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YOUTH PARTICIPATION: RESULTS, LIMITS AND CHALLENGES OF APPLYING EDUCATIONAL COMMONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the development and results of an European project focused on the application of educational commons -an alternative system of values and actions in the field of education-, and the participatory audiovisual methodology -that works with audiovisual content through action-research-. The project was implemented in two case studies with young people between 16 and 18 years old in

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a socio-educational center of El Raval neighborhood, in Barcelona. The main objective of the research was to observe whether these methodologies could encourage the participation of young people from vulnerable contexts. The results prove that the creation of cooperative, democratic and playful spaces, as well as the use of a familiar language (such as audiovisual for young people) can foster greater motivation and encourage participation. However, the need to involve young people from the beginning of the implementation of the project and in the decision-making process, are also identified as necessary points to prevent them from feeling forced to participate and to make them feel part of the process.

Keywords: youth participation, educational commons, audiovisual participatory methodology, action-research, vulnerable contexts

Introduction

The Raval neighborhood community is characterized by its multiculturalism. According to data from the Barcelona City Council, 51.8% of its population is of migrant origin, in contrast to the rest of Barcelona's neighborhoods, which have a percentage of between 20% and 25%.The people living in the Raval are mainly from Pakistan, the Philippines and Bangladesh. In this sense, the neighborhood has an active associative life represented by the numerous social, cultural and educational entities that promote respect and cultural diversity coexistence.Among them is the socio-educational association AEIRaval, a private non-profit organization that provides social services and works with vulnerable groups to promote inclusion and equal opportunities (AEIRaval *n.d.*).

Regarding the link between youth and education, the report *Diagnòstic de l'educació al Raval* [*Diagnosis of education in the Raval*] reveals that almost all of the young people surveyed in the Raval do not feel part of the educational center where they attended compulsory secondary education (ESO).This expression appears connected to the teaching staff, as they stated 'little understood', 'lacking of support', 'little listened' and, in some cases, 'belittled' (Fundació Tot Raval 2017: 27). In addition, young people declare that they are the ones who adapt to the institute, but that this does not happen the other way around, stating that if they were part of the decision-making of the dynamics of the educational centers they would have a greater sense of belonging (Fundació Tot Raval 2017).

Respecting the teaching models with which they feel more motivated, young people refer to those with more dynamic and practical characteristics, where they can be more active (Fundació Tot Raval 2017).In this way, promoting participation could strengthen the bond between young people and educational centers.These kinds of actions are also useful to build a community identity and to benefit young migrants' inclusion in the culture of the host society.

In this sense, the SMOOTH-H2020 project asks whether applying the proposals of the emerging paradigm of the commons, an alternative system of values and actions in the field of education, can reverse the social inequalities of children, young people and adolescents at risk in Europe.As researchers of this project, we work on participatory action research and on the use of audiovisuals in two case studies with young people between 16 and 18 years old. These case studies are the result of an alliance between the Universitat Pompeu Fabra and a socio-educational center in the Raval neighborhood. The aim of this paper is to analyze whether the educational commons methodology can promote the active participation of young people from vulnerable contexts. For that we analyze the results obtained in the both case studies of the SMOOTH project.

Theoretical-methodological framework

Historically, ethnographic studies portrayed the research subject through the lens of specialists, leaving the researched individuals voiceless and devoid of their own perspective (Sucari 2017). Similar approaches were applied in studies examining various issues faced by children and adolescents, sidelining their voices and agency.These groups were often rendered passive and considered vulnerable or incompetent to express themselves (Clark 2010).

In relation to children and young people in vulnerable circumstances and contexts, academic literature has tended to depict them as a dependent, defenseless social group in need of assistance instead of understanding them as potential agents of their own well-being (Honwana and de Boeck 2005). This approach fails to focus on their rights or their inherent capacities to overcome adversities, leading to a 'biased portrayal of their reality' (D'Amico et al. 2016: 538-539).

To avoid falling into these epistemological contradictions, the present research is grounded in the concept of educational commons. This perspective asserts that the process of learning, knowledge transmission, and acquisition should be co-constructed among the entire educational community through spaces that promote autonomy, equality, self-sufficiency, and participation in public life (Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis 2020).

In the case studies carried out in the AEIRaval entity, the audiovisual participatory methodology is used, framed in Participatory Action Research (PAR), which breaks with traditional research and offers the study participants space to become active agents (D 'Amico et al. 2018), as well as the possibility for them to create narratives regarding what they want to express and in the way they want to do it, using audiovisuals as a transformation tool (Arciniega et. al 2022; Johansson 1999). Also, it is necessary to frame the issue of young people and adolescents at risk of exclusion around the problem of vulnerability as a condition of being hurt or receiving injury, physical or moral. This notion is used by social sciences to refer to an ecosystem in which, in the presence of a certain force or energy, some of its components can suffer damage and cause inequality and social exclusion (Vargas 2002).

By transferring this notion to the educational field, whether formal or non-formal, the concept refers to those difficulties that mark the school path of some individuals and is related to emotional, family, economic, interpersonal and even aspects related with the space in which the teaching-learning process takes place. These conditions prevent them from taking advantage of the curriculum and limit

their performance in the classroom (Manzano 2008). Although the application of the SMOOTH project has been developed within the framework of non-formal education, it should be noted that these programs also replicate conventional pedagogical methods, as well as typical practices of the regulated education system. This is especially present in the hierarchical relationships established between adults and young people, perpetuating the inequality of power between them.

We understand participation as an objective of human beings itself, as well as a mean to achieve the progress and development of societies.Participation has a fundamental role in the improvement of active citizenship inclusive models; supports girls, boys, young people and adolescents to adopt different levels of engagement. As Trilla and Novella (2001) point out, participation can stand for a lot of things, from *showing up*, *making decisions*, *getting informed* about something, *giving an opinion*, *managing* or *executing;* to simply *being enrolled*, *being a member* or *getting involved* in something with your body and your soul. So, there are many forms, types, degrees, levels and areas of participation.

These authors present an ascending ladder model of participation. At its base *simple* or *low-intensity* participation is observed, which is characterized by taking part in a process or activity as a spectator or performer, without generating an intervention, nor in its preparation, nor in decisions about its content or development. Individuals are basically limited to following directions or responding to stimuli.The next step is followed by *consultative participation*, which represents progress in listening to persons.Although at its most basic level we find the polling of their opinion through surveys or other means, progress is generated when talking about binding consultative participation, trying to give space to an agreement that enhances commitment on the part of the subject.

In this ascending order, *projective participation* seeks to enhance the agency of the subjects, highlighting their co-responsibility within the project, as well as their ability to negotiate responsibilities, through a decisive dialogue. Finally, at the top of the ladder *meta-participation*, determined by the construction of spaces with a strong sense of autonomy to encourage active participation, is situated. Since it tends to arise as a response to a systematic boredom with the lack of legitimate and efficient participation mechanisms, it is a politically confrontational stage. That's why it has a strong sense of demand.

The young people who were part of the sample of the study is determined by the SMOOTH project at the AEIRaval institution. We should point that they come from vulnerable contexts, mostly from migrant families with economic and social difficulties and with little access to political participation mechanisms. This group of approximately 30 young people with whom two case studies were developed,

periodically attends the AEIRaval Open Classroom, in the post-institute afternoon shift on Monday-Wednesday or Tuesday-Thursday. Most of them are between 16 and 18 years old and they are studying the last year of ESO, high school or some vocational training (FP). Since being a group that voluntarily attends a non-formal education space after finishing their academics journey at the institute, sample has some limitations because in many cases the participation in the project is determined by external factors.

Stages of project development SMOOTH	Researchers/ educators	Participants	Issues to be developed	Methodology Process	Data collection techniques	Information collected
1th Round (febrery - juny 2022)	**Researchers:** observers (1 woman), facilitators (2, 1 man and 1 woman). **Educators of the center:** 1 man and 1 woman.	**2 Groups** Group 1: 12 participants Group 2: 16 participants	The collective imagination of the future from children and young people from the El Raval neighborhood of Barcelona.	Step 1: Acquisition of knowledge, reflection, and consolidation of the vision of the future	Participant and non-participant observation	32 observation cards
				Step 2: Project design	Semi-structured interview with the centre's educators.	2 interviews, (1 with each educator) gender parity
				Step 3: Diagnosis with different age groups	Focus Group with the participants of each group	18/ 12 participants groups 1 and 2
				Step 4: Reflection and action		
				Step 5: Final event, open exhibition		
2nd Round (febrery - may 2023)	**Researchers:** observers (1 woman), facilitators (2, 1 man and 1 woman). **Educators of the center:** 1 man and 1 woman.	**Just one group**: 18 participants	Mental health and the different problems it has for young people in the Raval neighbourhood, Barcelona.	Step 1: Acquisition of knowledge about mental health in young people age	Participant observation	12 observation cards
				Step 2: Project design	Semi-structured interviews with the centre's educators.	2 interviews, (1 with each educator) gender parity
				Step 4: Reflection and action	Focus Group with participants	21 participants, one group only
				Step 4: Final event with the institution		

Table 1. Case study summary. First and second round SMOOTH. Own elaboration

Results and discussion

In the beginning, some young people were very defiant with the activities proposed in the framework of the SMOOTH project. Evidence of this result was collected in the observations, where it was recorded that the young people were sitting, almost lying down, with their arms crossed; they were reluctant to get involved in the planned sessions.When we detected this, we reflected as a team and realized that young people were not consulted about their willingness to get involved in this proposal, but that it was something agreed upon between the organizations (Universitat Pompeu Fabra and Aula Oberta). In other words, it was a decision made by the adults. In this sense, following Trilla and Novella (2001), we were faced with *simple participation*, insofar as we were demanding an open attitude from these young people without them having decided whether or not they wanted to take part in the project, without involving them in the preparation of the content. For this reason, they probably limited themselves to being physically present without a more active participation.

The time slot in which SMOOTH was set up had previously been a leisure space for young people who came to the center after school and could have a snack and do their homework once they had had some rest. Therefore, the apathy they expressed was also related to this change (or 'imposition') in their routines. As an alternative, we imagined and proposed playful dynamics. This served to motivate the participation of both the young people and the adults who intervened throughout the process. Who doesn't like to play? We then planned dynamics involving body movement and anything that involved going outside 'rational logic'. This was positive and allowed for a change in the general attitude of the project participants.

Experimenting with the commons implies, from our perspective, working in teams, sharing ideas, discussing, negotiating, and making decisions in assembly formats. However, we noticed that some young people with more introverted profiles did not want to talk or participate in groups that were too large, as we had planned our sessions. When we detected this, we changed the strategy and proposed working in smaller groups to generate a climate of trust in which young people could express themselves in a safe environment. We also chose to carry out activities that gathered their opinions and ideas indirectly, using resources such as post-its, collages, and artistic actions. This second turn favored more equal participation between boys and girls and those with more introverted profiles. Here we can situate a consultative participation following Trilla and Novella's (2001) scheme.

The change in participation was even more evident with the introduction of the audiovisual component, as it is a tool that uses a language that is familiar to young people. This closeness allowed the young people to begin to lead the process. The educators also ceded power and control of the educational space, so that the young people were the ones to decide what to portray on this occasion. When it came to thinking about the topic they wanted to work on, the exchange of ideas and experiences on certain topics that appealed to them as young people allowed them to share their thoughts horizontally and in a space of trust. This made it possible for them to see that they had similar perspectives and experiences on these issues. Listening to each other and the level of commitment to the project allows us to point out that at this moment, participation advances to the next step and becomes *projective* (Trilla and Novella 2001), encouraging the construction of a critical discourse of their own issues of common interest.

Finally, audiovisual production set in motion collective work in which it became necessary to acquire different roles, choosing which responsibilities they wanted to assume, according to their interests and capacities. The creation of the audiovisual products that are the material results of the application of the project, show the consolidation of *projective participation* (Trilla and Novella 2001), as they are also

the result of the process of teamwork, of the resolutive dialogue and of the negotiations that as a group allowed them to achieve the project's objective.

Once the structure that sustained the project ended, we have had no news of its effects and whether the seed of this initiative has allowed young people to autonomously lead any proposal or take a more active step about the demands and criticisms of the social system as expressed in the audiovisual pieces.Perhaps this is the movement that would allow them to move towards *meta-participation* in terms of Trilla and Novella (2001). However, it should also be noted that some authors point out that the debate on youth participation is too focused on young people with social integration difficulties (Bradford 1999). In this sense, Bendit (2004) conceptualizes participation as a mechanism to compensate for social inequalities and therefore it is necessary to introduce the social background into the debate on participation. No one is opposed to participation, but it must be recognized that participation experiences are not always positive; perhaps it is better not to participate than to have a bad experience. Moreover, if there is a right to participate, there is also a right not to participate (Murray and Hallett 2000).

Conclusion and challenge

In this text we have explained how the application of *educational commons* and participatory audiovisual methodology within the framework of action research has mobilized the participation of vulnerable young people.The participatory processes, the dialogue and the choice of the topics allowed them to become aware of those structural factors that determine them, in which they recognize themselves and from which they can build an identity as vulnerable young people.This material reality also allowed them to build a critical discourse (Arciniega et al. 2022) and to have a *projective participation* (Trilla and Novella, 2001) in the elaboration of the audiovisual pieces.

The results of the interviews carried out with the professionals who work in Aula Oberta also shed light on what the project meant for the young people. Although the way of participation was modified throughout the application of both case studies, the center's educators commented that, after the proposal that the SMOOTH project brought with it, one of the groups of young people became unmotivated and another group came together. As we have noted above, we believe that it is important to consult and involve young people from the beginning of the implementation of a project of these characteristics to prevent them from feeling that they are required or forced to participate. In addition, this can be beneficial for themselves, since they can make decisions and make contributions about the issue, modality and development of the entire project.

Among the challenges that must be pointed out to generate 'successful' participatory processes, it is worth asking what type of expectations we place as adults in participation. That is, is there an appropriate way to participate? Why should they participate in the way adults expect? Another challenge to continue working in these spaces is that of gender inequality in participatory processes, since there are dynamics that promote equal participation and others that hinder equality.

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