

## Article

# Children's Participatory Capability in Organized Leisure: The Mediation of Transactional Horizons

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**Abstract:** This research conducted in Switzerland addresses the participatory capability of children regarding their organized leisure activities. Observations were made in 2016 in three French-speaking counties in Switzerland within 11 leisure facilities differentiated by their structural organization. Individual interviews were conducted with 34 children aged 13 to 16 as well as 11 managers of the leisure centers and three county-level child and youth policy-makers (Fribourg, Valais, Vaud). The findings are that children's participatory capability in organized leisure facilities depends on a combination of factors that are both societal (economical, political, organizational) and personal. Three forms of participatory capability emerge around the opportunities for effective participation that are provided by the children's social environment, corresponding to (1) the adaptive participation, (2) the innovative participation and (3) the cooperative participation. However, there is no strict correspondence between the types of organization of leisure structures and forms of participatory capability. This is due to the mediation of "transactional horizons", acting as symbolic landscapes that are channeling social interactions and the negotiation of forms of participation. This confirms the relevance of an interpretive approach to children's rights in order to better understand how they actually translate into practice.

**Keywords:** participation; children; rights; capabilities; leisure; agency



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## 1. Introduction

State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter CRC) recognize the child as a rights holder and must ensure the effective protection, provision and opportunity for participation. In particular, article 12 of the CRC stipulates that "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 in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" [1]. As a "general principle" of the CRC, article 12 is at the same time a subjective right and a procedural rule for the application of all substantive rights contained in the Convention. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also issued a General Comment on the right of the child to be heard [2], implying that the implementation of the child's right to leisure also requests his or her opinion.

In the different fields and according to the contexts, children participate in different ways, notably because of the variation of normative injunctions. The awareness of new international norms, such as the participatory rights contained in the CRC, has been accompanied by the emergence of reflexive practices around children's participation, favoring both the development of children's capacities and the promotion of democracy [3–5]. This work has been more practice-oriented and has not been accompanied by significant theoretical development. In their handbook on child participation, which consolidates this literature in a comprehensive and authoritative manner, Percy-Smith and Thomas [5] observe that implementations of participatory practices have far outpaced theorizing efforts. It is in this effort to theorize practices that we mobilize the capability approach.

The capability approach [6] focuses on the capacity of achieving the kind of life one has reasons to value. Children's capabilities can, therefore, be defined as real freedoms. Between the formal freedoms (rights) and the real freedoms (capabilities) of children, the gap can be significant. This is why we believe it is important to distinguish between the child as a subject of rights and the child as a social actor. Indeed, these notions are often confused, and this obscures the debate on children's participation, as if the promulgation of a right were sufficient to guarantee its exercise. Given that children have evolving capacities [7] to exercise their participatory rights, it is not the mere fact of being considered a subject of rights that gives children competence but what children make out of it, as they "are not only shaped by their circumstances but also, and most importantly, help shape them" [8] (p. 123). In order to understand this agentic process, we propose the concept of the child's "participatory capability", defined as the "capacity that the child has to effectively participate in defining and making choices affecting his or her own life" [9] (p. 66). This requires identifying the individual and social factors that construct this capacity.

We did this with a study on organized leisure conducted in eleven selected leisure centers in three counties of French-speaking Switzerland (Fribourg, Valais and Vaud) with the help of county-level child and youth policy-makers. By mobilizing the capability approach, we identified the individual and social factors that enable or hinder the conversion of the (formal) right to be heard into the (real) participatory capability of children in their organized leisure activities.

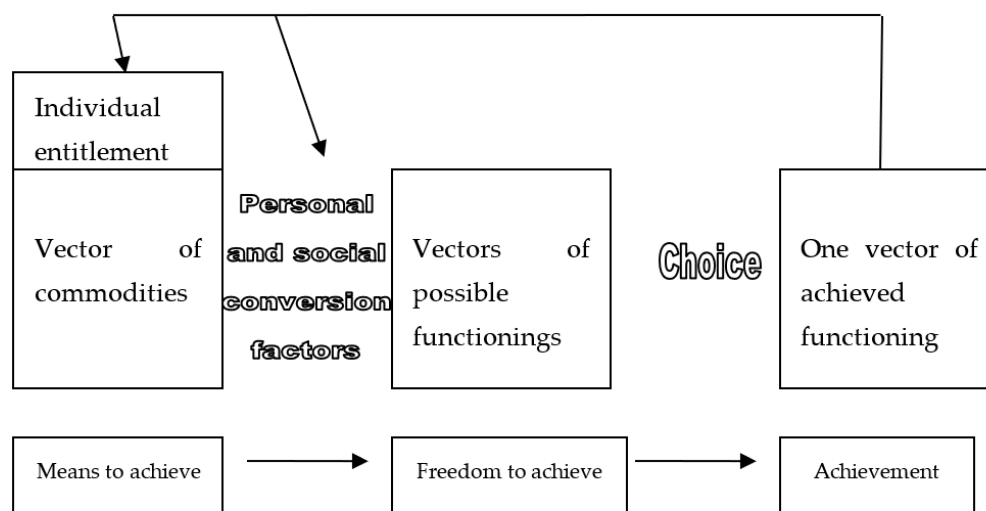
In this article, we will first shed some light on the theoretical framework provided by the capability approach. Then, we present the empirical results of the research. We conclude with more theoretical considerations on the agency–structure debate, highlighting the links between dominant modes of action and individual systems of action and proposing an original contribution to the theory of participation.

## 2. Problematization

Our research question is as follows: What are the structural and individual factors that promote or hinder children's participatory capability in organized leisure, and how do these factors interact? Our analytical framework is inspired by the capability approach [6,10]. By focusing on the capacity of achieving the kind of life individuals have reasons to value, the capability approach highlights the gap between what can be wished for, and socially considered through entitlements and rights, and what is actually achieved. It is particularly well suited to analyzing childhood as a social construct, i.e., a legal and social status conferred on individuals between the ages of 0 and 18 (UNCRC definition of childhood), which they can more or less claim and actively transform according to several factors that may or may not allow them to convert resources into real opportunities. The value of the capability approach to studying participation is precisely to shed light on the factors that enable actors to position themselves in relation to the issues they perceive. This helps to avoid two pitfalls. The first is the tendency in some educational research to view the child solely as a vulnerable being that is dependent on adult interventions [11]. The second pitfall is the naturalization of the category of "childhood", which is supposed to exist in itself, with natural and specific competencies shared by all children, regardless of their age and environment [12].

This approach, thus, favors a contextualized (and not universal) vision of the child as a social actor, whose development of capabilities, understood as real freedoms to lead the life they have reason to value, should be analyzed. In this sense, we believe that children's rights, although held individually, should be considered from a collective perspective, i.e., taking into account their social context of exercise [13]. In our application of the capability approach, we consider the child's right to be heard (article 12 of the CRC) a formal resource that does not translate for all children into equivalent real rights or freedoms. Rights and their implementation instruments are indeed resources that are variously available, accessible, evolving, accepted and adapted to the needs of children

and the contexts in which they live. Our study investigates how the right to express one's opinion is actually translated into real freedoms of participation for children, and if so how this translation or conversion takes place. It is, therefore, a question of identifying the factors that allow or prevent the formal right to be heard from being converted into a real right, i.e., an ability or capacity for expression defined as the real freedom to express one's point of view and to have it counted in the course of a collective discussion [14]. We summarize our approach in Figure 1 (below).



**Figure 1.** From entitlements and commodities to achieved functionings [9] (p. 134).

The right to be heard (article 12, CRC) is considered here as an individual entitlement conferred to the child. Hence, it is situated in the box on the left-hand side in Figure 1 (above). In order to observe how this formal freedom translates into real freedom for the child, it is necessary to see how this entitlement (right to be heard) is mediated or “filtered” by individual and social conversion factors that increase or limit the child’s participatory capacity. The conversion factors include interdependent elements, which can be located on the side of social opportunities and on the side of personal capacities. The analysis of recurring elements that emerged from the exploratory phase led us to identify 4 main conversion factors (economic, political, organizational and personal) that influence the process of transforming the formal right to participate into the actual freedom to do so [9].

First, the economic factor concerns the existence and availability of processes that enable the exercise of the rights in question. These resources are reflexively interpreted by individuals, and it is through their subjective perception that we will highlight the availability of structures. The analysis resulting from the exploratory phase allowed us to highlight two main modalities, namely the “provision” by existing structures or organizations of a project in which young people are called upon to participate, and conversely the “conquest” of support from others to carry out a project first imagined by young people.

Second, the political factor concerns the purpose of the processes that are envisaged. We make a distinction here between the aim of social integration and that of forced integration. A project based on social integration aims above all to build and strengthen civil society through access to rights and citizenship. This requires democratic spaces where different points of view can be expressed. The logic of forced integration, on the other hand, aims to integrate individuals into pre-existing institutions without discussing their functioning and role.

Thirdly, the organizational factor qualifies the real possibilities that children have to access the leisure centers available. We identified a selective logic (the centers choose their clientele) and an elective logic (the children organize themselves among themselves) at

work in the investigated leisure centers whose degree of internal organization (regulations) is more or less important.

Finally, the personal factor concerns the way in which individuals function. We limited ourselves to differentiating between individual functioning of the heteronomous type, which is characterized by the fact that the individual primarily follows the injunctions of others, as well as individual functioning of the autonomous type, which qualifies the individual who is able to set his or her own priorities and how they are achieved.

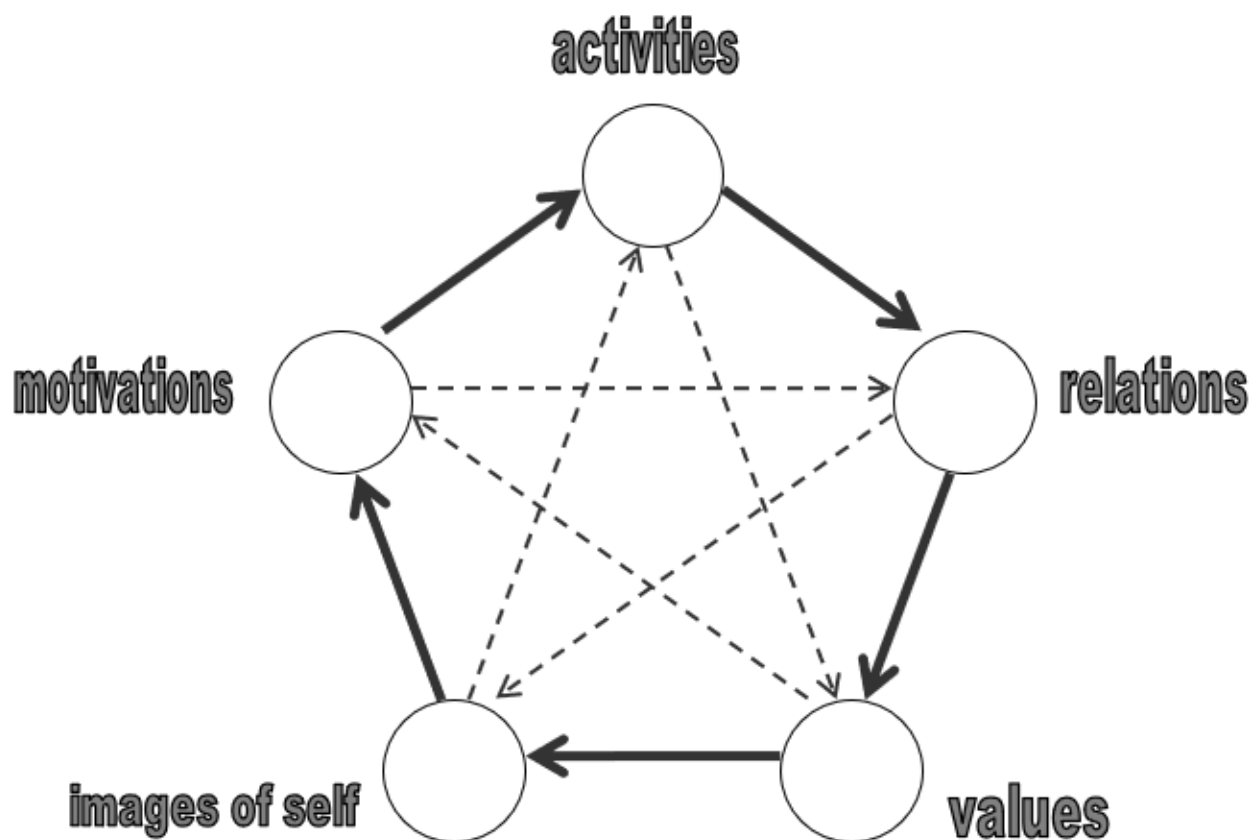
Our hypothesis from the exploratory phase [9] was that children's participatory capability increases when institutions leave open opportunities to create a self-determined space that favors the figure of the child actor in organized leisure. We were, thus, putting forward a strong assertion, and one that went against common sense, by saying that what is decisive for children's participatory capability is the incompleteness of institutions. In other words, we envisaged that neither structural resources nor individual skills alone guarantee participatory capability, as this is the result of a combination of social and personal factors whose dynamics remain to be identified.

The above-mentioned conversion factors (economic, political, organizational and personal) were, thus, seen as constituting the range of possibilities (possible functioning) found in the central box of Figure 1 (above). Through the interviews, we intended to observe actual functionings (elements located on the right-hand side of Figure 1) and to obtain information on the choices made by the children. The methodological difficulty, however, consisted of inferring real freedoms (often referred to as counterfactuals, since they cannot be observed in reality) from actual behaviors or functionings. The identification of conversion factors is also complicated by the non-linearity of Sen's approach, insofar as children's functionings (or achievements) at a given moment may constitute conversion (or obstruction) factors at a later stage. This is why we paid particular attention to recursivity (symbolized by the feedback arrows in Figure 1).

Recursivity refers to the property of what can be repeated over and over again, in this case the reinterpretation of law through practice. Indeed, the whole of participatory law is reinterpretable, renegotiable and can be reformulated through the practical experience of participation in the contexts of its exercise. This is also what the designers of the notion of "living rights" [15] envision when they ask: "Whose interpretations, and whose priorities of children's rights, are being defended? How do children's living rights coalesce with top-down international child rights implementation strategies? What are the trajectories of both approaches to children's rights? Where and how do bottom-up and top-down interpretations meet, if they meet, and what are the consequences of such an encounter?" [15] (pp. 20–21).

In order to get as close as possible to the way children experience their participation in organized leisure, we chose the dimensions of the "actor's system" [16], namely: activities, relationships, values, self-images, and motivations (see Figure 2 below).

These dimensions proved, since the exploratory phase, their capacity to shed light on and subsume the constituent aspects of the respondents' experience, in a way that was sufficiently broad to avoid imposing a distorting framing and sufficiently structured to avoid seeing the experience diluted in a framing that was too loose. These dimensions and the links between them make it possible to approach and understand the reasons given by the actor (child) for doing or not doing something, in this case for participating or not in decisions concerning him or her. Within the capability approach, we put emphasis on these dimensions that are considered "transactional horizons", defined as "symbolic landscapes channeling social interactions" [17] (p. 1). These interpretive means are important conversion factors; it is through these symbolic landscapes that entitlements are experienced and negotiated. Methodologically, we may better understand the transformation of formal freedoms into real freedoms when grasping how social actors use these interpretive means in their social transactions.



**Figure 2.** The actor's system [16].

In other words, transactional horizons configure the negotiations between social actors. They allow them to use different registers and to combine them in order to position themselves in relation to the issues at stake in the activities in question. They can, thus, put forward arguments about the effectiveness of the action, the relationships generated by the action, the values reinforced or undermined by the action, the self-images resulting from the action and the motivations to continue or stop the action. These modes of action are respectively dominated by a transactional horizon and are called entrepreneurial, relational, moral, identity and motivational modes of action. Our qualitative approach, thus, sheds light on the participatory capability as a result of objective factors, such as economic, political and organizational factors, and the way in which these factors are intersubjectively negotiated through transactional horizons.

This allows us to specify that the oscillation between the poles of autonomy and heteronomy, in the personal factor, takes place through the negotiations that these transactional horizons allow. This precision is fundamental because it allows us to get out of the essentialization of the child's agency. We consider that agency does not intrinsically belong to the actor, as the "new paradigm of the sociology of childhood" [8,18] sometimes would imply in its focus on children's emancipation. Our approach, thus, distances itself from the tendency to consider all innovation "from below" (bottom-up participation) as being desirable in principle. This does not mean, however, that we endorse the dominant discourse that rationalizes the supervision of youth (top-down participation) as a means to ensure their social integration. On the contrary, our analytical model based on transactional horizons favors the axiological neutrality necessary to be able to grasp the interactive process of children's participatory capability.



### 3. Methodology

In order to make the interview as child-friendly as possible, we put each of the five “transactional horizons” contained in the actor’s system [16] on 5 different cardboard cards. Respondents were asked to put the cards “activities”, “relationships”, “values”, “self-images” and “motivations” on the branches of a tree drawn on a blank sheet of paper with the only indication that the left-hand side of the tree should represent elements or influences coming from the leisure center and the right-hand side things coming from the child. This “mind mapping tree” is, therefore, a child-friendly translation of the rather abstract actor’s system [16].

This contributed to the replicability of the study, as it showed that the instructions were very well understood, leaving also some space for potential other “transactional horizons” that the child might consider if an element of experience could not be subsumed under any card. This “mind mapping tree” proved to be a relevant tool for eliciting the respondents’ experiences in the context of organized leisure; it allowed the researcher to see how respondents subjectively appropriate their concrete experiences by indexing them under different dimensions (activities, relationships, values, images of self, motivations). It also stimulated their expressions of intuitions and contributed to their reflexivity for the links they could make between the elements of experience. The validity of the respondents’ accounts is, therefore, increased as the methodology is open to their specific ways of reconstructing reality. The replicability of the study is consequently heightened as the methodology supports the respondents’ accounts, with transactional horizons acting as “sensitizing concepts” or “directions to look at” [19], thereby reducing the risk of constrained answers being associated with more classical interview techniques.

The children, aged between 13 and 16, were interviewed with the aim of understanding their points of view regarding their participation in organized leisure activities at the individual and institutional levels. Individual interviews were conducted with 34 children who regularly participated in organized leisure activities, as well as with 11 heads of the leisure centers involved and 3 county-level child and youth policy-makers in the counties of Valais, Vaud and Fribourg. The children were interviewed twice. The first set of interviews was conducted in the months following the start or resumption of an organized leisure activity. The second set of interviews took place 9 months later (T9) in order to analyze the development of their participatory skills (twice with 30 out of 34 adolescents). Since there were two series of interviews with these respondents (T0 + T9), there were a total of 64 interviews with young people (34 individual semi-directive interviews for the first series and 30 interviews for the second series). The “mind mapping tree” was used in the second round of interviews.

Our observations were made in 2016 in 11 leisure centers in three counties in French-speaking Switzerland (Valais, Vaud and Fribourg). We voluntarily limited the field and length of investigation, also taking into account the temporal planning and the feasibility of the project. In this survey, attention was paid to the diversity of the leisure centers and the young people who regularly attend them, referring mainly to the advice of those responsible for children and youth policies. The selection of the centers and the young people was, therefore, based on the following priority criteria:

Leisure centers: number of leisure centers (3 to 4 facilities per county); different sizes of leisure centers (small, medium and large); different types of organizations (highly structured, moderately structured, loosely structured); diversified leisure activities (dance, soccer, art, music, cooking, etc.).

Young respondents: number of youth (12 youth per county); gender (6 boys and 6 girls per county); age (13–16 years old); various nationalities; various school levels; type and location of residence (urban and rural); various family situations (parents’ professions, socioeconomic background, presence of brothers and sisters, languages spoken at home).

We favored a qualitative approach that allowed us to collect young people’s opinions on the leisure activities in which they participate, in order to better understand their motivations for organized leisure. Based on a qualitative and comprehensive analysis

of the adolescents' words and discourses on their experiences and the meaning of the participation and non-participation in certain organized leisure activities, we observed the transformation of their participatory capability between the two periods of our observations. The choice of this approach allowed for an analytical and comprehensive approach in various institutional contexts, while offering a methodological and theoretical contribution of children's participatory ability within a broader framework of reflections on these multiple issues of children's agency. The data collection and analysis were carried out using documentary research, individual interviews (semi-directive) and an experimental device (mind mapping tree).

The objective of the individual interviews conducted with children and leisure center managers was to better understand the reasons for adolescents' choices in organized leisure (extracurricular activities) from their point of view and to identify the personal and structural factors that promote or hinder young people's ability to participate in decisions that concern them in terms of their organized leisure. To this corpus we added the material collected during an exploratory phase from about twenty respondents aged between 12 and 16 years. We, thus, observed how the children's opinions are taken into account in their organized leisure activities and how they manage or not to develop their participatory capacity.

Ethical principles were fully respected. At the time of the study, the responsible researcher was working in the very small academic Unit of Teaching and Research in Children's Rights at the University Institute Kurt Bösch (in the canton of Valais in Switzerland) before it was integrated with Geneva University. As it was a unit dedicated to children's rights, ethical issues [20] were discussed at length regarding research and they were also taught in classes, although not formalized in an ethics commission. Hence, for this research, ethical aspects were duly taken into consideration. Consent forms were signed by the Directors of the leisure facilities, the children who participated in the study and their parents. Confidentiality and privacy were strictly respected. Respondents are referred to with just one capital letter in this text to guarantee anonymity. They were asked about their expectations before the study, and they were also informed of the results of the research afterwards.

The data processing and analysis were carried out using NVivo, a thematic analysis software for computerized qualitative research. We constructed a series of descriptors for each "transactional horizon" in order to organize and analyze the data collected through the semi-structured interviews and the literature search.

## 4. Results

We first describe the type of organization that prevails in the leisure centers, in order to analyze the structural factors that partially constitute the child's participatory ability. Here, we find three types: highly organized, moderately organized and loosely organized centers. We then turn to a descriptive analysis of the forms of participatory capability that arise from children's accounts of their experiences in the recreation centers. They are considered as personal factors that partially constitute the child's participatory capability. Three forms of participatory capability emerge: adaptive, innovative and cooperative. We find that the three forms of participatory capability and the three institutional parameters are linked and are constitutive of the effective conversion of the child's right to be heard in organized leisure. However, there is no strict correspondence between the types of organization of leisure structures and forms of participatory capability. What modulates the link between the forms of participatory capability and these structural forms are the transactional horizons.

### 4.1. Types of Organization

The nature of leisure centers is different from other institutions such as the family or the school, and this is reflected differently in the life of the child and the adolescent. The particularity of these leisure centers is the fact that they are envisaged as a transitional and

non-compulsory space where children can decide not only whether or not to participate, but also how they will participate (degree of involvement). The latter is not fixed; it evolves according to several factors and their interdependencies, which the research has identified and which we present below. Leisure centers are, therefore, in principle, a place where children's freedom of choice is expressed while respecting that of other children and the established rules of the community in which they participate. The concept of a "leisure center" is recognized by young people as a "safe, warm and organized place" (S), a "place to meet and share cultures" (Y) or a "place to share and help" (S), but also as a "place where we can carry out our projects and support each other" (R) and a place "for evolution" (S). Many respondents (children and leisure center managers) also emphasize that it is a dynamic and transitional space according to their needs and their social interactions with the institution and other actors. In general, the leisure center represents a place of freedom of choice, participation and cultural diversity where heterogeneity and open-mindedness without taboos are perceived as a positive element by young people. We identified three types of organization from a systemic analysis of the 11 leisure centers where we conducted our fieldwork. Among these centers, 7 were classified as highly organized, 3 as moderately organized and 1 as loosely organized. In the rest of the text, we will refer to these leisure centers according to the gradation of their organizational levels (C1 for highly organized, C2 for moderately organized and C3 for loosely organized).

#### 4.1.1. Highly Organized Leisure Centers (C1)

The first type of organization is a leisure center that is highly structured and supervised by a team of animators with diversified skills and that offers a wide range of organized activities: "At the level of participation there are certain limits, on the other hand it is possible and we define it here as a process of co-construction, and that's really it, that is to say that we already have a basic idea with the young people and then we assimilate the young people to this idea and we look with them to co-construct a project. There we really have participation that becomes effective knowing that the project is not completely finished and that we say to them at the end 'Ok we have to give a hand' and then 'Yes, yes, in our house the young people participate', it's not that on the other hand we can't give them all the keys in their hands and then say to them, 'Propose something to us, do it', because we realize that they are lacking a little bit of tools, instruments, ways of doing things" (staff in C1).

The center offers young people a certain number of hours of free time as well as various organized leisure activities. An outreach program has been set up to meet young people who do not attend the leisure center. In this sense, the economic factor takes the form of the provision of organized leisure centers. Some centers among them also rely on a formative and accompanied strategy by the team of animators in terms of youth participation. For example, some of the leisure centers offer some young people a formative position as assistant monitors during the sessions. One young person expressed a desire to have a different role in the center: "We wanted to have a place that was a little different from the one we had and then they offered us if we wanted to do, and since there is this trust and this willingness to change our place compared to when we came here well they offered us to do that" (M in C1).

The political factor promotes the logic of the supervision and insertion of young people. The organizational factor corresponds to the logic of selective access prefixed by the leisure centers (according to certain criteria such as age, gender or the school context of the children and adolescents).

#### 4.1.2. Moderately Organized Leisure Centers (C2)

The second type of organization is a moderately organized leisure center in the institutional sense, with support from professionals that is granted according to the demands of the youth. The basic idea here is to promote the active participation of young people. In this sense, one person in charge affirmed that she does not organize anything and that



everything comes from the young people—from the design to the setting up of a project. She is especially present to guide them and to give them advice, while leaving them great autonomy: “We are really into active participation; that is to say, taking charge of a project. We are really focused on this, because we could say that there could be participation just by presence...there are several degrees of participation I think and we...well I see the idea of very active participation” (staff in C2).

This, therefore, relates to the autonomy and motivation of each youth in the realization of their leisure projects. For example, a youth from C2 explained that his own project, “the newspaper”, also brings him a lot in terms of personal resources. The realization of a project has had a positive influence on his self-image; he feels valued and taken seriously. The practical aspects bring meaning to what he does and allow him to know where he is going. The recognition and support of his family for his project has also been important to him. According to him, “self-image” has an influence—either positive or negative—on any activity an individual decides to undertake: “If you don’t have a self-image, you don’t do much. If you think you suck...it depends on your self-image. If you have a bad self-image, I think you always say to yourself that it’s not good, so you don’t do anything” (J in C2).

In this type, the economic factor follows a logic of conquest or co-conquest between the youth and adults. The political factor favors a logic of integration. As for the organizational factor, it follows a logic of elective access. Participants tend to be “elected” by interest and word of mouth. Children in this context are relatively autonomous.

#### 4.1.3. Loosely Organized Leisure Centers (C3)

The third type of organization refers to a leisure center that is “not very structured” or “not very supervising” at the institutional level. For example, the main idea of the center (C3) is to leave the management of the premises and the activities to the young members of the association in the face of great motivation on their part. This resulted in the creation of a youth committee that collaborates with the adult committee. Together, they were able to draw up the internal rules of the premises. The adults are mainly present “To help, guide, advise, supervise or take over” (staff in C3). In general, young people come to the center to spend time together. It should be noted that the center is not structured according to institutional criteria and that there are no sociocultural facilitators. We also noticed a link between the absence of professional animators and the lack of knowledge about the role of this profession by the actors. It leaves more flexibility for the desires of each young person by resorting to their autonomy to the maximum extent, which is also a cause of rupture or dysfunction of activities: “The goal was that we wanted a place of our own where everything went well, we spent afternoons here and activities, etc. It was up to us, our responsibility. I was very disappointed in the end when the place was closing. But we knew that one day it would end. It was a good time here” (M in C3).

In this model, the economic factor follows a logic of conquest on the part of young people. A freedom is conquered “against” other spaces controlled by adults, accompanied by an elective participation insufficiently rooted in democratic processes (the organizational factor). The political factor favors a logic of integration and co-management with adults.

#### 4.2. Typology of Participatory Capability

Our observations allowed us to identify three forms of participatory capability: adaptive participatory capability, innovative participatory capability and cooperative participatory capability. These forms of participatory capability result from the combination of organizational and personal factors, which confirms that the agency and its forms are not intrinsic to the actor. We, thus, pursued a constructivist and non-essentialist approach to the notion of agency by shedding light on the individual and social factors that construct the “capacity that the child has to effectively participate in the definition and achievement of choices affecting his or her own life” [9] (p. 66). The three forms of participatory capability (adaptive, innovative and cooperative) result from the encounters between types

of structures and the actor's personal capacity to use transactional horizons as vectors for negotiation.

#### 4.2.1. Adaptive Participatory Capability

In this form of participatory capability, we can observe that the child's motivations are above all linked to the fun provided by his or her participation in the organized leisure activities available to him or her: "Because when I have fun it motivates me" (M in C1). The participation varies according to the opportunities provided by the social environment to which the child tends to adapt relatively passively: "Since we don't have much to do, we really don't know what to do. Often we come there because there are a lot of people" (A in C1). The participation depends on the adequacy of the offer, which is more or less well adjusted to the changing needs of the children, with the latter being variable according to age: "Actually, everything here is suitable for our age but it depends on the people...I'm more of a quiet person. I don't want to spend all my time on activities. If I have to come here it's more like sitting on the couch and talking with friends and that's it" (S in C1).

The adaptive participatory capability, thus, qualifies a situation in which the child's motivation for attending the leisure center is based above all on the pleasure of meeting people and the relaxation provided by the activities. In this case, the transactional horizons (of the actor's system) appear to be mainly oriented by the leisure center, as can be seen in the mind mapping tree illustration (in Figure 3 below), which shows that the respondent placed the green cards (representing transactional horizons) on the left-hand branches of the tree (symbolizing the influence of the center).

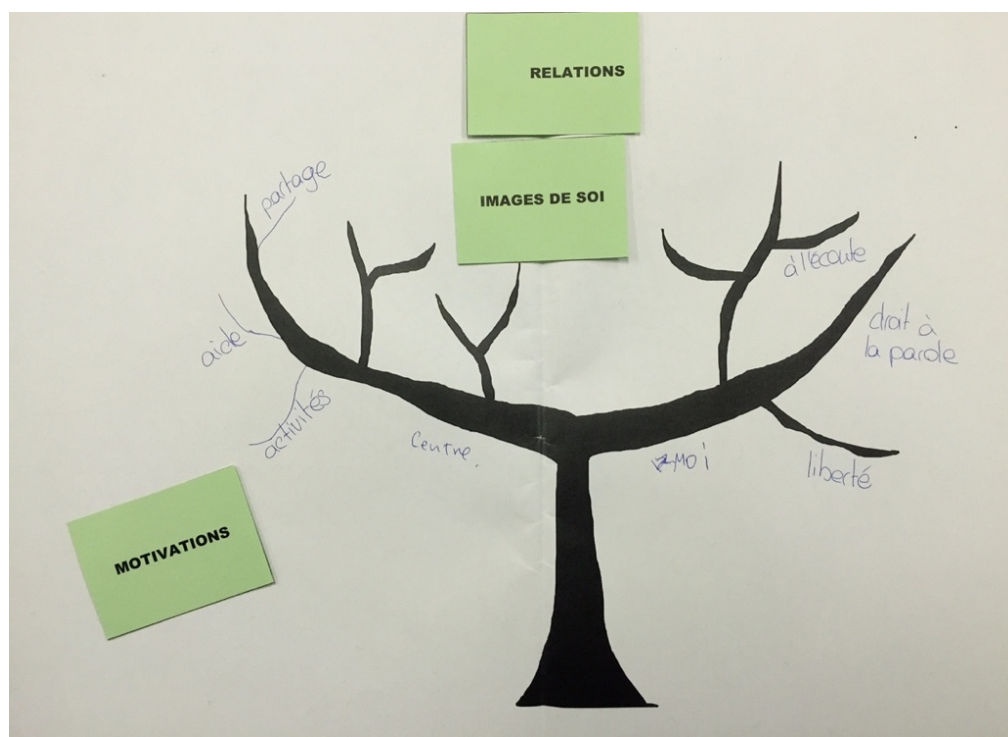


Figure 3. Mind mapping tree for S in C1.

As the mind mapping tree was made with French-speaking respondents, we translate hereunder the words written on it. The left-hand side of the tree contains the following (branches symbolizing the "center"): relations, images of self, activities, motivations, help, sharing. The right-hand side of the tree contains the following (branches symbolizing "me"): at school, right to speak, liberty.

This first type of participatory capability tends to prevail when institutional resources offer a diverse range of activities as well as the freedom not to actively participate. For

example, for a leisure center manager, one of the main objectives is that the offers proposed match with the needs of the adolescents, so that they are sufficiently oriented: “The goal is not that they are at the reception desk, we need an offer that meets different needs...we need to find something for everyone in the end” (staff in C1). In this sense, the adaptive participatory capability develops better in the first type of organization, namely a highly organized leisure center.

#### 4.2.2. Innovative Participatory Capability

In this case, the child’s personal motivations are strong and concrete. Innovative participatory capability is found in children who are highly motivated either to carry out their own projects or to transform certain resources (individual or institutional) following their initial motivations: “Actually, since I was a kid, I wanted to do something concrete. I had already done a nature club... I did all that, we were having meetings but we didn’t even know why to protect nature. Well, it didn’t bring much in the end. But it was not concrete. As a result, when we came here (leisure center), there was (name of the animator) who was, at the beginning of the year, in the classes. She told us that if we had projects, we could come and see her to propose them. I said to myself, ‘Here, the newspaper, it can be not bad’. I proposed it to my friends first. Then I suggested it to (name of the animator). So, at the beginning I sent her an e-mail and she told me that it’s good and that we should make an appointment. That worked out pretty well. Then I really wanted to do something concrete. And it suits me and it’s concrete! It’s work but it’s what we wanted” (M in C2).

In this situation, the child’s participatory capability increases when the institution offers adequate and personalized support to their requests. To increase their participatory ability in their leisure project, there are some important and combined elements, including personal interest (desire to do something concrete), previous experience of similar activities reinforcing their motivation, a positive image and a high degree of feasibility, with the youth worker offering adequate support to each child at the right time: “We talked to (name of youth worker) about our initial idea. Afterwards, what was cool was that she taught us how to take care of it. And then she helped us right away to do what we wanted to do and show us because we didn’t actually know how to do anything. So there were a lot of things that we hadn’t thought of. In fact, she was mostly there to remind us of all the little things we had to think about. Afterwards, we did it ourselves. For example, the letters, etc. It was up to us. But she was the one who put us in touch with the county-level youth delegate, who was able to finance us in this project” (M in C2).

This form of participatory capability is very much linked to the motivations of the young person. However, this motivation for innovation seems to have a lasting effect only when it meets a relatively organized structure. On the contrary, when the leisure center is not organized enough, the innovative participatory capability cannot build a real change because it does not have enough holds on which to cling. This is what we observed with the case of the center L, which was self-managed, with few formal resources or rules to refer to, ultimately leaving each young person with insufficiently negotiated desires. This led to drug use inside the leisure center and caused a breach of the contract of trust that had initially been made with the commune officials. To talk about these events, the young respondent used the word “brothel” (here a slang word used for “mess”), which can be found in the mind mapping tree (see Figure 4 hereunder, which refers to such unsuccessful innovative participatory capability).

The words written on left-hand side of the tree (branches symbolizing the “center”) by the respondent were, from the center to the extreme left, placed by distinguishing the chronological periods into three phases: first phase—good part, idea listened to by adults (linked to motivations); second phase—part that worked well, local (linked to activities); third phase—mess, no more dialogue, relations. On the right-hand side of the tree (branches symbolizing “me”), the respondent has evoked his state of mind, also following the chronological phases. First, he describes himself as having enough ideas; then, he evokes the television, the game console, the new canapes he installed and the

responsibility he bore; finally, he mentions his disappointment and discouragement when things turned out bad.

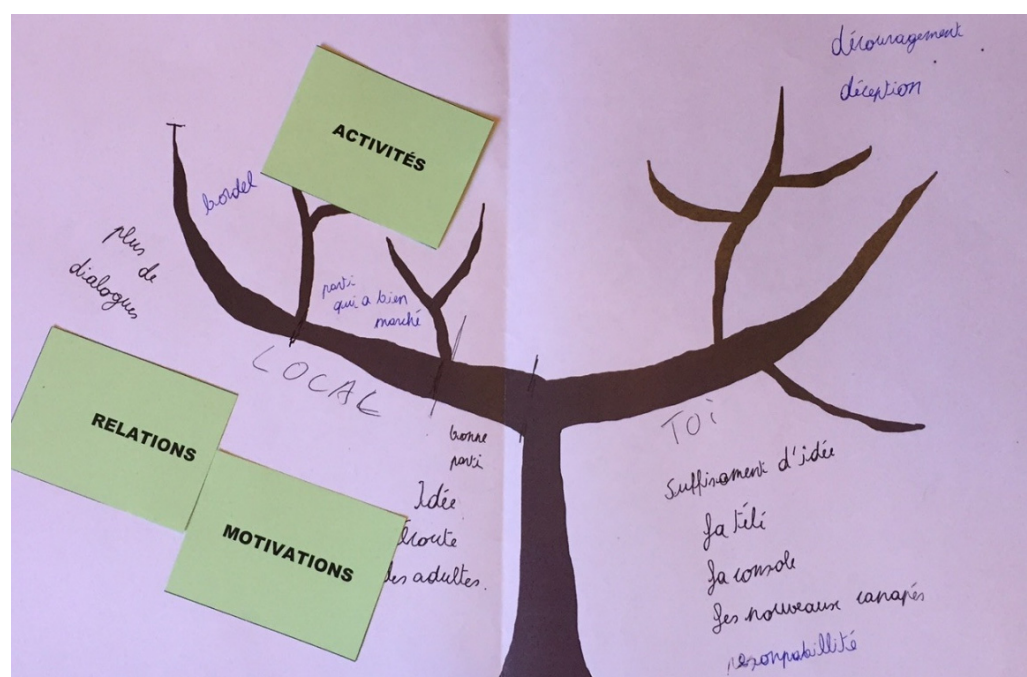


Figure 4. Mind mapping tree for M in C3.

The few cards (representing transactional horizons) are placed on the side of the leisure center. This reflects a sense of dispossession. The interview was conducted shortly after the closure of the center because of problems with youngsters (not originally from the leisure center) who came and consumed alcohol and marijuana; the interviewee, who was leading the activities in this rather unorganized leisure center, was not able to oppose these youngsters. This case illustrates a situation where the innovative participatory capability could not lean on a clear set of institutional rules. It suggests that innovative participatory capability can only be successful when a minimal threshold of structural dispositions is present, which is not the case when a leisure center is too loosely organized.

#### 4.2.3. Cooperative Participatory Capability

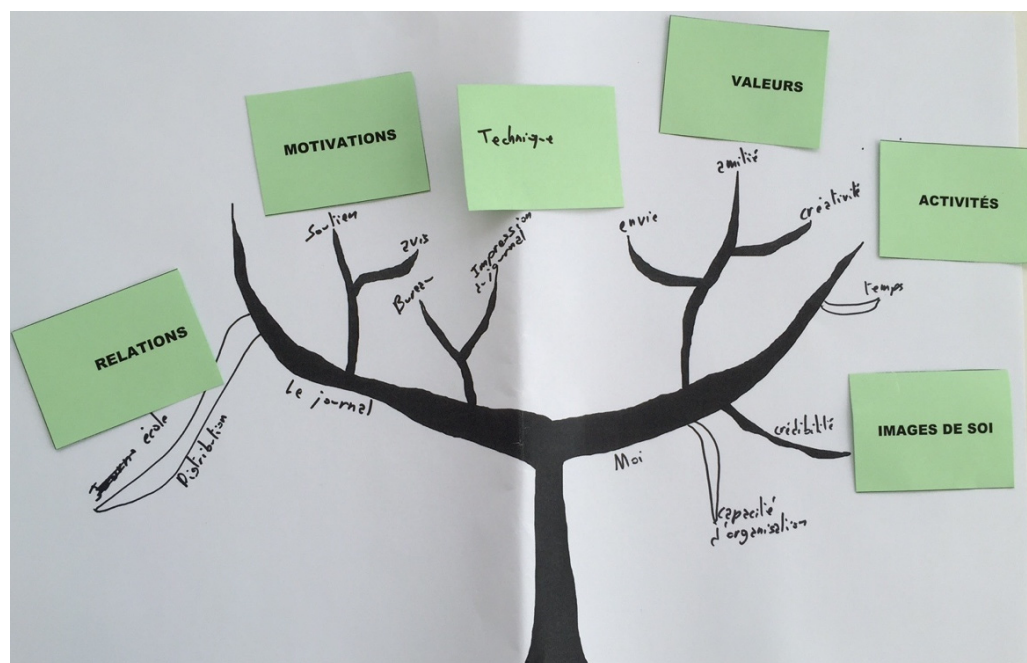
In this form of participatory capability, the motivations are multiple and evolve over time and in relation to others. Children's participation is often associated with the learning that takes place. This feeling of learning is a decisive factor in energizing their participation: "It brings me a lot, an open-mindedness, because to see a lot of young people, there are bits of all different cultures. So, if everyone reacts to things, it opens up a bit to all cultures" (S in C2).

The cooperative participatory capability concerns a situation of higher interdependence between the individual and the institution. The attunement between the actor's resources and the institution's resources as perceived by the actor can come from both "sides" (children and leaders), and in this case there is enhanced cooperation. This form of participatory capability is very strongly linked to the question of "good timing" (the right resource at the right time): "We are used to coming here, and in relation to our relationships with the facilitators, we wanted to have a slightly different place compared to the one we had, and then they proposed to us if we wanted to do that, and as there is this trust and this willingness to change our place compared to when we used to come here, well they proposed to us to do that" (M in C2).

This is the most dynamic form of participatory capability, the one in which the dimensions of the actor's system are most in circulation and most likely to include different



perspectives, and in which the system of action is more open to cooperation. This can be observed through the wider distribution of transactional horizons that cover the entire scope of the mind mapping tree, as illustrated in Figure 5 below.



**Figure 5.** Mind mapping tree for J in C2.

The words written on the left-hand side of the tree (branches symbolizing the project, i.e., the “newspaper”) are relations (placed on an added branch, enhanced by the distribution of the journal through the school), motivations (linked to the support and respect of one’s opinion) and techniques (linked to the impression of the newspaper and an office). On the right-hand side of the tree (branches symbolizing “me”) we find values (the will, friendship, creativity), activities, images of self (linked to credibility) and time and organizational capacity (placed on an added branch).

This case shows clearly that the transactional horizons are extending to all branches with a kind of balance between what belongs to the project (the journal) and to the person (me). An additional card (in green) was chosen to insist on the “technique”, as this dimension was not perceived by the respondent as covered by the 5 dimensions of the actor’s system (transactional horizons). In fact, it could have been considered as a subdimension of “activities”. However, the fact that the respondent adds one green card and also three branches reinforces the impression of expansion. The cards and words covering the tree convey the idea of “flourishing”, illustrating what the capability approach and studies on well-being consider central for “a life worthy of the dignity of the human being . . . a life that is flourishing rather than stunted” [10] (p. 278).

The three cases exemplify three ideal types [21] of participatory capability (adaptive, innovative and cooperative). Numerous other quotes could be used from other cases approaching one of these 3 ideal types. We chose not to add these quotes as they only confirm these ideal types and do not illustrate other forms of participatory capability. Their inclusion would have only lengthened the text without adding anything to the discussion.

## 5. Discussion

The forms of participatory capability (adaptive, innovative and cooperative) result from the encounters between types of structures and the actor’s personal capacity to negotiate his or her participatory positioning through transactional horizons. This leads us to specify the participatory capability of the actors by emphasizing the recursive and

dynamic aspects. One of our main results is that there is no simple determination process for the structural and personal factors of the child regarding their participatory capability in organized leisure activities; that is to say, even in a more structured institutional setting that is less favorable to the child's margin of freedom and autonomy (particularly in the leisure centers that fall under the second type of organization), we were able to observe a dynamic of transformation in youth participation.

The recursive character of the participatory capability lies in the reinforcement loops of a specific functioning. These loops are relaunched as long as the goals (motivations) and personal resources (affective, cognitive, cultural, social, physical) of the actor (child) are in harmony with the resources of the institutional environment. This match is observed regardless of the type of institution (highly, moderately or loosely structured). In other words, a dynamic process of matching between the individual and the institution is possible in all three cases. The actor, thus, elaborates opportunities [22] (p. 168) by linking his or her goals and resources to the opportunities for action offered by the leisure center. The actor's participatory capability, thus, evolves according to various phases and temporalities. We note that there is no strict correlation between the type of institution (degree of organization of the leisure center) and the forms of participatory capability (adaptive, innovative, cooperative).

It appears that what modulates the participatory capability of a child in an organized leisure activity lies rather in how the child perceives the resources and elaborates the negotiation and construction of the opportunities that he or she will then seek to realize or not. The importance of the transactional horizons mobilized by the respondents must be emphasized here, because they orient the forms of participatory capability (adaptive, innovative, cooperative) that they are able to exercise. However, the intensity of the rewards, which translates into a feeling of competence and the impression of being heard (article 12, UNCRC), is more tenuous in terms of the adaptive and innovative participatory capability than the cooperative participatory capability, because it is in the latter that the structure integrates the initiatives of the actors in a sustainable manner. This has a recursive effect on the actor's subjectivity, with reinforcement loops that allow them to make more optimal use of transactional horizons.

Indeed, we note that the greater the number of transactional horizons mobilized, the more the child is likely to show cooperative participatory capability. Conversely, the smaller the number of transactional horizons mobilized, the more we move towards the adaptive and innovative participatory capability, which is less likely to make practices evolve in the long term. By definition, adaptive participatory capability does not transform structures. Conversely, innovative participatory capability is transformative but tends to have only a short-term influence, without a sustainable impact. We then see a return to the status quo due to the inertia of the systems or to an *ex ante* situation because of the unintended consequences of the action, as in the case of the very loosely structured leisure center that experienced problems with cannabis use and had to be taken over by the adults.

A new hypothesis can, thus, be derived from this empirical finding, namely that the participatory capability of social actors allows for sustainable changes in the social environment when a large number of transactional horizons are mobilized. This link between the extent or deployment of the transactional horizons and the participatory capability of the actors allows us to critically review our original hypothesis. This hypothesis saw in the possibilities of creating a self-determined space a sufficient condition for participatory capability. With the results of our research, we can now see that this hypothesis was too deterministic, as it focused solely on the institutional side. There was then an imbalance in the consideration of "social factors" and "personal factors", with the latter still being too crudely defined in terms of autonomy and heteronomy. Moreover, the "personal" characteristics were themselves considered in an overly deterministic way (nationality, educational level, place of residence, family situation, socioeconomic background). This should lead us to look more closely at the transactional capacities of the actor, i.e., how



he or she handles transactional horizons (activities, relationships, values, self-images and motivations) in his or her exchanges and negotiations.

With the transactional horizons we were able to identify qualitative forms of participatory capability and to move away from the quantitative view of the capacity to act in terms of the degree or intensity. This allowed us to consider that the forms of participatory capability are interwoven in a dynamic and recursive way in the practices. They are both the results and subsequent conditions of the practices, and in this respect transactional horizons can be considered both structuring and structured [23]. We can, thus, complement the capability approach, suggesting that transactional horizons are vectors of functionings that are recursively involved in the practices of interpreting individual rights (see the feedback loops in Figure 1). In other words, rights can be interpreted by actors in terms of what they potentially allow them to do (activities), connect (relationships), value (values), represent (self-images) and desire (motivations). This means that individual rights do not have an existence in themselves independent of the interpretations that actors make of them and of the personal and social conversion factors that preside over their effective realization. The mere existence of rights in the form of articles written in international conventions and treaties is only an instantiation of these interpretations and the debates that underlie them.

Our study, thus, also suggests that “living rights” [15] are precisely alive through the transactional horizons that actors mobilize to make sense of their realities. In particular, this shows that rights are always alive in context. The interpretative subjectivity of the actor does not take place outside of the context. It is always the context of the interaction that leads the actor to optimize the balance between what is expected from him or her and what he wants to do. Our results clearly show the importance of this balance for each child; it is the child’s perception of the institution (leisure center) and of what the child considers to be one’s own motivations that enables him or her to exert participatory capability (in its three forms: adaptive, innovative and cooperative). This explains why the participatory capability is only partially linked to the institutional framework; even in a relatively rigid framework, an actor can deploy (adaptive) participatory capability when feeling in agreement with this framework. Conversely, a very open framework does not automatically favor (innovative or cooperative) participatory capability. We also note the issue of temporality, namely the importance of having the right resource at the right time, which has a strong influence on the child’s participatory capability. Here again, it is which is mainly a question of perception of the resource and not only its objective presence. This accounts for the dynamics in what we now see not as degrees but as forms of participatory capability as the provisional result of a double structuring (by the environment and by the actor) of a system of action specific to each individual.

These three forms of participatory capability can meet the needs of different children at different times in their lives. They have an important temporal aspect (the right resources at the right time). It must be emphasized that all of these forms of participatory capability are transitory and that the same individual can move from one form of participatory capability to another according to his or her biographical career and his or her constantly evolving “system of action”. Thus, we can specify that the participatory capability is not “attached” to the actors, but rather has various forms (the present typology identifies three) that are temporarily “seized” by the actors and that are transitory forms of inscription of the actors in a “social system”. The three forms of participatory capability – adaptive, innovative and cooperative – are considered ideal types [21] around which the children revolve.

This study on the participatory capability of children in organized leisure has important repercussions for theories around children’s political agency, “conceived in terms of subjectivity related to subject positions offered in the flux of everyday life” [24]. It confirms that the development of children’s capacities and the promotion of democracy [3–5] is bound to reflexive practices, and stresses that they should be present from the very start of the research process, as is the case here with the methodology of the “mind mapping tree”.

In particular, we see that children are not dependent on adult interventions [11] but negotiate these interventions, and that their participatory capability retroacts on their institutional environments, thereby questioning the homogenized category of “childhood” [12]. This contributes to the “ontological turn” [25,26] in the sociology of childhood as the materiality of the children’s environment is reintroduced, contributing to the transition from an oppositional approach (agency versus structure) to a co-muting approach in terms of assemblages (agency *within* structure) [27–29]. Our study especially reinforces the theory of situated agency, which emphasizes the dual structuration of subjects (children) and objects (rights) occurring in situated agency (in given contexts) [30]. The theory of situated agency is close to the notion of “multiple and multidirectional translations” and includes children’s “‘living rights’ (i.e., rights as they are lived) [15], and departs from a “purely top-down vision of the institutionalization of children’s rights” [30] (p. 575).

It also has implications for the conceptualization of children’s rights. The institutionalization of norms of expected behavior of adults towards children and of children towards each other is seen here as a process that must necessarily include the perspective of the children themselves, otherwise it is disconnected from the reality experienced by the children.

The limitations of our results are as follows. The observation of the transactional horizons used by the respondents (through the mind mapping tree) took precedence over the multivariate analysis of more traditional personal characteristics (nationality, level of education, place of residence, family situation, socioeconomic background). The latter were only included in the end to ensure that the sample was sufficiently representative of the social diversity of the respondents, but they did not lead to the establishment of multivariate tables. It should, therefore, be noted that transactional horizons do not replace or invalidate analyses conducted along these classic personal variables. However, the originality of the notion of transactional horizons, and the role they seem to play, has been sufficiently demonstrated in this study for us to consider integrating it and developing new models for analyzing and understanding the agency of actors. In particular, transactional horizons could allow us to better understand how social constructs (symbolic landscapes channeling social interactions) modulate personal resources (affective, cognitive, physical) traditionally considered as specific to individuals. This has already been suggested in another situation, namely regarding the climate marches; indeed, it has been shown that Greta Thunberg’s discourse embraces all transactional horizons and that this can be considered an important factor of her agency as a leader regarding the climate demands [17]. Further research should be conducted to better articulate the social and individual factors in the capability approach.

## 6. Conclusions

Three forms of participatory capability emerged in our study, corresponding to (1) the adaptive participation, (2) the innovative participation and (3) the cooperative participation. We found that there is no strict correspondence between these types of organization of leisure structures and forms of participation because “transactional horizons” mediate the opportunities for participation. These symbolic landscapes channel social interactions and serve as means for the negotiation of the kinds of participation. This confirms the relevance of taking an interpretive approach to children’s rights in order to better understand how they actually translate into practice.

The systemic approach developed here allows us to go beyond the reductive vision of agency as a property attached to an individual considered as autonomous. Our study, thus, suggests a complement to the relational perspective considering that the preconditions of flourishing and well-being should be conceptualized as “socially structured; economic resources and institutional preconditions for entitlements together constitute the collective support structures on which depend the choice of the set of chances of realization as well as the choices for the individual’s life conduct” [31] (p. 51), quoted in [32] (p. 217) (translation from German to English by the authors).

Our study on children in organized leisure activities specifies this relational perspective by showing the importance of transactional horizons in the flourishing of one's participatory capability. Leisure centers are invested in via certain forms of participatory capability linked to transactional horizons, which find more or less space to express themselves. Their attendance decreases when young people move to other spaces that better correspond to their search for harmony with the environment. We must, therefore, be careful not to interpret the declining attendance as a simple lack of motivation on the part of young people. It is rather a matter of decreased participatory capability, due to a complex social dynamic and not only to personal will. We can, therefore, speak of forms of participation and forms of agency or the "capacity to act". The three forms of participatory capability that we have identified (adaptive, innovative, cooperative) correspond to forms that are more or less appropriate depending on the context. The correspondence between the dominant modes of action in these contexts and the individual systems of action contributes to the stability of a social system. This makes it possible to consider social change in terms of the participatory capability, a more scientifically neutral concept than the concepts of empowerment and agency as currently used in normative perspectives. This opens up new perspectives for the empirical study of children and youth participation in different fields.

The implications for the organized leisure sector and more broadly for the world of education are relational; we recommend that participatory activities make sufficient room for all transactional horizons involved in the flourishing of individuals. In particular, it is a question of overcoming the tendency to focus on activities and the concomitant reduction in education to a question of academic performance that are currently predominant. Indeed, the entrepreneurial mode of action, while of course central to individual and collective development, can only be fully meaningful and relevant if it is linked to the relationships, values, self-images and motivations of the actors. We, therefore, believe that paying greater attention to these dimensions of experience is likely to foster greater participatory capability for children in the field of education. As we have seen, the institutionalization of the norms of behavior expected from adults towards children and from children towards each other must take into account the point of view of children if it is not to be disconnected from the experience. This conclusion ties in with considerations that date back more than a century but are still relevant today on the relationship between democracy and education [33]. From this democratic perspective, we recommend that an optimal balance of adaptive, innovative and cooperative forms of participatory capability be promoted in all educational activities. Each of these forms is relevant to different stages of child development. This approach applies equally to providing appropriate guidance in the exercise of the child's rights in a manner that is consistent with the child's evolving capacities (article 5, UNCRC). It could even be argued that this is a condition for the sustainability of these same rights, as they cannot remain alive and evolve without the recognition of all dimensions of the child's experience.

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