

# The Forum for the participation of children and teenagers in Teo: A socio-educational context that enables children's right to participation

Javier Riádigos<sup>\*</sup>, Rita Gradaílle

*Social Pedagogy and Environmental Education Research Group (SEPA-interea), Department of Pedagogy and Didactics, Faculty of Education Sciences-Campus Vida (15782), University of Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, Spain*

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## ABSTRACT

Children are citizens of the present and active subjects who must be educated to exercise and enjoy civil, social, political and cultural rights in conditions of equity. Based on this premise, in a democratic society, children's right to participation must be guaranteed by public administrations and their rulers. Therefore, this article aims to know the perception that children and adolescents and the social educator have about the right to participate, as well as their assessment of the Forum for Child and Adolescent Participation of the City Council of Teo (A Coruña, Galicia, Spain). To achieve this, a qualitative research was undertaken focused on the case study, based on data collection through instruments such as documentation analysis, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The results show that participation is perceived as a right to be exercised, while at the same time making a positive assessment of the Forum in terms of benefits (personal, social and educational). However, they reveal a series of challenges and limitations that hinder the exercise of the right to participate in an authentic, full and protagonist manner: 1) the adult-centric vision that prevails in part of the adult community, 2) a strong dependence in the decision-making process in matters that concern them, 3) lack of spaces to participate in the community, 4) difficulties in networking with other socio-community agents (families, schools, associations, etc.). It is concluded that the right to participation is reinforced with the creation of local bodies for child participation, but it is a priority to create more spaces or experiences of participation in Teo, to give protagonism to girls and boys in the participatory processes, as well as committing to strategies that make visible their sense of agency.

## 1. Introduction

Children are citizens of the present and active subjects who must be educated to exercise and enjoy civil, social, political and cultural rights in conditions of equity. Based on the assumptions that this group is part of citizens in the present, in a democratic society, the right to their participation must also be guaranteed. In order to exercise this right, the different administrations and governments have the responsibility and duty to listen to all citizens, including children, and to offer forms of real participation in all areas that shape their daily lives. This issue is included in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), in General Comment No. 12 (2009) and in the European Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021), which refers to the right of all children and teenagers to be heard, to have their opinion taken into account, to have freedom of thought and expression on any matter affecting them, to the right of association and to access to information to ensure full development in

community life. If this is so, why is this right not guaranteed to such a large and significant social sector as children?

Considering this challenge, and with the purpose of showing the interest and involvement regarding the rights of children and teenagers, and more specifically in terms of their social participation, the Town Council of Teo (A Coruña, Galicia, Spain) initiated a participatory process, with the children and teenagers and other social agents of the territory, to opt for the candidacy as a Child Friendly City, which is organised and awarded by UNICEF-Spain together with the Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030, the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP) and the University Institute of "Needs and Rights of Children and Teenagers (IUNDIA)" of the Autonomous University of Madrid.

Under these premises, the aim of this article is to know the perception that children and adolescents and the social educator of the Teo City Council have about the right to participate, as well as to identify the

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [javierriadigos.cousou@usc.es](mailto:javierriadigos.cousou@usc.es) (J. Riádigos), [rita.gradaille@usc.es](mailto:rita.gradaille@usc.es) (R. Gradaílle).

strategies and/or participatory experiences that exist in their immediate social environment. It will also allow us to know their assessment of the Forum for Child and Adolescent Participation (FoPIA), highlighting the strengths and weaknesses that will improve their socio-community participation.

## 2. Theory/calculation

### 2.1. Children and the approach to rights: The arduous road to the Convention on the rights of the child

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the international treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989, which recognises all persons under the age of 18 as subjects with full rights. To date, it is the most ratified international document in the history of mankind (with the exception of the United States which –up to today’s date– having signed it, has not yet ratified it); in the specific case of Spain, it was approved on 30th of November of 1990. The Convention provides a legal framework for signatory States and governments, committing them to strive to guarantee the rights of children under this treaty.

However, the road to its approval was a long, sustained process. Thus, as Casas (1998) points out, there has been evidence of children’s rights since ancient Rome and Greece, but it was in the 20th century that the most direct antecedents to the CRC were found, such as the Geneva Declaration (1924) and the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959). Two regulatory texts that came into being after the two world wars.

This international impact of the Convention on the concept of childhood opened a new era for this group (Casas, 1998). For the first time, children were recognised as *subjects of rights*, including civil and political rights (articles 12 to 16). In addition, their consideration as active subjects and social actors favours a change in the way children are currently represented; a fact that entails accepting their capabilities, as well as recognising –and vindicating– their social participation in family, educational, cultural, dynamics etc., as opposed to the traditional schemes of domination, authoritarianism and paternalism (Cruz, 2009).

Likewise, the CRC represents an advance with respect to the exclusively protectionist vision of the predecessor Declarations (1929 and 1959), identifying girls and boys as co-participants in society while granting them the recognition of their citizenship status (Cruz, 2009). However, there are critical voices around the Convention that question important issues of the text; in particular, they refer to the adult-focused vision that considers children as dependent beings. A perspective that coincides with the evolutionary-functional view of children’s capacities, which questions the effectiveness in the exercise and enjoyment of their rights, as well as the absence of children and teenagers among the diversity of actors who participated in the drafting of the Convention itself (Gaitán, 2018).

Considering that no right is more important than any other, and that these rights are indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, this study focuses on the last of the four guiding principles on which the Convention is based: the principle of the “right to participation” (Articles 12 to 15). It should be noted that in the Convention’s text, participation does not appear properly reflected as a right in itself, with the concept of “participation” experiencing an evolution in recent years (DIF & UNICEF, 2014, p. 203).

Along these lines, UNICEF (the UN agency in charge of overseeing the development of the Convention worldwide) classifies the set of rights of the CRC into three blocks, which respond to the well-known theory of the three “Ps”: provision, protection and participation. However, in order to integrate a perspective that responds to quality of life, Casas (1998) adds two more “Ps”: prevention and promotion. Even so, it indicates that the high consensus and low intensity of the rights related to Provision and Protection does not manifest itself in the same way when moving towards the third “P”: participation.

Meirieu (2004) also defends this differentiated position between the

first two “Ps” (provision-protection) and the third (participation). For this author, protection and provision are partly applied from the outside; while participation is inconceivable without an educational process that supports it. Indeed, Meirieu considers that children are objects of protection and provision, but also subjects in terms of participation.

However, what do we mean when we talk about (child) participation? What type or forms of participation do they exercise? What are the mechanisms or spaces for participation? The following sections will attempt to answer these questions by analysing participation and the elements that make it up, paying special attention to child participation.

The (social) participation of children: an educational process under construction.

The word participate comes from the Latin *participare*, composed of “pars, parti” (part) and the verb “capere” (to take, to grasp). According to the Royal Spanish Academy, to participate focuses (from its meanings) on three fundamental aspects: to take part in something, to receive and to share. A definition on which, a priori, there is unanimity.

Authors such as Hart (1992, p. 5) define participation as “the process of sharing decisions that affect one’s own life and the life of the community in which one lives”; it is both a means for building democracy and a fundamental right of citizenship. However, Novella (2012, p. 382) states that “we are dealing with one of the most complex and multidimensional concepts in educational sciences”, which needs to be approached from other disciplines such as Sociology, Anthropology, Political Science or Psychology. A complexity that, according to this author, increases when defining the concept of child participation, mainly because it is seen more as a discourse than as “a reality that is part of everyday life where children reach the maximum autonomous exercise of citizenship” (Novella, 2012, p. 380).

However, Novella (2008, p. 78) understands child participation as “a personal, collective experience that allows involvement in social projects that, through words and committed action, aim to transform the surrounding reality”. In the same direction, UNICEF’s Child Friendly Cities initiative (2020, para. 3) conceptualises child and teenager participation as a process in which “children and teenagers exercise this right by interacting with other people in their environment and dealing with issues that affect their individual and collective living conditions”, since it is not only understood as a right, which is recognised and acknowledged in the Convention, but also as a source of personal and educational development that promotes self-protection and resilience.

Returning to Hart’s (1992) arguments, child participation implies collaborating, contributing and cooperating for common progress; but also, generating self-confidence, endowing them with the principle of initiative. Likewise, it recognises children and teenagers as social subjects with the capacity to express their opinions and decisions regarding matters that concern them directly in the different spheres of participation: family, school, community and society in general. That is, those spaces in which interactions with other people take place, whether with children or adults. Hence, child participation should be conceived as a development process in permanent interaction with adults, as opposed to the separate, isolated creation of activity between both roles; created as a mutual learning process with a bidirectional sense. A participation that –according to the participation pyramid established by Wong et al. (2010)– must promote the development and emancipation of children and adolescents in an exercise of shared co-responsibility with adults, in order to improve their personal and community realities.

It should be clarified that –as stated in the “National Strategic Plan for Childhood and Teenagers 2006-2009” (PENIA, 2007)– three *sine qua non* conditions are required to promote participation: wanting to participate, knowing how to participate and being able to participate. The first condition –*wanting to participate*– refers to the motives and reasons for doing so, as well as the feeling of hopeful anticipation, desire or the need felt to participate. The second one, referred to *knowing how to participate*, points to how to do it and the need to learn how to carry out tasks, to work with other people, to organise oneself, etc. In other words, learning to participate involves educating *in* and *for* participation from

early childhood; hence, "participation in society begins from the moment a child enters the world and discovers the extent to which they are able to influence events by crying or moving" (Hart, 1992, p. 5). The last condition –being able to participate– refers to the organisation needed to make participation possible; therefore, it is necessary to create different scenarios and/or mechanisms to be able to do so (governments, municipalities, communication systems, etc.).

Specifically, when talking about child participation, it is essential to take advantage of the gradual learning process that makes it possible to acquire and assume the skills, competencies and responsibilities required to exercise participation, in order to develop the optimal capacities to become full citizens (PENIA, 2007). To this end, it is necessary to jointly build –in an intergenerational relationship– those experiences, initiatives and spaces that foster the social participation of children, allowing them to exercise their right to citizenship. A learning model that can take as a reference Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development, since children learn to interact in different systems, enabling opportunities for growth and personal development; interconnections that, due to their diversity, would facilitate the ecological transition towards more participatory social environments.

In order to favor participatory social environments, it is necessary to pave the way by articulating contexts, structures and actions that enable the exercise of this right, in addition to promoting the exponential acquisition of participatory competencies and the generation of educational climates of proximity and trust. Hence, beyond the result, the benefit of social participation lies in the process itself, since children and adolescents must assume the leading role in participatory-educational actions (Morata et al., 2020). A process that must be articulated as a means to improve and transform communities and, by extension, societies.

2.2. Contexts and spaces for the social participation of children: areas of child participation

As children and teenagers grow and develop, their opportunities for participation expand from the private sphere to public spaces, from local to global influence (UNICEF, 2003). However, there are discrepancies among authors who identify the various spaces in which this group can and should participate.

While the family, school and other educational institutions are reflected in the different proposals, differences are shown in other areas of participation. Thus, the State of the World's Children 2003 report (UNICEF, 2003) proposes five contexts in which child participation is transversal, as can be seen in Fig. 1.

Apud (2001) considers –together with the family and the school– a third basic space for developing and experiencing participation: social life, specified in the local community. This author gives the local council

a relevant role as a space for citizen participation for children and teenagers, as he considers that, by developing child participation practices at local level, children and teenagers achieve a greater leading role and increase their sense of belonging and involvement with the town. Furthermore, Casas et al. (2008) include other spaces for exercising, learning and/or promoting child participation: administrative and judicial procedures or organisations for leisure and free time.

As pointed out by different studies (Cho et al., 2020; De la Garza et al., 2019; Novella, Romero, et al., 2021; among others), technologies or the digital environment prevail as new forms and/or contexts of children's political and citizen participation; evidencing changes in the democratic culture and participatory practices of the new generations. In this regard, Novella, Mateos, et al. (2021) allude to three types of scenarios at the municipal level as a result of the new (co)governance frameworks: 1) municipal bodies for child and adolescent participation (participation forums, local councils for children and adolescents, etc.); 2) participation experiences of a consultative and projective nature from participation (participatory processes); and, 3) participation experiences promoted and led by children and teenagers. In the different scenarios, participation must be led by children in order to favor transformative actions that make municipal co-production possible.

2.3. Children's councils as mechanisms of –education for– real participation and citizenship schools

Of the different spaces, experiences or initiatives that promote good practices in favour of children –in public policies, in the defence and promotion of their rights and, above all, in their personal and collective development– the Children's Councils are perhaps the representative and participatory bodies that best help to visualise the participation of children in cities.

Caride (2015) points out that there are many other experiences or initiatives that are moving in the same direction at multiple institutional levels (international, state, community, regional and local), and that deserve to be identified due to their socio-educational potential. All these initiatives share citizen participation, as a common denominator, including the youngest groups of society; where the "City of Children" project by Francesco Tonucci or the "Educating Cities" model stand out at international level. At national level, it is worth mentioning the "Child Friendly Cities" project (UNICEF-Spain) since, as it is undertaken at local level, the proximity between the administration and the children and teenagers plays a fundamental role in the exercise of children's social participation and their right to citizenship. Specifically, the Education Department of the Barcelona Provincial Council promoted –in 1997– the project 'The City of Children', which became a pioneering initiative by guiding eight municipalities in the promotion of policies and practices in favor of children and their right to citizenship.

As a result of this proximity, the UNICEF-Spain initiative –since its implementation in 2001 in Spain– promotes the creation and operation of child and adolescent participation bodies at the municipal level; spaces in which children and teenagers play a leading role and interact with their local governments. In addition, these structures are configured in different typologies and/or modalities depending on each local reality: from the creation of the body through coordination with schools, the adaptation to the operation of already existing entities such as points for young people, toy libraries or informal meeting spaces and/or in coordination with local associations, or the constitution of municipal councils, plenary sessions and hearings for children to interact with local Government.

According to Trilla and Novella (2011), the Children's Councils are meeting places where children and teenagers gather to reflect, talk, debate and make proposals on the aspects that need to be changed in the city to improve their living conditions and, by extension, those of the rest of the inhabitants. Therefore, they are configured as spaces for meeting, observation of the city, training for citizenship from citizenship, as well as for the exercise of democratic procedures and values. To

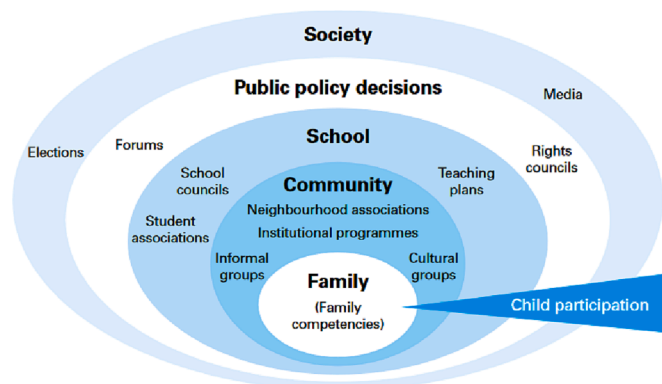


Fig. 1. Contexts of child participation Note. Adapted from UNICEF (2003, p. 3).

summarise, children's councils constitute an educational experience programmed to form active citizenship "that has participation as an educational principle, as a learning procedure and as a scenario for the construction of democratic values" (Novella, 2014, p. 128).

Along the same lines, Trilla and Ayuste (2018, p. 125) consider that they are "participation bodies that at the same time become experiences that intrinsically educate for participation". In this case, the authors recognise that the main theme of the councils is the town, community, neighbourhood and/or the place where children and teenagers live and coexist, with the aim of thinking critically about how it is, how it could be better and what can be done to improve it.

In this respect, it is necessary to take into account two elements that turn children's councils into true schools of citizenship (Novella, 2014). On the one hand, the aforementioned multi-dimensional nature of the concept of participation, which allows for the broadening of its educational intentions; on the other hand, the set of forms or levels of participation that involve the council in diverse and complex participation experiences. Both elements are the driving force behind the exercise of citizenship skills by each member of the children's council.

According to Trilla and Novella (2011), children who become involved in a children's council learn to participate by participating, while at the same time developing a series of skills linked to democratic citizenship. In other words, they learn citizenship in an everyday context through the practice of a series of values, attitudes, skills and knowledge; a diversity of learning and capacities that provide children with the tools to advance towards greater autonomy and security in the decision-making process of what concerns them.

In short, it is undeniable that child participation has an educational impact on the education of citizen; a participatory process that contributes to the acquisition of skills, development of competencies, values, attitudes and ways of being (Agud & Llana, 2018). According to these authors, this set of learning "contributes to shaping an active and committed citizenship that develops capacities that are articulated in participation" (p. 200). Therefore, it is concluded that the mere fact of participating as a citizen has an impact on the development of skills that allow us to interpret and critically adapt to reality, in order to be able to transform it.

A challenge that is included in the Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027), which ensures the participation rights of children and/or adolescents, promoting different mechanisms that facilitate their participation in decision-making processes; for which it is necessary to create spaces that turn them into active citizens of fairer, more equitable and democratic societies. A transition to full citizenship requires a greater involvement –and predisposition– to participate in the different spheres of social, political and community life, assuming future commitments that allow them to transform locally –and globally– the daily realities in which they build their own identities.

### 3. Material and methods

This article focuses on an eminently qualitative case study and is part of a broader research project. It aims to analyze the Forum for Child and Adolescent Participation (FoPIA) of the City Council of Teo, based on the following reflections and opinions of the leading players of this municipal initiative from a perspective based on their own experiences.

For Albert (2009), the case study as a research method consists of describing and analysing single social units or educational entities (person, organisation, programme, etc.) in detail; at the same time, it involves a "process of inquiry characterised by the detailed, comprehensive, systematic and in-depth examination of the case of interest" (García, 1991, p. 67). In this sense, the unit selected for the study is FoPIA as a participatory body made up exclusively of children and teenagers. However, the intention is to make an instrumental use of this case study, which will allow us to respond to the objectives set and contribute with possible improvements, in addition to serving as an incentive to promote initiatives and socio-educational experiences in

order to encourage child and teenager participation, with the necessary adaptation to different Galician municipal contexts.

#### 3.1. Participants and context

The Forum for Child and Adolescent Participation (FoPIA) is part of the Local Council for Children and Adolescents of Teo (CLIA), the latter being the body in which issues related to the situation of children and teenagers living in the municipality are addressed, establishing mechanisms for collaboration with adults (elected officials, technical staff, socio-educational entities, Parents' Associations, etc.) in municipal policies with the aim of promoting their personal, social and community development. Thus, it is configured as a participatory body of a consultative, informative and representative nature of all children and adolescents in the municipality.

Both agencies (FoPIA and CLIA) were created in 2017, coinciding with the distinction of Child Friendly City granted by UNICEF-Spain to the City Council of Teo; and respond to the recommendations made by UNICEF-Spain for the proper functioning of child and adolescent participation structures at the local level. That said, the present study focuses on FoPIA as an agency and space that promotes, dynamizes and makes it possible to exercise the right to social participation of the children of Teo. In the 2020–2021 academic year, it is made up of girls and boys from different schools in the area (CEIP (Infant and primary Education Centre) Os Tilos, CEIP A Ramallosa, CEIP A Igrexa Calo and the Institute of Compulsory Secondary Education Cacheiras), and more specifically, girls and boys from the 6th grade of Primary Education, the first three years of ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education) and the ARC Os TILOS Association based in the same municipality. The Social Educator, as a municipal technical person (Family Educator of the community social services), forms the group and is in charge of accompanying and revitalising the FoPIA work sessions, in line with the duties of the CLIA (Local Council for Childhood and Teenagers) secretariat.

Article 7.4 of the Regulations of the Local Council for Childhood and Adolescence (CLIA) establishes the selection process of the members of the Forum. At the beginning of the school year, one boy and one girl are democratically elected per classroom in each center and/or entity, through an electoral process that guarantees the secret ballot, the participation of all, as well as the gender approach that respects the parity of the elected persons. In a flexible and voluntary way, they will participate in the different initiatives and meetings promoted by FoPIA throughout the months of September and June, in order to design and implement projects, actions, and/or activities of interest to children and adolescents.

For the present study, a formal invitation was extended to all FoPIA members to participate in the interview and focus group. This process followed the ethical considerations established by Graham et al. (2013) and Martínez & Velásquez (2021):

- i. sending informed consent, prior to conducting the interview and focus group, in accordance with General Comments No. 25 and No. 20 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child;
- ii. the protection of informed consent within the processing of personal data: Organic Law 3/2018, of December 5, 2018, on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights (LOPD-GDD) and the EU Regulation 2016/679, General Data Protection (art. 7).
- iii. the participants (social educator and children and adolescents) were clearly and precisely informed of the type of research proposed, its objectives, context and participants, considering the communication and situation of children and teenagers;
- iv. the voluntary participation in the study has been respected, as well as the decision taken regarding their personal data, taking into account their ability to express their points of view;

- v. the right to privacy and intimacy, as indicated in Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966);
- vi. the right to the protection of personal data, in accordance with Article 8.1 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 16.1 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

Finally, the social educator and 4 girls, boys and adolescents from the child and adolescent participation council in the 2020–2021 academic year participated in the research on a voluntary basis. The (3) girls live in Teo and are aged between 12 and 14 years; two of them have been members of the Forum for 2 years, while the third has been a member for 4 years. The boy is 11 years old, lives in Teo and has been a member of FoPIA since January 2021, being the youngest representative.

### 3.2. Data collection

Documentary analysis, In-depth qualitative interviews and focus group discussions were used for data collection. A protocol of basic questions was designed for this, based on those used by Novella and Sabariego (2020) and Novella, Romero et al. (2021), so that the protocols created revolved around four thematic blocks, of which the following two are the object of analysis for this article:

- Perceptions of participation and participatory experiences
  - What does child and teenager participation mean to you? In other words, how do you define child and teenager participation?
  - What other initiatives of participation of children and teenagers exist in the municipality?
  - What about participatory practices led exclusively by children and teenagers?
- Assessments and proposals for improvement
  - How do you consider the evolution of child and youth participation in Teo since the creation of the council?
  - What strengths and weaknesses do you find in relation to the social participation of children and teenagers in Teo?

The choice of the content blocks (Fig. 2) responds to the purpose of this research and the objectives set; but also, to the theoretical framework on which the motivation for the study of this reality is based. These contents are also adjusted to the particular needs of the research design implemented; hence their articulation responds to two main blocks, from which the questions that make up the data collection instruments have been derived:

The first block was aimed at analyzing the perceptions of the participants regarding the participation of children and adolescents at the municipal level: what they understand by participation and the meaning attributed according to their role (adult-child, child and adolescent; question 1.1); as well as to find out in which other contexts children and teenagers participate beyond FoPIA (questions 1.2 and 1.3). The second

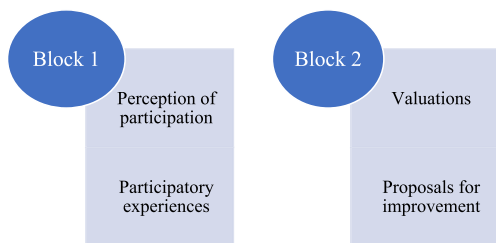


Fig. 2. Content blocks.

block aimed to collect the assessments of the participants on the evolution of participation in the Teo City Council since the creation of the participation bodies (question 2.1), as well as to know the strengths and weaknesses detected based on their experiences in the process of exercising the right to participation initiated by the municipal government since 2017 (question 2.2).

However, the wording and content of the common questions were adapted to the capacities of the children and adolescents, adding other specific questions that did not condition their answers. In the course of the interviews, flexibility predominated in both the questions and the answers, preventing the interviews from becoming a mere questionnaire administered orally and turning into a dialogue focused on the aspects of most interest.

The steps followed are detailed below, according to the order in which the data collection techniques were used and carried out:

- *Documentary analysis*: a review and analysis of the official internal documentation (provided by the social educator) and external documentation (through communications and disclosures on the institutional page of the town council) was carried out. Basically, the internal documents allude to the minutes of the different sessions of the Local Council for Children and Teenagers (CLIA) and the Forum for the Participation of Children and Teenagers (FoPIA) since their creation in 2017. These minutes record the actions, interventions and proposals drafted by the body and, more specifically, by the children and teenagers who make up the body; they also serve to nurture the discussion of the results obtained from the information gathered with the instruments described below (interview and focus group). In turn, the external documents allude to the regulations of both participation bodies (CLIA and FoPIA), the Comprehensive Plan for Children and Teenagers 2018–2020 (PIIA), the Activities Report (2017) and the Situation Report on Children and Teenagers (2017). The analysis of these documents was used to contextualize and record the information related to the object of study.
- *In-depth interview*: the person interviewed was the municipal technician, in her capacity as FoPIA facilitator and CLIA secretary; hence her importance as a key informant, due to the role she plays as a socio-educational reference in supporting the children and teenagers of the children and teenagers council. In view of the degree of standardisation, we opted for a semi-structured interview based on a script or topics of previously determined open-ended questions. The interview format was a single session adapted to the availability and preference of the interviewee, with a total duration of 90 min.
- *Discussion group*: This qualitative technique was chosen because it allows us to approach the perceptions (opinions, feelings, beliefs, experiences, etc.) of the participants about the research problem (Haumi & Varela, 2013; Tójar, 2006); taking as a reference the model designed by Novella, Romero et al. (2021). In addition, with the intention of guaranteeing a certain quality, and following the recommendations made by different authors (Rubio & Varas, 1997; Ruíz, 2007). For this purpose, all FoPIA members were invited on the scheduled date, with the possibility of amending the date according to their availability, a single focus group was developed with the voluntary participation of 3 girls and 1 boy from FoPIA, in a session lasting 53 min. The place chosen for the meeting was the Plenary Hall of the Town Hall, as it is the usual space where the council sessions take place; an intentional choice in order to create a pleasant, comfortable and isolated environment in which the children and teenagers felt at ease, in peace and above all with the necessary confidence to express themselves freely and sincerely.

It should be noted that permission to record was requested as a support measure for the subsequent transcription and analysis of the data for both the interview and the focus group, and to capture in the most literal and trustworthy way the dialogue and conversation generated. Also, the guarantee of anonymity was reported, for which a

codified system of nomenclatures was used for the different participants.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The data analysis was based on the content analysis technique, as it was considered the most suitable for meeting the objectives of the study and for its potential in combining and contrasting the more technical opinions –obtained from the social educator– with the experiences of the children and adolescents, as protagonists of child and adolescent counseling. Likewise, other control techniques were used with the intention of reinforcing the consistency of the analysis and reducing possible biases when this task falls to a single person (Cabero & Loscertales, 1997), such as triangulation (data and methodological) and the review of the literature on this subject (Arias, 2010; Denzin, 1978).

The review of the technical documents of the municipal participation bodies (CLIA and FoPIA) was key to complement the data collected, especially with regard to the contextualization of the case (FoPIA): functions, internal organization, selection and conditions of the members of the participation bodies, minutes of the FoPIA and CLIA sessions to learn about the proposals and experiences worked on, material created and disseminated by the social networks, schools and socio-community centers, etc.

Added to this is the strategy followed for the analysis of qualitative information and the elaboration of inferences related to the study topics (content block), based on the interview and discussion group transcripts (analysis corpus, Table 1), which were coded according to the thematic areas proposed in the content block and to the dimensions and categories that emerged from the instrument design process (Table 2). Thus, patterns of meaning units were generated that responded to the research objectives (Jorrín-Abellán et al., 2021):

## 4. Results and discussion

The results are shown following the system of categories created and in accordance with the objectives articulated in this article. In addition, they are presented through narrative descriptions accompanied by illustrative textual quotations (quotes from the social educator and children and teenagers). In accordance with academic trends, these are discussed in order to strengthen the empirical section by reinforcing the information obtained in the fieldwork with studies related to the topics addressed.

### 4.1. Dimension 1: Perception of participation

This block of questions deals with the perception of participation and existing experiences in the municipality. Based on the responses, it can be affirmed that both parties **consider participation** as a fundamental right of children and teenagers, regardless of their status, and that it serves to express their opinions, since, as part of being citizens, they should be heard and considered. This is what GDn2 says, when she says that “I love the part of all the meetings we have and the activities; how we are being taken seriously, that we are one of them, that we are listened to and we can talk. It makes you feel important. A view shared by GDn3 when she states “they make us feel important because they take us seriously“. These answers are reminiscent of the first premise alluded to in the theoretical reference framework: “wanting to participate“ to

**Table 1**  
Corpus of analysis.

Informants	Type of document	Code
Social Educator	Interview transcript	E1
Children and adolescents	Transcription of focus group	GDn1 GDn2 GDn3 GDn4

**Table 2**  
Categorical system.

Dimension	Category
Perception of participation	Consideration of participation Participatory experiences Contexts of participation
Value of participation	Evolution of participation Strengths Weaknesses

promote participation; as well as constituting the essential reason for doing so; this fosters feelings of enthusiasm, desire or need to participate.

In this sense, E1 emphasizes that, beyond rights, they are subjects with “their own thinking, each one adapted to their evolution and development. But in any case, with the capacity to give their opinion and interpret the facts that occur in their environment and to have their own vision“. That is, children and teenagers build their image as citizens in the exercise of citizenship; hence the need to support and guide this building process, mainly by Local Government teams, so that “children and teenagers recognise themselves as responsible members of the municipality and builders of their environment in a framework of diverse and plural coexistence“ (Novella & Llana, 2018, p. 109).

A recognition that requires a change in the way we look at childhood, since there is still a “very adult-focused view, the opinion that is always valid is that of the adult, and this shapes the relationship that adults have with children and teenagers“ (E1). Consequently, Gaitán (2018, p. 46), will say that in the face of the emergence of children and teenagers as new actors in social life, “changes in the socially shared mentalities emanating from the position of adult power that oppress the agency of children and teenagers“ are required. However, E1 considers that there are a series of factors and/or aspects that condition this change: on the one hand, she refers to the terms used to refer to childhood (minors or teenagers) as she understands that the first concept “refers to that social undervaluation for the simple fact of being a minor“; on the other hand, the term children and teenagers implies the recognition of their capacity as subjects who fully exercise their rights (DIF & UNICEF, 2014). On the other hand, the voluntary nature, in the legislative framework of the States when guaranteeing the social participation of children is evident, alluding to the high consensus and low intensity with rights commented on by Casas (2008). An issue that requires “greater social awareness to consider that all this participatory work or these opinions make sense and are at the same level as those of adults“ (E1).

For this reason, the personal contributions generated in the children and teenagers by the very exercise of participation should be considered, including “personal growth, I suppose, because we are learning a lot of things that I personally had no idea about“ (GDn2) and that “I am learning much more than I knew, I knew almost nothing about this“ (GDn4). A sentiment also shared by GDn3, as she says she likes to “listen to other people’s opinions and learn new things“. GDn1 expresses herself along the same lines when she states that “the important thing is to participate while listening to what others say (...), to know other people’s opinions on the same topics as you and to know how to listen to them and adapt yours to do something in common, even if in the end you don’t always think the same“. This appreciation recalls that child participation implies collaborating, contributing and cooperating for common progress (Hart, 1992), giving priority to the collective over the individual in a context of equality, in terms of horizontality and dialogue, between children and teenagers and adults. In addition, the ability to get involved in group actions favours the construction of community identity and a sense of co-responsibility (Morata, 2014).

At the same time, children and teenagers express the importance and the need to participate in those matters that affect them, although they also show the limitations to be able to do so. This is how GDn2 explains it:

“yes, because if we don’t contribute anything, adults are making decisions by knots and often without asking us for our opinion. So, we have to wait to become adults to be able to explain how we feel about everything, it’s as if they were making us invisible or not letting us do things”

These words recall the treatment received by children throughout history as a differentiated group that is invisible, being seen as weak in their education and as an object of protection. Thus, according to Novella and Llena (2018), not having their citizenship recognised limits the possibilities for children and teenagers to intervene with full rights in political and social life and, therefore, in the community of belonging. Regarding the decisions made by the Town Council, GDn1 points out as a limitation “that you don’t really know how to influence them”. A statement that is identified with “knowing how to participate” as part of the participatory process, showing the importance of educating in and for participation, providing children and teenagers with the appropriate tools to do so.

This need should be reinforced by the participation of children and teenagers in **context** other than FoPIA (family, school, etc.), since “you have more experience of how to talk and all this” (GDn2), which corroborates the educational impact of the children’s councils on the acquisition and development of skills and capacities of the children and teenagers who participate in these bodies. A diversity of learning and skills that makes it possible to advance in their autonomy and security in the decision-making process in what concerns them.

In addition, they agree on the homogeneity of the profile of the members of the body and the imbalances in the continuous attendance to the sessions. In this regard, E1 clarifies that:

“I see that there is an initial boom in exploration (...) without knowing much about the commitment it requires (...), and then there is a slump in those who cannot participate because they have other activities (which happens a lot). Then it remains stable and when May arrives there is another small drop that is very counter-productive because it is then when we have to prepare for the CLIA session in June, and there is a kind of setback”.

Meanwhile, GDn1 emphasises that “there are people, that we are the same as always and the same profile of people”, and GDn2 adds that:

“In the end we are always the ones who are most committed because at the beginning of the course there are many more people and then they end up leaving and it makes me very angry. In high school no one wanted to try my course, not even to try. And it’s true that they are missing out on a lot of things and then they complain and they don’t like things, but they don’t do anything to change it.”

The arguments expressed in the Discussion Group allude to the biased view that the rest of the children and teenagers have of the identity and purpose of this body, seeing it “as something mainly boring. Something that does not interest them” (GDn2); and also to the approach that the presentation of FoPIA is given in the initial sessions of the school year, since “I think it is poorly focused, the way it is presented. I think that’s not exactly how it should be approached” (GDn1). An opinion shared by GDn2, who considers that “I totally think it is wrongly focused and that people see it as more class, more duty or more things to do and they totally take no notice of it”.

Regarding knowledge and/or **participation in other initiatives or experiences** of participation in Teo, these can be grouped into the following categories. In the first category are those led by the administration and other community socio-educational associations, among which the “Ecological School” initiative promoted by the Youth area and the ARC Os Tilos association are of particular mention. The second category includes initiatives promoted and led exclusively by children and teenagers in the municipality, specifically the environmental movement *Fridays For Future* Teo (FFF), which is currently inactive due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, since two FoPIA members are also

members of the FFF, they agreed, as a result of the GD meeting, to reactivate the initiative by inviting the other two participants to join the group. Although these initiatives are few and far between, E1 shows signs that “these initiatives are increasing (...) lately; there are other initiatives of the town council that seek more child participation (...), as children are becoming more involved in more issues, especially in the culture and education area”. An advance that plays in favour of the consolidation of their participation at municipal level while amplifying other essential and complementary forms in the transformation and change of their environment by children and teenagers; in such a way that organic structures, participatory processes and experiences led by children and teenagers are strengthened and reinforced (Novella & Sabariego, 2020). Finally, they agree that FoPIA is the channel for finding out about these initiatives, since “most of the activities we do are from FoPIA” (GDn2) and although they are “independent of FoPIA, it is true that we were told about them here” (GDn1). In short, they believe that it is a positive space not only to guarantee information but also to promote permanent and suitable training for children and teenagers.

#### 4.2. Dimension 2: Value of participation

Generally speaking, the parties involved agree on the positive **assessment** of this experience. The need and importance of having these participation spaces to meet, express themselves, talk to other people (including adults), express their opinions freely and listen to other people, are arguments shared by both children and teenagers. This manifestation shows the potential of these spaces for participation in order to promote the personal and social development of children and teenagers in the community they belong to (Novella, 2012; Novella et al., 2022; Riquelme, 2016). They also affirm that FoPIA serves to inform them about other initiatives, since “most of the activities we do are from FoPIA” (GDn2) and although they are “independent of FoPIA, it is true that we were told about it here” (GDn1). In short, they believe that it is a space that favors information and promotes permanent and suitable training for children and adolescents.

In terms of **strengths**, the children and teenagers stressed the importance of considering their proposals and, above all, valuing their opinions and ways of thinking, creating meeting spaces that favour mutual learning. In the words of GDn2 “just as they teach us a lot of things, we can also teach them things about how we think and what we want in our future and our spaces”. An argument that coincides with the discourse of Hart (1992), who considers that child participation, should be conceived as a mutual learning process with a bidirectional sense, as opposed to the separate and isolated idea that is predominant in historical evolution. This statement is shared by GDn1 when she indicates “that adults, no matter how much they think, are not going to know what we want, no matter how hard they try”; which reveals the adult-focused view that prevails in much of the public consciousness regarding the fact of considering children and teenagers as dependent beings, of the future and of what they are not yet (Gaitán, 2018).

The empowerment of children and teenagers is the first of the strengths of child and teenager participation; and it occurs when the actions of children and teenagers have repercussions, because “there is, let’s say, a result” (E1). This is, words are transformed into action, and the children and teenagers are the real lead players in the whole process (design, execution, decision making, dissemination, etc.) of transforming their closest social reality: the local area. In addition, Hart (1992) would say that this action favours greater self-confidence and promotes the principle of initiative, to the benefit of continuing to create new actions led by them.

Finally, E1 positively highlights the moments of meeting with the political representation of the town council (namely, the meetings with the mayor) and the events that, when they present some of the activities or actions undertaken, bring together a lot of people. It is, therefore, the public projection of the results obtained and the collaborative process followed to achieve them. This last step is very significant, as it allows

the work carried out to be valued and to receive the social and institutional recognition that the body deserves. This gesture enhances the involvement and motivation of children and teenagers and gives greater meaning to the reason for (children and young people) participation.

On the other hand, from the perspective of boys and girls, the **weaknesses** denote the lack of consideration as full subjects and as part of citizenship. This is how GDn1 explains it when she states that “I think that sometimes, as much as we are taken seriously with CLIA, we are not taken as seriously as we should be”. In this sense, GDn2 indicates that “we must take adults too much into account for the things we have to do”; a perception that alludes to autonomy and security in making decisions that affect them. This fact, following Novella and Llena (2018), shows the imbalances that still persist in the consideration of children and teenagers not only as subjects of rights, but also as subjects with capabilities.

From E1’s point of view, four points for improvement in the participation of children and teenagers were identified. The first refers to the way in which families are involved in the project itself, as it has a direct impact on certain aspects of the children themselves (for example, in attending the sessions or activities developed by FoPIA); a situation that is due, in part, to the “deficit of social participation of the adult world in all areas” (E1). Another of the reasons identified is the change of modality in the development of the sessions (from face-to-face to online) due to the fact that there is no meeting at entry or exit. In a certain way, this distancing conditioned the bond generated with the children and their families; hence the need to work on this aspect with the families in order to make them aware so as to advance in the paradigm of the culture of participation. To this end, it is necessary to (re)orient the relationships between young people and adults in order to make them more equitable and inclusive. Therefore, the promotion of spaces, initiatives and/or experiences in which these interactions take place entail suitable strategies to favour this relational context in their close environment: the community.

The need for an assessment of the experience by the children and their families represents the second weak point pointed out by E1, who considers that it is a cross-cutting exercise that allows reflection on issues that could be improved, since it makes it possible to adapt the actions by regulating the times to achieve the goals set. In addition, in this process, it is relevant to recall the successes achieved and the capacities developed by the children and teenagers in the different actions for their achievement. It is therefore necessary to “take care of the group’s self-esteem and strengthen its participatory confidence” (Novella & Pasqual, 2018, p. 176).

The third point focuses on the need to take up the external (community) coordination table again, as well as to have coordination and participation mechanisms in which the different social agents of the territory are present; since it is essential to create the necessary synergies to adequately articulate, and in an integral manner, all the issues related to the well-being and quality of life of children in the community context. Specifically, with regard to the areas and/or contexts in which children and teenagers should –and must– develop and experience their participation, so that they learn to participate by participating in these spaces.

Likewise, children and teenagers consider that, in general, their requests, proposals and/or demands are taken into account by the Town Council; but they are also aware of the limitations when it comes to responding to certain requests from the local administration. An example of this is the comment made by GDn1 when she states that “there are some that yes are carried out and others that are not, because there are some things that cannot be done for whatever reason (perhaps they are very ambitious proposals), there are others that are long term and so we are working on them, and others that are being undertaken”. An opinion also shared by GDn2 when she expressed that “it is not so easy either because there are many things that are beyond the control of the Town Council”. This statement denotes the existence of a consistent exchange of information between the local government and FoPIA on

the decisions taken and their reasons; otherwise, “the children’s council would become an ornamental body” (Trilla & Novella, 2011, p. 34).

However, the largest number of responses to their proposals and which were more “visual” date from the first year of FoPIA’s life (2017–2018). In the words of GDn1 “I also believe that the proposals of the first one were more, that they are more noticeable because, for example, you don’t know about fund-raising, but if you are going to put in a speed bump or a pedestrian crossing, you can see it”. Once again, the importance of seeing their actions materialise can be seen, thus making the children and teenagers the leading players of these actions.

This manifestation is reflected in the unanimity in favour of the creation of more spaces or experiences of participation in Teo, arguing that “it would be great to have, like FoPIA or just as we have the FFF Teo which is about ecology, to have others related to health, or activities for Teo” (GDn2). However, they understand that having these bodies favoured their right to participation, but also contributed to making the Town Council more visible, serving as a lure to participate in other actions and activities. They also agree that these initiatives are not linked to their community, as many are developed from or with entities outside the Town Council of Teo. In this sense, it is necessary to involve the rest of the community to link it with the territory and make this structure known to the greatest number of people, as reflected in the PIIA (2017).

In order to raise awareness of FoPIA and its benefits, the children and teenagers consider that they would like to do what they have not done so far. Specifically, they allude to the possibility of they themselves being the ones to develop the dynamics, with the intention of changing the erroneous view that prevails about FoPIA with the rest of their classmates in schools. This is what GDn2 says:

“I would like us –the children– to be able to show what we are doing in schools and institutes in a different way and in other aspects, because as I said before, all the children have a negative view of what we are really doing in FoPIA: talks, representations, etc., so that they are more fun and the children can see that it is not as boring as they think”.

This opinion is shared by GDn4 and GDn3 when they indicate that they “would like to make it known to girls and boys in schools, high schools or whatever, to organise excursions with FoPIA, games to learn more or less how FoPIA works”, and “as my colleagues say, I would like to make it known as a more positive view of what we do”, respectively. The first refers to the reiteration of acquiring greater importance in the actions and initiatives to be developed in order to transform what surrounds them; consequently, greater autonomy and self-management of the group is achieved, as the maximum expression of the children’s participation bodies. The second reading refers to the importance of using methods that stimulate and encourage the participation of children and teenagers, such as the potential of play, recognised as a right in Article 31 of the CRC, and playful spaces or group dynamics, especially in the context of the current health crisis. Employing these methodological tools favours trust, bonds and creativity of group members; at the same time, it enhances connectivity with their way of understanding and relating to the world (Comas et al., 2018).

## 5. Conclusions

The right to participation of children in the community environment, as an object of study, is reinforced and promoted with the creation of certain bodies such as CLIA and FoPIA. In spite of the recent trajectory of the latter, it can be concluded that it is a process under continuous construction that guarantees the active and involved participation of children and teenagers in the formation of a critical, conscious and responsible citizenship. A process which –in essence– must be educational, since children and adolescents learn to participate in community, and in which the five levels of participation established by Shier (2001) are vindicated, since they go from being –simply– listened to, to being involved, empowered and learning to take responsibility in the decision

making process of projects at the local and/or community level, independently of adults.

Regarding the perception of participation, it is evidenced as a fundamental right regardless of the conditions of children and teenagers. In turn, they recognize that participating brings personal, social and educational benefits, which contributes to improving their image as citizens and makes it possible to exercise their citizenship, despite identifying certain limitations in this process (Corney et al., 2021). Thus, the adult-focused view of a certain part of the population and the dependence in the decision-making process in matters affecting the youngest social groups, condition intergenerational relations and sometimes limit their participation in social, cultural and leisure activities in their reference contexts.

The participatory experiences identified by the group of participants are proposed by external agents (such as the city council or other entities) and show the scarcity of spaces and contexts in which children can participate, as well as the lack of initiatives led or self-managed by the girls and boys themselves in their communities. Hence the need to promote more spaces for meeting and participation so that children and teenagers can exercise this right (Lundy, 2007). These actions make it possible to reinforce and strengthen the involvement, motivation and leading role of children and teenagers in everything that concerns them, progressively acquiring the necessary skills and abilities to play a better citizenship, enabling the transformation of their immediate social environment based on the real experiences lived through the aforementioned local participatory structures: CLIA and FoPIA.

In this sense, promoting the leading role of girls and boys in the development of the initiatives contributes to strengthening the educational and formative nature of these experiences, while at the same time it implies reducing the biased view of the body that prevails over the rest of the municipality's children and teenagers, to the benefit of achieving inclusive participatory practices that guarantee greater representation of these social sectors. In order to increase the opportunities for social, political and cultural participation of children and teenagers, it is necessary to foster leadership and political will on behalf of the public administration, which requires resources and stability of human teams in socio-educational support. This action would consolidate the participatory processes and their permanence over time, facilitating support and promoting the empowerment of the group and, above all, its autonomy of action and reflection. This set of contributions is aligned with the eight pillars that facilitate the community participation of children and adolescents proposed in the study conducted by Novella et al. (2022) in collaboration with UNICEF-Spain.

The commitment to the participation of children and teenagers is evidenced in the progressive repercussions on the parties involved (children and teenagers, institutions and municipality); a fact that implies moving towards the participation of children and teenagers based on tangible results that reinforce the potential of citizen participation –including all people– in the various context of daily life. This highlights the need for collaborative work between children and teenagers and the rest of the social agents in the search for solutions *with* them, as opposed to *for* them. Consequently, participatory assessment and co-design should be incorporated as strategies that involve children in the innovation processes required to advance in the achievement of more inclusive, humane and equitable societies, as advocated by the Child Rights Strategy 2022–2027.

In this process, it is necessary to highlight the relevance of the social educator as a mediator between the local government and the children and teenagers, but also, and especially as a professional of reference in FoPIA, since she is in charge of guiding and accompanying the group in those teachings that allow the children and teenagers to become more empowered, to think critically and reflectively, to be autonomous in the management of their participation, and to promote the exercise of the right to citizenship (Shier et al., 2012). It also guarantees the fulfillment of the exercise of child participation as part of the active citizenship and activist in the processes of change and social transformation of their

closest social reality: the community. In addition, it contributes to strengthen their position in the community, enabling them to solve their daily problems (Liebel, 2021). A challenge that, as suggested by Novella, Crespo et al. (2022), requires that child participation in the municipality be addressed in a cross-cutting manner and integrated into the educational ecosystem of all citizens.

Thus, as a prospective, it would be interesting to expand the range of selected participants to other social agents involved in the participation of children (elected officials and technical staff involved in the promotion of local participation of children, schools, associations and socio-educational and cultural entities, etc.) and/or children and teenagers who are not part of FoPIA but who, nevertheless, live in the municipality. Likewise, future research will be able to analyse the consolidation of these bodies, as well as their relevance in terms of education in and for child participation and the benefits this entails, as shown in the theoretical approach of this study.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Javier Riádigos:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Rita Gradaille:** Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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