

**ACTIVE CHILD CITIZENSHIP: CREATING SPACES FOR PARTICIPATION**

*Ciudadanía infantil activa: creando espacios para la participación*

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ABSTRACT

Studies on the concept of citizenship reveal the correlation between the participation-citizenship pair, which is key to enhancing social inclusion and cohesion. A challenge in which education —due to its pedagogical and social role— and the municipal sphere —due to its proximity— become essential catalysts for the formation and construction of active citizenship from an early age, thus placing the citizenship of childhood in the spotlight of democratic and inclusive societies. This multiple case study aimed to characterize the concepts of citizenship and the settings that enable the participation of girls and boys in the municipalities of Moeche, Tomiño, and A Coruña (Galicia). Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted, 4 focus groups and a brief questionnaire were conducted; participating 3 technical figures,

3 elected officials, 2 experts in child and youth participation and 36 children and adolescents of the three municipalities. The main findings show: 1) a tendency towards differentiated, active, inclusive, and practical citizenship typologies, despite identifying barriers that hinder their real and effective practice; 2) five scenarios of child participation, demonstrating an institutionalization of child participation; and, 3) a connection to the means (programs, resources, and/or services) in the forms of participation, as well as the dominance of adult figures in the identified scenarios where there is a limited presence of actions managed children and adolescents themselves. It concludes with the need to generate new participation spaces and different forms of collaboration between government teams and child participation groups, through collective strategies that promote the right to actively participate in public life and municipal policies.

*Keywords:* education; citizenship; childhood; youth participation; local government.

## RESUMEN

Los estudios en torno al concepto de ciudadanía evidencian la correlación entre el binomio participación-ciudadanía que resulta clave para mejorar la inclusión y la cohesión social. Un reto en el que la educación —por su quehacer pedagógico y social— y el ámbito municipal —por su proximidad— se convierten en catalizadores esenciales para la formación y la construcción de ciudadanías activas desde edades tempranas, situando así a la ciudadanía de las infancias en el punto de mira de las sociedades democráticas e inclusivas. Este estudio cualitativo de casos múltiple se dirigió a caracterizar los conceptos de ciudadanía y los escenarios que posibilitan la participación de las chicas y los chicos en los municipios de Moeche, Tomiño y A Coruña (Galicia). Se realizaron 9 entrevistas semiestructuradas, 4 grupos de discusión y un breve cuestionario; participando 3 figuras técnicas, 3 cargos electos, 2 personas expertas en participación infanto-juvenil y 36 niñas, niños y adolescentes de los tres municipios. Los principales resultados evidencian: 1) una tendencia hacia tipologías de ciudadanía diferenciada, activa, inclusiva y práctica, aun identificando barreras que dificultan su práctica real y efectiva; 2) cinco escenarios de participación infantil, manifestando una institucionalización de la participación infantil; y, 3) una vinculación a los medios (programas, recursos y/o servicios) en las formas de participación, así como el dominio de la figura adulta en los escenarios identificados en los que se constata una escasa presencia de acciones autogestionadas por niñas, niños y adolescentes. Se concluye con la necesidad de generar nuevos espacios de participación, así como distintas formas de colaboración entre los equipos de gobierno y los grupos de participación infantil, mediante estrategias colectivas que promuevan el derecho a participar activamente en la vida pública y las políticas municipales.

*Palabras clave:* educación; ciudadanía; infancia; participación juvenil; administración local.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature on the idea of citizenship shows the correlation between the participation-citizenship binomial as a foundation *of* and *for* democratic societies. This relationship is essential to improve inclusion and social cohesion (Graziella and Rivera, 2018), as it represents an opportunity to educate citizens on ethical and democratic principles (Trilla and Novella, 2011). This education implicitly entails being able to practise citizenship (Crespo *et al.*, 2021); however, the condition of *being a citizen* has been historically questioned for certain collectives or social groups, which is why not only must the rights of each person be considered, but also the duties, commitments and responsibilities that they entail.

Children and adolescents (NNA in Spanish) have been “labelled” in the collective social imaginary, giving rise to representations that limit their human agency (Esteban *et al.*, 2022) and that pose barriers to participation in social and political spheres, in contrast to the renewed views that shape a new paradigm based on the principles of an active, dynamic, participatory and inclusive citizenship that respects the rights of children and adolescents<sup>1</sup> as full members of society.

Education—due to its pedagogical, social and democratic task—is an essential pillar to form and build active citizenship from an early age (Gajardo and Torrego, 2022). But local institutions and governments—as educational agencies—must also assume responsibilities for the education, development, democratic participation and the extension of citizenship to move towards co-governance models (Mata *et al.*, 2018; Sabariego *et al.*, 2023). This commitment has been called for by various international organisations such as the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) or citizenship education under the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The aim of this article is to characterise the concepts of citizenship and the scenarios that make child participation possible, as expressed by children and adolescents and socio-educational agents in the municipalities of Moeche, Tomiño and A Coruña (Galicia),<sup>2</sup> members of the networks of Child Friendly Cities (UNICEF-Spain) or Educating Cities.

### 1.1. *The multi-faceted citizenship of children in contemporary societies*

The idea of citizenship does not have an unambiguous design, as different factors (time, ideologies or social characteristics) have influenced its dynamic nature throughout history. Initially, Thomas H. Marshall gave it the qualifier of *status* and differentiated three components inherent to its exercise: the civil, necessary for the freedom of the individual; the political, which aims to boost participation in the

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, childhood and adolescence refers to all persons under 18 years of age. It was decided to prioritise the term *childhood* or the acronym *NNA* for easier reading.

<sup>2</sup> This research has been carried out within the framework of “Grants for University Teacher Training from the Spanish Ministry of Universities (FPU21/00667)”.

political dimension; and the social, responsible for social and economic well-being (Gaitán, 2018b; Seguro, 2016). A universal vision that was gradually eroded by the social, economic and cultural changes that took place in the 20th century. Two events emanate from this concurrence: 1) the recognition of special rights for historically silenced groups; and, 2) the reconceptualisation of the idea of citizenship. In the latter case, conceptual twists claim the (re)emergence of a new political and social actor: children and adolescents (Gaitán, 2018b; Llena and Novella, 2018).

Westheimer and Khane's (2004) proposal differentiated three types of citizenship: personally responsible, participatory and social justice-oriented; considering *social participation* essential to achieve citizenship status and to favour democracy and social justice (Seguro, 2016). Guichot (2013, 2014) affirms democratic citizenship to be an educational experience that enables participation in the political, social and economic spheres; a citizenship that—in contrast to the tradition and authority of the dominant (neoliberal current one (Doganay, 2012)— must be critical, in order to implement actions that respond to collective responsibilities and encourage the participation of all citizens (Esteban and Novella, 2018).

Following this perspective, Ramírez and Contreras (2014) consider *citizenship as the practice* that materialises in a space where people—paying attention to their uniqueness—organise diverse actions that generate learning opportunities. However, despite this critical and inclusive nature, young people are sometimes left out. In this regard, Gaitán (2018b) differentiates two definitions: *active citizenship* and *differentiated citizenship*, which will identify the discrepancies and/or dilemmas related to its consideration for children and young people.

In turn, Lister (2007b) warned that two trends coexist, brought together in different platforms: those that identify children and adolescents as 'apprentices of citizenship', in the education process; and those that affirm that they are social actors with a sense of agency and with different competencies (Cano *et al.*, 2021). But this dichotomous polarisation can be reductionist, as there are intermediate positions (Figure 1); hence Gaitán and Liebel (2011) established a classification that identifies citizenship as:

- Practice: as its exercise constitutes a practice (Lawt and Biesta, 2006), avoiding statuses and polarisations (citizen versus non-citizen).
- From below: as it emerges from everyday practice, without regulatory requirements and absence of power and rights (Liebel, 2006); therefore, children and adolescents should be empowered, (self-)creating a collective consciousness.
- Focused on difference: considers children and adolescents as citizens with full rights of belonging, who must "be recognised on the basis of social difference" (Gaitán, 2018b, p. 44).

Similarly, Lister (2007a, 2017b) alludes to other citizenships: 1) *lived citizenship*, understanding the meaning of personal experiences; 2) *inclusive citizenship*, as an

FIGURE 1  
CLASSIFICATION OF CHILDREN'S CITIZENSHIP



Source: Gaitán and Liebel (2011) and Lister (2007a, 2017b)

alternative to the traditional inclusion/exclusion binomial; and 3) *active citizenship* of children, adopting a critical stance due to the neglect and materialisation of children and adolescents' citizenship rights.

Other studies encourage constructing a critical, participatory and transformative citizenship from an early age under the framework of democratic and inclusive societies (Esteban *et al.*, 2022; Mata *et al.*, 2013; Melero *et al.*, 2021); taking into account recommendations that demand greater involvement and political commitment in relation to their rights (Gaitán, 2018a, 2018b):

- *Civil*: the lack of spaces conditions the right to be heard (article 12.2 of the CRC), limiting the opportunities for civic practices to express and assert their demands.
- *Political*: the right to assembly (Article 15) is forgotten, having an impact on the exercise of participation and the development of critical citizen awareness among peers.
- *Social*: they show the low participation of children and adolescents in certain areas, especially in formal education, the right to rest and recreation (article 31).

In this regard, Novella *et al.* (2013) suggest moving forward on two fronts: 1) recognising that children and adolescents are citizens of the present; and 2) recognising them as citizens and educating them in this. Child participation is an inescapable factor in crystallising responsible and involved citizenship (Esteban and Novella, 2018); which is substantive —as Ramiro and Alemán (2016) would say— and lived (Pauliina *et al.*, 2020). Achieving this requires institutional approval to transform the adult-centric policies that oppress the agency of younger generations (Gaitán, 2018b).

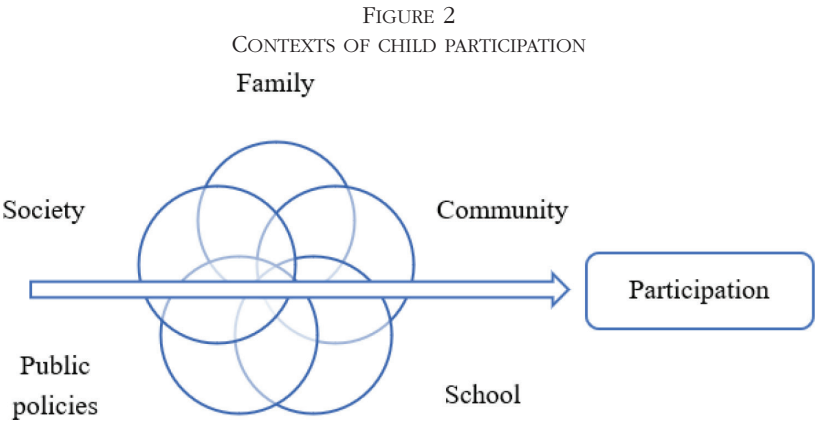
## 1.2. *Enabling scenarios for children's citizenship*

Participation being the common denominator of the theories of children's citizenship, Hart's (1992) theoretical position stands out in which —in the form of a ladder— it differentiates eight steps, categorised into two large blocks: non-participation and genuine participation. In the first block are the first three steps (Manipulation, Decoration and Symbolic Performance), while genuine participation comprises the top five, representing the scenarios of real and effective participation of children and adolescents.

Starting from this metaphor, Trilla and Novella (2001) suggest four broader ways of characterising it: 1) simple: led by adults, with a symbolic and passive character of children and adolescents; 2) consultative: where they (deliberately) raise issues with the management teams; 3) projective: where children and adolescents are actively involved; and 4) meta-participation: where children and adolescents are at the centre of reflective and collegial processes. They all constitute scenarios for learning to participate by participating and promote the development of participatory competences, conditioned by four factors (involvement, information-awareness, decision-making capacity and individual commitment-responsibility) that give rise to complex, multi-dimensional, inclusive and feedback practices (Novella, 2008).

Tresseder (1997) offers a circular interpretation of child participation, with all elements influencing each other; while Lansdown (2005) establishes three levels of participation (consultative, participatory and autonomous) between adults and children to become the protagonists in projects. This reading implies that opportunities for children’s participation have to be expanded from the private sphere to public spaces (UNICEF, 2003), identifying five scenarios of participation (Figure 2): 1) family: where primary socialisation takes place; 2) community, where daily experiences occur; 3) school, as the educational institution of reference for the promotion of student participation; 4) public policies, introducing children and adolescents into specific structures (Children’s Forums or Councils); and 5) society, specifying their contribution in electoral processes and mass-media.

Apud (2001) or Casas *et al.* (2008) pointed to other contexts conducive to learning how to participate democratically: social life (municipal or local), administrative procedures or organisations for leisure and free time. Other studies (Castellanos, 2022; Cho *et al.*, 2020; Novella *et al.*, 2021b), allude to digital environments as new contexts



Source: Compiled by the authors, adapted from UNICEF (2003)

for political participation; however, there are trends that consider digital media as a poor strategy for participation at these ages (Dias and Potter, 2016; Murden and Cadenasso, 2018) due to the potential risks to which they are exposed (Pavez, 2014).

The study by Novella *et al.* (2021a) points out three types of governance scenarios from the institutional sphere driven by children and adolescents, as an organised and self-managed collective. The first identifies the municipal bodies for child and adolescent participation (participation forums, local children and youth councils, etc.); the second includes participatory initiatives of a consultative and projective nature; and the final one includes experiences promoted and led by children and adolescents. It is therefore necessary to promote spaces and opportunities for participation in different contexts (families, schools, municipalities, etc.) from an early age, as well as to encourage education for responsible citizenship with children's rights, in order to promote their inclusion in municipal public policies.

## 2. METHOD

This article derives from the project called “Childhood and Participation: Diagnosis and Proposals for an Active and Inclusive Citizenship in the Community, Institutions and Governance” (RTI2018-098821-B-I00); whose purpose was to analyse the participation of children in those municipalities that are members of the International Association of Educating Cities and/or Child Friendly Cities of UNICEF-Spain. This paper focuses on a multiple case study—combining qualitative and quantitative techniques (interviews, focus groups and a questionnaire with open-ended questions)—of three Galician municipalities: Moeche, Tomiño and A Coruña (Galicia); in order to explore and describe the perceptions held by the agents most directly involved in child participation from the contexts themselves (Simons, 2011; Stake, 1995). The aim was to characterise the ideas of *citizenship* and *scenarios of child participation* in these three municipalities, as well as to find out the *ways* in which they sum up their participation.

### 2.1. Contexts and participants

Selecting the municipalities was based on two criteria: 1) belonging to the network of Educating Cities (EC) and/or Child Friendly Cities (CFC) of UNICEF-Spain; 2) voluntary participation in the project. The singularities of each case allowed for a certain heterogeneity in the sample, identifying common elements that contributed to sustaining the quantity and diversity of the information obtained. In this way, it was decided to include (2) experts in boosting child and youth participation, (3) people with elected posts and (3) municipal technical figures as agents in charge to promote the participation of these groups. In addition, 36 children and adolescents participated and their stories complemented and contrasted the information provided by other actors (Table 1).

TABLE 1  
MUNICIPALITIES, PARTICIPANTS AND CODING

Municipality	Instrument	Participant profile	Code
Moeche (1)	Interview	Councillor for Local Development, Equality, Childhood and Adolescence Education Technician	P1E T1E
	Discussion group	Child and adolescent	NA1D NO1D
Tomiño (2)	Interview	Councillor for Eurocity, Youth and Children Participation Culture and Youth Technician Child and adolescent council facilitator	P2E T2E D2E
	Discussion group	Child and adolescent	NA2D NO2D
A Coruña (3)	Interview	Education Councillor Education Technician Expert adviser	P3E T3E OA3E
	Discussion group	Child and adolescent	NA3D NO3D

Note: As an example, the code T2E corresponds to Tomiño's technique (2) whose textual quotation derives from the Interview  
Source: Compiled by the author

According to INE data (2024), the municipality of A Coruña has 247,376 inhabitants, making it a large city<sup>3</sup>. Tomiño —with13,836 inhabitants— represents a medium-sized town; and Moeche is the smallest territory, with 1,206 inhabitants. Beyond these differences, others are evident: number of municipal departments, population dispersion/concentration, territorial condition (city compared to rural), means and/or services of communication with the youngest groups, as well as strategies to manage their participation in the municipality.

Although all three have a proven track record in child participation, the town council of A Coruña has been a member of the International Association of Educating Cities since 1996, creating the local body for child and adolescent participation (CLIAC) in 2023; while Tomiño and Moeche have been part of the Child Friendly Cities network (UNICEF-Spain) since 2018 and have local councils for children and adolescents (CLIA).

<sup>3</sup> In the glossary of the National Statistics Institute (INE), large towns are those with more than 50,000 inhabitants.



## 2.2. Instruments and procedure to collect information

The instruments used in this study were designed *ad hoc* by the research team, in collaboration with experts in children's rights; they were validated by the Bioethics Committee of the University of Barcelona.

The semi-structured interviews (E) aimed to learn about the experiences and reflections on the dimensions and categories addressed; a total of eight interviews were conducted—with the prior consent for recording and subsequent transcription—during the months of February to July 2021 using an *online* platform, depending on the availability of the informants. The interview was divided into 4 thematic blocks: 1) Contextual data, professional profile and trajectory in children's participation; 2) Social representation of children and adolescents; 3) Children's citizenship; 4) Forms of participation. This article presents the narratives related to thematic block 3, which included the following questions: *What does citizenship mean for children and adolescents? In your view, do these rights and responsibilities translate into practice? Do children and adolescents have the same rights and responsibilities as others? What opportunities and difficulties do you identify for this exercise of citizenship by children and adolescents to become effective in the municipality?*

The discussion groups (DG) were intended to include the voices and views of children and adolescents regarding their participatory citizenship, as well as to create a space for opinion to learn about their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, beliefs and/or experiences (Haumi and Varela, 2013). Four DGs were carried out in face-to-face format (2 in A Coruña, 1 in Tomiño and 1 in Moeche), with the participation—on a voluntary and consented basis—of 36 children and adolescents aged between 10 and 12 (60% girls) from the three municipalities. Its duration fluctuated between 40 and 120 minutes, taking place in spaces trusted by children and adolescents in each municipality. A specific guide was prepared for three key moments: preparation, convening and development. Three blocks of content were explored on the basis of 6 questions: 1) children and participation; 2) inclusion of children in municipal participation. Reasons and opportunities; and 3) new forms of participation. In relation to this instrument, block 1 is the subject of analysis, which includes the following questions: *What spaces do you participate in most at local level? How do you participate in these places?*

Finally, a short questionnaire (C) was applied to the adult informants, whose information helped to reinforce the triangulation of the analysis of the results and which consisted of 14 open questions organised in three blocks: 1) general: municipality, gender, position/responsibility, studies and education; 2) related to concepts of childhood, citizenship, participation and opportunity scenarios for children; and 3) to incorporate optional comments. For this article, the following questions are taken into account: *What do you associate with the term citizenship? What scenarios of opportunity do you identify for participation and decision-making?*, linked to the categories of citizenship and scenarios of opportunity in block 2.

TABLE 2  
CATEGORICAL SYSTEM

Dimensions	Categories
Children’s perceptions of the concept of citizenship	Child citizenship
	Classification of the concept of citizenship
Scenarios of opportunity	Identification of scenarios for child and adolescent participation
	Characterisation of the scenarios and forms of participation of children and adolescents

Source: Compiled by the author

2.3. *Analysis procedure*

The content analysis technique was selected to process the information obtained by creating a categorical system (Table 2) and the *Atlas.ti* v.9 programme was used to facilitate the process. The categorical system resulted from two phases: the first phase consisted of two parts: 1) inductive, from which the initial dimensions and categories derived from the transcripts were obtained, and 2) deductive, examining the initial proposals in accordance with the theoretical reference of the research project. The second phase served to redefine —after a group analysis— the provisional system, approving the categories for coding the units of analysis of the three instruments used. The use of codes (Table 1) is in accordance with Organic Law 3/2018, of 5 December, on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights.

3. RESULTS

This section presents the results obtained in relation to the goals, the dimensions and categories created, as well as the content analysis carried out.

3.1. *Children’s perceptions of the concept of citizenship*

In general terms, children’s citizenship is associated with rights, duties and responsibilities, although there are differences in the equal consideration of these attributions between children and adolescents and adults. The unanimity in the theoretical recognition —based on official regulatory documents— of the right to equality of both groups contrasts with its daily application; a theoretical-practical distance that shows that —despite legislative advances— it is necessary to raise awareness of the role that children can —and should— have in their communities in order to exercise citizenship under equal conditions. It highlights the need to materialise some of the issues shaping this public debate:

The child is not a productive entity (...) they do not have the right to move freely, for example. They have no right to be heard. They have no right to protest because they have no capacity for self-organisation (...) I think this was seen very clearly in the pandemic, wasn't it? Where were the children? Pets had more rights! (OA3E).

Hence, duties and/or responsibilities should be different between children and adolescents and adults, adapting to the evolutionary condition, age, sex/gender, behaviour... since "we ask them for more responsibilities than we give them rights" (P1E); "you cannot ask the same responsibility from an adult as from a child" (P3E); "they cannot have the same duties (...) we cannot demand the same from them (...)" (T2E).

These arguments reveal the association of the concept of citizenship with these requirements:

- Children and adolescents are citizens of origin: "one is a citizen from the moment one is born" (P3E).
- It has a legal-political conception: "it is to take into account all the rules that you think you should apply or the conditions that you should be able to enjoy" (T3E).
- It focuses on "social difference" (OA2E), but considers them equal to exercise the right to be part of society.

The OA3E classification, which establishes three levels, deserves special mention:

"1) citizenship as a legal condition: referring to the rights and duties embodied in official documents; 2) citizenship that is aware and responsible: to fulfil, know and exercise their rights and duties; and 3) critical, participative and committed citizenship: to improve their community and the coexistence system".

In short, levels that aspire to achieve a transformative citizenship, highlighting the need to work collaboratively with adults in the organisation of child and adolescent rights; promoting social changes that do not limit their agency in the collective imagination, since "they are people who have the same dignity as everyone else" (OA3E).

The following word cloud (Figure 3) shows the conceptualisation of child citizenship ascribed by participants in the questionnaire:

### 3.2. *Scenarios of opportunity*

#### a) Identification of the scenarios of child and adolescent participation:

The scenarios of opportunity for child and adolescent participation (Figure 4) identified by adult participants in the questionnaire applied are linked to: a) institutionalised structures that favour child and youth participation (councils, schools, children's plenary sessions, government...); b) agents of socialisation (friends, associations, environment...); and, c) recreational or leisure spaces for children and adolescents (sport, volunteering, culture...).

FIGURE 3  
WORDS ASSOCIATED WITH THE CONCEPT OF CHILD CITIZENSHIP



Source: Compiled by the author

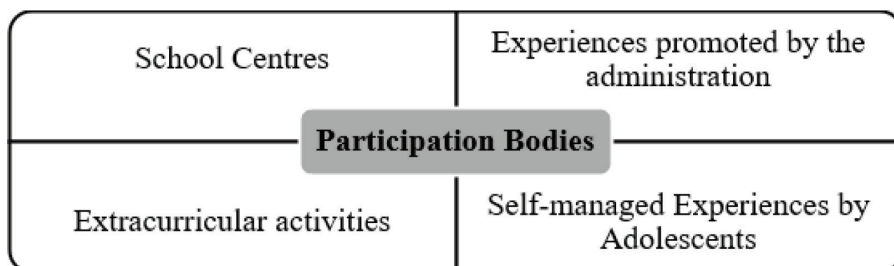
FIGURE 4  
OPPORTUNITY SCENARIOS FOR CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PARTICIPATION



Source: Compiled by the author

Meanwhile, in the narratives of the interviews and discussion groups, five scenarios of child and adolescent participation were identified (Figure 5): municipal bodies, schools, self-managed or institutionally-driven experiences. However, despite the existence of other environments for participation, relationships and/or socialisation that are more in tune with the times and ways of relating to today's youth, these are barely in evidence.

FIGURE 5  
SCENARIOS OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PARTICIPATION



Source: Compiled by the author

b) Characterisation of scenarios of opportunity:

1. *Bodies for child and youth participation promoted by local government:*

In Moeche and Tomiño, the participation councils represent the main scenario where children and adolescents exercise and practice their citizenship, affirming that “the Local Children’s Council is a binding consultative body through which they can participate. They are a channel of communication between children and adolescents and the town council through which they communicate their concerns to us” (P1E); furthermore, they indicate that “in Tomiño, the Local Council was renewed because those who were participating reached the age of majority (...). Right now, there are about 18 members” (P2E).

Thus actions are developed, *in* and *from* these bodies, aimed at:

- Questions and issues related to the council: internal organisation (proposals, decision-making, voting...) and annual planning, stating that “Tomiño is large and dispersed, so what we do is that every time they meet in person, a vote is held among the Council group and they decide where they want to meet” (P2E).
- Design of spaces and programming: remodelling initiatives and requests for municipal programming, expressing that “they are now in the middle of choosing an artist to paint a mural for which they have decided on the theme, the building. This has been facilitated by the government itself” (D2E).
- Awareness raising: road safety education, intergenerational relations, environment, social networks (*TikTok*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*), indicating that “we participate in many ways: with UNICEF, we go to parliament, we propose activities, we made a road safety education circuit, we name streets...” (NO1D).
- Participation in meetings with other children and adolescents: Galician municipal councils, regional, national meetings or meetings promoted by UNICEF,

the Galician Parliament, etc., stating that “we had a meeting of several councils together talking about bullying and debating” (NO2D) or that “we took part in a meeting of councils for children and adolescents at regional level” (NA2D).

## 2. *Schools:*

In relation to the participation of children and adolescents in the school framework, two clear intentions are concluded: the election of representatives for the participation bodies (CLIA), as well as collaboration in the actions carried out by the council and/or the municipality, stating that “in our school the council facilitator came and first we voted on who would be our spokespeople” (NO2D); and the promotion of the participation of these groups in the educational centres and the community:

The children’s plenary session is that each school promotes certain themes and a certain way of working by the centres that sign up at the beginning of the school year. They deal with topics that the children have to try to work on in the centre, and they bring proposals regarding these topics that they research in the town. In the plenary hall, the mayor welcomes them and listens to their requests (T3E).

In this scenario, the actions focus on issues related to the design of public space, the environment, the design of proposals for the municipal plenary session and the stimulation of entrepreneurship. They express it by stating that “we conducted participatory architecture with natural objects for the playground. We placed benches, sculptures made by us in turns. It was the children who organised it by doing those things” (NO1D). Therefore, simple and consultative forms of participation predominate, relegating projective participation to specific actions, which causes some dissatisfaction in them, as evidenced in the following commentary:

On social media they ask us, What should we do to improve something in the town? And we all stated our ideas, but basically I think the ideas actually just stayed in the exercise. They usually ask us for a whole sheet of paper full of questions that you answer, even with ideas, and it’s not worth anything, because you do it, they correct it and what good does it do you? It’s just a waste of a sheet of paper, isn’t it? (NA3D).

## 3. *Experiences promoted by different departments of the local administration with an impact on the community:*

The third scenario is characterised by the implementation of programmes and proposals linked to different municipal departments that request the participation of children and young people in:

- Community volunteering: a scenario in which different types of interventions take shape, as they state that “we have a local volunteer group with many years

of experience, encouraged from the Youth Information Office (P2E); or that “in Social Welfare there is the Youth office which has a programme in which young people are volunteers (P3E); incorporating the intergenerational vision, as they affirm that “with the help of Social Services, at Christmas, children wrote letters, first to the elderly who were admitted to the two old people’s centres in Tomiño, but in the end they were extended to the population over 80 years old” (T2E).

- Information and dissemination of municipal resources and services for young people, such as the Information Antennae, which “is an initiative made up of young volunteers who sign up and act as informers in different places. These activities should be taken into account because they are great triggers for participation, especially among adolescents” (P3E).
- Environment: in which some action was also carried out “almost more or less symbolic, we planted some trees” (NA2D).
- Coexistence: promoting exchanges between Galician and Portuguese school-children, considering that “it was a good experience. We did it with Portugal because it is the ‘Eixo Atlántico’. There is an aspect of coexistence, of getting to know another culture. I think it is a good initiative” (T3E).

In these actions, participation takes different forms: simple, consultative and projective; by participating —symbolically or actively— in some of the proposed initiatives, being protagonists and co-responsible in their development and execution, as they say: “I was involved in an Adoquin project, in a park company, making a kind of park outline” (NO3D).

#### *4. Self-managed initiatives by adolescents in the community:*

They are those experiences that are —only— driven and led by adolescents, and that are linked to cultural and sports associations; a scenario that is only contemplated in the town council of Tomiño, whose actions have an essentially recreational purpose, expressing that “associations, such as ‘Os Teixugos’, the Taíña festival, which are made up entirely by young people. But it is more focused on its cultural or sporting sphere; so, like the council, there is nothing else” (D2E).

#### *5. Extracurricular activities at the town council:*

The group of children and adolescents also identifies places or spaces that favour participation by means of extracurricular activities in their local town council (sport, music, dance, etc.). In this case, the predominant form of participation is simple, and is associated with attending initiatives designed by adults, stating that “I go to hip-hop classes. Sometimes there are groups of four or five and the teacher



teaches us the steps and dances, sometimes we choose the music and she teaches us the steps” (NA1D).

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As the results show, children’s citizenship is associated with the rights, duties and responsibilities attributed to their age. However, there are still different perceptions of the idea —and especially the exercise— of citizenship in their local communities of reference. Hence, they demand greater awareness of the role they can play in community environments, going from being interpreted as recipients of actions to being listened to in order to obtain answers and for their demands to crystallise into proposals for action of interest to them (Esteban and Novella, 2018). Demands that materialise in the desire to increase their participation in order to be recognised as people of the present and not as future agents.

This claim addresses the minimum standards proposed by UNICEF (2019) and the basic conditions for ethical, effective, valuable and quality participation (Save the Children, 2017), in order to mark them out as citizens with agency and transformative competence; an explicit recognition of citizenship that is to shape a restructuring of the social fabric. Thus, and according to Liebel (2021), the fact of promoting projects that favour active citizenship for girls and boys contributes to the transformation —and redefinition— of adult-centric structures and visions that exclude them; since —from their point of view— adult behaviour makes them lose motivation and they become indifferent, as opposed to the possibility of sharing actions that generate interest and allow them to learn to participate, opening new opportunities to discover and get involved in collective projects. To do so, it is necessary to remove barriers between adults and young people by engaging in peer-led processes (Esteban and Novella, 2018). This circumstance calls for the progressive autonomy of children and adolescents on the road to citizenship (Ruiz, 2019), in order to achieve full equality of rights and build fairer and more democratic societies. An achievement that —according to Gaitán and Liebel (2011)— must be based on the principle of difference as a social group.

In this eagerness to activate multiple scenarios that favour child participation, it is clear that the school system is not the most suitable place to learn citizenship and participation (Aguado *et al.*, 2018). In contrast, the study by García *et al.* (2019) points out that —at least in schools in Catalonia— the children’s collective is incorporated as a partner in the school’s governance, although their degree of participation in its functioning is less recognised. But there are also other initiatives that favour the participation of children and young people in schools, creating reflective spaces of dialogue that allow them to transform educational reality (Saiz-Linares *et al.*, 2019) and to get involved in assessment processes (Pascual-Arias *et al.*, 2022).

The different participation scenarios identified suggest an institutionalisation of the participation of worthy groups in the municipalities studied, with the participation



bodies being the dominant channel (except in the case of A Coruña); aligning their actions with the functions of representing, proposing and designing proposals (Trilla and Novella, 2011), as well as raising awareness at different levels (Novella *et al.*, 2021a). However, the adult figure facilitates the organisation of participatory projects and/or experiences, to the detriment of those led and/or self-managed by children and adolescents, which is why consultative and projective participation stands out (Trilla and Novella, 2001), with Tomiño being the only one with adolescent leadership that links its actions to the cultural and sporting spheres. In this sense, and even considering that all forms of participation are praiseworthy and necessary, it is necessary to incorporate methodologies that promote critical-reflective thinking, agreeing on committed actions from practices of involvement (Llena and Novella, 2018). The aim is to encourage projective participation and meta-participation, characterised by being based on reflection *in*, *for* and *about* action; becoming mechanisms that facilitate collegial decision-making and help plan the actions to be implemented. In other words, children and adolescents have to construct and model their own participation, assuming a research/evaluative role in their practices in order to progress in their relevance and leadership (Riádigos and Gradaïlle, 2023).

Children and adolescents also identify spaces that favour their participation through extracurricular activities (sport, music, dance...) that enable greater involvement at community level (Gairín and Galdames, 2023). In this case, the predominant form of participation is simple, and is associated with attending initiatives designed by other adults (Cano *et al.*, 2019), identifying leisure experiences that take place in the neighbourhoods of reference and in public spaces. But it is also necessary to consider other educational spaces such as families or digital environments (Cho *et al.*, 2020; De la Garza *et al.*, 2019), since —in recent decades— they have become a participatory space at the service of the youngest citizens (Novella *et al.*, 2021b). However, although social networks have changed the meaning and significance of child and youth participation, they are capable of stimulating their engagement and social action (García *et al.*, 2014) by transforming individual and social relationships, information and communication, interaction between citizens and governments, and civic participation (UNESCO, 2019; UNICEF, 2020). Changes that —apart from traditional hierarchies— shape new tools for social and political entrepreneurship.

In any case, according to Trilla and Novella's (2001) classification, consultative and projective participation continue to be the majority options, given that not only are certain issues debated, but they are actively involved in the different phases involved in the implementation of projects in the community, materialising in proposals for volunteering, dissemination and coexistence. The review prepared by Mateos *et al.* (2022) on the scope of child and adolescent led experiences is supported by the diversity of child and adolescent led participatory settings, highlighting environmental and urban scenarios; with experiences related to climate change and emergency, care and protection of the environment (e.g. the *Fridays For Future* movement) being the predominant ones (Novella and Sabariego, 2020).

The citizen participation of children in municipalities implies political, technical and professional commitment (Novella *et al.*, 2023); hence the responsibility of the administration to assume and exercise its educational agency. To this end, and in order to broaden the study, it would be desirable to carry out a comprehensive and holistic approach that takes into account the new participation scenarios (digital environments), to promote municipal citizenship education programmes (Crespo *et al.*, 2021; UNICEF, 2020) as well as to analyse —from a comparative perspective— other contexts in which children participate in the exercise of their citizenship.

In short, it is necessary to generate new forms of collaboration between government teams and children's participation groups, as well as to promote more opportunities for active and activist citizenship. In this challenge, the link between education-participation-citizenship is essential to promote the exercise of democratic rights, encouraging greater involvement of children and adolescents in the design of public policies in order to become authentic agents of change and transformation of their communities (Twum-Danso, 2023). A pedagogical and social task that will contribute to improving local democracy by focusing on the rights and inclusion of children and young people.

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