CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION, ACCORDING TO CHILDREN'S VOICES

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Conditions for Effective Children's Participation, according to Children's Voices

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Abstract

This study focuses on the conditions that children's participation experiences that take place in different educational settings, such as the school, leisure education and children's councils, should fulfill. Our findings are based on a multiple case study performed in six educational experiences, in which the information is provided by the main figures of the participation: the children involved. The children's inputs allow us to identify three categories that define the conditions of children's participation for the latter to be meaningful and authentic: (1) the acknowledgement of the rights of childhood; (2) how the participation-based experience works, and finally (3) the role of the educators. It transpires that the conditions stated by the children coincide greatly with the ones indicated by different authors in their theoretical proposals.

Keywords: children's participation; school; leisure; children's council; citizenship education; research with children.

Introduction

Children's participation was one of the gauntlets thrown down by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which specifically acknowledged that children have the right to participate in all matters that affect their lives (art. 12). This challenge faces children, professionals, families, politicians and society in general. Since that moment, numerous contributions have been made with a view to

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understanding, acknowledging and making this right effective. Here, mention should be made of Recommendation No. R (98) 8 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States of the Council of Europe on Children's Participation in Family And Social Life (September 18, 1998), and more particularly the Committee's proposal on the Rights of the Child, in General Comment No. 12 (2009), where different guidelines, recommendations and measures to make children's right to be heard effective are mooted and proposed. We would like to emphasize the conditions proposed by the Committee in view of their value and transcendence in all the processes in which children have a voice and participate: (1) *Transparent and informative.* Complete and accessible information must be provided; (2) *Voluntary.* It should also be made known that they may transfer their participation in any moment; (3) *Respectful.* With the opinions and the initiatives of the children; (4) *Relevant.* Truly relevant to the children's lives; (5) *Child-friendly.* Environments and methods adapted to children's capacities; (6) *Inclusive.* Avoid discrimination and encourage the participation of minorities; (7) *Supported by training* Preparation for adults with practical skills; (8) *Safe and sensitive to risk.* Take precautions against violence, exploitation or any r negative consequence of their participation; (9) *Accountable* Commitment to the monitoring and evaluation of the experience.

Theorists and practitioners of children's participation have also contributed to the conceptualization of the principles that should guide children's participation projects for such participation to be effective, namely Treseder (1997), Chawla (2001), Landsdown (2001) Hart (1992), Save the Children (2005), Shier (2009), Trilla and Novella (2001), among others (Agud, Novella, & Llena, 2014). However, despite the legal and academic acknowledgement that has been accorded to children's participation, there is still insufficient knowledge about ideal models that would help to foster their effective participation by children in all areas of their lives. Moreover, neither are there any theories on children's participation in which children were involved in the formulation. Our study is based on several basic premises. First of all, that experiences that promote a democratic education are a key factor in modern societies. And secondly, educational research involving children must be promoted, particularly when the purpose of the research is children's participation. Therefore, the objective of this study was to identify the conditions that must be guaranteed by children's participation experiences in order to be effective from the standpoint of the children that participate in them.

Method

In order to accomplish this objective, we conducted a case study - the empirical investigation of a specific and defined phenomenon, chosen for its potential to yield information about a theory (Smith, 1978) and which hopes to understand the

complexity of a unique case of special interest (Stake, 1995) - in the different scenarios where children's participation takes place intentionally and systematically: (1) schools (2) children's club (scout clubs) and (3) children's councils.

Selection of the case studies

The most important criterion considered was that they had to offer great potential to provide an answer to the questions addressed by this study (Stake, 1995). Of all the spaces where children's participation practices are implemented and referred to in the literature (UNICEF, 2003; Casas, 2008), we chose the ones that constitute intentional and systematic practices: the area of formal education (the school), the area of leisure education (scout groups involving continual practice and a commitment to participate regularly), and finally, the community area, through the experience of children's councils (representative municipal organs comprised of children aged between 10 and 12 years, following the model proposed by Tonucci (1996)).

Moreover, the experiences had to substantiate real and genuine participation (UNICEF, 2003; Chawla, 2001; Casas, 2008); the participation promoted had to be projective (Trilla & Novella, 2001) and be at least on rung five of Hart's ladder of participation (1992). Finally, they had to fulfill the operating conditions proposed by the aforementioned experts.

Two experiences were chosen for each educational area (school, children's clubs and children's councils) to be able to examine different ways of putting the theoretical criteria into practice. Therefore, we studied a total of 6 experiences in order to compare the different scenarios and thus enrich the study.

Table 1. Case studies

AREA	CASE STUDY	EXPERIENCE
SCHOOL	FUNDACIÓ PERE VERGÉS (1)	S1
		S2
LEISURE	MINYONS ESCOLTES I GUIES DE CATALUNYA (2)	L1
		L2
COMMUNITY	CHILDREN'S COUNCIL NETWORK (3)	CC1
		CC2

(1)Fundació Pere Vergès: The foundation has two schools, one public and one private, through which it applies the same participation philosophy.

(2) Minyons Escoltes i Guies de Catalunya (Scout Movement): this movement has eight branches throughout Catalonia and each one is formed by numerous groups. In our research, we selected two groups from the city of Barcelona with the longest record and greatest experience.

(3) Children's Councils: In selecting the two councils, we took into account the recommendations of experts working for the Diputació de Barcelona, and eventually selected two councils which have different ways of working.

Informers: The children

The study informers were selected by means of two criteria: they had to have a direct involvement in the participation experience and be aged between 10 and 12 years, since only children within this age bracket participate in the children's councils experience. According to Tonucci (2012), this is justified by practical, rather than theoretical reasons, since children of this age have already mastered the techniques that are necessary for the Council's regular activities, including reading and writing. As for the particularity of conducting research involving children, we opine that children should be treated equally, and that adults should strive to understand their diction and adapt techniques to their evolutionary age, their particular use of vocabulary and attention capacity. We also consider that the children should feel comfortable and enjoy themselves during their collaboration in the research (Punch, 2002).

Data collection

We therefore conducted a focus group – whose main objective was to describe and define the significances and interpretations of a selected group of people to obtain knowledge about a specific topic from the standpoint of the group's participants (Liamputtong, 2009) - in each one of the cases studied, totaling six, as can be seen in table two. Liamputtong (2011) has also given us key elements for focus groups to be effective, so we followed her points: The participants share a story; they are involved in the same experience; they share social and cultural values and economic status; they share an age range. Finally, we maintained an equal number of males and females. We also considered what authors have to say about the suitable number of participants, which ranges from 4 to 8 (Kitzinger, 2005) or from 6 to 12 (Liamputtong, 2011).

Table 2. Focus group participants

Focus group		
Area		Children
School	S1	7
	S2	12
Leisure	L1	8
	L2	6
Children's Council	CC1	8
	CC2	6
Total		47

Data analysis

We proceeded as follows in the analysis process: data organization (Drisko, 1998); discovery phase and coding phase (Taylor & Bogdan, 1990). Following what the literature says about data triangulation (Stake, 1995; Rodríguez, Pozo & Gutiérrez, 2006), in our study we applied the so-called "triangulation protocol": triangulation of scenarios: school, leisure and community.

Results

Hitherto, the literature has reflected the efforts made to formulate criteria to be able to make an evaluation of participation practices, and now it is time to know what children have to say about what the conditions under which they can implement their own participation should be like.

In this section, we shall be presenting the results obtained from the triangulation between the three areas studied (school, children's clubs and children's councils). The data have allowed us to deduce the conditions that children formulate for their own participation, and which we have organized in three major categories: (1) with regard to the acknowledgement of the rights of childhood; (2) with regard to how participation-based experience works, and finally (3) with regard to the role of the educators.

Table 3 summarizes the categories and contents of each one, which will be further developed below.

Table 3. What children would like their own participation to be like

Categories	Sub-categories
(1) Acknowledgement of the rights of childhood	· Active listening · No manipulation · Visibility and connection between spaces
(2) How participation-based experience works	· Accessibility · Inter-generational work · Adult training · Diversity · Visible results · Promote relationships · Promote continuity · Positive subjective experience
(3) Role of educators and facilitators	· Group management · Acknowledgement of childhood · Promote positive relationships · Educator's characteristics

On the acknowledgement of children's right to participate.

When the children we talked to refer to the acknowledgement of childhood, they do so through different elements, which are listed below:

- *Active Listening.* They want to be listened to, with patience and with tact. They ask adults to understand their own diction, their language, their culture and that they be willing to include their inputs into their thought matrix. It is the adults' duty to learn to do these things, to increase their capacity to listen to what the child has to offer. Active listening means acknowledging the other person's arguments, listening to their ideas, acknowledging them, even if this does not necessarily involve granting their wish. Children are good at detecting this, and this is recognized by the Council of Europe, which, in point four of the aforementioned recommendation, establishes that adults should listen to children and their particular forms of speech. In this regard, Lansdown (2001) also establishes, as one of the principles of participation, that children's views and their personal experience should be respected, and that each project should therefore apply a methodology that makes it possible to take children's viewpoints seriously. Finally, Chawla's (2001) conditions refer to competence, or skills, i.e. children should be helped to express their point of view and be given the information they need to make their own decisions.

- *No Manipulation.* Many children mentioned that on several occasions they felt that they were making proposals that they had not actually come up with, but rather had been given the idea by adults. This is a case of an adult using children's participation to their own advantage. We still find, perhaps unintentionally, the interference of the adult voice in the child's voice. Adults need to commit to this second learning process within the framework of the acknowledgement of childhood: to be able to respect the authenticity of the children's genuine ideas and views, their own thinking must be trusted. Once again, this is consistent with the Council of Europe, recommendation (98) 8, which states *that participation should not be used by adults to further their own interests.* Moreover, another one of Lansdown's principles (2001) speaks of the need for transparency in power relations and in decision-making structures, and that adults must be honest about this process and in decision-making. This is reasserted by Chawla as a condition for Reflection, *there must be transparency in all stages of decision-making.*

- *Publicize children's participation.* Children call for a broader and better dissemination of the children's participation experiences in which they are involved. The lack of information about children's participation is a barrier to this acknowledgement of children and their participation by the adult

community, institutional organizations and also by their peers. Children tell us that other children who do not participate do not understand what they are doing, the purpose of it all, they see no value in the experience and even make fun of them. This need to disseminate, publicize the experiences and attach value to participation detected by the children involved is a new element, as it is not addressed in the literature. One of Chawla's conditions for convergence is that the project's activities lead children's participation to be seen as something natural, which is not possible without the dissemination referred to by the children. On the other hand, we regard it as relevant, and that it should be considered in the community where children's participation projects are carried out, since, in addition to spreading awareness of such participation and of children's rights in general, as the task of making experiences known properly is directly related to the their availability, a question we shall discuss later.

- *Visibility and connection between spaces.* While it is true that this view is to be found among the children involved in children's councils and leisure experiences, it is very closely related to formal educational institutions. Many of the children interviewed feel that there is no strong bond between the children's participation experience and their school. They would like to have, within the school setting, a space where they could share their experience and exercise their participation more democratically, by including and allowing a greater number of children to be heard, children who they may ultimately be representing in their city through the councils. Lansdown (2001) suggests, as a condition related to the project, that the latter has to be linked to children's daily-life experience, as does Chawla (2001), who establishes, as one of the conditions for convergence, that the project must be built upon structures that support children's participation. The author speaks of shared responsibility across all areas of the community to support children's participation. In this regard they also agree with the families of children interviewed, who assert that the school should be given greater responsibility to promote children's participation, creating a space to give greater visibility to participation experiences in the community.

On how the experience works

Secondly, we will be presenting the characteristics that the children interviewed regard as conditions for the participation experiences to work. These conditions are:

- *Accessibility.* The fact that a greater number of children can participate in this type of experiences is closely related to the quality and to the extent of the dissemination of these experiences, as we have already mentioned. The

availability of information is the first step towards participation; children must at least have the ability to decide whether or not they want to participate. For this purpose, the interviewees suggest that schools should guarantee this information through activities or workshops. This condition was also taken into account by the Council of Europe, which stated that experiences *must permit the inclusion of children of different social levels, origins, ethnic groups and genders.* Lansdown, referring to the values of the experience, considers that these spaces should be inclusive and offer equal opportunities in access to participation for everyone. In Chawla's opinion, one of the main conditions of access is that it must be accessible in terms of time and location in the children's everyday life.

- *Inter-Generational work (collaboration, cooperation…).* Breaking down inter-generational barriers is essential when talking about participation, since fostering relationships with people of different ages, for example, helps to make children feel less intimidated when proposing or criticizing the point of view of someone older, and vice-versa, it helps the adult to become more accustomed to understanding the child's language, it trains them to listen and to include the child citizen's thought in their own thought matrix and actions. This quality, highlighted by the child participants, promotes equal respect for children of all ages (Lansdown, 2001), mutual respect between all the participants, who will support each other, and ultimately generates opportunities for the gradual development of dialogue skills (Chawla, 2001).

- *Adult training.* The training of adults involved in children's participation experiences should not only involve mastery of participatory strategies and methodologies. The adults should also have ethical training and believe in children's participation. This training can be given by other facilitators with extensive experience in the field, but it can also come from the actual children involved in these experiences, since they are also perfect transmitters of the institution's culture. Once again, this adult training in relation to children's participation is not regarded as a condition by the literature, but it is voiced by the children interviewed, and they are perceived as the perfect trainers to ensure a meaningful participation exercise.

- *Diversity.* This condition is two-sided. On the one hand, experiences should be inclusive, everyone should be able to participate in their own terms, and the individual potential of each child should be leveraged so that everyone can participate without a feeling of frustration. In addition, participatory methodologies not only help to tackle this diversity, they also help to identify the particular abilities of each child, thus permitting a more adapted/personalized intervention. Working on the question of diversity means that nobody feels excluded, everyone finds the role they are

comfortable with, and according to the information provided by the educators, when work is based on participation and the specialties of each child are detected, there is a perceived improvement in other aspects of the children's lives.

- *Visible results of the participation.* Seeing the impact of participation is a great motivation, they realize that their effort was worthwhile, they have been listened to and they have had an impact on a specific reality. Chawla establishes as a condition for competence, that the project must yield tangible results and there must be opportunities to make contributions, to play a role in decision-making and in the accomplishment of objectives. If it cannot be guaranteed from the outset that the children's participation will lead to a change, we must not manipulate their expectations to make them more realistic, although the experience should be able to make a difference and offer the possibility of bringing about change (Lansdown). The Council of Europe's recommendation also takes into account the condition that participation should have specific consequences within a time frame that is not too long for the children.

- *Encourage the relational aspect.* The participation experience must create a climate that promotes relationships between participants, because they share a story and cooperate towards a common goal. But it is also necessary to promote the relationship with the environment, or setting, which should eventually become a familiar, trustworthy place, because they know its history, they appreciate it, they have made it their own, either because they have decorated it or because they look after it... It is an environment where they belong.

- *Promote continuity.* The experience of children's participation should offer gateways to future participation experiences; it should promote continuity of all the learnings accumulated during childhood related to participation, and not just be limited to a time-specific reality that ends when childhood ends. In addition to this ensemble of characteristics that children feel should be part of their participation experiences, it was found that they in general ask to be given more responsibilities, call upon adults to trust in their abilities and be considered capable of being involved in all aspects of the experience. While it is true that the adults involved in the children's participation experiences are great believers in the abilities of children and acknowledge their ability to deliberate, to have an opinion, to take initiatives, act in social questions, issues etc., children also want to be involved in areas of the experience related to management and organization, they want to organize their own participation. They demand to be involved in the management of financial resources, time management, logistics issues, etc., which are still adult affairs.

- *Positive subjective experience.* Participation is a process that is experienced personally and with a significant degree of involvement. If this condition is not met, it will be difficult to consolidate the learnings associated with participation, since we learn to participate precisely by participating. As a personal experience, it has to promote the subjective well-being of the children involved. It must be a place where they can have fun. Irrespective of the area in which they are participating, they must be excited and enthusiastic about the experience and be highly motivated. The experience has to ensure that they have a good time, but not only that, they must also feel useful, and accept that they are a core element and regard themselves as key actors if the project is to work. Moreover, and as was mentioned above, the participation space promotes the relational aspect; it is a place where they strike up new and different friendships. Finally, it is a space where they feel listened to and free, where they can disconnect from the adult authority they are accustomed to in other areas of their daily lives.

On the role of the facilitator

With regard to the role of the educators that facilitate participation experiences, we identified certain characteristics that children feel should be present to develop the experience.

Firstly, according to the children, the characteristics shared by the educators in the three areas studied may be classified as follows:

- Characteristics related to *group management:* The children involved in the participation experiences identify characteristics in the educators of the participation experiences that are related to group management skills. These features are, for example, attention to diversity; the promotion of group cohesion, ensuring that all children feel included and that they all evince the same level of participation.
- Features related to the *acknowledgement of childhood:* in this category, aspects such as active listening, using understandable language for children, particularly when "typically" adult topics are addressed, and above all that educators actually implement the decisions taken by children as a result of this active listening.
- Characteristics related to *fostering better relationships*: this group of characteristics includes encouraging constructive criticism, boosting empathy and reinforcing dialogue between participants.
- Characteristics related to the *educator's personality:* this refers to a high personal involvement in the experience by the educator, who acts as a model for participation, who recognizes their role as a partner in and not as the leader of the experience, and who establishes a confidence-based and close relationship with the children.

We also identified certain specific characteristics of the educators in the leisure area, such as their role as *animator.* In this area, the educator also helps to organize games, songs, provides the children with materials and corners for activities, etc. Therefore, in this area the educator underscores the educational value of leisure activity more than in the other two areas studied.

Finally, educators in children's councils have specific tasks with regard to the other two areas. These tasks are, first of all, that facilitators should remain alert, so as *to avoid the interference of adult reflections* taken on by children as their own. Since this area addresses "adult" topics (such as politics, resource planning and management, the design of urban spaces, etc.), there is a risk that children make proposals they have heard from adults and which are not really their own. To this end, the facilitator must strive to probe and question the children in order to elicit the children's purely infantile perceptions of the topic. Secondly, the facilitator in the field of children's councils must *encourage transfer* between child counselors and other children. In the process of introspection, based on a self-reflection on what is being addressed, through to participation in a public forum, the educator has to emphasize the idea of representativeness to strengthen the children's awareness that they are representing all children as a group in their city.

Conclusion

This study has allowed us to hear what is relevant to the children involved in participation-based educational experiences in three different educational areas and to identify the characteristics they perceive as necessary for them to be able to participate. It transpires that the conditions stated by the children coincide greatly with the ones indicated by different authors in their theoretical proposals. At this point, we know that participation spaces must be clear and transparent, with objectives agreed to jointly with the children, where they can decide whether to participate or not and what they want this participation to be like. Is also advisable that participation take place in familiar environments, where they feel comfortable, with suitable and accessible methodologies, in an atmosphere of safety, trust and mutual respect. Issues such as power, and how it should be distributed and managed, should be addressed with them. We have found that a fundamental condition lies in the role of adults, who must be consistent, transparent and ethical, providing support and assistance. But not only the adults who are directly related to the experience have the responsibility to care for and promote the rights of children, as the community at large must recognize children's right to participate and facilitate the necessary channels and structures to make this possible, and build stronger links between the spaces frequented by children, such as the school, children's clubs and children's councils.

Acknowledgments

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