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Child Participation to Build Citizenship and to Transform the School Territory in a Global World

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Abstract: This article presents a participatory research project developed in a school in Cantabria (Spain) that has sought to enhance the participation of the educational community to transform the school. The article focuses on the analysis of the contributions of the students (children from 3 to 12 years of age), key agents and promoters of change. Pedagogical documentation has been used as a tool to narrate the development of this research and to encourage subsequent reflection. The students have experienced what it means to participate, to listen, to be listened to, to feel recognised and to exert influence in their own lives. The results go beyond mere changes in the configuration and use of spaces. The project has made it possible to think of the school as a forum for citizen participation, favouring the experience of a democratic school, the development of otherness, the feeling of belonging and the experience of community.

Keywords: childhood; school space; documentation; participatory research; Reggio Emilia approach

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1. A Project Inspired by the Image of the "Rich" Child

What is our image of childhood? We know that the image we have of it is a social convention that changes according to the era or the collective that defines it. We also know that the social or political components that underlie its definition will allow us to take into account and recognize its potential (Dahlberg et al. 1999; James and Prout 1990). Being aware of these components favours the construction of contexts of reflection and action that give value to these qualities. What we think children are allows us, as Rinaldi (2013) points out, to define their social and ethical identity, their rights and the educational and living context they are offered.

The idea of a child "rich" in potential and resources, competent and powerful from the moment of birth, has been widely pointed out as a fundamental principle of action in Reggio Emilia schools by Malaguzzi. Thus, we are presented with a model of childhood that is clearly committed to developing a relationship with the world, with the intention of experiencing that world in a complex system of skills, strategies, languages and diverse ways of organising relationships. The "rich" image of childhood involves us in the consideration of a group that demands to be respected and valued for its unique and differential identity peculiarities. In short, it is a matter of recognising their rights, because by recognising them we assume new rights for everyone (Cagliari et al. 2021).

There are multiple childhoods and educational contexts based on our interpretations of what they are or should be. The approach in this paper to a positioning of the social construction of childhood (Gaitán 2006; Osoro and Meng 2008; Candela and Fuentes 2021) offers an interesting perspective from a pedagogical point of view. It captures the idea that the "rich child makes a rich pedagogue and rich parents. Conversely, a poor child provides a poor pedagogy and you also have poor parents" (Dahlberg et al. 2005, p. 86).

Our work puts forward the idea that teaching and learning processes are not isolated or individual, nor are they circumscribed to curricular areas or developed independently

of the context. On the contrary, they are moments of knowledge construction that occur in relation to others, and this is the fundamental principle of the construction of intersubjectivities: the natural predisposition to understand and be understood by others (Contreras 2017). Children have ideas and put them into practice, turn them into action, use different languages to express them and examine and re-examine them, and we adults are participants in all of this.

In the constructions of the "rich" child, as Dahlberg et al. (2005) point out, we observe that learning, far from being individual, is a cooperative and communicative activity in which children construct knowledge. We understand that they are born perfectly equipped to learn and that, sometimes, it is the school institutions themselves that impoverish their capacities (Gajardo Espinoza and Torrego Egido 2022; Lay-Lisboa et al. 2018). We believe that the school, beyond school content, should promote the acquisition of the necessary skills to encourage the development of citizenship and, therefore, participation in society. A participation that is experienced from an early age, that promotes a strong image of childhood and that presents children as active citizens in the present moment (Moss 2021).

Our project, entitled "Between spaces and emotions", was developed in a rural school in Cantabria (northern Spain) and was aimed at promoting children's contributions, favouring a real, meaningful and localised experimentation of participation.

2. The School as a Forum of Participation

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations (UN) 1989) defines child participation as the right to be heard and taken into account in matters that affect them.

The UNCRC emphasises that children are subjects of rights and should play an active role in the creation of educational policies that contribute to the development of democratic schools. Hart (1993, p. 5) defines participation "as the ability to express decisions that are recognised by the social environment and that affect one's own life and/or the life of the community in which one lives". We therefore advocate child participation as a means for social transformation, an instrument, as Hart (1993) pointed out, for building democracy. This is clearly linked to the definition of participation provided by Sarramona (1999), who argued that participation implies sharing power, thus not considering it as the "exclusive patrimony" of a few.

In this respect, the school is presented as a privileged forum for participation, a means of exerting influence from the everyday, as well as from the reference group in which children learn and in which they live. This a context that we understand as privileged as long as it breaks with pedagogical practices that treat children as passive beneficiaries of teaching. The definition of child participation proposed by Sarramona (1999) directly calls for the need to change the way we look at children, to abandon "adult-centrism" (Ochoa-Cervantes 2021), which places children in a condition of inferiority and in a kind of moratorium of "preparation for the future", denying their presence and possibilities of action in the present (Trilla and Novella 2011). For its part, General Comment No. 12 (United Nations (UN) 2009) echoes this situation and points to the attitude of adult superiority as the greatest barrier to fostering child participation.

The school becomes a forum for participation when children feel respected and appreciated, when the importance of their contributions is recognised, when time is allowed for listening, opportunities are provided, spaces for participation are allocated, different forms of expression or the multiple languages of children are acknowledged and, finally, when the teacher develops a continuous reflection on their teaching practice (Lancaster 2006; Pramling-Samuelsson and Park 2017; Groundwater-Smith 2023).

Democracy in school implies a participatory process where all participants feel equal. However, this seems to be a problem in the school context, where children are taught to identify with adult ways of life. Schools should promote children's protagonism in the construction of their own subjectivity, in the recognition of others and diversity and in social transformation (Belavi and Murillo Torrecilla 2020; Bustos et al. 2020; Lay-Lisboa et al.

2018), since children have their own interests and opinions which, when made explicit, can help transform the territory they inhabit, the relationships they build and the institutions in which they participate.

All of the above requires a commitment to a pedagogical model which is not restricted to school and which encourages children not only to grow and develop happily and optimally, but also to learn and contribute to the construction of a responsible, participatory, ethical and democratic community life. It is only through the daily practice of participation that the development of identities and the learning of citizenship from an early age will be fostered (Moss 2021).

Although some progress has been evident in the recognition of children's rights, we share Novella's (2011, p. 3) claim when she states that "the most essential part is missing and that is that child participation is real and, above all, that we think of it as formative of children's identity". We believe that we are facing the challenge, but at the same time the opportunity, of being able to discover, value, listen to and respect "children's culture" (Hoyuelos 2009).

3. School Space: Towards a "Spatially" Pedagogical Child Participation

This binomial space–participation relationship is a way of understanding the school as a place, a forum in which children and adults are involved in projects of educational, social, cultural and political significance together with others. Things of great significance happen in this space that go beyond the mere reproduction of culture and the individualistic approach to education. On the contrary, there is "joint participation in projects of common interest and collective action" (Dahlberg et al. 2005, p. 121). In this sense, Márquez-Román and Soto (2021) point out how the aesthetic design of educational spaces makes visible the pedagogical conceptions that guide teachers' educational practices. The school space is not a dead or neutral space, but rather a speaking space that conveys multiple messages related to educational intentions and the child's image that is defended and projected (Trueba 2015).

Taylor (1993) argues that while we expect classrooms to teach children how to live together in a democratic society, often the spaces we provide in school for their learning are more like a prison or police state where everything is imposed and there is no room for creation. For his part, Clement (2019) points out the existence of a spatially democratic pedagogy that rejects spatial determinism and appeals to the co-construction of these spaces by children, thus leading to the participation of those who will use them. Our work addresses children's participation and action in the school space and draws on previous studies that use the Mosaic approach: a multi-method, adaptable, participatory and reflexive approach that is embedded into practice and focused on children's lived experiences (Einarsdottir 2005; Clark 2010).

We believe that the school as a whole is full of places full of meaning and significance for children, spaces that speak only to them and that go unnoticed by the adult ear. This is why we consider important the claim of the "Pedagogy of Listening" of the Reggio Emilia Infant Schools as an act of collecting, organising and understanding what the intelligence of children and adults produce in the context of the school (Cagliari et al. 2021). It implies open-mindedness and a readiness to interpret the attitudes and messages of others. Giving children an active role in intervening and transforming the school space will make it easier for them to make sense of a scenario that they shape by their presence. It is a space through which they pass but which they turn into a territory (lived space, subjective space), because with their action and influence in that space they inhabit and fill it with meaning.

4. Origin and Purpose of the Project

This project (*) arose from the concern, interest and involvement of 15 teachers from a public infant and primary school in Cantabria (northern Spain). From their professional reflection on the type of school they want to have and how they want to achieve it, they

proposed the need to address the design of the school space as a key element to change the way of thinking, functioning and relating in the school.

This is what the school's director pointed out when recalling the origin of the project: "The teaching staff as a whole agreed on recognising the value of spaces as an agent and the lack of attention that had been given to them in our school". From this point on, the teaching staff began a process of research involving training in different participatory methodologies and research into different pedagogical trends, which finally resulted in a project called "Between spaces and emotions". For the development of the project, the school's management team sought advice from the Faculty of Education at the University of Cantabria, which provided a theoretical and empirical reference framework that guided and documented the process of the educational research.

The team's research question was the following: How could the school be improved through a participatory project involving children and adults to achieve a rethinking of the spaces of the school? The aim of the project was to transform the school through the generation of a participatory culture that helps to reconvert the educational centre, presenting the configuration of school spaces (both indoors and outdoors) as an opportunity to recognise and value the different identities present in the school, promote listening and participation processes, generate consensus and transform the school, creating a culture of inhabiting school places designed as spaces of knowledge, culture and encounter. The approach was to link the space category to the analysis of the image of childhood and the school's educational project. For this reason, the study focuses on allowing the reconstruction of space in three areas: the physical, the conceptual and the relational, based on a higher order proposal such as the right of children to their own environment.

5. Participants

The school as a whole was the target of the project, specifically 15 teachers, 144 pupils and their families. It is a publicly owned infant and primary school located in Cantabria (northern Spain) in a rural setting, a small village by the sea. The school consists of two separate buildings, one for infant education and the other for primary education, as well as two playgrounds, one for each of the educational stages. Based on a participatory methodology, which diversifies the languages of research and conceives children as key agents of educational change, this article analyses the contributions of school children (from 3 to 12 years of age) toward improving educational spaces, which (as will be analysed later) implies a substantial improvement in relations, teaching methodology and the school's relations with its local community.

6. Participatory Research

Chiristensen and Prout (2002) have classified the different perspectives of childhood research, recognising the existence of research where the child appears as an 'object' of the research, as a subject, as a social actor and, finally, as a participant. Our research is inspired by a rights-informed approach and devises the child as a social agent who must be listened to in relation to the issues that affect them and in the decision making that affects their lives. It is a study inspired by the 'pedagogy of listening' (Rinaldi 2001). In other words, it is a form of participatory research that understands children's participation as an objective to be achieved and a method to be followed.

Placing children at the centre of research does not mean minimising the role of adults or conceiving research as a place free of moral and ethical dilemmas. On the contrary, our research assumes that knowledge is constructed in a complex and political dialogue between children and adults. This dialogue is complex and political because of the different positions of power and influence that children and adults occupy in the research. Also, we recognise the group of participating children and adults as a heterogeneous group socially, historically and geographically situated (Gallagher 2008).

In order to advance in the construction of a more democratic science, open to participation, this research is undertaken with the understanding that is necessary to acknowledge

the positive effect of an attitude of methodological immaturity that allows us to investigate from methodological assumptions that are under construction, imperfect or emerging (Gallacher and Gallagher 2008).

The project is structured around four pedagogical axes (Osoro and Castro 2017). The first is Being and Being. This axis was worked on through the pedagogy of identities, which favours rethinking the school's signs of identity and, therefore, the school's educational project. The second is Belonging and Participating, which was achieved through the pedagogy of participation, which involves giving children a voice and respecting their right to participate in the issues that affect their lives and, therefore, allowing their experiences to be taken into account in the school context. The third is Exploring and Communicating, which was achieved through experiential pedagogy which involved facing the challenge of finding the most appropriate techniques to encourage children's expression. The fourth and last one is Narrating and Meaning, through the pedagogy of meaning, where shared discourses are constructed and where, finally, the transition from the gaze of each individual child to the shared gaze is favoured, based on the inter-subjective gazes of childhood and its situations.

Taking these four axes into account, the project went through three phases. Phase 1 was the creation and acceptance of individual and social identities that are built through participation. Phase 2 involved the transition from the individual to the collective gaze, based on consensus and transformation of the territory. The third and last phase, which we call meaning and impact, involved assessing the influence that the project had on the participants' lives.

7. Ethical Considerations

In the implementation of the project, all ethical considerations guiding children's participation in educational research were taken into account (Graham et al. 2013). In this sense, children's participation was always voluntary. Informed consent was requested not only from the parents but also from the children themselves, with a model being designed for infant education pupils and another for primary education pupils (age-appropriate and considering the role of families as mediators). The final decision to participate in the project was in the hands of the children. Throughout the research process, the need to include all pupils was also kept in mind, especially taking into consideration Gillet-Swan and Lundy's (2022) reflections on how to deal with the dilemma of conflict of interest that usually arises in schools when we adopt the children's rights in education approach.

As Halldén (2003) points out, the children's perspective becomes a tool for making educational policy and a means for school improvement. It is important to emphasise the children's perspective and not only the teachers' perspective, which leads to the "necessary problematisation of how to take a position on needs and rights and to determine what constitutes a child's perspective" (p. 13). A relational approach such as the one outlined above will have to start from their everyday life as they represent and experience it. This is a methodology that recognises that childhood researchers must research for and with children (Alanen 2001).

8. Data Collection and Documentation

School is an ideal place for children to express their intelligence and relational competences. The image of the "rich" child as a global expression of children's competences is completed by another element pointed out by Fortunati (2016): "children are competent in themselves, but always in relation to others". It is not possible to understand children's experiences simply by listening to their statements, as these must be related to the social structures in which they are framed (Alanen 2001; Halldén 2003).

There is, therefore, a clear relationship between the expression of children's competences and the relational space in which these experiences occur, and in this space educational documentation processes take on vital importance. In this project, educational documentation has been used as an instrument for reflection, for the construction of alter-

native practices in the school, for altering meanings, for rethinking the figure of the teacher as a reflective practitioner and as a tool for recording what happens during the research process, which favours subsequent reflection. In addition to mapping reality, documenting involves a process of co-construction of specific situations that occur in a given context.

Documentation becomes a form of content during the research process in that it captures what children say and do and how teachers relate to each other in this context (Dahlberg et al. 2005). It is also a process of rigorous, methodical and democratic reflection carried out by teachers, both alone and in encounters with other teachers, children or their families.

We are therefore talking about a collective project in which we investigate a practice that allows us to construct a narrative that enables us to navigate the complexity of the experience. It goes beyond the attempt to build a collective memory, to take us from the narrative to the deep analysis of the project.

9. Data Collection Techniques

The project faces the challenge of generating techniques that favour children's participation and the exercise of their leading role. These are "child-friendly" techniques that aim to enhance the inclusion of children in educational research as key informant agents. Clark et al. (2003) refer to them as "familiar" techniques, as they are known to children in their daily lives. They stand out for their simplicity and ease of execution, for their playful component and for being techniques that can be carried out in a group, thus increasing children's confidence and security in the presence of the adult.

- Drawing: The technique was used in the project following the works of Dockett and Perry (2005), Einarsdottir (2005), Castro Zubizarreta and Manzanares Ceballos (2015) and Castro Zubizarreta and Valcárcel-Delgado (2022). The children were provided with sheets of paper on which they were asked to draw the school they would like to have. The drawings were made after a free tour of the interior of the school and the school grounds by all the children in the school as part of the 'space detectives' activity. In this activity the primary children also became mentors for the infant children, accompanying them on the tour and helping them to gather their perspective through the different techniques. The technique allowed the children to express what they felt was important to have in the school and to suggest new uses for existing spaces. It is a technique that allows them to express themselves effectively and creatively.
- Photographs: Photographs were also used to encourage children to use graphic devices such as cameras, with which children photographed those spaces, people or objects that they considered interesting or important to them (Ali-Khan and Siry 2014; Coleyshaw et al. 2012; Rasmussen and Smidt 2002). The children were asked to photograph the spaces they liked the most and with which they felt most identified. This technique was also developed as part of the 'space detectives' activity.
- Conversations with children: Having conversations with children was a technique that accompanied drawings and photographs. It was carried out in small groups of two or three children to reduce the ethical disparity of adult power and to encourage their opinions. Through this technique, drawings and photographs that each child had included in a previous individual portfolio were shared and shown. They also shared those elements desired for their ideal school, spaces that aroused their interest, suggestions for improvement and the projection of other uses of spaces that took on new meanings through their contributions. One of the researchers posed an introductory question: "What have you drawn and photographed on your route and why?" From there, the children were listened to, respecting their silences. The conversations were recorded and transcribed with the informed consent of the children and their families.
- Lego constructions: The choice was made to facilitate other forms of expression for the children through constructions, given their familiarity to the children in infant education and the existence of a construction corner in the daily life of their classroom

(Boyle and Hine 2014). These constructions were used to help make explicit the school they would like to have.

- Focus groups: Creating focus groups with older children has been a technique used continuously throughout projects to gather children's perspectives (Castro Zubizarreta and Manzanares Ceballos 2015; Castro Zubizarreta and Valcárcel-Delgado 2022). Focus groups were held at the beginning of the project to gather children's initial expectations and interests. They were also used at the end in order to collect their assessment of the project, its influence and its impact on their lives. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the participants. At the same time, the school developed assemblies during the project that served to report progress of the project to the children while also allowing them to make decisions together, to value the contributions of all the children and to create a sense of belonging and community.
- Observation: Observation was the basic tool used for reflection by the teaching and research team.
- Finally, in this project we incorporated peer mentoring in an attempt to empower children, so that younger children had older peers as mediators and allies, specifically, primary school pupils.

The data analysis was carried out on the basis of a thematic analysis following the 6-phase method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarizing yourself with your data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report. The elaboration of the codes was performed in an inductive–deductive way, taking into account the theoretical framework of the research and the emerging themes.

The codes used were the following: (a) type of space (classroom, corridor, library, kitchen, exit/entrance of the school, playground, outdoor enclosure), (b) activities (individual, group, active, passive, mental, physical, noisy, silent), (c) relationships (child–child, child–teacher, teacher–teacher, teacher–parent, child–external adult, teacher–external adult), (d) adjectives used to describe the space (positive, negative, neutral), (e) more and less drawn spaces (colours, sizes, associated adjectives, type of constructions), (f) objects provided (shape, size, material, use, description), (g) adjectives used to define teachers (relationships, methodology, materials, positive, negative, neutral) and (h) barriers and levers to participation.

10. Results

10.1. Individual and Social Identities That Are Built through Participation

We began the project with the recognition of the identity differences that make up the school. This involved the development of a process of introspection, self-knowledge and self-evaluation that required the collection of the particular look of each child, the recognition of their self and the co-construction of intersubjectivities in relation to others. It is here that concrete actions are initiated which help children to get to know themselves and to recognise themselves among others, with their own tastes and interests, in a process of presentation towards the other. Activities are carried out in the infant and primary education stages involving children, families, teachers and agents of the socio- community environment with the aim of claiming their presence, valuing the uniqueness of each one and expressing and representing their identity. During this process, the recognition of the other and the creation of a culture of "we" is encouraged.

Some of the actions developed for infant and primary education are described in this and the following paragraphs. The children in infant education were asked to bring to school an object representative of themselves and their family, accompanied by a short simple text expressing what it meant to them.

The objects and texts formed a community art installation. The installation gave life and meaning to the entrance space of the school and prevented it from being seen as a non-place or a place of transit. It became a living space that was given collective meaning, a symbolic place for the celebration of being together.

This meant showing their parents their object and their space, seeing themselves and being shown. This also involved identifying the objects that others had brought and that they also liked, talking about them, sharing and socialising. This activity is about providing open proposals that seduce the children and that they finally show, expose and share with others in that entrance hall that is an invitation to welcome and share.

In the primary education stage, the children researched the origin of their name, drew themselves and shared their particular story and presented it to the others. The entrances of the two buildings were filled with meaning, making them an open door for encounters and relationships by displaying authentic letters of introduction to the people who live in the building. The recognition of the identity of each member of the educational community was accompanied by the co-construction of the identity of the school.

The teaching staff also participated by bringing objects and images of themselves, both present and past, through which they presented themselves as members of the shool, sharing tastes and hobbies.

The children were also asked the following questions: What is your ideal teacher like? What would you like to be like as a pupil? These questions were accompanied by activities that encouraged them to learn about the history of the school, the reasons for its name or the environment in which it is located, with the aim of awakening and encouraging their feeling of belonging to a group (pupils at the school) that identifies with the context (school) in which they live, grow and learn. The children's contributions, together with those of other members of the educational community (families and teachers), helped the teachers to rethink the school's educational project.

10.2. Expressing Our Ideas about the School We Would Like to Attend

In this phase, both children and adults, with the same power of contribution, point out the elements they would like to see in their school. These productions are not limited to the school space or premises, allowing for the incorporation of other territories, the breaking down of walls and incorporation of the community into the pedagogy. To this end, we relied on participatory or child-friendly techniques (Figure 1) that encourage the expression and communication of ideas (drawings, photographs, conversations, tours, constructions, etc.) and peer mentoring.

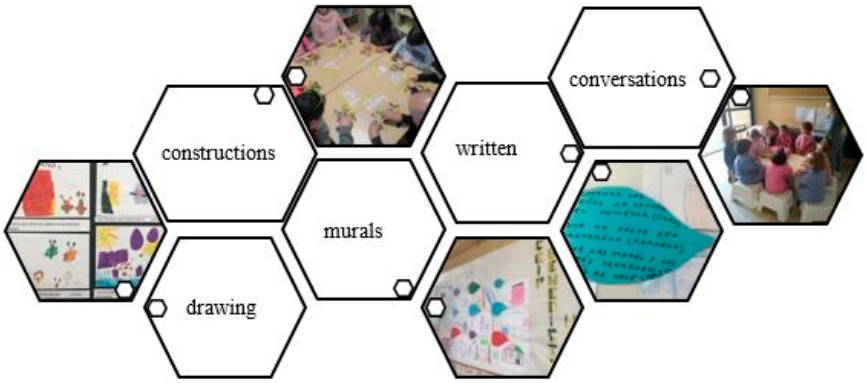


Figure 1. Participatory techniques used (source: own elaboration).

The aim is to create a participatory community that feels that the school belongs to all the people who live there. For this reason, it seems important to us to create closer ties between the pupils of the school at different levels and educational stages, erasing the barrier of "those in infants and those in primary". Each child in primary education is paired with a child in infant education, supporting them in the process of listening and participation in the activity in which they are involved.

Through the activity "detectives of spaces", primary school children were in charge of helping their tutor on the tour through the school spaces to take photographs, with tutors

collecting the verbalisations of the children while they were making the drawings and helping in the creation of a portfolio for each child (Figure 2).

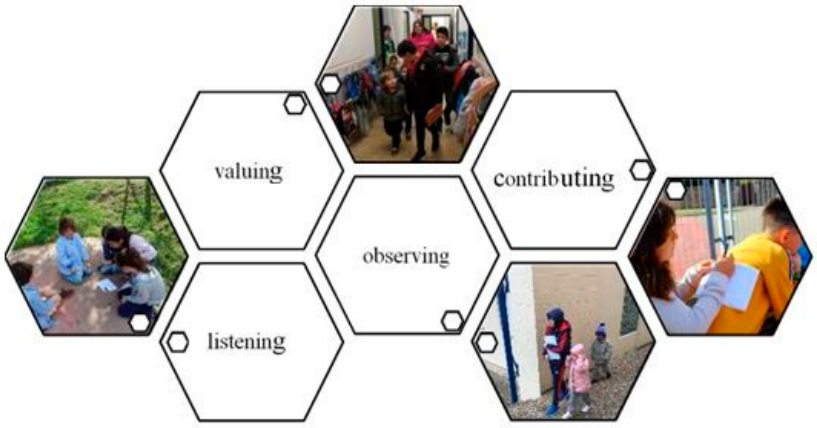


Figure 2. Peer mentoring and the 'space detectives' activity (source: own elaboration).

This activity was an exercise in the empowerment of children. It is the children's collective that collects and transmits the contributions of all their peers in a framework of listening and joint understanding where children's words take on their maximum value and meaning. This breaks down an adult barrier to child participation and, above all, to the participation of the youngest children: the adult belief that participation requires a certain age and maturity. Providing opportunities for participation and believing in children's abilities and being surprised by them is key to reducing the hegemonic gaze of the adult in school.

It is significant that in the drawings made by the children in infant school and the first years of primary school, the two buildings appeared together, despite being separated. This is a constant that is reproduced in quite a number of drawings and projects the idea of unity that we understand to have been favoured by the development of peer mentoring and the inter-level activities developed. The following are some of the initial contributions of the children in infant and primary education (Figure 3).



"A giant slide and a butterfly garden."
"Mums and dads should come to school more."
"A little kitchen in the courtyard".
"A school of water." "A swimming pool."

Figure 3. The school spaces that children in pre-primary education would like to see in their schools (source: own elaboration).

For their part, the primary school pupils made contributions through drawings and videos in which they interviewed themselves and collected their ideas. Some of their demands were the following: "*We want a swimming pool in the school playground*" (boy, primary school). "*Secret spaces to relax*" (boy, primary school). "*A climbing wall*", "*circuits*", "*nets for the goals*" (girl, primary school). "*A fountain*" (girl, primary school). "*A swimming pool for when it is hot and when we go for a swim at break time*" (girl, primary school). "*It should be very big and have several rooms to relax in and lots of games to have fun*" (boy, primary school).

The children's initial demands raised doubts among adults about the quality of children's contributions:

> **Teacher 1:** *You see, they ask us for a swimming pool. . . they ask for crazy things, most of them are unfeasible.*
>
> **Researcher:** *But what's behind the pool. . .?*
>
> **Teacher 2:** *The demand for water. . .*

As the project developed, the desired image of childhood was also made explicit, as were the discordances between this image (in theory, a creative and enabling one) and the teaching practices, which seemed to present difficulties in changing their routines. From the teachers' reflection, debate and exchange, we began to learn how to observe, understand and interpret children's messages. Giving time to children and building a reflective practice in relation to their contributions are key aspects in reducing the prevailing adult-centrism. Along the same lines, an attempt was made throughout the process to encourage children's reflection, shaping their contributions and opening them up to what this type of proposal was suggesting to them: "*Great, because we have been able to give our opinion on the school we want*". "*I really liked it because we were able to draw the "things" that are missing in the school*".

Each child created a portfolio in which they collected their drawings, ideas, expressions and photographs. This acted as an instrument that could be used to collect their individual view of the school spaces in which they would like to learn.

10.3. From the Individual to the Collective Gaze: Consensus and Transformation of the Territory

Once each child's ideas had been made explicit, we moved from the individual and particular view of each group to the shared view, which required the search for consensus and the construction of shared meanings. Each child shared his or her portfolio with the others in class, and ideas were shared through assemblies. Some ideas gained support and were enriched, while others were discarded by the children themselves.

> "We also have to think about the fact that everyone can use it, not just the big ones or just the little ones [. . .] it's not just what we want, but also what everyone wants so that we can all be happy and at ease" (primary school child).

With everyone's contributions, a mural was created in which proposals made by children of each educational stage were specified. The children from primary education visited infant education pupils to get to know the proposal and also gave their opinion on it. It was also the other way round, with the children from infant education getting to know the proposal of their primary education classmates. In this way, we managed to move from an individual perspective to a shared perspective.

At the same time, the need to create participation nodes was observed (Figure 4). This involved generating a network of representatives from each classroom to convey the demands of the school's pupils. It meant giving children a hearing, making sure that their voices were heard by the people who could respond to their requests. The representatives were elected by the children themselves and their initial demands were heard by both the management team and the local mayor.



Figure 4. Participation nodes and audiences (source: own elaboration).

The infant education representatives requested more games, a blackboard in the playground, a tunnel, bouncing games, climbing games, a playground for balancing on a slide, a sandpit, music, a tree house, inflatables, a fish pond, flowers, more benches, a swimming pool, a kitchenette, a tree house, a water circuit and a fountain. The primary school representatives also requested a tree house, an indoor swimming pool, baskets on the red court, dance areas, a climbing wall, a water park, wooden tables, flowers, colourful bollards and litter bins.

The mayor explained what the municipality could commit to and what was not feasible, giving the reasons for this and providing alternatives.

> **Mayor:** *"Right now in the school, which is a very small space, we are going to try to do everything we can to meet your needs [. . .]. We have built you an indoor track. We gave you an area dedicated to sports. . . maybe we made a mistake. Maybe, on some of the side walls of the school we can create a climbing wall. We have a zip line in the public park. We have to have a space of 30 metres. The swimming pool [. . .] the problem with the swimming pool is to maintain it [. . .] we have to try to make things sustainable and maintain them at the lowest possible cost. We can do the fountain, where do you think we can put it?"*
>
> **Girl:** *Near the courts* (a teacher explains why they ask for this because if they are playing on the courts and they are thirsty they have to go to the school toilet to drink).
>
> **Mayor:** *"The nets for the indoor track, baskets, the climbing wall, tables and litter bins we can also put in."*

After this hearing, the pupils continued to improve their proposals, including a new criterion in their formulation: feasibility (in terms of whether it could be carried out and whether it could also be built). It is here that the territory begins its transformation and spaces emerge within the school that are conquered by the children (for example, the space under the stairs, the corridors, the shelves that become places to read, etc.) and that had previously gone unnoticed. Transit spaces become meeting places (Figure 5). The children create their own little houses, shelters and secret spaces to relax, be and feel. They decide to create water circuits in the playground and one made of stumps, to recover a vegetable garden and to decorate and paint walls and fences.

These physical changes are accompanied by relational and methodological changes with the commitment of the school's teaching staff to workshops or free classrooms. They promote encounters between different age groups and encourage autonomy, the right to decide and the right to participate, offering creative and free-choice workshops based on the interests of the pupils.



Figure 5. Emerging spaces, or "spaces to" do something (source: own elaboration).

10.4. And the Surprise Came to the Project: New Hearings and a Gift

A new opportunity to be heard came from the radio. The children took part in a programme that described what they were doing at school, what they had achieved with the town council, their wishes or unfulfilled requests and what they themselves had created. Suddenly, a gift arrived from the school workshop: the playground kitchenette requested by the infant education pupils. The project had broken the walls of the school, it had become a community project driven by the illusions of the children's collective (Figure 6).



Figure 6. New audiences (source: own elaboration).

To share the work carried out, an exhibition was held at the town hall itself, with explanations provided by the children and open access to all the citizens of the municipality.

10.5. Meaning and Impact: The Influence on Participants' Lives

This stage of the project involved reflection on the meaning and significance of what had been done, identification of the learning generated, what the children considered they had achieved and verification of the influence of their actions on the school. In this phase, conversations were held with children through discussion groups to capture their particular view and assessment of the project. Contact with the younger children and

working together were very positively valued by the children in the upper grades. They valued their contributions and looked after their interests.

> **Researcher:** *And what did you like most about the project?*
>
> **R2.** *I like to listen to all the ideas of the little ones because sometimes it's also cool. There are times when they tell you things to play that don't make sense, but then they tell you good ideas like here we can play . . . and you realise that it's true and that you can play a lot of different ways.*
>
> **R3.** *That, even though they are small, they also have the right to say what they want to have to play with, even though in a few years we are going to leave and we won't be able to use everything. And what I liked the most was the coexistence with the little ones, which was very cool and, in the end, they were right.*
>
> *They note that they have felt important, that they have been listened to, that all their contributions have been taken into account. They see themselves as people with rights and competent.*
>
> **Researcher:** *And how did you feel?*
>
> **R1.** *We have felt like the presidents of the Spanish government.*
>
> **R2.** *I think we have felt important because the teachers have listened to us. They have written down [everyone's contributions] even if it doesn't make sense, they have written it down and that's something we like. And also, at least for me, I really liked the experience and although we can't achieve everything, in the end it will be done and when a few years go by, it will be achieved. And we would like it to be achieved because, just like us, the other children also have the right.*

Among the lessons learned, they point to listening, the ability to express oneself and freedom of action: "*Listening to others, yes*"; "*you have to learn to listen and to be listened to*"; "*besides, the mayor listened to us very well, he also told us the reasons why things could not be done*"; "*you can do things a bit your own way, not just the way they want you to*".

For their part, the infant education children reflected on what they had achieved by expressing and sharing their ideas and commenting on what they had liked most: "*Going to the older children's building*", "*investigating*", "*being in the big playground*", "*having an older friend who helps me and worries about me*", "*playing with water*" and "*playing with the little kitchen in the playground*" were some of their statements. From these statements we can infer the conquest of space by breaking the limits established between infant and primary education, the possibility of playing and experimenting with forbidden elements, such as water, which was a highly demanded element, the achievement of creating alliances between peers, older classmates who look after their interests and help them to raise their voices and exercise their rights, and satisfaction of the demand for play with elements that they had inside the classrooms (kitchenette corner) and which were also satisfied outside. In addition to the recognition and satisfaction for what had been achieved, the children who were finishing the primary education stage also identified the feeling of being agents of change, of being able to leave a mark during their time at the school:

> *"Yes, because the teachers have organised it and helped us, but, above all, we have done it ourselves. We have done it and it has worked". "When I have children and if they live here and they go to this school and you say, look now you come and play here at this school because I did this".*

11. Discussion and Conclusions

This project gives value to children and presents them as a powerful collective that experiences their right to participate and exert influence through their presence at school. Through the project, the definition of a social and ethical identity has been enhanced in the participating children, recognising their rights (Rinaldi 2013; Ochoa-Cervantes 2021).

Through participation, the project has made it possible to think of the school as a forum for building citizenship, favouring the experience of a democratic school, the development of otherness, responsibility, recognition, the feeling of belonging and the experience of community. The project shows how children's contributions are surprising and how they improve if spaces and opportunities are created for their expression, debate and consensus. It is a child-centred project that moves away from the adult-centrism prevalent in schools. We also believe that the project has encouraged continuous reflection, both by the children and by the teachers themselves. We believe that it projects an image of a rich child and a rich community that overcomes the resistance of the school culture to change, thus giving a voice to, listening to and recognising the subjectivities of all of its members.

The inclusion of a third closing phase in order to capture the influence of the project on the lives of the protagonists addresses one of the proposed requirements for quality child participation or authentic participation, namely that it can have an impact on their lives (Dahlberg et al. 2005).

The children at the school have experienced and learned what it means to participate, to contribute, to listen, to be listened to, to feel important, to be recognised and to exert influence in their own lives. They are active citizens of the present who are building another school. The results go beyond mere changes in the configuration and use of spaces. The participating children report feeling important, capable, listened to and competent. It is a project that we understand to be perennial, unfinished and in continuous construction and reconstruction because the spaces are inhabited and change, like their inhabitants. Likewise, we consider that the project presented shows how the greatest obstacle to child participation is the adult attitude, in line with Clark (2007), General Comment no. 12 United Nations (UN) (2009) and Castro Zubizarreta and Valcárcel-Delgado (2022).

On the other hand, unlike other studies that address child participation in the reformulation of school spaces (Clark 2007; Clement 2019), the work presented here empowers children not only in the school context, but also in the socio-community environment, raising their voice as a citizen collective before local civil institutions (city council).

In the project, the role of the adult has been that of a companion, specifically a companion on a journey through spaces and emotions. The adult collective has overcome beliefs and attitudes that undervalue or silence children's voices. Providing opportunities for listening, empowering children from an early age through peer mentoring, subscribing to reflective practice, incorporating the value of surprise and the unexpected and taking advantage of it and encouraging their contributions to reach other audiences so that they can materialise are key to experimenting with a more democratic school, one where participation is learned, lived and felt.

The project has highlighted the importance of children's participation and the understanding of their experiences as an essential element in the analysis of their living conditions at school (Halldén 2003). We have tried to capture not only their perspective, but also the structural conditions of their schooling and the school environment in which they develop on a daily basis, favouring the improvement of these spaces.

The main limitation of the study is that it focuses only on one school, with the possible interference of the research team during the observation and documentation process carried out in the field being another limitation. One area that involved ethical tension was that of favouring the expression of the infant children over the contributions of primary school children and the adult community, with another being the convenience of adults freeing themselves from the tendency to give a single interpretation to texts, photographs or drawings (Halldén 2003). Peer mentoring was effective in this regard. Also, the presentation of project progress through regular school assemblies was an opportunity for accountability and reduced the adult tendency to make interpretations of inputs without validation from their authors.

In order to advance the intensity and quality of children's participation and move towards an approach that frames students as co-researchers, it would be interesting for children to choose and decide on the technique or techniques they prefer to use to express

their perspective. Also, deciding the topic they are interested in researching or want to know more about could aid this effort. As a future line of research, we would be interested in finding out how the children participating in the project define the terms participation and childhood as a result of their experience and learning about the contributions and nuances that can be made from a child's perspective toward concepts that have historically been defined from an adult perspective.

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