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## **ANALYSIS OF AN EXPERIENCE OF DAILY PRACTICES OF DEMOCRACY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

*Análisis de una experiencia de prácticas cotidianas de democracia en educación infantil*

Katherine GAJARDO ESPINOZA & Luis TORREGO EGIDO

*Universidad de Valladolid. Spain.*

*katherine.gajardo@usach.cl; luis.torrego@uva.es*

*<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9972-6116>; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2907-1158>*

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### ABSTRACT

Democratic education is essential for building more just and equitable societies. Hence the importance of children's participation and the exercise of citizenship in school, which must be carried out from an early age, as soon as children begin the process of socialization with their peers. However, experiences of democratic practices in formal childhood education are scarce, perhaps due to the scarce consideration of children as subjects of citizenship rights. In this article, we analyse the actions and dialogues, both in the classroom and outside it, of a teacher with an intense career in the Movements of Pedagogical Renewal (MRPs), and the children of pre-school education in a public school in Spain, regarding the exercise of democratic education. The research is carried out through a case study conducted over two academic years

(2018 to 2020) and which uses participant observation, informal interviews, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. The results indicate that it is possible to favour actions focused on students and their citizen participation, with the perspective of democratic education and from a very early age (2 to 5 years). To this end, it is essential that teachers be committed to the rights of the child, that they use dialogue as the backbone, encourage care for themselves and others, promote coexistence and cooperation among peers, denounce injustice, promote equality and develop diverse relationships with their surroundings.

*Key words:* Early childhood education; citizen participation; Democracy; rights of the child; right to education.

## RESUMEN

La educación democrática es esencial para la construcción de sociedades más justas y equitativas. De ahí la importancia de la participación de niños y niñas y del ejercicio de la ciudadanía en la escuela, que ha de realizarse desde edades tempranas, apenas los pequeños inician el proceso de socialización con sus pares. Sin embargo, son escasas las experiencias de prácticas democráticas en educación infantil formal, quizás por la escasa consideración de la infancia como sujeto de derechos de ciudadanía. En este artículo se analizan las acciones y los diálogos, tanto en el aula como fuera de ella, de una maestra, con una intensa trayectoria en los Movimientos de Renovación Pedagógica (MRP), y de las niñas y niños de educación infantil de una escuela pública de España, respecto al ejercicio de la educación democrática. La investigación se concreta en un estudio de casos realizado a lo largo de dos cursos académicos (2018 a 2020), que se sirve de observación participante, entrevistas informales, entrevistas en profundidad y análisis documental. Los resultados indican que es posible favorecer acciones centradas en el alumnado y en su participación ciudadana, con la perspectiva de la educación democrática y desde muy tempranas edades (2 a 5 años). Para ello resultan esenciales el compromiso docente con los derechos del niño, la utilización del diálogo como eje vertebrador, el impulso por el cuidado de uno mismo y del otro, el fomento de la convivencia y la cooperación entre pares, la denuncia de la injusticia, la promoción de la igualdad y el desarrollo diverso de relaciones con el entorno.

*Palabras clave:* educación de la primera infancia; participación del ciudadano; Democracia; derechos del niño; derecho a la educación.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey states that democracy constitutes participatory engagement in the construction of the values that regulate human coexistence. Dewey does not only refer to the role of school as a preparation for future civic life, but goes further, and argues that more than a form of ruling or a set of experiences that prepares for the future, the central issue is to live in the present — and in the present of schooling — situations of democratic life (Dewey, 1946).

To this end, the school must be open to the students' participation, «giving them the floor and committing to listen to them (...) it is worth calling students to a main role of co-responsibility within their school» (Tonucci, 2009, p. 19). This is not any extraordinary attribution, as it is part of children's rights: The Convention on the Rights of the Child states that «children have the right to express their views whenever decisions are made that concern them» (Tonucci, 2009, p. 20).

However, there is a high and low-intensity consensus in society regarding children's right to social participation, even more so when they are «very young» (Casas, 2008, p. 21). The idea that children are not mature enough and do not have enough life experience to decide their own path is based on a number of variables, and in one of them teachers have been key: during schooling, childhood has been so managed by adults that their own voices seem to have been forgotten (Winter, 1995).

Children's awareness of their citizenship rights, based on the real exercise of these rights (Verhellen, 1999), is essential for strengthening an educational paradigm that considers the student as the protagonist of his or her formative process (Casas, 2008) and for the development of democratic societies (Hart, 1992). Korczak's contribution goes further: he imagines a «children's society» where children are able to chart the course to social justice through the agency (Liebel, 2019). To this end, education in schools is crucial.

Peter McLaren (1984) argues that our culture, however, promotes the strange myth that teaching is an independent, neutral, objective and value-free activity.

This is exacerbated in early childhood education, which is considered an elementary stage in which girls and boys receive a supposedly aseptic education, based on care and training of basic bodily and hygienic functions and the acquisition of minimal knowledge through transmission or training. The rejection of this vision and the consideration of education as an ethical and anthropological issue, which implies the development of reflexivity, learning to participate and the construction of processes of listening, dialogue and co-responsibility are the basis of any democratic experience in early childhood education.

The practices and conditions in which school activity takes constitute the first experiences of citizenship development:

The most significant forms of democratic education often take place through the process and practices that make up children's everyday lives (...) they deserve our most special attention if we are truly concerned with democratic education (Belavi & Murillo, 2016, p. 30).

Teachers are a key factor in achieving democratic education. The teaching activity must be understood as an ethical commitment to a model of society that is under continuous reconstruction in the classroom, from early childhood to university (Carbonell *et al.*, 2018).

In this paper, we analyse a case in which a teacher linked to the Movements for Pedagogical Renewal (MRPs) throughout her career develops actions in her classroom that are consistent with her democratic convictions. Undoubtedly, belonging to this educational movement has shaped their teaching identity, as belonging to a social movement «leads to conceiving collective identities as interactive entities, the product of relational processes of exchange and negotiation between individuals or groups» (Delgado-Salazar, 2011, p. 207).

MRPs emerged in Spain at the end of the Franco regime and expanded during the so-called democratic transition. These organisations are mainly made up of teaching professionals committed to putting education at the service of the human being and, therefore, work and fight for:

Renewing and democratising schools, with an approach that is not only educational but also social. MRPs constitute an alternative to the existing educational model for its transformation into a universal, ethical, critical, inclusive, scientific, secular and democratic model that includes participation in society as a goal (Esteban, 2016, p. 269).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on democratic education in the early years shows a varied range of approaches, depending on the main concern and interest with which the research is approached.

Particularly interesting for the purpose of our study are those works that detail experiences based on the recognition of children's rights and the promotion of their participation (Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013), such as those carried out by Mesquita-Pires (2012) in Portugal, or those of Labaha (2014) and Leinonen *et al.* (2014) who show how the curriculum and the commitment of the educational communities have given children in Norwegian and Finnish schools the right to express their opinions through actions such as: (1) admitting that children have multiple forms of expression; (2) allocating space for communication; (3) allowing time for listening; (4) providing opportunities; and (5) subscribing to reflective practice.

A different perspective, more markedly political and multi-faceted, is provided by Cameron and Moss (2020), who develop actions against market logics in education, suppressing the idea of children's training for academic performance and advocating the liberation of early childhood teachers from the logics of accountability.

The contributions of the latter author, Peter Moss, are worth highlighting in a context marked by the development of neoliberal capitalism (Moss, 2014; 2015; 2017). Moss advocates the strengthening of Slow Education; affective participation; respect for equal opportunities (sex and gender), children's skills and/or capacities; collaboration between educational agents in the school and the creation and/or use of techniques that reflect the multiple languages of childhood (use of drawing or dialogical conversations, for example).

Two specific areas of research have experienced a significant development: the relevance of pedagogical leadership in children's schools for strengthening democratic educational practices through the development of reflexivity (Bøe & Hognestad, 2017; Boardman, 2018) and children's participation in education for sustainable development activities and programmes with a democratic and responsibility-developing perspective (Hedefalk *et al.*, 2015; Kanyal *et al.*, 2019).

Publications of this kind are rare in Spain. These include the proposals by Bernabé (2016) and Correa *et al.* (2016) on democratic classrooms and the overview of European education policies for democratic citizenship by Gutiérrez *et al.* (2010). Of particular interest is the review of research on listening and participation processes in early childhood by Castro *et al.* (2016), as well as the proposal of Ortiz *et al.* (2018), who developed an extensive literature review to identify and define some characteristics of a democratic educational experience. These indicators, which are useful for our research, will be addressed in the following section.

With regard to research analysing the impact of MRPs on the achievement of a democratic school, should refer to the studies by Esteban (2016) or Torrego and Martínez-Scott (2018), both of which highlight the importance of teacher commitment for an education that respects children's rights. Likewise, those researches that study the impact of MRPs on teacher identity, such as the work of Santamaría-Cárdaba *et al.* (2018), which identified four aspects influenced by MRPs: (1) the critical view of the school and the educational system; (2) the high degree of commitment to the educational community; (3) the need to establish collaborative teaching reflection and (4) the configuration of common pedagogical ideological references (such as Freire or Freinet).

Ortiz *et al.* (2018), our main theoretical source, generated a series of indicators of democratisation in schools and analysed three educational experiences promoted by the collectives Red Khelidôn, Educació en Transició and MeSumaría. Their study shows there is coherence between a school founded on the ideals of MRPs and high indicators of democratic education in its educational projects.

### 2.1. *Brief theoretical framework of the research*

The literature review identifies a number of procedures, attitudes and organisational structures specific to democratic education experiences. Ortiz *et al.* (2018), who also start from a review of the state of the art on this issue, generate indicators to identify democratic educational actions that apply, precisely, to the analysis of educational projects promoted by MRPs members or organisations. We used four of them in our research:

- Prevalence of dialogue, negotiation and social relations based on affection between the different groups in a school. The democratic school community is the result of interpersonal relationships that take the form of «affection, communication and cooperation» (Puig, 2000, p. 63). In this context, dialogic action takes place when everyone in the classroom has the possibility to deliberate and decide on issues that affect them.
- Educating in a positive and critical view of conflict, the resolution of which can lead to possible change, dialogue, critical thinking and reflection. Domínguez (2008) stresses that democratisation is characterised by permanent dialogue between all stakeholders, continuous negotiation to solve problems and resolve conflicts. Changes made may take the form of agreements that generate particular outputs, such as class rules.
- Acting against negative aspects such as racism, injustice, poverty, among other inequalities, and advocate for equal opportunities. Apple and Beane (1997) explain that for democratic awareness to exist, complex concepts such as injustice and inequality must be known. Assuming equality through the construction of representations and conditioned relations in the classroom is vital to promote citizenship awareness (Blanco, 2009).
- Generating frequent relationships with the environment: interactions with other people, whether or not they belong to the educational community, and other places of learning, favour exchange and awareness of autonomy in learning processes (Terrén, 2003).

We also seek to find basic references to guide teachers' practice and their relationship with MRPs. Research (Bolívar, 2004; Santamaría-Goicuría *et al.*, 2018) has highlighted how teacher identity appears linked to referents that represent the embodiment of the educational ideals of the specific professional. We can mention thinkers of the New School such as Pestalozzi or Cousinet amongst the references of MRPs, who defended paidocentrism and the exercise of citizenship in schools. There are also references to the Modern School of Ferrer and Guardia. MRPs assume the heritage of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (Esteban, 2016), which is conducive to innovation in educational practices. On the other hand, given the emancipatory purpose of teaching, MRPs emphasise an education in line with the ideas of popular

education, with many of the desires set out in the pedagogy of liberation led by thinkers such as Freire and Freinet (Hernández, 2011), and the foundations of the critical sociology of education, with contributions from Bourdieu, Passeron and Giroux, to name but a few (Pericacho, 2015).

### **3. METHOD**

#### *3.1. Objectives of the research*

The study analyses the actions and dialogues, both in and outside the classroom, of a teacher who has a long history as an MRP activist and the students who participate in her class. The analysis uses four of Ortiz *et al.*'s (2018) indicators for the identification of democratic educational actions. The aim is to identify concrete actions, discourses, dialogues and educational references that encourage children to exercise their right to participate in school and to have an education consistent with democratic principles. The aim is also to study the teachers' conception of the teacher's role as a promoter of democracy and its link to MRPs.

#### *3.2. Methodological approach*

Since our interest is in the analysis and understanding of a singular experience, we opted for the case study, as «case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a singular case, in order to gain an understanding of its activity in important circumstances» (Stake, 2005, p. 11).

More specifically, we opted for a holistic case study, according to Yin's (1989) typology, which can also be included in the intrinsic case study in Stake's (2005) classification or in Yin's own denomination: single case design. We intend to address a complex educational reality and understand the internal processes, so that we can reflect on the practices that are developed.

Our aim, in carrying out a case study, is to recognise the materialisation of a teacher's discourse in specific practices, identifiable and analysable in their natural context, with children who are aware of their rights, in a revealing way (González, 2013).

#### *3.3. Participants*

We take a closer look at the work of a teacher with more than 30 years of experience in infant and primary classrooms and more than 25 years of experience as a member of a management team. From the beginning, she has been an MRPs activist in Catalonia, where she has actively participated in the drafting of the document Ethical Commitment of Teachers (MRPC, 2011), which expresses a commitment

to children and to guaranteeing their rights as recognised internationally by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Her case takes us to an urban public school where she has obtained a place in 2018, providing education to 209 children from diverse backgrounds in the province of Segovia, Spain. During the academic year 2018-2019, the teacher is, for the second consecutive year, the tutor of a group of 21 children in the final year of Infant Education; during the academic year 2019-2020 she is the teacher of a group of 25 children aged between 2 and 3 who are starting their schooling.

Our study only focused on the teacher's interactions with the two groups of children and with those who collaborated in the educational activities, including three student teachers in their practical training and more than 15 volunteers who collaborated in educational activities and outings in the natural environment (primary school students, artists, scientists, professionals and members of the children's family groups). The work did not seek to study the institution in which the research was carried out, but rather the educational action of a teacher and the children in two specific classrooms.

### 3.4. *Data collection techniques*

In line with Yin (1989), we designed multiple sources of evidence during the data collection phase. Through participant observation, unstructured interviews (3), in-depth interviews (1) and documentary analysis (field notes, photos, audio and video recordings and educational documents provided by the teacher) we identified and characterised the dialogues and described the actions and interactions that took place in the framework of common activities carried out daily by the teacher and which are related to the foundations of democratic education and the exercise of citizenship (Ortiz *et al.*, 2018): speeches, conferences, assemblies, field trips and collective and individual work.

An observation form validated by experts (Gajardo, 2019) was used for participant observation, which served as a guide for record-taking. Throughout this process, we followed a protocol for observing the learning environment (Iglesias, 2008) in which we envisaged three dimensions: (1) physical dimension of the environment under analysis (structure or organisation of the classroom or learning place); (2) functional dimension and type of activities developed (educational activities, forms of execution and purpose); (3) relational dimension between teacher and students and other participants (types of discursive and dialogical interactions).

The unstructured interviews (Trindade, 2016) with the teacher took the form of dialogues that took place outside working hours with the researcher; they explored — under a logic of pedagogical reflection typical of critical pedagogy (Shön, 1992) — the characteristics and meaning of educational activities and organisational modalities.



The in-depth interview was conducted at the end of the process and focused on the teacher's life story, motivations and references that guided her educational action.

### 3.5. *Fieldwork*

As mentioned above, fieldwork was carried out over two school years. A researcher from our group attended 32 school days during this period (5 hours a week for 12 months, excluding holidays), during which, in addition to carrying out the tasks specifically focused on the research (taking records and filling in analysis sheets), she collaborated with the teacher and the aforementioned individuals and groups by performing a variety of educational tasks during the participant observation: guiding learning activities (accompanying the children while they carried out the activities and actions set by the teacher), planning activities (meeting with the teacher, trainees and/or volunteers to generate educational actions for the pupils), organising teaching materials (providing the children with the teaching materials selected for each activity), giving instructions (reiterating what the teacher said or explaining the activities herself), carrying out collective and individual readings (reading stories or scientific texts when requested by the students in moments of free play in class), ensuring safety in pedagogical outings, dialogue in conflict situations (following the examples given by the teacher), among others.

Our researcher met with the teacher outside school hours to conduct unstructured interviews that turned into dialogical and pedagogical reflections and accompanied her to six teacher training activities.

### 3.6. *Data analysis technique*

In order to simplify the integration of examples according to the purpose of the study, we grouped all the records obtained (texts of field notes, audio transcripts, interview transcripts, participant observation sheets, photos and videos) and with the support of *Atlas* qualitative analysis software. *Ti* (version 7.5.4), we coded the actions and oral texts according to the four theoretical indicators selected from those proposed by Ortiz *et al.*, (2018), thus determining the categories of the analysis:

TABLE 1  
 INDICATORS AND CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS

| <b>Theoretical indicator</b>  | <b>Category generated</b>   |
|---|---|
| Prevalence of dialogue, negotiation and social relations based on affection between the different groups in a school (Ortiz <i>et al.</i> , 2018) | Prevalence of dialogue, negotiation and social relations based on affection |

| Theoretical indicator   | Category generated                             |
|---|--|
| Educating in a positive and critical view of conflict, the resolution of which can lead to possible change, dialogue, critical thinking and reflection (Ortiz <i>et al.</i> , 2018) | Positive and critical view of the conflict     |
| Acting against negative aspects such as racism, injustice, poverty, among other ce inequalities, and advocate for equal opportunities for all (Ortiz <i>et al.</i> , 2018)          | Promoting equality and denouncing injusti- ce  |
| Generate frequent relationships with the en- vironment (Ortiz <i>et al.</i> , 2018).  | Strengthening relations with the environ- ment |

Source: Based on Ortiz *et al.* (2018)

Data triangulation was carried out on the basis of the information collected using the data collection techniques and instruments. By doing so, we ensure the internal validity of our research (Yin, 1989).

We then selected excerpts and resources that showed elements of the development of these pedagogical axes of democracy and/or represented theoretical justifications by the teacher. Finally, by means of a qualitative content analysis (Abela, 2002), we chose the activities and the expository and dialogical exchanges that took place in and outside the classroom and that exemplified this formula of democratic education, according to the categories indicated.

### 3.7. Ethical issues in this research

Throughout our research we generated procedures that were always known and binding with the teacher, the students and those who collaborated in the classroom (Tójar & Serrano, 2000). It should be noted that those who interact with the teacher’s educational philosophy are in agreement with the development of research of different types in the classroom, mainly families, who sign an informed consent form. The records obtained from the activities (videos and pictures) were shared with the children’s families so that they could decide whether they agreed with their use and appropriateness.

All names mentioned in the description of the results have been replaced to protect the identity of the participants.

## 4. RESULTS

The presentation of the results is organised around the categories generated and the theoretical explanations obtained during the fieldwork. Verbatim transcripts

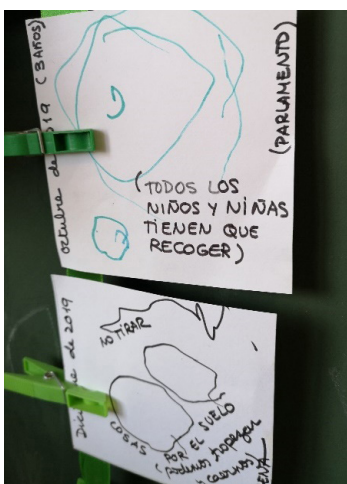
indicate who is or are involved, as well as the class group and the month in which they are made.

#### 4.1. *Prevalence of dialogue, negotiation and social relations based on affection*

Dialogue is the main feature we identified in the sessions we witnessed. In the classroom where we worked, the conditions for the development of dialogical activities were always present: here, the voice of the students was the main vehicle, as were agreements and consensus, explicitly and intentionally encouraged by the teacher. Both in the 4- and 5-year-old classrooms and in the 2- and 3-year-old classrooms, we found assemblies to organise the work and parliaments in which the laws of the class are agreed upon (daily assemblies and weekly parliaments). Children generate rules and write them on dated pieces of paper. Rules are only written when all children agree.

The teacher stresses the importance of respect in order to establish dialogical relationships. She highlights this fact on multiple occasions with phrases such as «In this class we all respect each other because we love each other» (Teacher, group 2 and 3 years old, September 2019).

FIGURE 1  
ACTS OF PARLIAMENT



Source: Prepared by the authors

Dialogical discussions take place both in the daily interactions of learners inside and outside the classroom, as well as when defining learning activities and projects:

Teacher: We will now organise our work. We know a lot of things about how dogs and cats are born and about endangered animals (...) We have to think very carefully about what we want to learn (...) so let's do a thinking exercise: what do we really want to learn? (age group 4 and 5, May 2019).

The children take the floor and present work plans based on what they want to learn:

Boys and Girls: What we want to know about dogs and cats is whether dogs and cats have bones in their tongues; how puppies are born; why dogs go for walks with people; how puppies get out when they are born (...); how cats eat fish if they are afraid of water; why cats and dogs fight; why animals are endangered (summary of proposals, group 4 and 5 years old, May 2019).

In order to generate these dialogical discussions, the teacher takes as much time as possible, from a logic, in the teacher's words, of «slow education» (field note, May 2019). The process can take several days (in this example, it took a week) and is usually dealt with in assemblies. Students are asked to sit in a circle in a large area of the classroom with a clear instruction: «everyone must look each other in the face» (field note, May 2019). If there are adults collaborating in the classroom, they are part of the circle and follow the same rules. The teacher invites them to recall what they have learned and «this process usually takes a few minutes, but the children in the class are always encouraged to say something» (field note, October 2019). The teacher makes sure that everyone says something, unless a child declares that he or she does not want to speak. Everything is written down in notes which are then read out so that students can correct their speech and hung up somewhere in the classroom accessible to everyone. Collective discussions, such as assemblies or parliaments, can last from 5 minutes to 20 minutes, but no longer. If no agreement is reached and/or tiredness is noted, the teacher congratulates the patience of the participants and proposes a new meeting for the following day(s).

At their choice, children can also initiate dialogical negotiation processes with their peers and with adults in the classroom when they want to share new learning: «I brought a book from home. It is about dinosaurs, my favourite is the diplodocus (...) you can read it» (Child to researcher, age group 4 and 5, June 2019). Throughout the study, we noticed that this action became natural progressively, as the teacher encouraged the children to teach their peers about the learning they were gaining outside the school environment:

FIGURE 2

EGGSHELL. A GIRL WITH FARMING RELATIVES TALKS ABOUT HER CHICKS IN CLASS; UPON LEARNING THIS, THE TEACHER ASKS HER FAMILY TO HELP HER HATCH EGGS IN THE CLASSROOM



Source: Prepared by the authors

In the classroom, it is primarily intended to create a climate of affection and trust that generates a feeling of belonging: it is common to hear phrases such as «in this class, everything is for the good and not to be afraid» (Teacher, group 2 and 3 years old, November 2019) or «you will have to agree (...) because the only compulsory thing in this class is that nobody suffers» (Teacher, group 4 and 5 years old, April 2019).

This intentionality also extends to the child as a subject of rights and is being appropriated and practised by children, as shown in actions such as:

- Seeking the permission of the person you would be talking about and talk about them only if they allow it: «Álvaro, can I talk about you for a moment? [waits for him to say yes] Álvaro is very clever, but you know what happens to him (...) like almost all of you, he is always eager to learn» (Teacher, 4- and 5-year-olds, April 2019); «The thing is that (...) can I talk about you, Valentina?» (Teacher, age group 4 and 5, March 2019).
- Performing actions and producing creations for the people we love: «I want to take this biscuit to mummy, the Saint Fruits biscuit» (Child, group 2 and 3 years old, October 2019); «We should bake at least 5 biscuits so that all children can enjoy them with their families» (Trainee teacher, group 2 and 3 years old, December 2019).

- Reaffirm that we are valued by everyone in the group and that feelings are respected: «If someone here wants to help María, with all the love in the world, with all the love in the world indeed, we will accept that» (Teacher, group 4 and 5 years old, May 2019), «I want to help her (...) I cried too because I was scared» (Girl, group 4 and 5 years old, May 2019); «Just imagine: you get run over and we all cry (...) you in the hospital and us crying, because you thought you were not going to get run over» (Teacher, group 2 and 3 years old, September 2019).

#### 4.2. *Positive and critical view of the conflict*

In order to deal with small conflicts, such as sharing a toy, the teacher encourages actions where students who resolve the situation and for this, dialogue between the parties is essential:

Teacher: Did I take your toy?

Girl: No, it was her.

Teacher: So why do not you ask her directly and work it out together?» (Dialogue between the teacher and a girl in the 2- and 3-year-old group, October 2019).

We did not find this kind of dialogues in the 4- and 5-year-old group, as they had already acquired the habit of talking about their problems before asking the teacher for help, they knew that these conflicts could be solved by themselves without resorting to adults.

In the 2- and 3-year-old class, systematic work on dealing with everyday conflicts was developed aimed at understanding others and making clear the need for dialogue and agreement:

Teacher: There are 25 of us and only 4 toys, so what do we do with them?

Boys and girls: We share them! [choir-like reply].

Teacher: Look, Jaime (...), don't be like that [she addresses a child who crosses his arms and makes an angry face], if when you get angry you get like that, you are already angry, it is not going to get better (Dialogue between the teacher and the children in group 2 and 3 years old, January 2020).

When conflicts affect the whole group, a parliament is held. In the 4- and 5-year-old class the parliament is promoted by the children; in the 2- and 3-year-old group it is initiated by the teacher:

Teacher: The parliament is very important, because we make the rules there (...) we will raise our hands to be able to give the floor, here we are three teachers so you help me to see the words because sometimes I may not be fair because I do not see the words (...) I will be moderating (group 2 and 3 years old, October 2019).

Teacher: We have two things that I'm going to put on the table (...) it turns out that Alba had problems with things that were on the floor. Alba, you have the floor.

Girl: Someone left a box in the middle and I tripped over it.

Teacher: This is something that happens (...) if we leave things and we do not pick them up again, there are people who fall (...) what things should we do so that this does not happen? (...) Let's vote now, do you all agree that we have to be careful? [all raise their hands] We are all unanimously in agreement (...).

Teacher: Those of you who agree with Josefa's proposal, which says that we should not play with things that can harm us, raise your hands [all raise their hands]. We are all in unanimous agreement. (Dialogues between the teacher and the children in the 2- and 3-year-old group, November 2019).

By making conflict work on a daily basis (figure 3), the children deal with it in a positive way, so there were very few occasions when we saw members of the group being overwhelmed by a situation and requiring specific attention. This is another example where the conversation starts with a girl's «complaint» and the teacher puts them back in the situation of taking responsibility for resolving their conflicts:

Girl: Alfredo has pushed Carlos and hurt him.

Teacher: Who did it? Why are you talking if you have not asked Alfredo for permission? (...) did Alfredo do it? [Alfredo raises his hand and says he did it]

Teacher: Alfredo, tell us what happened, did you push him? You were brave, well done! You were able to tell something that not all of us would tell (...) when we tell the truth, things can be solved (Dialogue between a girl, the teacher and a boy in front of group 2 and 3 years old, October 2019).

When the students do not reach a mutual agreement immediately or an agreement between them and the teacher or other collaborators, the conflict is dealt with gradually over time: during our visits to the 2- and 3-year-old group, there was a conflict with a little boy who hit his classmates in the middle of their games; the problem was dealt with in the parliaments, between the boys and girls in their games, and between the teacher and the child, always with very understanding dialogues:

Girl: You do not bite now like you did when you were small.

Child: I am a big boy now.

Girl: we can play in the kitchenette today (Dialogue between a girl and a boy, group 2 and 3 years old, December 2019).

The conflict was resolved within a couple of months, and when the teacher was asked, she credited the students for their patience with their classmate and the boy himself for changing an aspect of his personality that was causing him suffering.

FIGURE 3  
 DEALING WITH CONFLICT: 3-YEAR-OLDS REFLECT ON RESPECT  
 FOR OTHERS WITH TEACHER TRAINEES AFTER GROUP CONFLICT



Source: Prepared by the authors

#### 4.3. *Promoting equality and denouncing injustice*

The discourse for equality and justice is a constant feature of the sessions in which we participate. The teacher takes the opportunity to talk about injustices and invites the children to give their opinions:

Teacher: If we have potatoes here in Segovia, why do we have to bring them by plane and pollute the world? (age group 4 and 5, March 2019).

Teacher: Reading and writing was a conquest of the workers, because did you know what they used to do? They wrote a contract on a piece of paper and they cheated them (...) now you, when you go to work, you can read the contracts and say: I don't find this fair (group 4 and 5 years old, April 2019).

Under the umbrella of the projects that students carry out in their learning process, complex issues such as gender equality, respect for animals, the development of a fair world for all people are sometimes addressed and actions are proposed to make the world a better place. This time there is a debate started by a child about the word «strike»:

Boy: I told my sister that I am going on strike, and I am going to stop looking after you and she was sad.

Teacher: Strikes usually take place when we work.

Boy: She is impressed at the word «strike».



Teacher: It is a strong word (...) because yesterday we celebrated this, because a hundred years ago there was a very strong strike and it was very complicated (...) but do you know what the workers achieved? That fathers and mothers only had to work 8 hours, because before they worked all hours (...) the young children were left alone (Dialogue between a child and the teacher in front of the group 4 and 5 years old, May 2019).

This awareness of justice, which cuts across all the actions that take place in the classroom, is also demonstrated in the dialogues between the students:

Girl: but there are children who want to go home (...) others want to play on the mats.

Boy: we find it hard to listen (...) and we are a bit rowdy.

Girl: That is not fair to the teachers. (Dialogue between the children, 2- and 3-year-old group, December 2019).

#### 4.4. *Strengthening relations with the environment*

During our work in the classroom, we witnessed 15 sessions dedicated to the study of the environment (social, cultural and natural environment) that resorted to the development of learning through intermediaries belonging to the educational community.

- Outings outside school

Outings outside the school were common throughout our work. In total, we made 7 visits to explore the natural environment and 8 visits to learn about the cultural environment of the city.

In the group of children aged 2 to 3 years, the emphasis of learning in the outings was on self-care, caring for others and the experience of living social agreements. In this group there were 4 visits to the park and 3 tours of the city's cultural heritage.

Teacher: We are going to visit the cathedral, which is very beautiful (...) on our way to the cathedral, we have to go through places that are a bit dangerous, because cars pass by (...) we have to be careful (...) safety first (group 2 and 3 years old, September 2019).

Girl: We go slowly without falling on the road (...) we go slowly so we are not hit by a car (3 years old, September 2019).

Boy: If we are running, a car is coming at full speed and if we do not look, it could run us over (2 years old, September 2019).

In the 4- and 5-year-old group the learning emphasis was on enquiry, exploration, caring for others and caring for the environment in order to learn new things about it. In this group there were 2 museum visits, 2 mountain exploration visits, 3 heritage tours and a visit to a farm.

After the outings, the children always meet in an assembly to discuss on what they learned or on situations, and dialogues like this one take place:

Teacher: It was a very nice day (...) we went to the park, but when I called all the children, some of them did not come (...) is there a child who did not want to come when I called him or her?

Boy: It is just that when you called us, I was removing the sand from my shoes.

Teacher: But you know what happens? (...) if there was a danger you have to come anyway and then you ask me for time to get the sand out of the shoes (Dialogue between teacher and child in front of group 2 and 3 years, January 2020).

FIGURE 4  
 OUTING OUTSIDE SCHOOL: 5-YEAR-OLDS LEARN ABOUT  
 ROCKS AND MINERALS WITH A GEOLOGIST



Source: Prepared by the authors.

In the 2- and 3-year-old group the prevailing dialogues are related to enjoyment and the common good. In the group of 4- and 5-year-olds, dialogues point to learning and agreements: «In the farm I learned that sheep also eat stones» (Boy, 5 years old, May 2019); «I learned sheep do not have horns» (Girl, 5 years old, May 2019); «I learned that we should not mistreat animals» (Boy, 4 years old, May 2019).

With regard to the teacher's actions, it can be noted that in the outings:

- a) It offers spaces for autonomy without forgetting to take care of the students' safety and learning: «The children in this class have chosen this place, but they can choose another place if they want to learn new things» (Teacher to researcher, group 2 and 3 years old, January 2020).
- b) Provides space for children to plan actions before each visit, remembering itineraries: «We will visit the aqueduct and the boys and girls will watch out for

cars, we will go away from the street (...) I will go first and Alma behind (...) is that clear?» (Teacher to 2- and 3-year-old group, October 2019).

- c) Frame the field trips in the learning choices made by the students in the assemblies.

FIGURE 5  
THE 4- AND 5-YEAR-OLDS VISIT THE HATCHERIES OF A FARM AS PART  
OF THE PROJECT «HOW ANIMALS ARE BORN»



Source: Prepared by the authors

- Visits to the school by members of the community

During our work, the school was visited by several community members, in the context of learning projects that the groups develop and planned by the teacher or the educational community so that children learn from their direct social environment.

In the group of 4- and 5-year-olds, 4 visits were made by experts who gave scientific lectures: a dog expert with her dog (April 2019), a cat expert with her cat (May 2019), a farmer (May 2019) and two firefighters (June 2019).

In the 2-3 years age group, two visits took place, one by a children's rights expert (November 2019) and one by a storyteller (October 2019).

On the other hand, every day we see people from the educational community entering the classroom in the framework of daily activities: visits of children from primary classrooms who tell stories to the children (figure 6), visits of family members to support various activities: birthday celebrations, construction of welcoming spaces in the classroom, creation of materials for learning activities.

FIGURE 6  
 VISITS BY PRIMARY SCHOOL GIRLS. TWO GIRLS FROM 5<sup>th</sup> GRADE TELL  
 A STORY TO THE 3- AND 4-YEAR-OLDS



Source: Prepared by the authors

#### 4.5. Software. *MRP references in the teacher's actions and talks*

As previously stated, the combination of models and theoretical references in the configuration of the teaching identity is relevant. In view of the above, it is natural for this teacher to follow the principles of Freinet (1972), who maintains that morality is not taught, but practised, in her pedagogical work, and to create an atmosphere of trust, governed by the basic principles of freedom, discipline and a sense of responsibility, she makes use of Freinet techniques such as the assembly. However, the teacher is emphatic in saying that this choice is not based on techniques,

but on the philosophical coherence it has with its referent: «applying methods in a crazy way is nonsense, it is not about applying techniques (...) it is an educational philosophy of which I am convinced» (teacher to student trainee, December 2019).

On the other hand, the use of learning in the environment and the freedom to choose children's learning projects is one of the characteristics of Freinet's pedagogy that first caught our attention in our observation. At the end of their projects, students aged 4 and 5 often create magazines or present lectures, where they communicate their learning to their families and the educational community: «she [the teacher] told me very proudly: 5-year-olds giving a lecture, we can learn a lot from them, for me this is democratisation of knowledge» (field note, June 2019).

FIGURE 7  
«ANIMALS IN DANGER OF EXTINCTION» MAGAZINE FOR 4- AND 5-YEAR-OLDS



Source: Prepared by the authors.

Resorting to Freire's postulate of dialogue as a fundamental educational tool that is also consistent with this belonging to MRPs, since it is the platform from which the individual is affirmed and the language of instruction, of one-size-fits-all answers, is banished (Freire, 1990). It is through dialogue that the practices necessary for democracy are established:

Dialogical communication is a day-to-day thing, so that trust is really established, you should not transform dialogue into something technical (...) it is something that is born (...) something human (Teacher, in-depth interview, August 2020).

In our conversations we also identified the influence of Loris Malaguzzi's (2001) pedagogy of listening and his theory of a hundred languages: children do not only express themselves through speech; if they are offered the suitable resources, they have a hundred languages to make themselves heard, and we adults must develop the capacity to understand these languages:

In order to understand the children, the group should first consolidate (...) and think as a tribe (...). For example, we are going to accept Amelia [a girl with difficulties to communicate in the classroom] as she is and we are going to accept her process, we tell her «we want you to be like this», she has seen this way and has realised that she has to change, it is a process of each child (Teacher, in-depth interview, August 2020).

On the other hand, on the need to have theoretical references to shape a coherent democratic pedagogical practice, the teacher says: «A good educator needs a broad knowledge of multiple spheres, needs to read a lot and needs to make choices based on what the great teachers have taught and then make choices» (Teacher, in-depth interview, August 2020).

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In our study, we have shown the possibility of articulating consistent and reflective processes in children who are living their first experiences of participation in the community. The case shows the development of a pedagogy of listening, dialogue and affectionate negotiation, based on a competent vision of childhood present in the pedagogical thinking of the Reggio Emilia nursery schools. Just like in these experiences, it highlights children's enormous ability to listen and the importance of reciprocal expectation: children «listen to life in all its forms and colours (...) they listen to others, adults and peers (...), they notice how listening is essential for communication» (Rinaldi, 2001, p. 3).

Affectivity and love, present transversally in the four axes analysed, are substantial in the actions analysed. Each of the educational actions described imply a «living of service with joy» and an implicit development of the pedagogy of love (Jiménez, 2016). In every dialogue, instruction or educational action, our teacher generates a welcoming, loving environment, conducive not only to the comfort of the children — who learn in a meaningful way — but also for the people who cooperate in the classroom on a daily basis, who are infected by this educational philosophy.

This environment, with prevalence of transversal and transformative dialogue (Gergen, 1994), creates an ideal context for developing a positive and critical view of conflict. To this end, the teacher promotes examples of conflict management based on a pedagogy for coexistence (Uranga, 2007), above all in the area of affirming the identity of each child, which enables a friendly learning of key social behaviours, such as self-regulation, self-esteem and self-discipline.



Student participation is conceived as a pedagogical right and education for democracy is based on issues central to this pedagogy: experiencing a sense of belonging to a group, autonomy, people's critical and dialogical sense (Lansdown, 2001), in line with the findings presented by McNally and Slutsky (2017) and Knoester (2015) in their work. Values cited by Moss (2017) also appear: recognition of different perspectives, respect for subjectivity and development of critical thinking.

The classroom has become a public space for participation and building democratic relations, for the development of autonomy, without avoiding complex issues such as the rejection of injustice. The influence of teacher identity is visible, forged here in the ethical commitment of teachers and in the defence of public schools, the hallmarks of MRPs.

In the classroom, children are encouraged to think for themselves, without isolating themselves from the community and taking into account different opposing positions, which is an excellent learning for the development of citizenship. We have seen how democracy is built using dialogue as a tool and promoting care, coexistence and cooperation among all members of the educational community. We have seen it come true for children at very young ages, and so our hope in the transformational power of education is growing.

From the experience analysed, some basic recommendations can be drawn, agreed with the teacher, to facilitate the incorporation of democratic practices in early childhood education:

- Creating a climate of love and respect, which generates confidence in the pupils.
- Working on the sense of belonging to the group in this atmosphere.
- Promoting processes of listening to children and to each other.
- Promoting situations in which students can decide and make choices and, at the same time, work towards consensus.

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