Ouve-me, eu participo!

Uma análise antropológica da participação das crianças: o caso do estudo internacional de investigação participativa
'Feel good: A visão das crianças sobre a inclusão".[1]

Giulia Pastori, Alice Sarcinelli, Valentina Pagani (Università di Milano-Bicocca)

Introduction

Children play a central role in the social inclusion policy agenda, yet most initiatives to implement this agenda 'were and are still designed, delivered and evaluated by adults' (Hill et al., 2004[2]). The study presented in this paper - set within the framework provided by EU-funded collaborative project ISOTIS (http://www.isotis.org/) and part of the international participatory research study, titled 'Feel good: Children's view on inclusion' (lead by the authors of this paper) – aimed at exploring children's perspectives on inclusion and well-being at school in order to provide new perspectives to inform policy-makers, as well as a critical reflection and suggestions on methodological and ethical aspects of doing research with and for children. The paper will present the international study design and the theoretical and methodological framework, while the data analysis will go in detail in the Italian data set, and will provide some first reflections from the on going international comparative thematic analysis. The paper will develop a meta-reflection on how children's perspective mirrors society's expectations of them while they offer a 'creative reinterpretation' of adult society (Corsaro, 1997/2018). Moreover the analysis of the research process and of the results allows us to make some further reflections at methodological, political-educational and social level.

This paper will contribute to an anthropological analysis of the exercise of children's rights to participate. If social inclusion is an inescapable priority for the worldwide political agenda and in the academic debate (UNESCO, 2014), what are the real conditions of children's participation? This question implies methodological challenges with respect to: a) how to enter into children's 'direct experience' about delicate issues; b) how to include

---

[2] For the full bibliographical references and a more detailed presentation of the reserach, see D2.4 Technical Report, available at http://www.isotis.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/D2.4_Technical-Report-on-the-Child-interview-study.pdf.

transformative and applicative aspects in research with children. It also raises issues at the political-educational and social level: how school contexts and local representation of childhood affect the forms of research deeply rooted in democratic values, inclusive, attentive to the well-being of all children and to the unique perspective they offer on their own experience regarding school and society?

A children study within the ISOTIS project

The ISOTIS consortium aims to understand early and persistent social and educational inequalities in Europe and to provide recommendations and tools for policy and practice that can help to tackle them. To complement a large-scale structured interview study among parents from socioeconomically and culturally disadvantaged communities was conducted, combined with smaller scale qualitative in-depth interviews with subsamples of these parents, a Children study was carried out in 2018-2019. It involved about 300 children in pre- and primary school settings and informal after-school contexts in areas characterized by high cultural diversity and social inequality in seven European countries[3].

The ISOTIS Children Study was designed to enable better understanding of experiences, perceptions and opinions of young children from native-born low income families, and families with ethnic minority and immigrant backgrounds regarding inclusion and well-being at school. It aimed at exploring children's perspectives on inclusion and well-being at school and at identifying facilitating positive elements at school within social, cultural, religious and linguistic differences, what children identified as quality indicators of school inclusiveness and their suggestions to make school more welcoming and inclusive. The study elicited children's views on inclusion and well-being at school, and beyond this, the study explored a form of education through democracy, examining how a supportive democratic learning environment can be created. Overall, the study intends to provide new perspectives and valuable ideas to inform policy-makers, as well as a critical reflection and suggestions on methodological and ethical aspects of doing research with and for children, to enhance inclusive environments through children's active participation and to empower children in their roles as democratic citizens.

---

[3] The country, target groups and contexts involved are: Czech Republic (romani children, primary school), England (low-income children in house environment), Germany (immigrants children in preschool), Greece (romani children in preschool and after-school program), Italy (Immigrant children in preschool, primary school and after-school program), Norway (Immigrant children in preschool and primary school), Poland (low-income children in pre-school and primary school).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical and methodological framework that guided the conceptualization of the study design relied on a number of pillars: (1) **Children's Rights** and the paradigm of the «Research With and For Children»; (2) the **Participatory Research Framework** in connection to Education Through Democracy and the Active Citizenship Framework; (3) **Social Inclusion and Well-Being** as key topics regarding children's participation.

Children's rights and the paradigm of the "research with and for children" The relevance of children's perspectives in the field of research has become well established in the field of the human sciences due to relevant cultural and scientific developments in the 20th century, shedding new light on the image of the Child and Childhood. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) established the inviolable rights granted to children of any age, gender, origin and social status, and among others the right to participate and the right to freedom of expression (art. 12 and 13). Academic contribution came from: (1) Socio-Constructivist Early Childhood Pedagogy that promoted a new concept of the 'competent child' actively engaged in cognitive and socio-emotional learning experiences, but also in decision making and participation; (2) the Anthropology and Sociology of Childhood that has long recognized children as competent actors and reliable informants on their life (O'Keane, 2008); (3) Students'/Children's Voice Theory that acknowledges how children's perspectives are essential to understand their unique viewpoint in educational and school contexts where they represent one of the main groups of stakeholders. In these fields of research, there has been an important shift from a research paradigm focusing almost exclusively on children as mere research objects to a research paradigm that involves children as collaborators. Childhood studies have claimed the capacity for children to be researchers, and children have evolved from being 'positioned' as mere objects, or, at most, subjects of research, to being research partners that can actively and meaningfully cooperate and co-construct along with researchers (Bessell, 2015). The paradigm shift requires not only an idea of research with children, but also specific attention to the educational impact and the priority of children's well-being in participating in research. Therefore, not only is there talk of "research with" children, but also of a "research for children" (Mayall, 2003; Mortari, 2009).

The participatory research framework in connection to the education through democracy and active citizenship framework To truly listen to children's perspectives and to allow children to have meaningful experience within research, giving voice to children is not

enough (Mortari & Mazzoni, 2010; Sarcinelli, 2015: p.6). It is essential to take their ideas into account and let them experience how their voices can influence the contexts they live in. Four separate factors require consideration: (1) **Space**: 'creating an opportunity for involvement – a space in which children are encouraged to express their views' (Welty & Lundy, 2013:2); (2) **Voice**: recognizing children's many languages and using as many ways of listening as possible (Moskal & Tyrrell, 2015); (3) **Audience**: ensuring children that their views are listened to by adults; (4) **Influence**: ensuring that children's views are not only heard, but that they are taken seriously and, whenever possible, acted upon. The participatory and transformative research integrates listening to opinions and a phase of constructive work, proactive and that transforms the context or object under consideration. This model becomes an opportunity for the research participants to be actively and meaningfully engaged, experience citizenship, agency and, to all effects, it can represent a democratic education experience, according to the threefold definition of democratic education[4].

Beyond giving 'voice' (namely eliciting children's views on inclusion and well-being at school), this study was meant to explore how the research could result in a form of education through democracy, allowing children to collaborate in decision making. In contexts of social distress and marginalization, like this one, such an approach could be an important catalyst for social inclusion – 'social inclusion' intended as 'making sure that all children and adults are able to participate as valued, respected and contributing members of society' (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003:VIII). In line with this theoretical framework, the ISOTIS study explored children's ideas on how inclusion, acceptance and respect for differences manifest in their classrooms and schools. Children's proposals about what could be done to make their school (more) welcoming and inclusive for each child were elicited and some of their ideas were implemented, so that the children could have a tangible experience of democratic life (Welty & Lundy, 2013) and develop their skills and awareness as knowledgeable, responsible and active citizens in their communities (UN, 1989).

Social inclusion & Well being as key topics to involve children's participation The study focused on children's ideas and proposals for change on inclusion and well-being in the school context. Inclusion and well-being are two closely interconnected concepts in theoretical models. Inclusion has been conceptualized as a four-step process including

---

[4] The three dimensions of the definition are (1) education about democracy regards deep understanding of what democracy is and what it requires from each citizen; (2) education for democracy is to learn how to participate and exercise one's democratic rights; (3) education through democracy takes place in supportive, democratic learning environments (Gollob et. al., 2010).

well-being (Rosenthal and Levy, 2010): (1) **Inclusion as acknowledging differences**: a precondition for promoting inclusion is recognizing and drawing attention to social and cultural differences; (2) **Inclusion as valuing differences**: diversity should not only be recognized, but also appreciated as a value (Salamanca Statement; UNESCO, 1994); (3) **Inclusion as acceptance**: only when differences are recognized and valued, all forms of social and cultural diversity can be accepted; (4) **Inclusion as well-being**: the recognition, appreciation, valorization, and acceptance of diversity are key preconditions for promoting well-being. The concept of well-being has been defined as the opportunity to feel that "one's perceptions and experiences do matter" (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007:45); it "requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society. It is enhanced by conditions that include supportive personal relationships [and] strong and inclusive communities" (Newton, 2007:1; see also ISOTIS Deliverables 4.1. and 4.2).

The value of eliciting children's viewpoints on such topics and their active involvement is particularly meaningful for several reasons. **At a basic but paramount level**, though such topics are delicate and require an attentive ethical consideration when dealing with children. It has been acknowledged that they affect children's personal experience within the school, the family, the neighbourhood they live in, and the wider society, starting from the early years (Rayna & Brougère, 2014). **At the research level,** this study offers an interesting contribution in a seldom-explored field[5] with respect to how to talk with children about these issues. The aim is to enter children's 'direct experience', in order to reflect with children on what they consider to be factors of well-being or discomfort in the school context. **At a policy level**, it can be observed that children are still not enough involved and allowed to express their viewpoints on social inclusion. Social inclusion has become a key issue in the academic debate across disciplines and an inescapable priority for the worldwide political agenda, especially in the field of education (UNESCO 2005, 2013, 2014; OECD 2018a, 2018b). Research on the impact of exclusion and discrimination on children and childhood demonstrates that 'the challenge of future inequalities can only be met through child policies for social inclusion' (Cook et al., 2018:16). The third one relates to policies to support the participation of all children in play, recreation, sports and cultural activities, and to promote children's participation in decision-making in areas that affect their lives. Overall, the study demonstrated there has been little change in most countries since 2013. Against this

---

[5] Very few studies have encompassed young children's perspectives on and understandings of inclusion (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009; Mahbub, 2008).

background, the ISOTIS Child study, recognizing this gap, aimed at eliciting children's voices on inclusion and well-being in reference to the school context.

The methodological framework

The methodological framework and the selected research strategies and instruments refers to two main approaches: a participatory methodology (O'Kane, 2008) and a multi-method approach (Clark & Moss, 2001).

Participatory research methodology Children were involved in the research process as co-constructors and co-researchers in reflecting on the quality of their (pre)school contexts, on well-being at (pre)school and in proposing innovations. The methodological proposal was meant to: (1) promote a safe environment where children were encouraged to express their views, feeling that they were being heard and never judged; (2) recognize children's many languages, adopting a multi-method approach that used many ways of listening and enabled diverse opportunities for expression; (3) give voice to children's experiences, and let them be (pro)active. In this regard, a critical and reflective stance (Flewitt, 2005) was adopted, considering both children's participation in the research and the implementation of their proposals. Specific attention was dedicated to balancing children's right to participate with the need to ensure a worthwhile and positive experience, adjusting the adult's and children's roles according to children's ages and competences. We asked all of the children (in various age groups and contexts) their suggestions to make their school more welcoming presented a major challenge and implemented the most feasible proposals. Finally, while the initial construction of the research-partnership with the children was mainly an ethnographic participant observation, many different methods and techniques were proposed, such as focus groups, circle-time discussions, art-based and manipulative activities, virtual photo tours and digital product making. This choice not only met the need for triangulation, but also provided a richer and more comprehensive picture of children's viewpoints, recognizing children's many languages (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) and ensuring that each child had the opportunity to explore and represent their perspective in their own terms. The study had to adopt a common framework and a common set of strategies and instruments needed for a cross-cultural study and comparison, yet they were proposed as flexible and adaptable based on the specific: (1) objectives of National teams given the presence of different target groups (e.g. Roma, Low-Income, Moroccan); (2) culture of schooling and inclusion in each country; (3) culture of childhood in the different target groups and the different developmental stages

of the children and contexts involved (formal and informal). The mainstays of the proposed methodological approach were similar across the different age groups and countries for both formal and informal contexts, in terms of methods, languages, and tools. We provided national teams with a manual with general guidelines and specific research techniques and activities for each of the three contexts (preschool; primary school and informal contexts), inviting them to adapt and customize activities or parts of them to better take into account the peculiarities of each site and to investigate specific topics and themes most relevant to their context/target group. The research protocol adopted in the three contexts to explore four different dimensions: (1) identity; (2) children's views and experiences on inclusion; (3) well-being at school; (4) children's proposals.

Ethical considerations

The national teams were asked to guarantee respect of (1) the European General Data Protection Regulation (Reg. EU 2016/679); (2) relevant national legal and ethical requirements; (3) that the standards described in the ISOTIS data management were fully met during this task. In reference to the involvement of young children as research participants and the delicate topics addressed by the study, four main levels of ethics were addressed and cautiously considered: (1) Aims and benefits; (2) Informed consent; (3) Privacy and confidentiality; (4) Data collection, storage and use of the data.

The impact that participation in the research may have had on children in terms of potential harm and possible benefits was considered. The questions of children's participation and the notion of children's voices have been critically addressed and deconstructed (Komulainen, 2007; Lewis, 2010). Research with children, especially with very young ones, gives rise to major ethical concerns, highlighting the inherent risks of oversimplification, hypocrisy, manipulation, or of practices that are more formal than substantive (Palaiologou, 2012, 2014). Notwithstanding that children's voices need to find a way to be expressed and heard, these issues were taken into account, especially considering the very delicate issues addressed by the study such as inclusiveness, well-being and respect for diversity (Bittencourt Ribeiro, 2017). The ethical questions that we addressed in designing the research methods regarded (1) the positive involvement of young children in exploring and discussing inclusion/exclusion in school contexts characterized by cultural diversity and social inequalities; (2) the addressing of these issues in a sensitive yet meaningful way to children and the alignment of the research questions and methodology with the children's competence, motivations and interests.

The Italian study

In Italy, the study was conducted between November 2018 and April 2019 in three highly culturally diverse settings in the city of Milan (the biggest city in the North of Italy): one preschool (two groups, respectively, of 4- and 5-year-old children), one primary school (one group of 10- to 11-year-old children) and an after-school educational program run by Save the Children Italy (two groups, respectively, one with 10 9- to 10-year-old children and the other with 21 10- to 14-year-old children).

The preschool and the primary school involved in the Children Study were both part of the same Institution (i.e., *Istituto Comprensivo*) located in a culturally highly diverse neighborhood with a significant percentage of disadvantaged immigrant families (mainly Arabic and North African families, which represents about 60%) and very few middle-class Italian families. In the **preschool**, we co-conducted all the activities in order to lessen any possible intimidating effect of our presence as 'strangers' and to ensure children a familiar environment, with trusted adults, and to better address each child individually and stimulate discussion, making reference to concrete episodes of the children's experience. After a circle-time discussion with 33 children about how to welcome new children that would start preschool the following year, two separate circle-time discussions were conducted, respectively with the 4-year-old group and with the 5-year-olds, to understand what they proposed and what materials they could prepare to welcome the new children and make them feel comfortable in their school. The younger children suggested that it could be important for the newcomers to have some friends at the new school and to know its spaces and its rules. Since the children had suggested that it would be important for the newcomers to know the new school and its rules, pictures of the various rooms/spaces taken by the teachers were projected on a whiteboard one by one, and the children engaged in a group discussion on each of them. They were asked what they liked/disliked in each space and why, and the rules for each space were elicited. Afterwards, large pictures of the spaces were printed and placed on the floor, and the children were asked to indicate their favorite and least favorite ones using emoticons (happy or sad faces) cut from cardboard. The output was the creation of a multilingual, digital mixed-media (visual and audio) tour of their school to present the different spaces/rooms and the rules to the newcomers to make the new children feel comfortable and welcome in their school. The 5-year-old children' suggestions to welcome the newcomers were implemented during a visit of one of the infant-toddler centers in the

neighborhood with a group of 10 2- to 3-year-old children who would start preschool the next year.

In the **primary school**, the teachers were not involved in the research design and did not propose any adaptations. We carried the study with the use of a Virtual Learning Environment, designed by the Italian team in collaboration with ISOTIS partners. The study was introduced through a notifier for the class group at the VLE noticeboard, where the researcher had left a short video-message asking for some help to better understand their point of view on their school, in order to contribute to the European study ISOTIS. As a starting point to engage the children in the research, a letter from a Dutch researcher letter was presented through a PowToon animation. Afterwards, each child received in their personal VLE space a part of the letter and some questions to answer individually through a video or audio message, with a written text or with a drawing realized on the VLE. After, children with the same topic were invited to work together in small groups and asked to provide a group answer (a video, audio, written text or drawing) to the researcher who wrote the letter. All answers were then posted on the VLE, watched together and discussed through a focus group discussion with all class members. After an evaluation of the school context on the VLE through the "Answer a question" tool, children first asked to think about suggestions on how to make their school more welcoming and inclusive, in order to inform the Dutch researcher who would be collecting suggestions from children in different European countries in order to send them to the European Union to improve school inclusiveness in Europe. To make concrete proposals that could be directly implemented in their own school, children were free to form small groups and choose the form their proposal would take. The outputs posters, letters to the school director, video clips and video interviews of other children in the class, short video clips were the children acted or simulated an information campaign, video messages to the teachers and a protocol on how to welcome newly-arrived students. As final output, the entire class created an awareness raising project about religious diversity in the school through a digital, multi-religious calendar on the VLE to be posted on the school website: the calendar contained videos, information, pictures and explanations collected among the school personnel and the families regarding special dates and celebrations for different religions.

The **informal context** is an after-school service located in a very working-class, multicultural neighborhood on the outskirts of Milan (87% of non italophone children). The educational center *Fuoriclasse* (a play on words, meaning both "out-of-school" but also "champ") is part of an integrated program carried out by Save the Children Italy in cooperation with local

schools and local organizations[6] to combat school drop-out through early prevention. Active listening to children's voices and their protagonism are central in this methodological approach. The activities were mainly lead by the researchers, although were realized in presence of two educators from the after-school program and one volunteer. For both groups children (9-11 years old, 11-14 years old), each steps was introduced by playful warming-up activities involving children, differentiated among the two groups. A video-cued focus group was realized using two clips as stimuli, the first focusing on newly-arrived students unable to speak the national language, the second focusing on the exclusion of second generation immigrants because of the inability to speak his parents' mother tongue. Next, an autobiographical activity was carried out with different methodologies for the two groups. For the primary school group, we created different sheets, each exploring specific aspects of their school biography (e.g. the first day at school, what made them feel good at school, etc.). For the junior high school group, after a game meant to help children to gradually reflect on their school experience, each child created a "creative" autobiography. In both groups, children could also carry out an audio or video interview. The last step for both groups consisted of a message to the authorities. The 9-11 ys. old group realized a big poster where all of the children contributed with their ideas on how to make school (more) welcoming and inclusive, whereas the junior high school children realized a message as they wished (posters, videos etc.). A video clip of the results of each of the two research journeys will be edited by the research team and presented to the children who they will then decide whether they want to present it in their own school. The journeys finished with a trip to the University.

Findings

Because of the little space, we will focus only on the preschool children's proposals. Despite their young age, the children were able to take on a different point of view from their own. They pointed out that the newcomers would be **excited about the new toys** at preschool, but they might also **feel sad and lonely**, **missing their parents and their friends** and **need to be comforted**. Hence they proposed: (1) letting the newcomers play with their toys, hiding those that could be harmful to younger children; (2) reading the newcomers a book they liked; (3) making friendship bracelets to make them understand that they already had some friends in the new school; (4) decorating their classroom to make it more welcoming and joyful.

---

[6] See Save the Children, *Fuoriclasse, un modello di successo. Il contrasto alla dispersione scolastica,* https://s3.savethechildren.it/public/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/fuoriclasse-un-modello-di-successo-il-contrasto-alla-dispersione-scolastica.pdf

Secondly, they pointed out the need to teach to the new children the **rules** of the class/school. Some children raised the issue about how to comfort the newcomers or explain the classroom rules to them if they could not speak Italian. To overcome this issue, the children proposed: (1) using what they considered *universal gestures* (e.g., hugs, kisses, caresses) to communicate with and comfort the new children feeling sad; (2) teaching the newcomers some words and sentences in Italian; (3) using their mother tongue - if they shared it - to overcome the linguistic barrier or involving their parents as linguistic mediators. (4) celebrating a party singing songs in various languages to offer everyone the chance to 'feel at home'. With teachers' assistance, the children (1) created a multilingual poster to welcome newcomers; (2) decorated their classroom using bright colors and smiling emoticons to reassure the newcomers; (3) realized a digital mixed-media (visual and audio) tour of their school to present the different spaces/rooms and the rules, involving parents with immigrant backgrounds in providing a written and audio translation (incorporated in the digital artifact) of the sentences they selected to present each space/room.

Children recognized that several elements could contribute to influence a child's well-being at school:

Factors undermining well-being	Factors promoting well-being
Missing their parents and friends may contribute to making a child feel sad at school	The fact that teachers and peers ensure that a child felt welcomed and at ease at school, introducing the school, its spaces and its rules to the newcomers
Not knowing the school environment, its spaces and rules may make a child feel lost and uncomfortable	The opportunity to see their mother tongues used in the school environment
The linguistic barrier may be an obstacle for children to make friends and communicate at school	Having peers and parents as linguistic and as "Italian" teachers

The Children Study had an impact at various levels: (1) **On teachers.** Even though the two teachers involved had a high consideration of their children's competencies, they were surprised that they had such clear ideas about complex issues and advanced such sophisticated proposals; (2) **On children.** Some children, usually shy and bashful ones, started to actively participate in the activity proposed and freely expressed their ideas after the first few meetings. Children with immigrant backgrounds who were shy about speaking their home language and talking about them started to be prouder about their origins and share some words or songs in their mother tongues; (3) **On the context.** Some proposals made by the children were actually implemented and changed the preschool context, characterized by dominant monolingualism, giving visibility to home languages, not only during a one-time event (i.e., Mother Tongue Week), but in everyday life.

Conclusions

The collected data and the research process of the international study brought up four aspects: (1) the themes proposed by the children regarding the school context, inclusion, and their proposals for change; (2) reflections and themes concerning the methodological challenges and the ethical dimension of research with children; (3) the actual implementation of the children's proposals in the studied contexts and the feedbacks collected on the work from the research participants (children, teachers or other professionals); (4) the educational effects on children and teachers involved in the research.

From the **methodological point of view**, the study offers an interesting contribution in a seldom-explored field with respect to how to talk with children about delicate issues as inclusion and respect for social and cultural differences. In the ISOTIS Children Study, the focus was not to 'measure' identification or acculturation processes regarding the perception of discrimination (as is done in studies in the field of social psychology), but to enter into children's '*direct experience*', in order to reflect with children on what they considered to be factors of well-being or discomfort in the school context. One of the main methodological challenges was to elaborate a research protocol that would enable researchers to truly listen to children, that is, "taking full account of what they tell us" (Roberts, 2000, p. 225). As Helen Roberts argues, "It is clear that listening to children, hearing children, and acting on what children say are three very different activities, although they are frequently elided as if they were not (…). There have always been people who have listened, sometimes there have been people who have heard, and perhaps less often, those who have acted wisely on what children have to say" (2000, p. 238).

The research protocol we developed tried to meet the challenge of **listening to children**, **hearing them** and **acting on what they said**. In this sense, it was based on the idea that the research proposals needed to be adapted to the children according to their age and the context. For these reasons, different kinds of stimuli were provided in order to reach the same objectives and answer the same research questions. For instance, the stimuli for pre-schoolers needed to be very direct and concrete, whereas for teenagers the stimuli were more indirect, such as a letter from a researcher or clips from a movie. Not only were different kinds of stimuli included in the research protocol, but it was crucial to provide a methodology with a high level of flexibility and customization, yet maintaining common elements across ages, target groups and countries.

To guarantee this process of customization, a main pillar of the methodological approach was the **observation of the context and the negotiation with the professionals involved**. Given the variability of adults' ideas about children's ability (Garnier, 1995) and local pedagogical orientations, this preliminary step not only aimed at letting the children (and professionals) get to know the researchers and the research process, but also allowed the researchers to familiarize with the context, in particular with: (1) the professionals' ideas about children, children's roles in the school life and in the learning experiences and children's ability to participate; (2) the professionals' local pedagogical culture to listen to children and ask them for proposals. These characteristics regarding each context were crucial variables that researchers had to take into consideration in order to define the ways, techniques and times required for the involvement of children in a research process characterized by a high level of **direct participation**. Including children in a process of research, participation and reflection on the school context and proposing changes, required careful evaluation of the techniques and the time needed to avoid hastily evaluating children as incapable or not yet mature enough to participate. The negotiation of the research protocol and the timing with the professionals was thus a key point in the preparation of the fieldwork.

Ethical challenges were also significant in our research process, especially with regard to children's ages and the topics addressed (Bittencourt Ribeiro, 2017). A key point of the theoretical and methodological framework that was a good choice was to adopt a positive and constructive stance in the research approach involving children, aiming at improving their critical analysis of their experiences at school and at improving the school context itself, avoiding focusing only on the negative aspects. The children had the opportunity to talk about themselves and also to share painful experiences in and out of school. This self-revelation was not an end in itself and was not put in the spotlight by the researchers as the main object of research, but was welcomed within a path of constructive and positive work regarding the analysis of resources and the possibilities for improving the context. In connection to this point, from the point of view of the **impact on children,** it is possible to say that proposals for school innovations and their implementation augmented the participation and enthusiasm of the children involved (as has emerged in several country DE, IT, PL), confirming the necessity to include these transformative and applicative aspects in research with children.

Of course, in this kind of research model, it is crucial to consider how much the context will allow for implementation of at least part of the children's proposals. In some countries a lack of time (like in the Czech Republic) represented an obstacle for implementing proposals.

However, in general, it was very important that researchers and teachers or educators were attuned to the values and aims that inspired this research practice, and that all social actors involved were sensitized to offer concrete experiences of context transformation. It has to be part of the research agreement settled beforehand with professionals. At the same time, the feasibility of the proposals should be weighed with the children themselves, helping them identify the right interlocutors at different levels (from the class teacher, the entire teaching staff and the principal, to local or national administrative levels). Children needed help in recognizing and discriminating among these different levels.

This participatory and transformative research experience can have great educational value and models *democratic life practice* in a 'child-friendly' form in the school context, anchored to children's everyday experience. The participatory and transformative research model is a form of education *through* democracy (Gollob et al, 2010), or, as in Dewey (1916), a 'practice and experience-based' active citizenship, offering a supportive democratic learning environment, which not only gives 'voice', but allows children to collaborate in decision making which in turn renders them active social actors who are responsible for their environment, albeit in a manner proportional to their psychological maturity.

The guiding principles of participatory and transformative research are coherent and reinforce a socio-constructivist and active teaching approach, promoting a collaborative social and relational climate, respectful of different points of view, all salient factors in the improvement of children' learning and school motivation. But it is possible to say that they represent a step forward in children's participation, as they embrace the possibility for children to be full-fledged protagonist of the school environment, not only in the learning experiences but in the whole life of the school.

In relation to this, two further levels of analysis and reflection can be developed. The first level concerns the **effects not only on children but on the professional development for teachers**. We believe that an interesting result to analyse in international research is the educational impact that this research experience has had on teachers or educators who have collaborated or at least witnessed the research work, as far as it was possible to detect in the short-term by the research teams. In all the countries where the study has already been conducted, the teachers or educators have shown amazement and appreciation for the ability shown by children, even very young ones, to participate in the research. They were generally surprised that children were able to carry out activities like the ones proposed by the research protocol, such as working in groups or formulating their opinions, **being proactive** (CZ, IT).

14

In brief, the research experience allowed teachers and educators to think about and probably re-consider their ideas about children, their potential and recognize that they were underestimating the children's abilities to give their opinions, evaluate the school and make proposals. In few cases teachers had some critical comments on the activities (for example in Greece, preschool teachers considered some activities too abstract), but most teachers were likely to increment the activities involving children's participation and to extend them to other classes (like in IT, CZ).

The second level regarded the political-educational dimension. The promotion of these forms of research appears to be a desirable objective in order to promote school contexts that are deeply rooted in democratic values, inclusive, attentive to the well-being of all children and the specific and unique perspective they offer on their own experience, regarding school and society. Research in education has always aimed to combine the cognitive and training objectives of the subjects involved in the research, which is even more relevant when the participants are children. Promoting forms of participatory research with children (and with their teachers and educators) can allow effective combing cognitive and training objectives.