and contributes to positive socialisation both in the local community and in the society.

4. Implemented research enabled to confirm the idea that analysed projects were implemented without exploring concrete numbers (eg. how many young people were a part in these projects etc.) while they mostly emphasized the role, functions which are important to processes of integration and participation of youth to local community.

5. The results gained from the research reveal practical benefit for local community (local community in general, teachers, parents and other concerned local actors) using the applied methods. The given case study enables to disclose various nature related activities, enhancing integration and participation not only of youth, but also other social groups. Accordingly an important role fell on various local actors who interested on integration and participation issues of various social groups.

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ŽALIOSIOS INFRASTRUKTŪROS ERDVĖS KAIP JAUNIMO INTEGRACIJOS IR DALYVAVIMO VIETOS BENDRUOMENĖJE PRIEMONĖ

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Santrauka


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