Equity in Education: A Handbook for Participative Approaches in Research and Development to Address School Inequalities

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Preface

Inequalities in education remain a significant challenge across the globe, even in the face of numerous policy initiatives, carefully designed reforms, and well-intentioned interventions. Limited resources in early childhood centers, entrenched underrepresentation in universities, and wider structural barriers all demonstrate the necessity for innovative, context-sensitive strategies. Real progress requires more than simply imposing solutions from above; it calls for approaches that directly involve and empower the communities most affected by these disparities.

This handbook stands out for its focus on participatory and co-creative approaches that place marginalized communities at the center of both inquiry and action, effectively bridging the gap between theory and practice. It offers adaptable, community-focused methods that enable stakeholders – teachers, parents, students, and policymakers – to work together on designing and implementing inclusive educational reforms. Rooted in a commitment to social justice, the handbook underlines both the methodological rigor and the tangible, real-world applications needed to advance equity in education.

Equity – in Education: A Handbook for Participative Approaches in Research and Development to Address School Inequalities embodies this collaborative ethos by highlighting Research & Development projects and theoretical perspectives demonstrating how participatory research methods, citizen science, and critically reflective initiatives can benefit children, schools, and learners, especially in disadvantaged contexts. Moving away from a purely methodological focus, the chapters also illustrate how diverse stakeholders – teachers, parents, students, social workers, and local community members – can partner with researchers to co-design, execute, and assess interventions aimed at lessening educational inequities.

Such participatory models derive from the understanding that research and interventions are most effective when they elevate the voices, experiences, and knowledge of marginalized groups – perspectives that traditional frameworks often neglect, thereby reinforcing existing systemic inequalities. By contrast, participatory approaches emphasize that effective solutions must take shape through direct community involvement. This inclusive orientation enriches the research process and provides local actors with genuine agency, ensuring that solutions are co-owned and better sustained.

Collectively, the works in this volume suggest that efforts to achieve equity thrive when marginalized communities are involved at every stage, from the earliest planning to the final reflection on outcomes. Whether focusing on inclusive curricula, reimagining family-school partnerships, or encouraging youth engagement in environmental campaigns, these chapters illustrate the transformative potential of participatory, co-creative, and reflective pedagogies. They also shed light on the difficult but necessary balancing act of ensuring continuity, negotiating power dynamics, and incorporating local wisdom into larger policy frameworks. By confronting these complexities, the chapters underscore both the promises and the challenges of putting community members at the forefront of educational change.

They likewise point to the need for education reform and community-based interventions to abandon the notion that uniform strategies and hierarchical oversight suffice. Instead, regionally anchored and dialogic processes can reveal the multiple facets of educational inequities and shape sustainable solutions. More than compiling data, the participatory practices described here foster new social ties, enable reflective learning, and encourage meaningful commitment among groups that might otherwise remain marginalized.

Still, these chapters also tackle practical obstacles, including limited project funding, inflexible administrative systems, and

potential pushback from existing hierarchies. They highlight the intricate balance of advancing critical awareness, collective ownership, and short-term deliverables within institutional or donor-imposed constraints. Far from diminishing the importance of participatory methods, these difficulties reinforce the need for flexible, inclusive, and community-centered educational research and social engagement.

Readers – whether educators, policymakers, community leaders, or co-researchers – will discover practical guidance and conceptual insights that challenge them to rethink how they collaborate across social divides. Each chapter illustrates that young people, families, and local groups can act not merely as recipients but as partners in creating knowledge and driving action. In a climate of deepening social divides and entrenched inequities, the participatory and critical pedagogical strategies presented here emerge as pivotal pathways for collective empowerment and meaningful educational transformation.

1. Empowering Voices: Participatory Research for Educational Equality

Juliette E. Torabian

1. Introduction: The imperative for inclusive inquiry

In recent years, participatory research (PR hereafter) has emerged as a powerful approach to addressing educational inequities and empowering underrepresented voices (Bang & Vossoughi 2016).

There are several underlying reasons for this trend. A primary reason is that despite progress, educational inequalities persist across different contexts (OECD 2024; Global Education Monitoring Report Team 2022) and in Europe, too (European Commission 2024). This is particularly the case for marginalised or disadvantaged communities and special needs learners despite efforts towards inclusive education (Bešić 2020). Educational inequalities – defined as dis/advantages in access to and uptake of education related to individuals' ascribed characteristics such as social background, gender, disability, or immigration history (Hadjar & Uusitalo 2016) – bear detrimental and long-term impacts on individuals, communities, and societies at large.

To tackle educational inequalities, there has been an increasing need for research-based evidence that can facilitate tailored and promising policies and practices tackling educational inequalities (Benz et al. 2021). This entails a multifaceted approach that not only addresses systemic barriers to equal access, participation opportunities, attainment, and transition, but also provides evidence from community-engaged and participatory research that meaningfully involves and amplifies the voices of excluded groups in research and policy processes (Benjamin-Thomas et al. 2018). This has led to a recognition of the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders, including students, families, teachers and community members in the research process to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex issues at play (Johnson

& Parry 2016) and to ensure that research findings are relevant to their needs with improved and sustainable impact – at least this is what is desired.

In effect, there has been a growing awareness among educational and sociological researchers to democratise knowledge creation and to practice social justice in the design of their studies. After all, it is only sensible that "to enumerate individual characteristics and to treat the individual as if he were detached from his environment and hence and abstraction" (Boudon 1971, 48) contradicts the very objectives of social justice, equal opportunities, and diversity that researchers seek to promote and achieve. A fair research process does recognise that marginalised communities possess a wealth of knowledge and insights essential for understanding and addressing educational inequities (Wilkinson & Wilkinson 2017). As such, it differentiates itself from traditional research approaches that have often failed to adequately capture the perspectives of those studied.

Participatory research has, therefore, emerged as a collective attempt towards democratising research processes (Midgley et al. 2012) and elevating the knowledge and perspectives of those who are typically excluded from academic knowledge production. Unlike traditional research methods that "position" the object of the study as passive, participatory research aims to be open to socially situated perceptions and constructions of educational inequality (Rix et al. 2020) by research participants as active, engaged contributors to the research process. It hence includes their views from problem identification to data collection and analysis, and ultimately to the co-creation and dissemination of knowledge and solutions (Nind & Vinha 2013; Asaba & Suárez-Balcázar 2018).

This chapter aims to explore how participatory research practices can empower marginalised communities and promote educational equality. In the following section, I will first delineate educational inequalities and the rationale for participatory research to address them. I will then discuss the theoretical foundations of participatory research and its key principles. This will be followed

by an analysis of various participatory methodologies relevant to educational research. In a next part, I will briefly review a few case studies to demonstrate the successful application of participatory research in addressing educational inequalities across different contexts. And finally, I will outline strategies for ethical integrity of participatory research projects in educational contexts.

2. Tackling educational inequalities through participatory research: The rationale

Despite progress, educational inequalities are well-documented phenomena across different national and regional contexts (Castelli et al. 2012). According to the OECD (2024), for instance,

> there has been good progress in educational attainment and outcomes, for example, with a significant drop in the share of 25–34 year olds without an upper secondary qualification, which has decreased from 17% in 2016 to 14% in 2023, in many countries.

Likewise, the Institute for Statistics (2017) reports on the expansion of access to education indicating that the global literacy rate among youth aged 15–24 rose from 83% in 1990 to 91% in 2020. However, these aggregate figures mask persistent gaps and multifaceted disadvantages faced by specific population groups.

Educational inequalities are multi-level (macro, meso, micro), intersectional, and multifaceted (Blanden 2020). They may be rooted in macro-level policy designs, meso-level institutional policies and practices as well as individual-level practices, educational choices, perceptions, and backgrounds. Educational inequalities manifest through disparities in access to quality education, educational attainment, and transition, as well as learning outcomes across various demographic groups (Tarabini et al. 2017). Studies have shown that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, racial/ethnic minority groups, immigrant and refugee communities, students with disabilities, and other marginalised populations are often "alienated" (Hascher & Hadjar 2018) and encounter challenges such as insufficient school resources, biased

curriculum and pedagogy (Davis-Cotton 2021), discrimination, and lack of culturally responsive support systems.

Hence, while some progress has been achieved in expanding educational access and opportunity, marginalised and underserved populations continue to face persistent systemic barriers and disadvantages that limit their educational opportunities and social mobility (Tarabini et al. 2017), which can be inter-generational in nature (Nennstiel & Becker 2023). In fact, evidence from research and across different contexts has consistently demonstrated a strong link between educational inequality and life chances (Bukodi & Goldthorpe 2012). For instance, the correlation between educational attainment and occupational disparities (Becker & Blossfeld 2021); the heightened risk of poverty and social exclusion among groups underrepresented in higher education and the critical role education plays in fostering social cohesion and development (Galindo & Rodríguez 2015); the higher risk of unemployment among less educated individuals (Neugebauer & Weiss 2018); the intergenerational transmission of educational (dis)advantages (Parsons et al. 2023); and even the association between lower educational outcomes and poorer mental and physical health (Remund & Cullati 2022; Walsemann et al. 2013).

Given the multifaceted and pivotal role of educational equality in determining an individual's life trajectory – and its wider impact on social justice – the academic examination of educational inequalities constitutes a significant research focus within the field of sociology. An early example of such research by Coleman (1968) depicted that among the schools studied, the gap in school resources was not as significant variable and that inequalities in educational achievement was due to the students' sociocultural family background), i.e., micro-level differences. To understand the roots of educational inequalities, researchers have also analysed (macro-level) educational policies to depict the ways educational equality is defined and the groups that are "problematised" in policy discourses across different contexts (Dunajeva 2022). In

a similar vein, research has focused on the institutional (meso-level) factors affecting students' achievement including the system of school-type differentiation (between-school tracking) and the level of standardisation (e.g., regarding central examinations and school autonomy) (Van de Werfhorst & Mijs 2010).

Participatory research: A path to understanding and addressing educational inequalities

Two key questions remain to be addressed regarding the importance of research on educational inequalities and how participatory approaches can help advance the understanding and addressing of these problems. These are discussed here below.

The prominence of research on educational inequalities is rooted in the idea of education as a public good and a "human right" (Morsink 2011). This means that education should facilitate social cohesion by providing inclusive systems and equal opportunities for all – regardless of their background and power relations (Bredo & Feinberg 1979). It shall, logically, remove the "hampering influences" of social inequalities as argued by Russell (1932) rather than reproducing and perpetuating the existing social dis/advantages (Erben 1979). Hence, educational inequality is fundamentally a human rights issue and in contradiction with the philosophy of education as a public good. As emphasised by Walker et al. (2019), "education has a vital role in empowering individuals, shaping their identities and enabling them to participate fully in the economy and society." What we are witnessing around the world, however, is unequal access to quality education and disparities in educational outcomes that profoundly compromise the life chances and well-being of affected populations, violating core principles of social justice and equality of opportunity.

Research on educational inequalities is, therefore, a reflection of sociologists' desire to facilitate social justice by illuminating how existing systems and policies serve to exclude or disadvantage certain groups and by informing efforts to expand inclusive

access, enhance equity, and promote the fulfilment of the right to education (Blanden 2020).

Although invaluable, earlier educational and sociological studies suffer from the same "epistemic injustices" (Omodan 2023) that researchers seek to analyse and tackle in schools, learning and teaching processes, policies, and curricula. In traditional research methods, the researcher maintains the role of an "expert" who objectively collects and analyses data, often overlooking the perspectives and experiences of the researched communities. That is, despite the best intentions of researchers and their attempts towards "reflexivity" (Khalid 2009), conventional research approaches may inadvertently reinforce power imbalances and marginalisation, thereby missing critical insights that could inform more inclusive and equitable educational policies and practices (Beckett 2009). These earlier forms of sociological research *position* the object of the study yet fail to treat them fairly by facilitating their *position taking* in research. Consequently, they fail to fully capture the lived experiences, perspectives, and voices of marginalised students and their communities – i.e., those most directly impacted by educational inequities. And this is indeed contradictory to the very objective that sociological research on educational inequalities purports to achieve.

To break away from such epistemic injustices, a growing number of scholars have advocated for a participatory research approach to enhance our understanding of educational inequalities. Participatory research – although neither a magical bullet nor without limitations – is inherently grounded in principles of social justice and fairness (Asaba & Suárez-Balcázar 2018). It recognises that research has the potential to be a tool for transformative action, shifting power dynamics, and amplifying the agency of under-represented communities. As such, it represents a critical departure from traditional, extractive models of research that may have – and perhaps even often – reinforced systemic inequalities. Instead, participatory approaches position the research process itself as an opportunity for critical reflection, capacity-building,

and collective problem-solving among participants (Wilkinson & Wilkinson 2017).

Respecting the rights and the voices of research subjects, participatory research prioritises active involvement of the communities being studied, positioning them as co-creators of knowledge rather than mere subjects (Bang & Vossoughi 2016; . This collaborative process not only gives voice to those who have historically been marginalised, but also leads to more relevant and impactful research outcomes (Tiffany 2006). By involving participants in all stages of the research, from framing the research questions to interpreting the findings, participatory approaches are better able to surface the nuanced perspectives and lived experiences that are essential for driving meaningful change.

In short, educational inequalities are deeply rooted in systemic barriers and the marginalisation of certain groups. Participatory research can be invaluable in generating evidence-based and contextually relevant solutions that elevate the lived experiences, needs, and aspirations of marginalised students, families, and communities (Kindon et al. 2007). From "community-driven to community-informed research" (Vaughn & Jacquez 2020), PR is a collaborative, empowering, and socially just approach to knowledge co-creation, where researchers work in partnership with concerned communities to identify problems, design solutions, and drive positive change (Amauchi et al. 2021; Macaulay et al. 2013).

3. Theoretical Foundations of Participatory Research

Participatory research draws strength and direction from several intertwined theoretical traditions, each contributing unique perspectives and principles to its core philosophy. This section will delve into the theoretical roots of PR, focusing on critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and action research, while highlighting key concepts that underpin its transformative potential.

Participatory research is rooted in critical theory which emphasises the role of power relations, social justice, and the empowerment of marginalised groups in the research process. At its core, participatory research rejects the notion of the researcher as an objective, detached observer and instead positions them as collaborators and allies – or "cognitive activists" (Earl 2017) – in a joint effort to co-create knowledge and drive social change. Heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, particularly his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970),[1] critical pedagogy emphasises the importance of education as a tool for social transformation. Freire's concept of *conscientização* (developing critical consciousness) is central to PR. It involves empowering marginalised groups to critically examine their social realities, challenge oppressive structures, and become active agents of change. PR adopts this emancipatory focus, aiming to empower communities. It facilitates an understanding of their circumstances and shapes their narratives through mutual dialogue to influence decision-making processes that affect their lives (Snell et al. 2009). This empowerment is a crucial aspect of PR, as it enables marginalised groups to gain control over their own stories and have a direct impact on the decisions that impact them.

Feminist scholarship has also played a pivotal role in informing the fundamental values and practices that define the participatory research approach (Penzhorn 2005). Feminist scholars have long critiqued traditional research approaches for perpetuating patriarchal structures and silencing marginalised voices (Dankoski 2000). In contrast, PR's commitment to equitable partnerships, valuing of lived experiences, and active dismantling of hierarchies within the research process directly responds to these feminist concerns (Muhammad et al. 2014). In fact, by centring the perspectives of marginalised groups, embracing their diverse knowledges, and challenging dominant power structures, PR aligns

1 This seminal work critiques traditional "banking" education models and advocates for a problem-posing approach that empowers learners to become critical agents of social change.

with feminist efforts to create more inclusive, just, and emancipatory research approaches.

Another significant theoretical foundation of participatory research is the action research tradition which emphasises the cyclical and collaborative nature of research (Rearick & Feldman 1999). Action research emphasises collaborative inquiry and problem-solving, where researchers and community members work together to identify issues (Kuhne & Quigley 1997), co-create and implement solutions (McTaggart et al. 2017), and evaluate their impact. This iterative process allows for continuous learning, adaptation, and refinement of strategies ensuring that research remains grounded in the lived realities of the community and contributes to meaningful social change (Kapucu 2014). Action research's cyclical and iterative approach offers a valuable foundation for participatory research, providing a structured yet flexible framework for collaborative inquiry and problem-solving. The emphasis on working closely with community members to identify issues through dialogue (Flood 2007) facilitates continuous learning, adaptation, and refinement of strategies, ensuring that the research remains responsive to the evolving needs and lived experiences of the community. (Baum et al. 2006).

In addition, participatory research finds common ground with diverse critical, emancipatory, and liberatory traditions, such as community-based participatory research, Marxist and neo-Marxist theories, critical race theory, and postcolonial studies. These perspectives share a commitment to challenging dominant power structures, amplifying marginalised voices, and co-creating knowledge in the service of social justice. From a Foucauldian perspective[2] (Foucault 1980), participatory research can be viewed as a form of "counter-conduct" or a revamping of power relations

2 Foucault's work explores the interconnectedness of power and knowledge, arguing that knowledge is not neutral but is produced and deployed within power relations to shape and control individuals and societies. He examines how power operates through discourse, institutions, and practices to create norms, regulate behaviour, and define what is considered "true" or "normal" (Foucault 1980).

through knowledge co-creation. From a critical race theory and a Marxist perspective,[3] PR is a research approach (not a methodology nor an epistemology) that can support the de- and re-construction of societies (McTaggart et al. 2017) and help individuals and communities to resist and transform oppressive structures through collective inquiry and action (Etmanski & Pant 2007).

Taken together, these theoretical foundations – critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and action research – converge to form the robust philosophical underpinnings of participatory research. By embracing principles of social justice, empowerment, equitable partnerships, and collaborative knowledge production, participatory research aligns with the goal of transforming societal structures and promoting educational equity.

Key concepts in participatory research

At the heart of participatory research lies several core concepts that distinguish it from traditional research approaches and guide its transformative potential. These are briefly discussed here below.

Empowerment is a primary feature of participatory research. It involves creating opportunities for marginalised individuals and groups to gain control over the research process, shape the questions and goals, and actively participate in the co-creation of knowledge (Dworski-Riggs & Langhout 2010). As such, PR challenges traditional power dynamics and hierarchies, and in-

3 While Marxist theory focuses on class relations and the capitalist mode of production as the primary source of social inequality and oppression, critical race theory (CRT) focuses on race and racism as fundamental organising principles of society. Both theories offer critical lenses for understanding how power operates to create and maintain social hierarchies, though their focus and proposed solutions differ. Some scholars argue that CRT draws inspiration from certain Marxist ideas, particularly concerning power dynamics and social critique, while others emphasise the distinctions between the two. Both theories engage in deconstruction by exposing and challenging dominant narratives and power structures. However, their approaches to reconstruction differ. Marxism envisions a revolutionary transformation of society, while CRT focuses on legal and social reforms to dismantle systemic racism.

tentionally creates accessible spaces where the voices, perspectives, and lived experiences of marginalised communities can be meaningfully heard, valued, and incorporated into the research and decision-making (Ramphele 1990). By centring the *agency* and *leadership* of marginalised stakeholders, PR seeks to dismantle oppressive structures and shift power imbalances, enabling these groups to shape their own futures and narratives (Torre et al. 2015).

Dialogue and mutual learning constitute another core element of participatory research. Rather than adopting a one-way, extractive approach to gathering information, PR emphasises reciprocal exchange, where both researchers and community members engage in a dynamic dialogue to co-construct knowledge This ongoing process of mutual learning allows for a rich exchange of diverse perspectives, the integration of varied knowledges and ways of knowing, and the continuous refinement of research questions and strategies. The dialogic and collaborative nature of PR facilitates a deeper understanding of the issues at hand, as all stakeholders contribute their unique insights and work together to shape the research process and outcomes (Asaba & Suárez-Balcázar 2018). In fact, this collaborative knowledge co-creation is a defining feature of participatory research as it empowers marginalised communities to actively shape the research that impacts their lives.

Community ownership and control is also a defining characteristic of participatory research (Macaulay et al. 1999). Building genuine, equitable partnerships between researchers and community members requires a deep sense of mutual respect, trust, and a shared commitment to working collaboratively towards common goals that address the evolving needs and priorities of the community (Wells 2009). Such partnerships are built on principles of co-creation, where all stakeholders contribute their unique knowledge, experiences, and perspectives to shape the research process. By centring the perspectives, voices, and agency of marginalised community members, these collaborative partnerships challenge traditional power dynamics and create more inclusive,

empowering spaces for participatory inquiry, knowledge co-creation, and collective action towards social change.

To co-create knowledge, participatory research recognises and embraces the diverse forms of knowledge and expertise held by different stakeholders (Stern 2019). It values the lived experiences, local knowledge, and traditional wisdom of community members and practitioners, positioning this alongside academic and professional expertise. By integrating these multiple ways of knowing, participatory research creates a richer, more nuanced, and contextually grounded understanding of complex social issues (Ferreira & Gendron 2011). This approach challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge, acknowledging the unique insights and perspectives that can emerge when diverse stakeholders collaborate as co-creators of knowledge. Participatory research thus seeks to amplify marginalised voices, democratise the research process, and develop holistic solutions that are responsive to the complex realities faced by the communities involved (Powers et al. 2006).

In addition, PR follows an *iterative, cyclical process* of planning, action, observation, and critical reflection. This allows for continuous learning, adaptation, and refinement of strategies in response to emerging needs and evolving contexts (Macaulay et al. 1999). The flexibility and responsiveness inherent in this iterative process ensures that the research remains grounded in the lived realities of the community and contributes to meaningful, sustainable social change. Ultimately, participatory research is an inclusive, empowering, and transformative approach that seeks to challenge oppressive power structures, centre the voices and lived experiences of marginalised communities, and mobilise collaborative action towards social justice and equality (Amauchi et al. 2021).

4. Participatory research methods

Participatory research draws on a diverse array of methods that are specifically designed to facilitate inclusive, collaborative, and

empowering forms of inquiry. These methods are briefly outlined below, including their strength, limitations, ethical implications and practical considerations.

Participatory action research (PAR). PAR is a collaborative approach that engages community members as co-researchers. This means that researchers and community members work together to identify research questions, collect and analyse data, and implement actions based on the findings. It aims to generate knowledge that is directly relevant and beneficial to the community.

Like any other research approach, PAR has its own strengths and limitations. By raising the ownership of communities over research process it both ensures higher impact (Baum et al. 2006) and promotes social change and empowerment (Tetui et al. 2017). As such, PAR can lead to more contextually relevant and culturally sensitive findings as well as increased community engagement and social change (Tetui et al. 2017). However, it can also be time-consuming, requiring more resources and a PAR researcher may face challenges in navigating power differentials between themselves and community members. While conducting PAR, it is, therefore, crucial to ensure informed consent, protecting participant confidentiality, and navigating potential conflicts of interest as part of PAR ethical considerations. In practice, PAR requires extensive collaboration, flexibility, and time commitment from all stakeholders – which is not an easy task for a rushed researcher. In fact, the success of PAR lies in the imperative of building trust, establishing clear communication channels, and developing shared decision-making processes.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR). while both PAR and CBPR emphasise collaboration and community involvement, there are subtle yet important distinctions between them. Both aim to address community-identified issues and promote social change, but their scope and emphasis differ slightly.

PAR, as it was discussed above, is a broad approach to research that emphasises participation and action by members of communities affected by the research. It's a cyclical process involving research, action, and reflection with the goal of understanding

the world by trying to change it collaboratively. PAR's focus is on empowering communities to take control of the research process and generate knowledge that can be used to address their own concerns. The "community" in PAR can be defined broadly, encompassing any group of individuals with a shared interest or concern.

CBPR, on the other hand, is a more specific type of participatory research that explicitly focuses on community well-being (Amauchi et al. 2021). It emphasises the active role of the community in all aspects of the research process, from defining the research question to disseminating the findings. CBPR projects typically involve partnerships between academic researchers and community organisations, with the goal of achieving social transformation and social/environmental justice (Ferreira & Gendron 2011). In CBPR, the community participates fully in all aspects of the research process, starting with the community itself, which is often self-defined but can include geographic communities, communities with shared problems, or those with common interests or goals. CBPR also emphasises equitable partnerships, sharing power, resources, credit, results, and knowledge, with reciprocal appreciation of each partner's knowledge and skills at every stage (Viswanathan et al. 2004). One of the challenges of PAR, and likely CBPR as well, is ensuring stakeholders remain committed throughout the project – given the diverse perspectives and values that can make consensus difficult (Lenette 2022). Another challenge is gaining in-depth understanding of the community, especially when researchers come from different cultural backgrounds.

In essence, CBPR can be considered a specialised form of PAR with a particular focus on community well-being and a strong emphasis on equitable partnerships between researchers and community organisations (Shalowitz et al. 2009). While PAR can be applied to a wider range of research topics, both approaches share a commitment to community engagement, social change, and the empowerment of marginalised communities.

Photovoice and participatory theatre. Photovoice is a participatory visual research method that enables participants to document and reflect on their lived experiences through photography (Molloy 2007). Participants are provided with cameras and are trained to capture photographs that represent their perspectives on a particular issue or phenomenon (Novák 2010). Photovoice can be particularly effective in giving voice to marginalised youth and communities and raising awareness about social issues (Strack et al. 2004). Similar to other PR approaches, photovoice empowers participants to express themselves visually – even if they lack literacy skills. It can generate powerful and emotionally resonant data that can influence policy and practice (Wilkinson & Wilkinson 2017). Nonetheless, photovoice requires careful consideration of ethical issues around informed consent, participant safety, power dynamics, and the representation of vulnerable groups. Practical implementation of photovoice necessitates providing appropriate training and support to participants, as well as time and resources for reflection, discussion, and curation of the photographic data – particularly awareness raising on right to image (Pierce 2018). Obtaining informed consent for taking and sharing photographs, protecting participant identities, and ensuring respectful representation of sensitive topics are important ethical considerations. Among practical considerations reference can be made to providing participants with clear guidelines for taking photographs, facilitating group discussions about the images, and developing strategies for disseminating the findings are key practical considerations.

Participatory theatre is another participatory research method that engages community members in the research process (Mayfield-Johnson & Butler 2017). Participatory theatre involves collaborating with community members to develop and perform theatrical productions that reflect their lived experiences and perspectives on social issues. This method empowers participants to share their stories and perspectives through artistic performance which can be a powerful means of raising awareness and advocat-

ing for social change (Mosavel & Thomas 2010). Like photovoice, participatory theatre requires careful attention to ethical considerations such as safeguarding participant well-being, ensuring informed consent, and navigating the complexities of representing sensitive or traumatic experiences.

Community mapping. Community mapping is a participatory research method that involves creating visual representations of a community's physical, social, economic, cultural, or historical characteristics (Teixeira 2014). This process can help identify community assets, challenges, and priorities, and promote collective understanding and decision-making (Li et al. 2018). As a form of PR, community mapping can be a highly engaging and collaborative process that brings together diverse stakeholders. It can provide valuable insights into community dynamics and spatial relationships. As expected, community mapping can be time-consuming and require specialised software or artistic skills (Farley-Ripple et al. 2020). Ensuring accurate representation and avoiding bias in the mapping process is of vital importance, of' course (Pánek & Sobotová 2015). As a qualitative and anthropological approach, community mapping also needs to account for confidentiality and negotiated access to sensitive information. Protecting participant confidentiality, respecting cultural sensitivities (the "do no harm" principle[4]), and ensuring equitable representation of different perspectives are important ethical considerations (Antle 2017). To best implement community mapping, it is useful to provide training and facilitation, establish shared understandings of the process, and collaboratively interpret and disseminate the resulting maps.

Storytelling and narrative inquiry. Storytelling and narrative inquiry are participatory research methods that centre the lived

4 The "do no harm" principle in research ethics, often linked to the Hippocratic Oath in medicine, emphasises the researcher's responsibility to avoid causing physical, psychological, or social harm to participants. This includes minimising risks, protecting confidentiality, and ensuring informed consent. It also requires researchers to consider potential cultural sensitivities and power imbalances that could lead to unintended harm.

experiences and stories of community members (Caxaj 2015). Participants are encouraged to share their personal narratives, which are then analysed to gain insights into community dynamics, social issues, and collective histories. It is a type of PR research that can be particularly effective in exploring complex social and emotional issues, for instance, gendered violence and inequalities (Mwaba et al. 2021). While storytelling provides a rich and nuanced understanding of individual experiences and remains a powerful tool for building empathy and promoting dialogue (McCall et al. 2019), it also has its limitations. Storytelling can be emotionally challenging for both participants and researcher hence the importance of ethical and respectful handling of sensitive narratives.

With the rise of digital technologies, digital storytelling has become an increasingly popular approach that combines multimedia elements with narrative (Douglas et al. 2020). This method combines storytelling with digital media, such as video, audio, and animation, to create multimedia narratives. It can be a powerful tool for sharing research findings and engaging wider audiences. Protecting participant confidentiality, respecting cultural sensitivities, and ensuring informed consent for sharing personal stories are important ethical considerations in digital narratives, too (Carter et al. 2014). Evidence from research shows that creating a safe and supportive environment for sharing stories, developing strategies for analysing narratives, and ensuring respectful representation of diverse voices are key practical considerations (De Jager et al. 2017).

Focus groups and participatory workshops. This PR approach involves convening group discussions and interactive workshops to collaboratively explore community issues and priorities through dialogue and discussions (Frasso et al. 2018). Focus groups and participatory workshops provide opportunities for community members to share perspectives, generate ideas, and engage in collective problem-solving (Tiffany 2006). These methods can be

particularly effective in amplifying the voices of marginalised groups and facilitating dialogue between diverse stakeholders. Focus groups and workshops require careful facilitation to ensure that all voices are heard and that dominant individuals do not overshadow others. Ethically, it is important to ensure equitable participation, manage power dynamics, and protect participant confidentiality. Developing clear discussion guides, creating a safe and inclusive environment, and managing group dynamics are key practical considerations.

Respondent-driven sampling (RDS). Respondent-driven sampling – introduced by Heckathorn (1997) – is a PR method that leverages social networks to recruit hard-to-reach or marginalised populations for research (Gile & Handcock 2010). This approach involves identifying a small number of "seeds" who meet the study criteria and then asking them to refer other eligible individuals from their social networks. The process continues in a snowball-like fashion with each new participant recruiting additional participants (Schonlau & Liebau 2012). RDS can be particularly useful for studying populations that are hidden, stigmatised, or difficult to access through traditional sampling methods. However, it is important to consider the potential biases and ethical implications of this approach such as the risk of coercion, the protection of participant confidentiality, and the potential for unintended consequences within social networks (Gile & Handcock 2010). This approach is often used in conjunction with other participatory methods, such as interviews or focus groups.

By carefully considering the strengths, limitations, ethical implications, and practical considerations of each methodology discussed above, researchers can select or combine the most appropriate approaches for their specific research question and context. PR methodologies offer a valuable toolkit for conducting educational research that is both rigorous and relevant to the communities it seeks to serve. They empower marginalised voices, promote social justice, and contribute to the creation of more equitable and inclusive educational systems.

5. Engaging diverse stakeholders in educational research: Strategies and challenges

As discussed in the previous sections, engaging diverse stakeholders is crucial for conducting meaningful and impactful participatory research (Hollmann et al. 2022). The pertinent question, then, is how?

In what follows, I will delve into strategies, challenges, and practical considerations in effectively engaging a few of the most frequent stakeholders in educational participatory research including children, parents, teachers, policymakers and local authorities, NGOs, and other relevant stakeholders. The aim of this overview is to address the complexities of power dynamics, representation, and inclusivity, while providing some practical guidance on building trust, establishing clear communication channels, and fostering respectful collaboration.

Strategies and challenges of mapping and engaging diverse stakeholders

Identifying and mapping the diverse stakeholders in the local context is a crucial first step in preparing for a participatory research project (Macaulay et al. 2013; Cargo & Mercer 2008). This involves taking the time to understand the local power structures, social hierarchies, and community dynamics that may influence who gets a seat at the table (Tiffany 2006).

To this end, researchers can employ a stakeholder analysis, which involves a systematic identification of all relevant individuals, groups, and organisations, and assessing their interests, influence, and potential role in the research process (Powell et al. 2019). This exercise can reveal important insights about marginalised groups that may be overlooked or underrepresented, as well as power imbalances that need to be navigated. At this very initial stage, developing relationships with community gatekeepers and leveraging existing local connections can facilitate access and identification of a wider range of stakeholders (London et al. 2020).

Once the stakeholder landscape has been mapped, the next step is to develop tailored engagement strategies for each group. Engaging diverse stakeholders requires a thoughtful and tailored approach that considers the unique characteristics and needs of each group. Here are some strategies for effectively engaging a few of the relevant stakeholders in PR project focusing on educational inequalities.

Engaging children. When engaging children in participatory research, it is crucial to create *child-friendly environments* by designing research activities that are age-appropriate, engaging, and respectful of children's developmental stages (Montreuil et al. 2021). This can be achieved through the use of visual aids, games, and storytelling to make the research process accessible and enjoyable for children. Additionally, it is essential to empower children's voices by providing them with opportunities to express their views and experiences in ways that are comfortable and meaningful to them, such as through drawings, photographs, or other creative mediums (Börjesson et al. 2015). Lastly, prioritising the safety and well-being of children throughout the research process is of utmost importance which involves obtaining informed consent from parents or guardians and adhering to ethical guidelines for research involving children (Powell et al. 2019).

Engaging parents. Building relationships with parents is another important PR strategy and a key to effective stakeholder engagement. To successfully engage parents a few strategies may be deployed including establishing open and respectful communication, sharing information about the research project in a clear and accessible manner, and communicating the outcomes and impacts of the research (Wolfenden et al. 2009). There are different ways that parents can participate in research activities, such as focus groups, surveys, or interviews to value their perspectives and incorporate their feedback into the research process (Shen et al. 2016). Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge and address any concerns or barriers that parents may have about participating in research and provide support and resources as needed.

Engaging teachers. Teachers play a critical role in educational research and should be engaged as key stakeholders (Powers 2007). By involving teachers, researchers can gain valuable insights into the local context, classroom dynamics, and the practical realities of implementing policy interventions that may be formulated in a detached perspective from the reality of schools and teaching–learning processes. Effective strategies for engaging teachers may include professional development workshops, co-creating research protocols, and providing regular feedback and updates on the research findings as well as engaging with them in communities of practice[5] (Roth et al. 2020). Establishing a collaborative and trusting relationship with teachers is essential for successfully integrating teachers' expertise and experiences into the research process.

Engaging policymakers and local authorities. Engaging local authorities is a crucial aspect of participatory research. Building strong relationships with local authorities involves establishing open communication channels where researchers can share information about the research project and its potential benefits for the community. Moreover, seeking input and collaboration from local authorities can greatly enhance the research process (Farhat & Tabach 2019). This may include involving them in providing data, participating in advisory committees, or even co-designing interventions. Additionally, researchers can leverage the research findings to inform policy development and advocate for evidence-based practices that address the community's needs. By fostering these collaborative partnerships, researchers can ensure that the research is responsive to the local context and that the

5 Communities of practice offer valuable opportunities for teachers' professional development and collaborative learning. These self-organized groups share a common interest or passion and engage in joint activities, knowledge sharing, and mutual support to improve their practice. They foster innovation, build leadership capacity, and can enhance teacher morale in a world where teachers' professionalism and social prestige is undermined by capitalism, digitalisation, and authoritarianism.

findings contribute to meaningful policy changes and practical outcomes (Baker et al. 1999).

Engaging NGOs. When engaging NGOs, it is crucial to identify shared goals and build partnerships based on mutual respect and shared values. Collaborating with NGOs that have a common interest in the research topic can be highly beneficial (Olivier et al. 2016) if the researcher is aware of differences in terminology and objectives – I would say. Researchers can leverage the expertise and resources of NGOs to enhance their research projects as NGOs can provide valuable insights into community needs and help connect researchers with local stakeholders (Drahota et al. 2016). However, the collaboration shall be beneficial for both parties and therefore it is important to work with NGOs to disseminate research findings and to advocate for policy changes based on the research results (Kennell & Woolley 2012).

Engaging other relevant stakeholders. Identifying and engaging other relevant stakeholders such as community leaders, social workers, or healthcare providers can also facilitate the success of participatory research (Silberberg & Martínez-Bianchi 2019). As I mentioned above, tailoring engagement strategies to the specific needs and interests of each stakeholder group is essential as different stakeholders may have unique concerns and priorities. Furthermore, fostering collaboration and building coalitions among diverse stakeholders can help maximise the impact of the research project and ensure that the findings are used to inform policy and practice (Goodman & Thompson 2017).

Of course engaging stakeholders in PR is not without challenges and risks. Some potential challenges in stakeholder engagement include power imbalances, conflicting interests, limited resources, and building trust (Karukstis 2005). In highly informal contexts and at community level, researchers must also be mindful of maintaining confidentiality and addressing any concerns around data ownership and use that may arise from stakeholders. In particular, as PR challenges traditional power dynamics, maintaining transparency and addressing power differentials is

a key consideration throughout the research process. One way to address these challenges is to establish clear governance structures and shared decision-making processes that encourage the equitable participation of all stakeholders (London et al. 2020) (Silberberg & Martínez-Bianchi 2019). In a similar vein, ensuring inclusive participatory processes through careful attention to the *accessibility*, *acceptability*, *availability*, and *affordability* of research processes and participation – for instance, by removing linguistic or gendered barriers – can improve equitable representation of diverse voices without creating a situation of conflict and resentment (Ettorre 2000). In addition, the sustainability of stakeholder engagement beyond the project timeline is a critical aspect to achieve long-term impact and the self-empowerment of local communities.

6. Participatory research case studies: Illustrating effective stakeholder engagement

This book includes several case studies that illustrate the application of a participatory research approach. To complement the diverse methods and approaches discussed in the following chapters, four successful participatory research projects are presented here. The cases are intentionally selected from a mix of European and non-European contexts to highlight the flexible adaptation of PR principles to diverse cultural and socio-political environments. I have also highlighted some of the challenges that raised due to the participatory nature of inquiry to facilitate a better and a nuanced understanding of PR approaches.

Case study 1: Students as co-researchers: Participatory methods for decolonising research in teaching and learning in higher education
Aim. This study (Timmis et al. 2024) explores the potential, challenges, and limitations of participatory, narrative, and multimodal research methods in decolonising research on student experiences in higher education. The authors argue for the necessity of redressing power imbalances inherent in traditional research approaches by incorporating methodologies that centre student

voices and perspectives. Specifically, the study investigates how participatory methodologies can be combined with narrative inquiry and multimodal methods to empower students to research their own lives and contexts.

Methods. The research employed a participatory, narrative, and multimodal methodological approach within an international study based in South Africa, with South African and UK partners. Sixty-five undergraduate students from rural backgrounds participated as co-researchers over 12 months. The study draws on Fraser's social justice concepts of *participatory parity*, *redistribution*, *recognition*, and *representation* to frame its analysis. The co-researchers were actively involved in shaping the research questions, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings. Narrative inquiry allowed students to share their experiences in their own words while multimodal methods incorporated diverse forms of expression, such as photography, video, and creative writing.

Key findings. The study highlights several key findings regarding the potential and challenges of co-researcher methodologies:

- *Empowerment and ownership.* Students as co-researchers experienced a sense of ownership and agency over the research process. This fostered deeper engagement and a greater investment in the research outcomes.
- *Enhanced data quality and insights.* The participatory approach generated richer and more nuanced data, providing valuable insights into the complexities of student experiences. The co-researchers' intimate knowledge of their own contexts allowed them to gather data that might have been inaccessible to external researchers.
- *Challenges of power dynamics*. Despite efforts to create equitable partnerships, power dynamics between academic researchers and student co-researchers remained a challenge. Negotiating these power imbalances required ongoing reflection and open communication.

- *Logistical and resource constraints.* Implementing co-researcher methodologies presented logistical challenges, particularly in coordinating activities across different institutions and countries. Adequate resources, including funding and training, are essential for supporting co-researcher projects.
- *Ethical considerations.* Ethical considerations, such as informed consent, data protection, and anonymity, were carefully addressed throughout the research process. Ensuring the well-being and safety of student co-researchers was a priority.

Conclusion. The study concludes that co-researcher methodologies hold significant promise for decolonising research in higher education. By empowering students to become active participants in the research process these approaches can generate more relevant, nuanced, and impactful findings. However, it is essential to acknowledge and address the potential challenges related to power dynamics, logistical constraints, and ethical considerations. The authors suggest that future research should focus on developing strategies for overcoming these challenges and further refining co-researcher methodologies to promote greater participatory parity and social justice in higher education research. The study's findings contribute to the growing body of literature on participatory research and offer valuable insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers seeking to implement more equitable and transformative research practices.

Case study 2: Baraza as method: Adapting a traditional conversational space for data collection and pathways for change

Aim. This study (Chubb et al. 2021) explores the adaptation of *baraza*, a traditional East African community discussion forum,[6]

6 The authors explain: "Baraza (or its plural form mabaraza) is Kiswahili for a type of group gathering space for dialogue traditionally used in the East African context. The roots of mabaraza can be traced back to Zanzibar, a small archipelago now part of the United Republic of Tanzania. Socially,

as a participatory research method for investigating intergenerational experiences of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and related programmes in a rural Kenyan community. The researchers aimed to create a culturally relevant and empowering space for community members, particularly young people, to discuss sensitive SRH issues and contribute to positive change. The study also sought to address the challenge of limited spaces for young people to engage meaningfully with complex sexual well-being issues.

Methods. The research team, comprising a university researcher and young adults involved with a local NGO, collaborated with community members to adapt the traditional *baraza* format for data collection. They conducted a series of *mabaraza* (plural of *baraza*) with different community groups, including young people, parents, elders, and religious leaders. The *mabaraza* provided a platform for open dialogue, sharing stories, and generating collective solutions. Data were collected through audio recordings of the *mabaraza* discussions, which were later transcribed and analysed thematically.

Key findings. The study revealed several key findings regarding the effectiveness of *baraza* as a participatory research method:

- *Cultural relevance and acceptability.* The *baraza* format resonated with community members due to its familiarity and cultural significance. This facilitated open communication and trust between researchers and participants.
- *Enhanced participation and engagement.* The *mabaraza* created a safe and inclusive space for diverse community members to share their experiences and perspectives,

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mabaraza can take on both formal and informal structures, from a council of elders deliberating on county budgetary issues to a group of individuals debating the outcome of a football match over a cup of kahawa (coffee). Well-established mabaraza are generally held in the same location with similar hours and processes, thereby inhabiting a distinct history over time. Mabaraza can be intergenerational and function as forums for welcoming community members and to debate and resolve community issues."

particularly young people who often lack opportunities to voice their opinions on sensitive topics.

- *Generation of contextually relevant insights*. The discussions in the *mabaraza* provided rich insights into the specific SRH challenges faced by the community, as well as local knowledge and beliefs related to sexuality and reproduction.
- *Community ownership and empowerment.* The participatory nature of *baraza* fostered a sense of ownership among community members, empowering them to identify solutions and take action to address SRH issues.
- *Bridging intergenerational gaps.* The *mabaraza* facilitated dialogue between different generations, promoting understanding and collaboration on SRH issues.

Conclusion. The study concludes that *baraza* is a valuable and effective participatory research method for engaging communities in addressing sensitive issues such as SRH. Its cultural relevance, participatory nature, and ability to foster community ownership make it a powerful tool for promoting positive social change. The researchers suggest that *baraza* can be adapted and applied in other cultural contexts to address a wide range of community health and development issues. The study's findings contribute to the growing body of literature on culturally sensitive research methods and offer valuable insights for researchers and practitioners working in community health settings. The adaptation of *baraza* demonstrates the potential of drawing on indigenous knowledge and practices to develop innovative and effective research methodologies.

Case study 3: Families and educators co-designing: Critical education research as participatory public scholarship

Aim. This study (Hernández et al. 2024) examines a participatory action research project focused on family–school collaborations within a large urban school district in the United States (pre-K–8

Catholic School). The project aimed to develop and implement school-site collaborations designed by families and educators working together to address issues of educational equity and improve student outcomes. The authors argue for the importance of critical education research as participatory public scholarship – emphasising the need for research to be grounded in community needs and driven by collaborative partnerships.

Methods. The research team, which included university researchers, district leaders, school administrators, teachers, and family members, employed a PAR approach over several years. The project involved multiple phases, including:

- *Initial research and report development.* The team conducted initial research to understand the current state of family–school collaborations in the district and developed a report outlining best practices and recommendations.
- *Pilot school–community collaboration (SCC).* Based on the report's findings, pilot SCCs were established in several schools with families and educators working together to design and implement collaborative activities.
- *Data collection and analysis.* Data were collected through various methods, including interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis. The research team analysed the data to understand the processes, challenges, and outcomes of the SCCs.
- *Refinement and expansion.* Based on the analysis, the SCC model was refined and expanded to additional schools in the district.

Key findings. The study highlighted several key findings regarding the implementation and impact of family–school collaborations:

- *Importance of shared leadership.* Successful SCCs required shared leadership between families and educators with

both groups having equal voice and decision-making power.

- *Building trust and relationships.* Developing strong relationships and trust between families and educators was essential for effective collaboration.
- *Addressing systemic barriers.* The research revealed systemic barriers to family engagement such as language access, transportation, and cultural differences. Addressing these barriers was crucial for creating equitable partnerships.
- *Positive impact on student outcomes.* The SCCs demonstrated a positive impact on student outcomes, including improved attendance, academic performance, and social-emotional well-being.
- *Challenges of sustainability.* Sustaining the SCCs over time required ongoing support from the district and school leadership, as well as dedicated resources.

Conclusion. The study concludes that critical education research can be a powerful tool for promoting educational equity and social justice when conducted as participatory public scholarship. This PAR project demonstrated the potential of family–school collaborations to improve student outcomes and create more equitable learning environments. However, the authors emphasise the importance of addressing systemic barriers, building trust and relationships, and ensuring shared leadership for successful and sustainable collaborations. The study's findings contribute to the growing body of literature on family engagement in education and offer valuable insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers seeking to create more equitable and collaborative school communities.

Case study 4: Engaging young people in a research project: The complexities and contributions of using participatory methods with young people in schools

Aim. This article (Petry & Puigcercós 2022) examines the complexities and contributions of using participatory research meth

ods with young people in schools. The study aimed to investigate what and how secondary school students learn in and outside of school, while also exploring the challenges and benefits of engaging young people as co-researchers within a formal school setting. The authors sought to understand how participatory methods could empower students and provide valuable insights into their learning experiences.

Methods. The research team, composed of nine university researchers, worked with 35 students aged 15–18 from five Catalan secondary schools in Spain over a period of six months. The project adopted a participatory ethnographic approach, with students actively involved in various stages of the research process. The co-researchers collaborated with the university researchers in making decisions, formulating research questions, selecting research methods and tools, collecting data, and analysing findings. Data collection methods included interviews, focus groups, observations, and student-generated artefacts such as photos and videos.

Key findings. The study highlighted several key findings regarding the use of participatory methods with young people in schools:

- *Complexity of school-based research.* Conducting participatory research within schools presented several challenges, including navigating institutional constraints, obtaining approvals from school administrators, teachers, students, and families, and integrating research activities into the school timetable.
- *Balancing research and school activities.* Integrating research sessions into school activities facilitated access to schools but also risked turning the research into a purely school-based activity, hence potentially compromising the authenticity of student participation.
- *Empowering young people as co-researchers.* Despite the challenges, the participatory approach empowered students by giving them a voice and agency in the research process.

Students felt valued and respected as co-researchers, which enhanced their engagement and motivation.

- *Generating rich insights into student learning.* The participatory methods generated rich and nuanced data about student learning experiences, both inside and outside of school. The co-researchers' perspectives provided valuable insights that might have been missed by traditional research approaches.
- *Ethical considerations.* The study emphasised the importance of addressing ethical considerations, such as informed consent, confidentiality, and power dynamics between researchers and young people.

Conclusion. The study concludes that participatory methods offer valuable opportunities for engaging young people in research and generating meaningful insights into their learning experiences. However, researchers must carefully consider the complexities of conducting research within school settings and address the potential challenges related to institutional constraints, balancing research and school activities, and ethical considerations. The authors suggest that future research should explore strategies for overcoming these challenges and further refine participatory methods to ensure authentic student engagement and empowerment. The study's findings contribute to the growing body of literature on participatory research with young people and offer valuable insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers seeking to create more inclusive and student-centred research practices

7. Key ethical considerations in participatory research

I have already discussed some of the ethical considerations that may arise when conducting PR studies, such as navigating power dynamics, ensuring informed consent, and protecting participant confidentiality. In this final section, it is imperative to emphasise the ethical principles that are to guide every stage of the participatory research process regardless of the method selected.

Data protection and anonymity. Protecting the privacy and confidentiality of research participants is paramount in any research endeavour; it is even more so in PR where participants are often members of vulnerable or marginalised communities (Walford 2005). Researchers must implement robust data protection measures to safeguard the sensitive information shared by participants – the European guidelines in the *FAIR Data* guide can be helpful (Open Research Europe 2022). This includes secure data storage and management practices, removing identifying details from the data whenever possible, and establishing clear agreements with community partners and participants regarding data ownership, access, and sharing. These measures ensure alignment with community values, privacy, and preferences.

Informed consent. Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research. In participatory research, obtaining truly informed consent requires careful consideration of the power dynamics inherent in the researcher–community relationship and the potential for coercion or undue influence. To address this, researchers must provide participants with clear and accessible information about the research purpose, methods, risks, and benefits, using language and formats appropriate for the target population. Additionally, they must ensure that participation is truly voluntary and that participants understand their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Recognising consent as an ongoing process, researchers should regularly check in with participants to ensure they remain comfortable with their level of involvement and to reaffirm their consent. As Hannes and Parylo (2014) explain, ethical considerations related to informed consent are particularly important in visual PAR research projects.

Power dynamics and reciprocity. PR aims to challenge traditional power imbalances and should, therefore, embrace equity in power as its core guiding objective. Between researchers and their research subjects, it is very probable that power dynamics still emerge because top-down power relations are "normalised" in certain contexts. It is the researchers' ethical obligation to re-

main mindful of these dynamics and strive to maintain equitable partnerships. Researchers should engage in critical self-reflection to examine their own power and privilege – a sort of decolonisation from within, I would say – and how these may influence the research. Ensuring that community partners have a meaningful voice in all aspects of the research – and not merely where it is pre-imagined by the researchers – is crucial. This can transcend from defining questions to interpreting findings and disseminating results. Investing in capacity-building activities, too, can be beneficial in empowering community partners and enhance their research skills. Community members may never have ever been engaged in any research activity and the academic methods and language may seem foreign and intimidating to them. Recognising that research should be mutually beneficial, researchers should consider how the research can contribute to community goals and priorities and provide tangible benefits to participants (Banks et al. 2013) while also discussing the importance of relationships and responsibilities in community-based participatory research.

Confidentiality and disclosure. Maintaining confidentiality can be particularly challenging in participatory research, especially in close-knit communities where participants may be easily identifiable. Researchers must develop robust strategies for managing confidentiality and addressing potential disclosures. This includes establishing clear protocols for securely storing, accessing, and sharing data – a data management plan (DMP)[7] can be beneficial.

7 A data management plan (DMP) is a formal document that outlines how research data will be collected, stored, processed, analysed, preserved, and shared throughout the research lifecycle and beyond. A DMP is crucial for ensuring data quality, integrity, and accessibility, as well as complying with funder requirements and ethical guidelines. Key components of a DMP typically include data description, storage and back-up procedures, data security measures, access and sharing policies, and long-term preservation plans. DMPs are increasingly required by research funders and institutions to promote responsible data management practices and maximize the value of research investments. For more information see, for example Bicarregui et al. (2012).

Researchers should also openly discuss the limits of confidentiality with participants acknowledging that absolute confidentiality may not always be possible. Additionally, they should prepare for potential disclosures of sensitive information such as child abuse or domestic violence by consulting with community partners and ethical review boards to develop appropriate procedures.

Conflicts of interest. Researchers must be mindful of the potential for conflicts of interest in participatory research which can arise when they have personal or professional relationships with community partners or participants. Scher et al. (2023) have some useful recommendation relating to methodology, logistics, and ethics of PR. Conflicts of interest may arise from power imbalances and regarding who influences research design, data collection and interpretation, who funds the research, as well as personal beliefs and values of researchers – particularly when addressing sensitive religious, ethnic, or identity topics. In their study, for instance, Agnoli et al. (2017) noticed an alarmingly large percentage of university psychologists in the United States and Italy who have used questionable research practices that can lead to biased findings. When questioned about their research practice, these researchers referred to reviewers' and journals' demands, which means participants, or their data have – most probably – been manipulated. Transparency and open communication are essential for managing these potential conflicts. Researchers should disclose any potential conflicts of interest to community partners and participants and develop strategies for managing them such as recusal from certain aspects of the research or involving an independent third party. By addressing conflicts of interest proactively, researchers can maintain the integrity of the PR process and ensure that it remains focused on the needs and priorities of the community.

Cultural sensitivity. When working with communities from diverse cultural backgrounds researchers must be sensitive to cultural norms and values and adapt their research practices accordingly. This involves consulting with community members to

gain insights into their cultural beliefs and practices which may influence the research process. The second case study (*baraza* as a method) included in this chapter is a good example of PR aligned with cultural practices and sensitivities. Researchers should also use culturally appropriate and respectful research methods and ensure that research materials and communication are accessible to participants in their preferred language. Discussing the importance of respecting participants' world views, Aluwihare-Samaranayake (2012) indicates that to constantly relate the two worlds of researchers and the researched, different modalities shall be used. These modes may include dialogue in the spoken and written and visual to affect their aims to adhere to the principles of respect, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice in a way that is mutually beneficial to the participant and the researcher.

Ultimately, by thoughtfully addressing these key ethical considerations, researchers can engage in participatory research in a manner that is truly respectful, equitable, and beneficial to the communities involved, ensuring that the research process and outcomes align with their needs, values, and priorities. Decency and integrity in research, just as any other sphere of social life, seems to be the key.

8. Conclusion

As it was discussed, participatory research is not merely a research method, but a transformative philosophy that reimagines the relationship between researchers and communities or individuals that are subjects of sociological inquiry.

Participatory research emphasises democratic principles, shared power, and social justice, aiming to create rigorous and relevant research that aligns with the needs and aspirations of education as a public good and a non-negotiable human right. Nancy Fraser's (2008) concept of "parity in participation" – although not primarily focused on research contexts – provides a useful framework for engaging relevant stakeholders and study subjects as equal partners and decision-makers in the entire research process (Asaba & Suárez-Balcázar 2018).

By embracing the core tenets of participatory research – including community engagement, shared power, and a commitment to social change – academic researchers can produce scholarship that is not only theoretically and methodologically robust, but also ethically grounded and responsive to the real-world concerns of the communities with whom they collaborate. Transparency, reciprocity, and respect for community values are crucial for ensuring ethical research practices (Wood 2017), as discussed in the previous section. PR has the potential to generate significant positive impacts on educational systems and communities by empowering community members to participate actively in the research process. It can lead to more effective interventions, improved educational outcomes, and greater social equity. But it needs to be carefully designed and with benevolence, too.

There are three final remarks that I would like to emphasise in this conclusion. The first is this: While PR is an alternative to traditional top-down research models, it should not be viewed as a panacea. Researchers and community partners must navigate complex power dynamics, confront historical legacies of exploitation and colonisation, and manage logistical and institutional barriers.

The second point is this: Participatory educational research must continue to evolve to keep pace with the rapid technological and socio-economic changes transforming education and society. As digital tools and platforms become increasingly ubiquitous, researchers should explore how technology can be leveraged to enhance PR processes and enable more inclusive, participatory modes of community engagement. For instance, Ng et al. (2023) use the concept of "digital commons" to explore the intersection between participatory design, digital gamification, and community engagement in urban design research. This involves the production, distribution, common stewardship and ownership of data, information, and technology that are valuable resources in collective decision-making (Bauwens et al. 2019). The same concept can be applied to educational participatory research knowing

that digital commons can lead to a new set of ethical challenges that emerge, particularly around data protection, privacy, and ensuring meaningful informed consent.

Finally, PR must contend with shifting political and economic realities that impact educational systems and communities. Researchers need to keep pace to develop strategies for navigating these complex landscapes, forging strong partnerships that empower marginalised voices and advance social justice agendas.

Investing in capacity-building initiatives and rigorous impact evaluation will enable participatory educational research to expand its potential, striving towards a more equitable and empowering educational experience for all within the complex dynamics of our world.

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2. Practice Research and Pioneering Approaches for Tackling Educational Inequalities: Experiences from the European Project PIONEERED

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1. Combating educational inequalities: The need for a multidimensional perspective

Educational inequalities, as key issue of the PIONEERED project (Hadjar et al. 2022), are not only attributable to one specific mechanism (such as the resources in the parental home), or to only one level of analysis (such as educational policy on the societal level). Instead, disadvantages in education among certain socially constructed groups originate from processes on different levels of analysis being a result of multiple layers of intersectional and interconnected issues. Thus, researching how to tackle educational inequalities at different educational stages and in different contexts in a comprehensive way prompt us to relational theoretical framework thinking and to combine different methodologies. Furthermore, both identifying and addressing educational inequalities requires going beyond traditionally established concepts, theories, and policy interventions (Jensen et al. 2021). Starting out from classical theories of primary and secondary effects of social origin of (Boudon 1974), complementing tertiary effects (Blossfeld et al. 2015), habitus, and capital concepts (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977) the PIONEERED project proposes a multilevel, intersectional, life course (MILC) approach.

This multilevel approach puts an emphasis on educational mechanisms at macro (e.g., policies), meso (e.g., school settings), and micro (e.g., individuals) levels, highlighting how policies and practices shape educational environments. It draws upon Coleman's (1986) structural individualism and Bronfenbrenner's

(1979) ecological systems theory, considering broader, higher-level influences on individual disadvantages in educational achievement and attainment.

The intersectionality approach (Crenshaw 1991; Walby et al. 2012; Gross et al. 2016) allows us to study the diversity and heterogeneity within social groups – structured by structural categories such as social origin/class, gender, migrant background, or disability – and to identify most deprived groups. It emphasises the complexity of inequality axes and employs anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical methods in research.

The life course approach (Mayer & Müller 1986; Elder et al. 2003) examines how educational inequalities develop over a person's life influenced by individual experiences, decisions, and actions as well as structural factors such as institutions (e.g., schools, companies) which frame these experiences, decisions, and actions. Studying the causes and effects of educational inequalities considering dynamic processes, with policies shaping life events linked to cumulative advantages or disadvantages, appears to be crucial.

The MILC approach has been accompanied by an even more open approach "beyond MILC" (Seiler et al. 2021) that seeks to transcend traditional frameworks, incorporating field insights and remains open to new, unexpected discoveries. Such an approach appeared to be useful in attempting to identify pioneering policies and practices in terms of highly innovative, boundary-breaking, bridging, and effective pilot projects (https://www.pioneered-project.eu/). "Beyond" refers to being sensitive towards MILC aspects, but always critically confronting and potentially adapting this framework and attempting to find new aspects during the empirical research steps.

Collaborative research

The PIONEERED project was carried out as collaborative research from 2021 to 2024. Researchers from 12 research institutions/universities in nine European countries (Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain, and

Switzerland) worked closely together and met frequently online as well as in person to discuss work steps, theoretical and methodological issues, and interim results. They agreed on the following objectives and mapping steps early in the research process:

- Mapping the state-of-research and concepts of inequalities and creating a comprehensive methodological framework to the study of inequalities
- Mapping policies to tackle educational inequalities, mapping data sets to analyse educational inequalities, providing harmonisation guidelines, and mapping results regarding educational inequalities and some mechanisms behind it (e.g., school segregation) for different countries
- Mapping and analysing promising practices in educational settings
- Listing and describing the most promising policies and practices in a comprehensive and concise way

The PIONEERED project was organised into eight work packages (WPs) to streamline tasks and leadership roles. WP1 focused on project management, ensuring smooth operations and adherence to commitments. WP2 conducted a literature review to understand educational uptake disparities and developed a methodological approach becoming the base for the empirical WPs with the MILC and beyond frameworks as key outcomes. WP3 analysed policies explicitly directed towards inequalities or from a researcher's perspective affecting the education system. WP4 used secondary data from national and international studies to examine educational inequalities and protective factors against related disadvantages. WP5 engaged in practice research with a participatory approach, aiming to understand and transfer pioneering practices that address educational inequalities. Fieldwork involved qualitative case studies (including guided tours and focus groups) in various educational settings. WP6 synthesised findings

from policy analysis, quantitative data analysis, and practice research to identify effective policies and practices. WP7 handled dissemination, communication, and sustainable implementation of results at national and EU levels, coordinating conference presentations and stakeholder engagements, while WP8 dealt with ethical issues of research and provided support throughout the project (Hadjar et al. 2022).

The researchers contributed with different expertises structured by disciplinary focus (e.g. sociology, educational sciences, psychology of education), methodological focus (e.g. practice research, quantitative data analysis, policy analysis), and focus on certain educational stages (e.g. early childhood education and care, higher education). As all research teams were involved in all work packages, and thus into different research steps transcending their core expertise, and an open and holistic mixed-method perspective was employed, the project went beyond the state-of-the-art in social science and multidisciplinary research. All participants of this research – not only researchers, but also the involved stakeholders and practitioners – reached a new and much more sophisticated understanding of educational inequalities and insight into how to combat them in practice.

In the following, we will focus on that aspect of our research that we refer to as "practice research." The basic elements of collaborative research just outlined – namely interdisciplinary and international collaboration, division of labour to achieve joint goals, the integration of different expertise and perspectives – are particularly central to practice research. They form the basis for creative processes that go beyond the traditionally established scientific and political concepts and thus open up the space for unexpected findings to combat educational inequalities (Jensen et al. 2021).

2. The international comparative practice research (ICPR) strategy

In order to identify and analyse pioneering egalitarian practices in education, the qualitative strand in PIONEERED developed

and implemented an international comparative practice research (ICPR) strategy for researching the multifaceted complexities of educational inequalities and for exploring promising ways for tackling these inequalities within national and across national contexts. The ICPR strategy combines two methodological streams within qualitative research – namely, practice research and international comparative case research. This combination results in three main characteristics that have been fundamental for our research right from the outset:

1. A commitment to involving practitioners with case-experience/practical knowledge of tackling educational inequality
2. An interest in generalising the results
3. An awareness regarding the broader social, political, historical, and cultural context of education and related inequalities

The following considerations first outline these three features and then describe the research steps based on them.

Participatory research: Involving practitioners with case experience

Following the key ideas of practice research, we focused on practitioners' direct experiences and knowledge of practices to reduce educational inequality. From the very beginning in the 1930s (Lewin 1953; Dewy 1986), it had been a fundamental concern of practice research to engage with innovative developments in the education sector. As an alternative to empirical analytical research, practice research aims at opening up paths in the scientific field that recognise knowledge that has its origin outside of the scientific field – in the field of practice (Tillmann 2011). In this way, practice research attempts to overcome the socially constructed insider–outsider dualism between academics and practitioners. In the same vein, it points to context dependency and partiality of scientific research and aims to uncover the interlinkage between scientific knowledge and social power relations

(Marx 2005, 16; Mannheim 1929, 45; Feyerabend 1976, 392; Jobst & Skrobanek 2020).

Research on educational inequality faces the danger of implicitly legitimising a model of society that is based on cultural assimilation and reproduction of existing inequalities between social groups. Practice research, however, has the potential to produce knowledge that sensitises regarding symbolic struggles for hegemony and thus tries to avoid reductionist perspectives on educational inequalities which keep the status quo. It calls attention to recognition and redistribution processes based on power relations and social inequalities (Jobst & Skrobanek 2020).

In this sense, our research in PIONEERED is guided by the methodological idea of seeing practitioners as agents of social change and autonomous formers of their environment. Their knowledge becomes the most important resource for identifying, understanding, analysing, reflecting, and further developing pioneering practices (Jensen et al. 2023, 6). Practitioners in the PIONEERED project had been government officials responsible for equality and inclusion in education, policymakers or experts from teachers' unions, as well as educators within pioneering practices. They became involved in our research both as experts of their daily practice and as co-researchers. Linked to this, an essential task for us as researchers was to create a third space where practitioners could feel encouraged to participate in the PIONEERED research process, including research design, data collection and analysis, and dissemination.

Generalisation of the results

Practice research faces the challenges not to remain limited to the microcosm of direct everyday experience, but to gain generalisable knowledge (Tillmann 2011, 111). For us, the solution to this challenge was to adopt an inductive–deductive strategy of international comparison (Jensen et al. 2021). In other words, it was important to guarantee an open approach that allowed us to see the previously unexplored, the pioneering, as well as to have a systematic approach that guaranteed generalisation of the results.

To deal with this complexity, we refer to the quasi-experimental function of explicit international comparison, the aim of which is to generate hypotheses independently of the context (Hörner 1993).

Our *tertium comparationis* (Scheffer & Niewöhner 2010) is pioneering practice tackling educational inequality. In order to make our *tertium comparationis* researchable, we referred to the already described MILC framework "educational inequality" on the one hand and found an operational definition that reflects our joint understanding of "pioneering practices tackling educational inequality" on the other hand. Thus, all partners in the research team were invited to develop a common understanding of the term "pioneering" in the context of educational inequality. Here, we identified two main dimensions (Jensen et al. 2021, 22). The first dimension, STA (state of the art) of contemporary research, includes categories that overlap with the heuristic MILC framework of PIONEERED. The partners emphasise that understanding and analysing educational inequality must include all levels of education, require a multidimensional perspective (social background, gender, ethnicity, disadvantaged neighbourhoods, etc.), a focus on support to improve educational equality, and a temporal and place-specific frame of reference. The second main dimension (GoingBeyond, not covered by STA) transcends the MILC frame. Based on this step of the analysis, pioneering practices became defined as a transformative–relational practice that overcomes established contexts, results, established theories, approaches, methods, and practices. "Pioneering means 'doing something unknown' or 'while putting pioneering work into practice', promoting the 'processual and contingent'" (Jensen et al. 2021, 19). Based on this common theoretical framework, the question grids of the empirical data collection as well as of the comparative analysis was developed (see further Method, parts 1 and 2).

A consciousness of the broader social, political context of education
Context matters. Following this imperative of international comparative research (Crossley & Jarvis 2001), we differentiated the

national contexts we studied according to their different welfare and education systems. As Table 2.1 illustrates, the welfare regimes in the partner countries are classified as "social democratic," "conservative," "post-socialist," "liberal," or "southern/family-oriented" and further described by the degree of stratification in the education system as well as the extent of educational inequality in each country (Esping-Andersen 1990). Using education system and welfare regime as variables in the macro system allows us to examine homogeneous and heterogeneous configurations as influences on the micro level (Hörner 1997; Hörner & Schlott 1983; Lieberson 1992, 105).

Table 2.1. Education Systems, Welfare Regimes and Level of Educational Inequality in Partner Countries

Country	Welfare regime	Level of strati fication in the education system	Level of educational inequality
Finland	Social democratic	Low	Low
Germany	Conservative	High	High
Hungary	Post-socialist	Medium	High
Ireland	Liberal	Medium	Medium
Lithuania	Post-socialist	Medium	Medium
Luxembourg	Conservative	High	High
Norway	Social democratic	Low	Low
Spain	Southern/family-oriented	Medium	Medium
Switzerland	Conservative	High	High

Using these predefined typologies of education systems and welfare regimes provides an opportunity to reduce complexity. However, those macro-level characteristics are only one dimension of comparison. In order to keep our approach open, we categorised the identified pioneering practices in each partner country inductively based on an empirical-based typology of practices. Although this categorisation has also been derived from the initial analytical frame of PIONEERED (MILC categories) in a confirmatory manner, open inductive coding has been at the forefront to account for unexpected phenomena in the empirical data. As

argued by Miles and Huberman (1994, 61), the field will, in most cases, be vastly more complex than social scientists' initial analytical frames. Thus, it would be unwise not to look for phenomena that go beyond the theoretical categories developed before data was collected (Jensen et al. 2021, 8). Table 2.2 provides an overview of the comparison steps, which are specified in more detail below.

Table 2.2. Comparison Steps

Steps of comparison	Purpose	Empirical basis
1. Juxtaposition of stakeholders' problem understandings and solutions	Participatory access and understanding of pioneering practices	Six semi-structured interviews, two focus groups, one workshop with stakeholders per country
2. International comparison of the country vignettes	International similarities, country group-specific differences, and country particularities inform the selection of cases	Country vignettes based on the country reports (step 1)
3. Cases analyses	Deeper insights into selected practices	Two practices per country: context analysis, six qualitative interviews, two "guided tours," two focus groups per country
4. International collaborative case comparison	Hindering and fostering factors for realising pioneering educational practices across European countries	Workshop based on case sketches, scatter plot (step 3)

Step 1: Participatory access to and understanding of the research field and international comparison

The purpose of part 1 of the method was to gather understandings of educational inequalities and pioneering practices implemented

to address educational inequalities among stakeholders in each country. Stakeholders were understood as experts with knowledge of policies and practices. They could be national, regional, or local government officers responsible for educational equality and inclusion, policymakers, teacher union experts, educational practitioners, teacher educators, representatives of community-led neighbourhood groups, parental organisation representatives, or representatives of transnational networks addressing educational inequalities (Jobst, et.al. 2022, 5). Following Abbott (2016), the focus was both on understanding the problem (how stakeholders think educational inequalities come about and what is at the core of inequalities), and existing strategies to address educational inequalities at local, regional, and national level (how these inequalities can be reduced regarding country-specific linked ecologies). Regarding the latter, the interest was to land a typology of pioneering practices known by the stakeholders based on

- Explicit and implicit objectives of the practices (e.g., target groups/institutions, aims, pedagogical devices, etc.)
- The extent to which these practices are considered to go beyond existing or taken-for-granted approaches

A multimethod/multiperspective approach was used for data collection and for exploring stakeholders' perceptions and knowledge. By this, different qualitative accounts were combined for the best possible exploration and identification of pioneering practices (Fielding & Fielding 2008). Following Brinkmann (2020), six individual interviews, two focus group interviews, and one workshops with stakeholders were carried out in each country. The interview guides were deemed to explore specific individual knowledge and perspectives on educational inequality, stakeholders' problem framing and practice experiences in the field, and the nature and outcomes of pioneering strategies and approaches to counter educational inequality in each country. The strategy chosen to identify and select those stakeholders who could best provide information about situationally and contextually related

existing programmes, within the specific country contexts, was to focus on those with local, regional, or national knowledge and practise expertise. Considering practicability, flexibility, and the fact that fieldwork took place in the COVID-19 context, it was left to the partners to justify the selection criteria and to decide to use online, or face-to-face interviewing. Regarding the later, and considering COVID-19-related constraints, online interviews were regarded to be the preferred option in contrast to telephone interviews (Abrams & Gaiser 2017; Poynter 2010).

The use of the semi-structured interview technique enabled us not only to discuss theory and practice based on stakeholders' interests and experience, but also to gather valuable information for identifying and understanding pioneering practice. A template regarding how to do the stakeholder interviews was elaborated to provide a brief description of the development of the technique: identification of stakeholders, number and selection (structural sample), and interview guide. The template was designed as a tool to guide country partners in their research process while acknowledging the need to take country partners' specific contexts into consideration. The interview guides were translated into the language of the partner country and a pre-test of the stakeholder interview guide was carried out before data collection.

The impressions and results from the stakeholders' interviews fed into the focus group discussions and both the individual interviews and focus groups analysis lay the basis for the workshops. While the individual interviews were intended to cover discourses with a rather individual perspectives, based on narratives close to the self-report, the focus groups were methodologically designed to capture discursive interactions and to elicit collective knowledge about specific topics (Silverman 2020, 220). The collective and interactive dimension of this research technique were also aimed at detecting the configurations of points of consensus and dissent surrounding the complexity of educational inequalities and how to tackle them. Focus groups offer participants the space to voice their opinion in a more nuanced and discursive way,

building together a group process that allowed for further exploration and reflection about educational practices able to make a difference and, hence, change the status quo.

The aim of the workshop with stakeholders was a reflection on the preliminary results together with researchers and stakeholders, contrasting individual and collective perspectives on educational inequalities and pioneering ways of tackling them. A how-to workshop template was elaborated to provide guidance in relation to the number and selection of participants, the objectives and the methodological approach. The stakeholders were selected by each country partner among the previous interview or group discussion participants (via the snowball-explorative-grounded recruiting strategy), or by identifying new experts on emerging dimensions that have previously not been acknowledged. The physical face-to-face workshop with six to ten participants was recommended. If the circumstances did not allow the face-to-face mode, an online workshop with fewer participants, from four to six, were recommended, due to the unique dynamics of the digital medium and the difficulties to moderate discussion spaces with too many members. This technique allowed the acknowledgment of the role of idiosyncratic contexts, and the debates and dilemmas that arose in the interviews and focus groups when discussing educational inequalities, and possible strategies to address educational inequalities regarding linked ecologies. Moreover, the workshop served as a methodological opportunity to generate valuable data to validate previously observed trends.

Semi-structured interview and discussion guides were designed with a common set of questions for the focus groups and the workshop to provided comparable information across countries. To frame the analysis of data, and to guarantee a coherent analysis, a template was provided to analyse the data obtained through the qualitative fieldwork with stakeholders. Specifically, to build the frame of analysis five general codes were identified: 1) general conceptions about educational inequality; 2) main (successful and unsuccessful) strategies; 3) pioneering practices (understanding,

aims, and practical examples); 4) references to MILC dimensions; and 5) controversies, dilemmas and contradictions concerning the understandings of educational inequality and the strategies to tackle it. Additionally, while reflecting on inequality and pioneering practices, partners were encouraged to be attentive to arguments addressing formal and informal education.

Each partner drafted a country report which included, besides a description of their own fieldwork data, a contextualisation, findings supported by data (transcript quotes) to evidence the arguments being made, dilemmas and promising strategies, and an executive summary which referred to the common codes of the analysis, pointing out and highlighting the main results and offering conclusions of the analysis. Based on the country reports, a short descriptive and analytical sketch was written to summarise and highlight main country-specific findings and condensing substantial information for comparing commonalities and differences. Country vignettes were intended to provide neat and to-the-point information when conceptualising and describing pioneering practices to address educational inequalities in a cross-national focus. Consequently, the vignette design was seen as a useful methodological first step for transforming the findings of the country-specific reports into neat and dense data which directly informed the international comparison. The next stage of research implied, as shown in the next section, the selection by each partner country of two promising formal and/or non-formal practices aimed at addressing intersectional disadvantages in a life course perspective.

Step 2: Case selection and "creating comparability"

The key challenge was to be as context-sensitive as possible when selecting pioneering practices, i.e., to enable the national teams to select practices that were as characteristic as possible for their respective national contexts, based on the knowledge of national stakeholders already gathered. On the other hand, the aim of making international comparisons between the national case studies required a selection of practices that were as comparable as pos-

sible, in the sense of similar addressees, life stages, institutions, etc. As already indicated above we resolved the conflict between these two objectives by using a comparison strategy based on a procedural determination of the *tertium comparationis* (Scheffer & Niewöhner 2010) in relation to the general MILC approach. To this end, we discussed the developing case studies early from selection and data gathering/analyses in three consecutive workshops, which aimed on sensitise us to similarities beyond the usual categories, like age group, inequality dimension addressed, etc. Based on that, we identified the two comparative dimensions of institutionalisation and bridging in the last workshop, which then informed the international comparison. In addition, subgroups were formed to develop more specific comparative dimensions with regard to selected case groups (e.g., the ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) - sector).

A further challenge was to implement the participatory approach in such a way that the pioneering practices could be described as comprehensively as possible in a relatively short period of time. This related, on the one hand, to the numerous actors and perspectives in the area of the respective pioneering practice and (multi-perspectivity), and, on the other hand, to the various forms of knowledge on which the design of pedagogical practice is based (multi-modality). With regard to the latter, in particular, it was important to also include the tacit or non-representative knowledge of experts and other actors, which is highly relevant for everyday routines and local practical solutions (Tress et al. 2003).

Therefore, we decided on an encompassing case study approach that combined a document analysis of all available documents for the respective cases (homepage, concept, etc.) with a total of three qualitative methods, which are all based on a dialogical understanding of joint knowledge production: semi-structured qualitative interviews, guided tours, and focus group discussions. A detailed template was created for all three data collection methods, as well as for the approach to the joint analysis of the three types of data.

First, we conducted problem-centred expert interviews (Döringer 2021; Flick 2022) which aimed on exploring the histories, resources, and contexts of developing, implementing, and maintaining the respective pioneering practice. Experts have been those who are "representatives" of the practice under study and have acquired specific knowledge about it through their professional position and involvement with it (head/managers and also responsible persons in the political administration or student or parent representatives). These interviews gave us detailed insights into the organisational side of pioneering practices, but also into the associated understanding of educational inequality.

Second, we conducted guided tours, which are a mixture of observation and unstructured interviews (Pink 2008; Thomson 2018). Here, the researcher ask the actors on site to guide them through the site(s) of their pioneering practice while describing it, serving three main purposes: 1) to get a visual impression of the practices and the associated atmosphere, 2) to get a more detailed description of the specific activities that make up the pioneering practice, and 3) to get more practical/situated/embodied knowledge about the pioneering practices that the participants of the tour express while showing us around. With the guided tour it was possible to capture detailed descriptions of how the practices under investigation were actually implemented and to assess associated values, norms, attitudes, emotions, dilemmas, and challenges.

Third, we conducted focus groups which aimed to identify collective and habitual knowledge related to the pioneering practice by encouraging a group of professionals and/or further actors deeply involved it to discuss their everyday practice (Parker & Tritter 2006; Barbour & Morgan 2017). The main purpose here was to learn more about their practical knowledge, as well as the ambivalences, dilemmas, and challenges they encounter and how they deal with them. Ideally, the discussion impulses were already based on the analysis of the interviews and the guided tours.

All data was audiotaped and transcribed and analysed by thematic analysis in general (see also research with stakeholder), and by more qualitative approaches in the case of specific questions. In order to be included in the international comparison, the analyses were transferred into short written case studies, which were structured using a corresponding template and, in addition to detailed descriptions of the practices, also referred to the analysed understanding of inequality and the challenges in developing and establishing a practice that combats inequality. Furthermore, the case studies were used for further publications and, in line with the participatory approach, were discussed with the practitioners being researched and reported back to them.

Step 3: International collaborative case comparison (ICCC), based on the international practice research strategy (IPRS)

The analysis of our data from the case studies was designed in such a way that there could be several feedback rounds in order to achieve a more balanced result. Further, we decided early on that the stakeholders should be thoroughly included in the agenda. First all PIONEERED partners were invited to summarise the main findings from their national data material in short case sketches based on common guidelines. After an initial read by the Norwegian team, all the partner countries were asked to formulate a second, more extended country analysis sketch. A guide for the sketches was provided so that the national sketches addresses dimensions like understandings of inequality, problem definitions of how to tackle inequality, methods, approaches and practices used for tackling inequality, as well as challenges or dilemmas in implementing pioneering practices. Using this sketch data material, we then explored in an open coding process the country-specific cases. The aim was to identify similar or different "main" or "dominant" codes in the case descriptions (Mason 1996, 100; Miles & Huberman 1994, 61) by following a classical "sensitising concept" approach (Blumer 1954; Jensen et al. 2023, 6). The case sketches were then presented at an online workshop and we delivered the first version of a scatter plot for clustering the different cases.

All this had been the basis for a two-day workshop in Bergen, Norway, where the research team and stakeholders/practitioners placed the country-specific results in a cross-national perspective to gain deeper understanding of the different pioneering practices in the specific contexts. Additionally, the goal was to identify common practice patterns and tools to promote practices that break the reproductive cycle of educational inequality. Here, eight stakeholders/practitioners from five different countries gave valuable insight and lived experiences from the cases. They presented their thoughts in the form of a panel debate and case presentations, and were naturally included in the group discussions and provided feedback on our research. All this was crucial to facilitate discussions and foster reflections regarding hindering and fostering factors for realising pioneering educational practices across European countries as well as the research methodology.

3. Reflection

In times of commodification and privatisation of the education sector, the ideal of education as a motor for social equality as the basis of a democratic and just society is becoming increasingly elusive. For this reason, it is all the more important to value practices that come as close as possible to this ideal. Research designed as ICPR is essential in those times. It provides insight into possibilities for changing the game for the better against all odds.

Strengthen the transformative potential of research. Recognising practitioners as co-researchers and agents of social change strengthens the transformative orientation of educational research. Firstly, it provides the basis for researching spaces that are crucial for change in the education system in particular and in society in general. According to Apple (2012, 13), these social movement spaces can be described as "decentred units." Secondly, on a methodological level, ICPR tackles conventional educational and social research – namely, its dualistic way of thinking, which draws a line between researcher and research object. And, last but

not least, on a theoretical level, it helps to look beyond familiar, prefabricated theoretical explanations of educational inequality.

Support the academic/professional development of practitioners. It has also become clear that the strategy can contribute to the academic/professional development of practitioners – for example, through joint publications (Sele 2024). This enables practitioners to see their own practice embedded in larger pedagogical and social contexts, to manifest this in publications and thus to strengthen the position of practice in political-economic distribution and recognition struggles.

Realising emancipatory research interests. The transformative power of research also forms the basis of the socio-political dimension in educational research. Based on the "emancipatory research interest," that is, a research interest that is common to all sciences that are orientated towards ideological criticism and self-reflection (Habermas 1968, 158), "collective emancipation" of people and society can be fostered (Klafki 1976, 269; Sünker 2003; Jobst 2023).

Developing an international perspective on problem-solving. Today, research-based social development is not possible without going beyond national containers. An ICPR strategy promotes this by revealing commonalities between countries besides national variations. For example, regardless of their national context, stakeholders agreed that successfully tackling educational inequality requires a comprehensive perspective that looks at education in the context of society as a whole – i.e., that schools alone cannot reduce educational inequality. An interdisciplinary and multifactorial understanding is therefore indispensable. In the case studies, we have identified the two basic overarching elements of practices that are able to combat educational inequality. Firstly, there is the element of recognition. This can refer to the cultural recognition of language or other cultural properties, e.g., through the recruitment of teachers and the support of staff from minority backgrounds and the promotion of multilingual competences.

Recognition is also expressed as personalised, needs-based education and is achieved through non-formal educational activities that take place within or outside the formal educational context. The second element, "integrative organisational structure," manifests itself in the areas of transitions between educational levels/institutions and interprofessional collaboration between different actors, such as psychologists, social workers, research institutes, etc. Both are necessary elements of a practice that has potential to counteract educational inequalities and promote equitable participation in education (Tokheim et al. 2023).

Challenges in the application of our ICPR strategy have arisen above all with regard to the limited time available, which works against the participatory and openly creative orientation of the research. With the focus on practice-based research, the two fields – practice and science – especially merged in WP5 of the PIONEERED project and created by this an intermediary system with a specific interaction context. This is comparatively more time-consuming and fluid in its form than traditional research methods with the dualistic assumption of researcher vs practitioner criticised above. In addition, normative ideas, i.e., ideas and practices of how things should be improved, become uncovered in this relational space. On the one hand, this is close to the already mentioned scientific interest in knowledge, which Habermas or Klafki describe as the leading category of democratisation. On the other hand, making normative (taken for granted) assumptions explicit – which is undoubtedly desirable from a research methodological point of view – requires sufficient time to discuss and reflect and to develop the potential for conflict resolution. Such extended time frame – as we likewise experienced in PIONEERED – is often not available in ambitious, multifaceted research projects.

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3. Participatory and Inclusive Methodologies of Educational Commons: Four Case Studies in Greece

Naya Tselepi, Angeliki Botonaki, Domniki Vagiati, and Yannis Pechtelidis

1. Introduction

This chapter aims to highlight concrete examples of projects that research, experiment with, and put in practice approaches and tools addressing inequalities, promoting inclusiveness, encouraging active participation, and fostering peer governance in school settings. It explores participatory and inclusive methodologies of educational commons offering valuable support to schools and researchers in effectively conducting research and development activities.

The four case studies (CSs) presented are part of the EU-funded Horizon 2020 project SMOOTH on educational commons and active social inclusion (https://smooth-ecs.eu/). These studies involve various types of schools: a public kindergarten, a private kindergarten, a private primary school, and a public high school, all located in and around Thessaloniki, in northern Greece.

The chapter will detail significant participatory and inclusive methodologies employed in these case studies, such as the sociocratic circle method (SCM), active listening, conflict resolution, and participatory planning. It will highlight the impact of genuine listening and communication on children's sense of empowerment and well-being. In addition, it will discuss how co-decision, shared rules, and responsibility for tasks can align with the commons' routines and practices of sharing and caring within a safe environment. Additionally, the chapter will shed light on the ways collectivity and communities are built both within and beyond school classes through horizontal relationships, team bonding, cooperation, convivial interaction, and trust.

2. Greek education and schools: The context

Education and schools in Greece have been extensively studied in academic research; however, this chapter does not aim to provide further analysis on this topic. Generally speaking, public primary and secondary schools in Greece face numerous challenges, most important among them being the rigorous annual educational programme mandated by the Greek Ministry of Education, Religious Affairs, and Sports, which places significant strain on teachers and professors. This top-down pressure creates and perpetuates a rigid atmosphere in the school environment, reinforcing disciplinary attitudes among teachers and fostering a competitive character in schools, which is strongly supported by parents and guardians. These factors significantly hinder the implementation of educational commons methodologies and logic in Greek public schools.

According to Tsoukala (2014), the ambiance and the limitations of voice and body play an important role in Greek public schools, where most follow a standardised architectural structure that has remained largely unchanged since 1830. A typical classroom in a Greek public high school reflects disciplinary approaches and hierarchical power relationships, with desks aligned in rows and teachers delivering instruction in a one-way direction. This setup leaves little room for active participation, co-creation of knowledge, or co-shaping of school life. Additionally, this arrangement divides the classroom into three areas of body movement: a) between desks, b) around the teacher's table, and c) near the blackboard. Students are generally required to remain seated and motionless, facing the blackboard for the entire lesson, or to stand at the blackboard to teach or solve exercises, as Germanos (2005) notes.

Tsoukala (2014) also highlights that the outdoor areas of schools, including schoolyards, are typically covered in cement with minimal green spaces, and feature undefined movement areas, benches, and steps leading to and from the main building. This architectural design reflects a perception of the body's role

in educational processes, emphasising a separation of mind and body rather than viewing children holistically. Meanwhile, voices advocating for the central importance of the body and a holistic perception of children are becoming more frequent. However, Greek public schools have yet to follow this trend. In contrast, Greek private schools offer a variety of alternatives but still operate within market-driven frameworks.

To truly overcome the systemic barriers imposed by the ministry's curricula, disciplinary environment, and market-driven logic, it is essential to conduct research into educational commons and implement participatory and inclusive practices. By integrating these methodologies, traditional educational structures can be challenged, democratising the educational process and reimagining schools as collaborative and dynamic learning communities.

3. Educational Commons

The concept of "educational commons" revolves around creating participatory and inclusive educational environments that challenge traditional hierarchical and market-driven models of education. These methodologies emphasise collective ownership, shared responsibility, and active engagement of all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and the broader community. Educational commons draw from various theoretical frameworks that advocate for democratic and collaborative practices in education. These include the principles of peer governance and peer learning, which promote shared and equal decision-making processes and knowledge 3production. Additionally, the idea of "commoning" refers to managing shared resources through collective action.

According to Pechtelidis et al. (2023), educational commons involve a shift from conventional top-down education approaches to ones characterised by sharing, cooperation, and collective creativity. This shift aligns with the principles of democratic governance, where educational practices are shaped collectively by teachers, students, and parents. Also, it is reminiscent of Elinor

Ostrom's seventh design principle for successful commons in *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990), where she asserted the right of commoners to govern themselves and the effectiveness of collective management and participation of the local community in handling their own shared resources. David Bollier and Silke Helfrich in *Patterns of Commoning* (2015) discuss how commons thrive on mutual aid and collective governance, reflecting the dynamic social systems crucial for participatory methodologies in education. Massimo De Angelis, in *Omnia Sunt Communia: On the Commons and the Transformation to Postcapitalism* (2017), expands on this by arguing that the commons provide a framework for transitioning away from capitalist modes of production and towards more equitable and sustainable practices. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth* (2009) further elaborates on the political implications of the commons, suggesting that they offer a foundation for democratic and decentralised forms of governance.

The implementation of educational commons entails a variety of participatory and inclusive methodologies, practices, and processes, such as the sociocratic circle method (SCM), active listening, conflict resolution, and participatory planning, which will vastly unfold in this chapter. These methodologies and tools help children develop essential emotional and social skills, such as empathy, communication, and conflict resolution, as well as peer governance skills like decision-making, role distribution, and task implementation. Additionally, activities like role-play, think-pair-share, and motor play effectively engage young learners, fostering a sense of ownership and active participation in their learning process.

4. Four Case Studies in Greece

The chapter presents four case studies conducted in Thessaloniki, Greece, during 2022 and 2023, as part of the EU-funded Horizon 2020 project SMOOTH that introduced the logic of "educational commons" in early childhood, primary and secondary education,

within both public and private contexts. These examples highlight the potential of these methodologies to transform educational settings.

Action research, as described by Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) and Kemmis & McTaggart (2014) was conducted in all case studies from 2022 to 2023. The research team at the University of Thessaly conducted CS1 and CS4 and the team at Aristotle University conducted CS2 and CS3. The researchers engaged in peer-to-peer feedback with a group of researchers, academic experts, and field educators in reference meetings and "coffee and chocolates" rooms, where they were able to discuss various issues from the field and receive feedback. In other words, there was an external support structure for the research coordinated by the scientific leaders of the University of Thessaly (Prof. Yannis Pechtelidis) and Aristotle University (Prof. Alexandros Kioupkiolis).

In all case studies, the researchers were also the ones who provided input for the methodologies and tools used. Angeliki Botonaki is an expert in Gordon's "teacher effectiveness" and Dr. Naya Tselepi is a certified expert, trainer, and facilitator of the sociocratic circle method. Also driven by the relevant research findings, both researchers/facilitators concluded that the dual role can be beneficial because it helped them be in direct and spontaneous interaction with the children. This enriched the process of harvesting information and reflecting on the participants' needs as well as enabled them to provide meaningful project outcomes. Meanwhile, it is important to note that the dual role complicated processes of providing input, put in practice, observing as well as making notes. As such, the involvement of a second person could be of significant value.

At a public kindergarten in the municipality of Thermi, the emphasis was on enhancing children's communication skills and their ability to resolve conflicts independently. Techniques such as active listening and the use of "I-messages" were implemented to help children express their needs and emotions constructively, promoting a more inclusive and supportive classroom envi-

ronment. In the three other case studies – the School of Nature (a private kindergarten), the Big Bang School (a private primary school), and a public high school that collaborated with the environmental organisation Mamagea – the focus was on peer governance and empowering students, both individually and within their assemblies.

4.1. A public kindergarten in Thermi

4.1.1. Description of the need and purpose

The research on active listening and conflict resolution at Thermi's public kindergarten aimed to address challenges in early childhood education, particularly in effective communication during conflicts. Action research was conducted in two classes of a public kindergarten in the metropolitan area of eastern Thessaloniki. The kindergarten features two spacious classrooms accommodating 19 and 20 children each, aged four to six years. It also includes a large shared indoor space and a front green yard equipped with playground toys. The staff consists of two primary preschool teachers who work from 8 am to 12 pm, two more from 12 pm to 4 pm, and an English teacher who visits twice a week. The interventions occurred twice weekly from March to June 2022. The primary goal of this case study was to introduce preschool children to values associated with the commons, such as cooperation, caring, sharing, and equal participation, aiming to create an open, participatory environment for free expression and shared decision-making in a context of horizontal relationships between students and educators, while also exploring the potential of educational commons in addressing inequalities.

The primary issues identified in the field include that children often struggle to express their desires clearly and manage conflicts, leading to unresolved disputes or dominance by the loudest voices, necessitating teacher intervention. Children's difficulty in regulating emotions and expressing themselves constructively during conflicts is often coupled with a lack of empathy and understanding of others' perspectives. Traditional conflict resolu-

tion methods often dissolve groups or impose unilateral solutions by dominant children, highlighting the need for a systematic approach to improve communication skills. Overall, observations of the children's interactions reveal recurring communication and conflict resolution issues, underscoring the need for an intervention to equip children with autonomous and empathetic conflict management skills.

This case study (CS1) aimed to empower children by developing competencies for better social interactions. The intervention, based on Thomas Gordon's principles of active listening and conflict resolution, was tailored to young children's developmental stages. It sought to create a supportive and cooperative learning environment where children could thrive as autonomous participants. Objectives included fostering trust, helping children manage emotions during conflicts, nurturing empathy by understanding others' perspectives, and providing practical tools for constructive conflict resolution. This approach aligns with the concept of educational commons, where shared knowledge and cooperative learning create a community of learners who collectively benefit from and contribute to each other's growth, promoting a culture of mutual respect and collaboration.

4.1.2. Description of team building and cooperation

In the first case study, "I Am Because We Are," several structured activities were used to foster team building and cooperation among children. Drama games, inclusive practices, and conflict resolution techniques were employed to develop social skills, respect, and shared governance. The following outlines the approaches and results of these activities.

Children developed peer governance skills through drama games, using Augusto Boal's "stop & go" technique to express thoughts at crucial moments. Also, mini assemblies allowed children to discuss game construction, with decision-making indicated by thumb signals. Active inclusion of mixed groups by age, gender, and confidence levels, facilitated by researchers to resolve

difficulties (Figure 3.1). Plenary sessions prevented exclusionary behaviour, with researchers modelling supportive behaviour.

Figure 3.1. Active inclusion, mixed groups, and participatory learning.

In peer learning and cooperation, children actively participated when they had a common goal. The "mix-freeze group" activity involved forming random groups to create shapes, fostering collaboration, and idea sharing without being affected by age, gender, or friendships (Figure 3.2). Additionally, children engaged in creating large-scale paintings together, which emphasised teamwork, respected opinion, and shared creativity (Figure 3.3). On the last day, a large parachute fabric facilitated imaginative play and sharing of materials, space, and time (Figures 3.4 and 3.5).

Figure 3.2. A mix-freeze group creating a river and bridge.

Figure 3.3. Peer learning and cooperation: Co-creating large-scale paintings.

Figure 3.4. Imaginative play with parachute fabric.

Figure 3.5. Sharing parachute fabric.

Convivial tools and routines, such as eye-contact greetings in circle seating and decision-making totems, supported trust-building. Activities created by the children, such as the 'balloon hug' and shouting their group's name ('Shiny Little Stars') while hand piling, became part of their routines and enhanced unity and joy. Classroom rules were discussed and voted on using the "thumbs" from the sociocratic circle method for decision-making, where

participants give thumbs up, down, or sideways to express their agreement or disagreement.

Interventions were designed based on children's preferences, maximising engagement. Boys often felt more entitled to speak, evident in their dominance in discussions. Gender differences influenced reactions to common practices, with rare but notable instances of cross-gender cooperation. Generally, children prioritised activity outcomes over community relations, although moments of fairness and inclusion were observed, such as when a girl was allowed to re-enter the game during musical chairs after the unfortunate loss of one of her shoes.

Conflicts were resolved through dialogue, with more verbally expressive and confident children prevailing. Boys tended to be louder and more aggressive. The presence of kindergarten teachers and short intervention durations limited conflicts.

4.1.3. Description of the method and approach

One of the researchers, Angeliki Botonaki, is an expert in Gordon's "teacher effectiveness," implementing an activity focused on an active listening and conflict resolution methodology. This initiative was rooted in the cooperative, caring, and sharing principles that characterise the educational commons perspective. By intertwining these principles, this approach aimed to foster shared knowledge and practices, promoting positive communication and collaboration within educational settings. The goal was to recognise children as autonomous participants in their learning journey, thereby empowering them to take an active role in their education.

To adapt these principles to suit the developmental stages of the children involved, various pedagogical methodologies were employed. These included participatory learning, role-play, pantomime, think-pair-share, motor play and constructive games. Each of these methods was designed to harness and celebrate the collective and convivial interaction of the children, creating an engaging and inclusive learning environment.

Participatory learning engaged children in the planning and execution of their learning activities, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and active participation. Role-play enabled children to explore different perspectives and practice social skills in a safe and supportive environment, fostering empathy and collaborative problem-solving. Pantomime allowed children to express ideas and emotions through movement and facial expressions, enhancing their non-verbal communication skills. Think-pair-share encouraged children to think about a topic, discuss it with a partner, and then share their ideas with the larger group, promoting critical thinking and communication skills. Motor play used physical activities to help children understand concepts and express themselves, supporting kinesthetic learning and cooperation. Constructive games provided opportunities for children to build and create, enhancing their problem-solving abilities and encouraging collaborative teamwork and conviviality (Figure 3.6). These methodologies collectively aimed to create a dynamic and supportive educational environment where children could thrive as active and engaged learners, and as commoners in general.

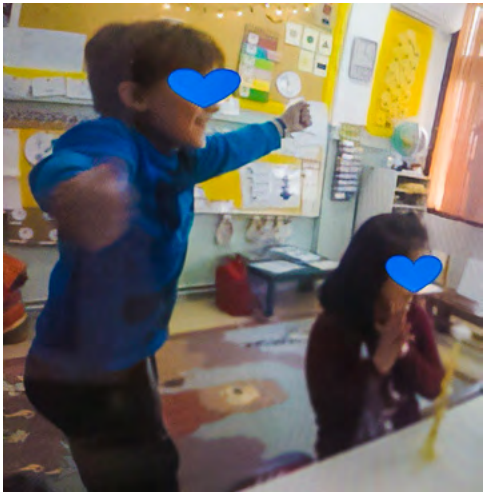

Figure 3.6. Convivial team building.

4.1.4. Description of activities

Initiating the instructional process, children employed the think-pair-share technique to articulate their conception of "behaviour." Subsequently, a series of motor play activities engendered an awareness that the acceptability of a given behaviour could vary among individuals. To explicate the concept of active listening,

researchers staged a scenario wherein the "listener" exhibited inattentiveness to the "speaker" encouraging the children to discern the requisite modifications for the speaker to feel heard and attended to. This exercise was then translated into an impromptu role-play, executed with enthusiasm by the children actively participating in their understanding and application of active listening skills, fostering an environment of shared learning.

Figure 3.7. Active listening.

The refinement of children's active listening proficiencies involved recurrent pair-based exercises, with a pronounced focus on discerning each other's emotions (Figure 3.7). Collaborative group work ensued, wherein one group formulated and narrated a fictional story (speakers), while the other group demonstrated active listening skills and identified the prevailing emotions (listeners). Through pantomime and role-play, the children were apprised of Gordon's "I-message" and its practical application. The "I-message," as advocated by Gordon, represents a non-offensive and non-aggressive manner of expressing dissatisfaction with another's objectionable behaviour. This educational commons' approach not only fosters a shared understanding but also highlights the autonomous and active role that children play in shaping their communication skills and learning experiences.

In the context of the applied methodologies, children exhibited a greater interest in their active participation in role-playing than

in physical activities. However, they faced challenges in maintaining patience to observe others, displaying a preference for self-directed action. Similarly, kinetic games required brevity to sustain the collective interest, necessitating numerous repetitions to internalise fundamental concepts of active listening. Ultimately, it was the enactment of a theatrical narrative or story that captivated their attention.

The introduction of active listening to the children led to unexpected revelations and engagement. Active engagement in active listening motivated the children, providing them both the impetus and a platform to express grievances stemming from their family environments. This realisation marks a significant step, underscoring the importance of genuine listening and raising concerns about the number of children dissatisfied with communication within their homes. Children felt unheard, manifesting evident bitterness and a sense of deadlock.

An excerpt from field research notes highlights instances where children, prompted by the fundamental tenet of not interrupting others while speaking, felt compelled to share deeper needs from their home environments. Notably, several children voiced concerns about interruptions during family conversations, expressing a desire to be heard and acknowledged:

> A1 (in a kind of scared and quiet voice and with a bowed head): "My dad always interrupts me when I'm talking to him." […]
>
> A2: "Um, and my dad and I, when we talk, he keeps talking and won't let me talk." […]
>
> A3: "And me, when I'm talking and I say something to my dad and I say, 'Look at me,' he says, 'It's nothing to do with the eyes. I can hear you with my ears.'… He talks to me, he talks to me and he says that I say stupid things, stupid things, 'Listen to me, listen to me' and stuff … and I say,… now … now you talk to yourself."

Another excerpt from the field notes illuminates the children's adeptness in acquiring and implementing conflict resolution skills, as evidenced by their articulation of disruptive behaviours and accompanying emotional states. Remarkably, this ability was demonstrated after a mere five intervention sessions. The subsequent example portrays the initiation of a dispute between two children, collectively committed to resolution during the kindergarten plenary session:

> B1 started first, saying in a booming voice: "When you make fun of me, it's not very nice and I feel very, very bad." B2 responded emphatically: "I don't like it when you tell lies."

Regarding the use of "I-messages" (like the ones in the excerpt) as part of conflict resolution, some children appeared to employ them more readily than others, indicating encouraging outcomes. However, we deemed it necessary to allow more time for the assimilation of such communication tools, given the limited scope of the five-hour interventions in the kindergarten. It is noteworthy that children excelling academically were not necessarily the same as those excelling in active listening.

4.1.5. Self-reflection

Case Study 1 provided valuable insights into the potential of the educational commons framework to transform educational settings. A significant realisation was the impact of genuine listening and communication on children's sense of empowerment and well-being. This holistic approach empowered children to express their needs, desires, and dreams, fostering an environment where active listening is promoted. The introduction of active listening revealed underlying issues in students' home environments, highlighting the need for supportive communication practices both in and out of school. Despite the short intervention duration, children demonstrated significant progress in articulating disruptive behaviours and emotional states, indicating the effectiveness of the approach.

Training for educators is considered crucial and should go beyond ensuring physical safety to encompass emotional and intellectual security. Thus, educators should receive comprehensive training in active listening, as it is essential for fostering participative governance and cultivating empathy. Such training equips teachers to support students in becoming effective agents of their own learning processes.

Children also developed governance skills using drama games and decision-making techniques. Inclusive practices and mixed groups by age, gender, and confidence levels promoted active participation and reduced exclusionary behaviour.

If the project were to be undertaken again, more time would be allocated to the assimilation of communication tools like "I-messages," ensuring that young children have ample opportunity to internalise and practice these skills. Additionally, efforts would be made to further integrate parents and caregivers into the process, addressing communication gaps in pupils' home lives.

4.2. A private kindergarten (the School of Nature)

4.2.1. Description of the need and purpose

The activities of Case Study 2 (CS2) were experimentally pursued by the researcher and the staff as part of the EU-funded Horizon 2020 project SMOOTH. The scope of the case study was the collective construction of the House in the Forest among a class of young children (aged five to six) and the school community (teachers, parents, school staff, local stakeholders, etc.) which aimed at supporting children in learning and experiencing peer-governance to become autonomous and collective beings aware of diversity and interdependence.

The School of Nature, a private kindergarten, had already applied participatory and inclusive methodologies with young children, however, there was a need to observe them in procedures of communication in circle and decision-making with consent, that's why the specific case study was undertaken. Hence, the research-

er, Dr. Naya Tselepi, a certified expert, trainer, and facilitator in sociocracy, introduced the sociocratic circle method (SCM), in line with the logic and the practices of the educational commons.

4.2.2. Description of team building and cooperation

The "House in the Forest" case study took place in the School of Nature, a private kindergarten located in the suburbs of Thessaloniki. Twenty-two children, aged from four and half to six years old took part in the study. In the class, one kindergarten teacher and one teacher of "special needs support" participated along with the researcher. The activities were held on a weekly basis, for two to three hours, for 21 meetings. The main sites of the activities were the school class, the premises of the school and the forest nearby. Children, teachers and the researcher worked together with the school community, the parents and the local society to construct a house in the nearby forest that would host their common activities.

4.2.3. Description of the method and approach

The methodologies adopted in this case study were participatory learning and learning from nature and in nature; project learning; peer and autonomous learning; active listening; reflection; class assemblies; community engagement and celebration of multilingualism; active research (interviews with experts); extrovert action and cooperation with other schools and experts. In addition, the sociocratic circle method was used as a methodology for facilitating communication in circles, for making collective decisions with consent and for holding open elections to allocate roles.

4.2.4. Description of activities

To establish the basic structure needed for a council of the commons, the sociocratic "circle," children in the case study were asked from the outset to create a circle, to look each other in the eyes and to turn their bodies towards the speaking person. The facilitator provided a safe space and time for each child to be heard.

She respected the right not to speak and promoted respect and active listening to others (Figure 3.8). At the same time, children experimented by addressing a group, waiting for their turn and actively listening to each other. A facilitating instrument employed at the beginning was the totem, or "magic stick" as it was called in the class. Most of the time the facilitation was carried out by the researcher and the teacher. Children were keenly interested in the circle with the "magic stick"/totem; it seemed to have helped them wait for their turn, focus more on the person who speaks, and feel safe enough to expose themselves by addressing the group. A child noted: "I liked it [the 'magic stick'] because everyone was silent."

Figure 3.8. Sitting in a circle in the forest.

Decision-making with consent was pursued also through the sociocratic circle method process of "shaping consent" which was coordinated by the certified expert/facilitator. This process cannot be fleshed out here in detail, however, we could highlight that it includes all voices in the final proposal that the facilitator presents to the circle members. To reply to this proposal the options

are: "like," "dislike," and "so and so," which are usually expressed with thumbs. Given the circumstances and the children's needs, the facilitator (who was the researcher) introduced a more corporal mode of expressing reactions by raising or lowering hands. Throughout the activities held in the case study, young children were highly motivated to do things collectively. Activities like the following were shaped promoting collaboration and community life:

- Shaping the definition of the common goals for the "House in the Forest" that was also signed by all children (Figure 3.9).
- The creation of three interrelated teams for the preparatory tasks in the forest: 1) to clear the forest paths, 2) to construct the main table for work and eating, and 3) to build an open WC.
- The co-creation of "the rules," "the treasures" of the forest, and of all steps in the process of constructing the house.

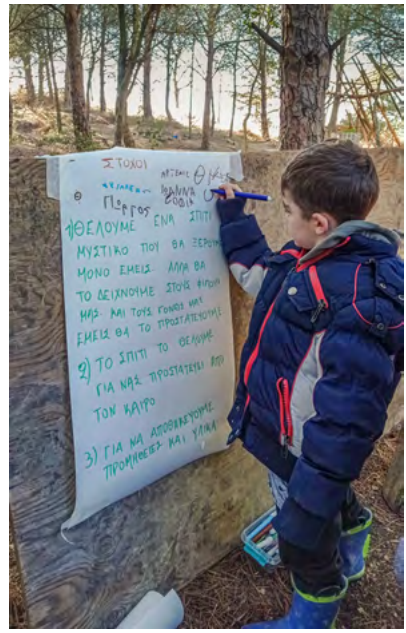

Figure 3.9. Common goals signed.

- Clearing forest paths. For this activity, a child remarked: "I liked it because we all worked together" (Figure 3.10).

During these activities, adults – teachers and the researcher – avoided heavy interference, carving out a space for children to express themselves freely and to configure the process on their own terms.

Figure 3.10. Working together to clean paths in the forest.

Moreover, the children of the case study actively shared their knowledge with other school classes, other schools in the vicinity, their families, and other actors who could relate to the project. Parents and guardians keenly participated in the process by sharing their own knowledge, skills, and materials with the children in the class. Supportive staff of the school and experts from outside had also been asked to contribute their knowledge to the construction of the "House in the Forest." Finally, sharing knowledge through presentations, theatrical plays, and games was critical for children to be able to grasp the knowledge provided ("the rules of the forest," etc.) as well as the concepts and practices of the "community of sharing."

Figure 3.11. Drawing "to hear and to learn."

4.2.5. Self-reflection

Through the sociocratic circle method, the children of the case study developed skills for being present in the circle and others of active listening, peer governance, defined rules, and reached decisions with consent. The "circle process" was one of the chil-

dren' favourites and that's why it was overwhelmingly represented in the drawings they were asked to create of their favourite moments of the project. One child drew herself in between others and trees and she said (fortunately noted down by the teacher), "When I hear when others talk, I learn more" (Figure 3.11). Collective decision-making with consent was not implemented fully, however, it introduced children to decision-making in teams, cultivating collective consciousness. One child expressed himself in his drawing: "We were discussing and deciding on how we will build a "House in the Forest." Cooperation was needed. Not everyone would do what they want. Everyone had their say and we made the appropriate decisions" (Figure 3.12).

Figure 3.12. Drawing for cooperation and decision-making.

Another aspect to be mentioned is that of the role of adults, teachers, researcher, and parents as "companions" promoting children's autonomy. Children along with the adults co-managed the practices of their everyday life in a manner of openness, equality, co-activity, engaging in a practice of commoning which builds

the governance of a "common good," which in this case study was the "House in the Forest" (Figure 3.13).

Figure 3.13. Building the "House in the Forest" collectively.

Sharing knowledge and opening up educational practices to other classes, educators, parents, and various other local actors formed a broader "school community" that could govern itself, construct, and commonly use the "House in the Forest."

4.3. A private primary school (the Big Bang School)

4.3.1. Description of the need and purpose

The activities of this case study (CS3) were experimentally pursued by the researcher and the staff as part of the EU-funded Horizon 2020 project SMOOTH. Students of the sixth grade in the Big Bang School, a private primary school, set up the Council for the Upgrade of Humanity, a team of experts whose role was to come up with solutions to major problems of humanity. The council was designed to enable children to engage in learning activities without the assistance of the teacher(s), to work as autonomous beings and self-organised groups, to experience peer-governance by self-organising their council meetings, making decisions together, and putting their words into practice.

The school had already applied the concept and practice of "a council" in their classes, however, there was a need to empower

these councils with effective communication in circles and decision-making with consent. Hence, the researcher, Dr. Naya Tselepi, a certified expert, trainer, and facilitator in sociocracy, introduced the sociocratic circle method (SCM) in line with the logics and the practices of the educational commons.

4.3.2. Description of team building and cooperation

The Council for the Upgrade of the Humanity case study was conducted at the Big Bang School, a private primary school based in the suburbs of Thessaloniki. Fifteen children, aged 12, partook in the case study. In the class, one teacher regularly supported the study. Occasionally, more teachers – such as the drama teacher or the music teacher – turned up and collaborated with the researcher. The activities occurred on a weekly basis, for two to three hours each and for 20 meetings. Their main sites were the school class and the premises of the school.

4.3.3. Description of the method and approach

In CS3, the methodologies consisted of participatory and peer learning, project learning, active listening, reflection, and active research (at the school). In addition, the sociocratic circle method was used as a methodology for facilitating effective communication in circles, making collective decisions with consent, and holding open elections to allocate roles.

4.3.4. Description of activities

To establish the basic structure needed for a council of the commons, the sociocratic "circle," the same process as in the previous case study, was followed. As for the facilitation in the circle, students of the class experimented themselves with facilitation and voted for their own facilitators. The experience of the "magic stick" attracted the attention of the primary school's students, too. This seems to have fostered active listening, "reigning in" their impulse to speak over the others, and sustaining meaningful communication (Figure 3.14).

Figure 3.14. Sitting in the circle.

Decision-making with consent was pursued through the SCM process of "shaping consent," which was coordinated by the certified expert/facilitator in the same way as described in the previous case study. Decision-making by consent contributed to listening to all voices and integrating it all into the final decision. As a result, children endorsed the outcome and they committed themselves to the tasks it defined. An additional SCM process integrated within this case study was the "open election," which aimed to

Figure 3.15. Relation building through collective activities.

allocate roles in the council. Its basic principle is that all members vote openly for the most suitable person for a role, justifying their choices with positive arguments. The final decision is also facilitated and reached through consent. This process helps to disclose hidden talents and encourages introverted people to participate in collective action. Within a common task, the invisible becomes visible.

To better organise themselves, the students (members of the council) were divided into three teams focused on different topics (environment, energy, and human rights), and they started meeting up and working to address the specific problems of their field. Relations were vastly built through these collective activities in teams (Figure 3.15). Relations were also cultivated by the teacher, who acted as a "companion" in educational commons, providing children with the space to express themselves freely and to define their process while assisting them in a subtle way. A great example of this is that the teacher was accompanying the students with his music instrument (a bağlama) during music workshops as well as during their play activities (Figure 3.16).

Figure 3.16. A teacher in an accompanying role.

The Council for the Upgrade of Humanity aimed at sharing the solutions considered and the methodology used with other school

students. Hence, at the end of the school year, the council's members prepared an open presentation in the school yard, and they collectively discussed their solutions and other alternatives (Figure 3.17). Later, they harvested other students' views on whether they wanted to set up their own class – or school – council (Figure 3.18). At the end of the event, the class children shared homemade snacks that they prepared with their families (Figure 3.19).

Figure 3.17. An open presentation and discussion.

Figure 3.18. A collective harvesting workshop.

Figure 3.19. Sharing homemade snacks.

4.3.5. Self-reflection

Drawing on the participatory observations notes of the researcher, the focus groups held with the children, the evaluation games, the reflection processes, and the teachers' feedback, the transformations experienced by students in this class environments can be summarised as follows:

- Their self-confidence in voicing their ideas has been strengthened.
- Their ability to speak in groups and in public and to make presentations has improved.
- Their respect for and acceptance of others' views has been enhanced.
- The inclusion of all voices has been fostered.
- Dialogue between children and within groups has improved.
- Argument and debate have been cultivated.
- The ability of the team to self-regulate has grown.
- The ability of the team to decide with consent was enhanced or consolidated.

- Active participation in assuming roles and responsibilities has increased.
- Practices of cooperation were established.

In this case study, likewise in the previous one, the methodology of sociocracy proved to be a good practice fostering active listening, peer governance, collective consciousness, and building a sense of equal power. Last but not least, the role of teachers as "companions" promoted children's autonomy.

4.4. A public high school collaborating with Mamagea

4.4.1. Description of the need and purpose

Despite the fact that many studies have dealt with the organisation of the interior space of schools, little importance is given to the schoolyard space. Indeed, the average Greek school is characterised by a complete or significant absence of natural elements in the schoolyard with over 70% of its surface covered by concrete. The yard, however, as a place of informal learning, is the main part of children's socialisation and learning. This fact prevents a better understanding of the connection between a person and the environment (natural, urban, social) at the critical age of development of important aspects of their personality in which school children are.

The environmental organisation Mamagea collaborated in the EU-funded Horizon 2020 project SMOOTH and implemented this particular case study as a part of its WONDER (Workshops for Nurturing and Developing Environmental Resilience) project, an environmental education programme. Ten meetings were held on a weekly basis with 18 students, 15–16 years old. Teachers of the class, an educator from Mamagea, Domniki Vagiati, and a researcher, Dr. Naya Tselepi, participated in the study. The activities took place in the classroom as well as in the school yard.

The main goal of the case study was to introduce children to some of the values of the commons, such as cooperation, equal participation, sharing, and caring for the school environment. It

also aimed to create an open participatory space for free expression and co-decision-making, enhancing the skills used in peer governance. In particular, the intent was to foster democratic participatory learning environments where children could negotiate their voices and understand the active part they could play in co-deciding upon the school environment they live in, and particularly the school yard.

4.4.2. Description of team building and cooperation

Some routines were generated through the sociocratic circle method, including: sitting and communicating in a circle; looking (with eyes and body) at the speaking person; active listening; showing consent with corporal expressions of "like," "dislike," or "so and so" (using a thumb), etc. "Rituals" were also important – for example, within the processes of "checking in" and "checking out" to pose the questions, "How do I come into the circle?" and "How do I leave the circle?" In this way, time and space were given for the participants' feelings and particularities. The students initially made fun of these practices because they were not used to expressing their feelings within the school environment in this manner. However, as the project evolved, they seemed to like them and began to use them (Figures 3.20 and 3.21).

Figure 3.20. Circular setting inside the classroom.

Figure 3.21. Circular setting outside the classroom.

Students also experienced peer governance through various processes. Following the circle structure of discussion, the decision-making was made with consent after a process of "shaping the consent" under the SCM, enabled by the facilitator. The consent process ensured that all voices were heard and included in the final decisions so that participants were happy with the outcome as well as committed to the tasks. Carrying out open elections for roles significantly contributed to the change in the students' representation of the "other" and led to the creation of trust as a basis for their collective bonds. The process supported the students to acknowledge and speak out on the positive characteristics of the "other" and, therefore, of themselves. This very fact empowered them – even the most introverted ones – to take on roles, to be responsible for the realisation of their tasks, to have trust in others, and to be actively involved in collective activities.

During the project the educator and the researcher avoided too much interference in youngsters' initiatives and acted as "companions," which was aligned to the practices of educational commons and proved to have helped them a lot in their process of empowerment and in the development of their self and collective autonomy.

4.4.3. Description of the method and approach

In CS4, practices and games based on the educational commons, peer-to-peer governance and learning, active listening, project work, participant observation, and mappings were some of the approaches employed. More methodologies and tools were also used, such as participatory planning, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely) goals.

In addition to these, the sociocratic circle method was employed for discussion in circles under facilitation, decision-making with consent, and open elections to allocate roles. The "circle" under facilitation, as the basic structure of the sociocracy method, was necessary. Thus, the facilitator provided a safe space and time for each participant to express themselves and respected the right of those who did not want to speak.

Figures 3.22 and 3.23. Mapping of the schoolyard.

4.4.4. Description of activities

The activities occurred on a weekly basis, and their main sites were the school class and the schoolyard. Students start to get to know each other better through games and collective activities. Then, working in small groups, they mapped the school yard, created layouts with their notes, and shared their results along with

Figure 3.24. The collective harvesting of ideas.

During the next meetings, students focused on the decision of their final project proposal which was the creation of a football pitch and of a thematic graffiti (Figure 3.25). They came up with a realistic plan and talked with the head of the school for its implementation. They invited the school counsellor in order to discuss more about the creation of the football pitch and then wrote a letter to the Municipality of the team (Figures 3.22 and 3.23). The students noted on the map the "dangerous and risky" points of the yard, the "green" ones, the "gender" ones, where usually girls go, as well as the "dark" ones, where a student can hide or sit alone. The aim of this mapping process was to discuss the invisible places in the school yard and their implications. A collective harvesting of ideas and then a SWOT and SMART analysis followed, which allowed students to gradually co-design their own project intervention in the yard (Figure 3.24).

Figure 3.25. The final idea for the graffiti.

Thessaloniki to ask for help from the competent service. At the final meeting, children organised a big celebration to inform the school community about their project. All of them took an active role during the process. Presentations, art exhibitions, and discussions took place at the celebration highlighting the students' need to share the process and outcomes of the project with their schoolmates (Figures 3.26 and 3.27).

Figures 3.26 and 3.27. The final event in the schoolyard I & II.

4.4.5. Self-reflection

The additional value of this case study was that elements of the sociocratic circle method were introduced by the educator of Mamagea, a candidate SCM facilitator, and the researcher, an SCM expert, as a methodology to cultivate the culture of communication, peer governance, decision-making, and role distribution within the class and assembly.

Here, it is important to remember that, especially in Greek public high schools, there is little space for students to actively participate, co-create knowledge, or co-shape school life. Thus, when participants were asked, at the very beginning, to create a "circle" (of chairs without desks), this fact in itself was a "crack" in the everyday school life of these students. In this class, the challenge for them was to break their previous pattern of communication; to actually listen to others, not to speak over them and not to be highly judgmental of what another was saying.

Some other important notes, in this line, from this case study are:

- Students of this age (approximately 16 years old) need to be respected, seen, and listened to. Their feelings and voices matter.
- They need to transform their disbelief in the "adult world" – that words are empty and cannot be put to practice – and they need more examples showing that they can make changes in school as well as in society.
- Their participation in decision-making regarding issues that concern them, whether related to the learning process, the organisation of the school, or even everyday life, is essential for a vital school life. Thus, the existing school and class councils should be adopted.
- The sociocratic circle method (SCM) empowered students in a way that they developed skills related to peer governance, shared rules, decision-making, and taking responsibility for tasks.

5. Conclusions

Studies on participatory and inclusive methodologies in educational commons across preschool, primary, and secondary education – in both public and private contexts – can offer valuable insight into viable alternatives for education and school life. These studies illuminate key findings in research on participatory and inclusive practices, highlighting their potential benefits and effectiveness.

Some overall remarks for all case studies are summarised here, focusing on educational level and the public–private dichotomy. CS1 and CS2: both case studies are at the preschool level, which appeared to be relatively "open" to new commoning tools and capable of integrating new approaches, methodologies, and tools into their pedagogies and school life. CS1 (on a public kindergarten in Thermi): despite operating within the constraints of the state education system, these public kindergartens can still innovate and create meaningful change. CS1 demonstrated that public education can adopt commons-based approaches to address social inequalities and promote a more empathetic and participative learning environment. On the other hand, the private kindergarten of CS2 and the private primary school of CS3 also embraced participatory and inclusive methodologies of educational commons; however, the concept, practice, and politics of "inclusivity" and "commons" within a private school environment requires further exploration.

At the same time, the introduction of new tools in the public high school of CS4 was well-received, partly due to prior communication and familiarity between the high school head and the educator from Mamagea. Additionally, both the researcher and the educator were alumni of this school, which facilitated the successful implementation of the methodologies. The success of these methodologies in both public and private institutions underscores their potential to transform educational settings and testifies to their viability and effectiveness across different educational contexts. However, more research and practice in combined pub-

lic–private case studies in primary and secondary education are needed to further illuminate the current findings.

In relation to the basic methodologies introduced in each case study, we could stress that the interventions made in CS1 were primarily aiming at fostering positive communication and relations among preschoolers while the CS2, CS3, and CS4 were mainly aiming at empowering students' peer governance skills. However, it is important to highlight the complementarity of the methodologies used. Active listening, conflict resolution, and the sociocratic circle method can accompany each other and, in many cases, elements of each are included in each other's practices and processes. CS1 in Thermi's public kindergarten focused on active listening, conflict resolution, and inclusive practices, highlighting the impact of genuine listening and communication on children's sense of empowerment and well-being. These approaches proved to have strengthened children, fostering their autonomy and active participation in their learning processes. Throughout the activities of the other three case studies, peer governance was central, thus, the sociocratic circle method was applied. The method proved to have supported and facilitated students of various ages, from the children in the kindergartens to the students in the primary and high schools, with their various learning styles. An adaptable pedagogy aimed at achieving the goals for each age level was employed. Communication in facilitated circles and decision-making with preschoolers were mostly made through games and theatrical plays, a process that was critical for children of this age to embody the knowledge and practices of peer governance. Collective decision-making with consent was not implemented fully, however, it playfully introduced children to the need for decision-making in teams, cultivating collective consciousness. The SCM gave a boost to the development of the skills of children and youngsters for peer governance, as they are applied in the environments of the educational commons: the definition of common aims and rules, collective decision-making, and shared responsibility for various tasks.

In searching for common ground among the four case studies, we could say that the variety of participatory and inclusive methodologies and tools used in all the case studies shape "smooth educational methodologies and practices."

To start, we can recognise that all case studies' frameworks emphasise the importance of active listening. In the educational context described in CS1, active listening is used to foster positive communication and conflict resolution among children, treating them as autonomous participants. In the other three case studies, active listening is central to the process as well, facilitated in a circle where everyone has an equal opportunity to speak and be heard.

The participatory methods are also valued, where learners or participants are actively engaged in the process. CS1 approach uses participatory learning techniques like think-pair-share and role-play to engage children in their learning path. Similarly, the other three case studies emphasise participatory planning and project work, where participants are involved in learning and decision-making processes.

Additionally, the concept of empowering individuals to take on an active role is key in all frameworks as well as the aim to create environments where individuals feel safe and respected. The educational methods in CS1 emphasise creating an inclusive atmosphere that celebrates collective interaction and the sociocratic circle method in CS2, CS3, and CS4 focuses on providing a safe space where participants can express themselves equally and practice in deciding with consent.

All case studies use diverse methods to accommodate different needs and developmental stages. CS1 includes techniques like motor play, constructive games, and pantomime to cater to various learning styles, employing structured yet adaptable pedagogy aimed at achieving specific goals. In parallel, the other three case studies use tools such as SWOT analysis, SMART goals, and visual aids to improve learning and decision-making in assemblies.

The assemblage of the above mentioned methodologies and tools creates a common ground where: 1) children have a safe space and enough time to actively listen and express themselves freely; 2) communication in a "circle" ensures equality, equity, and inclusion of all voices and needs; 3) decision-making with consent, rather than by majority, have optimal results because all members are content with the decision and more committed to the implementation of tasks and role assuming; and 4) the methodologies and tools used proved to be agile and tailor-shaped to each age's needs and each school's reality. On this basis, we can support that the "smooth educational methodologies and practices" proved to be good practices fostering educational commons, attesting to how education can be effectively organised on the basis of the commons.

Last but not least, additional reflections and recommendations for further work in this field include the following points:

- Many teachers need support in their pedagogical processes with students; organised training on methodologies and tools mentioned here will be of great support.
- Meaningful and sustainable cooperation is needed among preschools, primary schools, and secondary schools, on one side, and academic institutions and experts, on the other.
- Fruitful connection and feedback among schools, universities, the Greek Ministry of Education, and institutions that shape educational policies shall be the next step towards a systemic change on the curricula, the school environment, and life.
- There is a need for innovative and holistic projects run in public schools: 1) infrastructure in schools need to be transformed through more caring and participatory approaches, and 2) more external experts (child professionals and youth workers) are needed to work in more participatory and inclusive ways with students.

Contributing to everything mentioned above, studies like this bring to light that the participatory and inclusive methodologies of educational commons have the potential to catalyse significant changes from preschool education to primary and secondary education, within both public and private contexts. These smooth educational methodologies and practices can pave the way for a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape.

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4. Youth Advisory Boards (YABs): The Case of the Growing up in Digital Europe (GUIDE) Study

Klea Ramaj and Gary Pollock

1. Introduction

Youth advisory boards (YABs) are a youth engagement strategy used by organisations, programmes, and researchers to help incorporate youth voices into their work. There are different ways to operationalise young people's involvement in the research setting. They can be involved in the project design, goal setting, screening, and in fulfilling tasks and responsibilities (Soleimanpour et al. 2008; Taylor 2009; Jones et al. 2011; Daniels et al. 2014). Another way through which young people can be engaged in research is through workshops and focus group meetings. Young people have also been involved in data collection as well as in the interpretation of results, assessment, and discussion of findings (Francis & Hemson 2009; INVOLVE 2016).

Brajša-Žganec et al. (2019) describe two levels of recruitment strategies of young people into research activities. First, recruitment coming from one selected community or place with small differences between participants in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics. Second, the selection of children and young people from different regions, age groups, schools, or organisations, which is also the most common recruitment method. Diversity is very important in the recruitment of children and young people and can be achieved even if children are from one school, place, or organisation. Participation is based on a voluntary principle and that is why an important element in the strategy of recruitment is extensive planning.

There are two dimensions through which the research process benefits by involving children and young people: on an individual level as well as in terms of the research outputs. Individually,

both young and older members of research teams gain opportunities for improving critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and leadership skills, as well as for expanding their networks. The benefits of children's and young people's participation are primarily directed towards their future. Children and young people improve their skills and diversify their experiences. Adult researchers use children and young people's opinions to improve the quality of outputs and findings. The unique view of children enables researchers to get the information that adults might overlook. Findings and recommendations from consultations with young people are incorporated into methodologies, thus opening the way to improving research projects.

Youth participation has several levels, from somewhat tokenistic, consultative approaches to young people and adults sharing decision-making (Casas et al. 2012). Since its initial conceptualisation stages, the Growing up in Digital Europe (GUIDE) study has strived to involve young people in an advisory role, that is more meaningful than simply being consulted and informed, as portrayed by Hart's ladder of participation (1992). GUIDE is Europe's first comparative longitudinal birth cohort study of children and young people's well-being. GUIDE has developed through a series of projects funded by the European Commission, beginning with Measuring Youth Well-being (MYWEB, GA 613368), and followed by the European Cohort Development Project (ECDP, GA 777449), the Cohort Community Research and Development Infrastructure Network (COORDINATE, GA 101008589), and Growing up in Digital Europe Preparatory Phase (GUIDEPREP, GA 101078945). The GUIDE study is co-created by children, policymakers, and scientists. Child-centric approaches are the foundational basis of GUIDE. As such, children have been placed at the centre of GUIDE's ongoing work since the preparatory stages of the research design. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the development of GUIDE's youth advisory boards, followed by a discussion of the challenges encountered and potential solutions moving forward.

2. Measuring Youth Well-being (MYWEB)

The GUIDE project began as an EU-funded feasibility study, which sought to answer the question: "Is a pan-European longitudinal study on child well-being desirable and technically possible?" At this time, there was no prospect of starting a longitudinal survey. The idea was to evaluate the feasibility and to suggest some possible ways forward. From 2014 to 2016 the MYWEB project undertook a variety of tasks in this regard, many with scientists and policymakers, but importantly, also with children and young people. It is an ethical stand and a matter of complying with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), to actively engage children and young people in matters that concern them, such as research projects that consider their well-being.

Hence, a central theme of the project was listed as "direct engagement with young people" with the following objectives: 1) To select a diverse range of children and young people from each participating country to inform the progress across the project; 2) to use interviews and focus groups with these young people to explore the meanings that they attach to notions of well-being; 3) to use interviews and focus groups with these young people to assess the effectiveness of different modes of data collection and of particular challenges of longitudinal data collection; 4) to set up a "children and young persons advisory group" in each participating country to contribute to the development of the research instruments and the fieldwork processes to include both young people and experts in education and youth work.

A substantial amount of work was undertaken with children and young people (CYP) in 11 countries (Croatia, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, and the United Kingdom). Overall, 450 children and young people were involved, with the ages ranging from 9 to 24 (Mihálik et al. 2018). The selection was purposive and informed by the desire to achieve socio-economic diversity. In practice this was achieved by selecting two schools in contrasting areas. National teams worked

in their own languages with materials translated from English to explore differences in conceptions of well-being, as well as issues to do with fieldwork and data collection.

The main conclusion of MYWEB – secured through an international Delphi survey (Ozan et al. 2018) with policymakers, child well-being specialists, and academics as well as survey methodologists – was that a comparative pan-European longitudinal study is indeed both desirable and technically possible. Another central finding from MYWEB was that without substantial input from CYP, GUIDE will be suboptimal in achieving its objectives. Hence, one of our final recommendations to the commission was that there needs to be a CYP advisory board, where such input can be integrated with that from scientists and policymakers. Since MYWEB, these objectives remain at the heart of what the GUIDE project strives to do – fully contributing both to methodological approaches and questionnaire content. The governance structure for GUIDE includes a children and youth scientific advisory board to which all participating countries will contribute, and which has a remit that spans all aspects of the project.

3. European Cohort Development Project (ECDP)

On completing the MYWEB project, research infrastructure development funding was awarded by the EU to continue this work through a "design study," which began to provide greater detail on the research design and to develop the business case for GUIDE. This study was named the European Cohort Development Project (ECDP) and it ran from January 2018 until December 2019. As with MYWEB, a dedicated work stream for children and young people was included. The work done here was twofold. Firstly, to continue to consult with children and young people about understandings of well-being and to experiment with different ways of doing this. Secondly, the development of a manual for involving children and young people was completed with the intention that this would be taken forward and used in subsequent GUIDE-related projects.

MYWEB demonstrated that international child and youth advisory boards were useful and necessary. In ECDP, a decision was made to focus on two countries in order to extend and deepen the development of the advisory board methodology and to introduce new methods of engaging with children and young people. The UK and Croatia were chosen to provide data on two countries with significant linguistic, sociocultural, and historical contrasts. In MYWEB, the main tools to facilitate engagement of children and young people were semi-structured interviews and focus groups, supported by a range of project-related materials. These children and young people advisory groups (CYPAGs) continued in ECDP as they are efficient and useful in collecting information on specific topics. Each country CYPAG met three times and explored understandings of well-being (i.e., content issues), data collection methods, and ethical considerations related to the "consent to participate" form. In addition, CYPAG members were asked to engage in a "reflective storytelling." As with MYWEB, the ECDP CYPAGs proved to be fruitful and revealing.

Important insights from the CYPAGs include: 1) Participants defined well-being in relation to their significant relationships in life, namely, with parents and friends, and their important school-related experiences. In these definitions, two main aspects of life emerged as the most important well-being domains – the quality of social relationships and engagement in school, learning, and leisure activities. 2) Participants also rated family, friends, having your voice heard, and protection against abuse as the most important well-being specific topics. The least important topics according to CYPAG were family money, using computers, and social media. 3) While participants agreed that researchers should first ask parents if their child can participate in the study, they suggested that parents should not be present during interviews for the study in order for them to feel free and safe to talk about different topics. 4) Participants revealed that they are not sufficiently familiar with children and young people's rights as research participants. However, they understood the importance of

informed consent and they knew the meaning of confidentiality and anonymity. They felt that informed consent was needed and important. Indeed, children and young people liked the idea that they were being asked for personal permission. They also suggested that informed consent should be relatively short and concise (i.e., bullet points better than long sentences, paragraphs, and descriptions) so that it is readable, easy to focus and concentrate on, particularly for younger age groups.

There was, however, a desire to move beyond traditional engagement methods such as these, not least to find ways to empower the participants and integrate them into the research process in a less hierarchical way. The method chosen to promote deeper engagement was "community reporting" whereby ten young people in each country were trained to undertake interviews with other young people as well as their families, using video (Brajša-Žganec et al. 2019). The broad aim remained to gain insights from young people about understandings of well-being, but also to place this process within a real social context and facilitated by non-professional researchers. Community reporting is a storytelling movement that was started in 2007 by People's Voice Media, and it uses digital tools such as portable and pocket technologies to support people to tell their own stories in their own ways. Using the internet to share these stories with others, individuals can connect with groups and organisations who are in a position to make positive social change. Central to community reporting is the belief that people telling authentic stories about their own lived experience offers a valuable understanding of their lives.

In Croatia, we worked with young people aged between 16 and 21, and in the UK, with children and young people aged between 8 and 17. Over 60 stories of young people's perceptions and experiences of well-being were gathered from Croatia and the UK using this method. These stories were subsequently analysed to develop a systematic understanding of what they contain. The video stories are also publicly available (Community Reporter Network 2018) and have been used in scientific events to demonstrate the

importance of engaging with children and young people within research processes (Sergeant 2023).

The community reporting generated a vast amount of qualitative data, which has proved to be valuable in providing a depth of understandings of how young people see their own well-being in relation to the world around them. As a tool to help develop the GUIDE study, community reporting has provided important insights into the interconnections and interdependencies that young people themselves make. The rich stories provide a contextual explanation of where feelings are situated and how groups of questionnaire items might be relevant and important for analysts.

Much of what we found confirms that well-being must be understood as a concept made-up of a variety of inputs spanning the physical, mental, and social spheres. When looking at well-being from this perspective – as a multifaceted entity – we can see how micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors have an impact on young people's overall wellness. At a micro level, we can see how individual activities; eating, drinking and sleeping habits; as well as relationships that young people have are vital components of their world. When these aspects are positive, such as supportive friendships and eating healthily, they can contribute to young people's well-being. Yet, these factors are impacted by the meso-level contexts of the young person's world. Such contextual considerations include the area where young people live, the services they have access to, the income level of their household, and their family structure.

4. Cohort Community Research and Development Infrastructure Network (COORDINATE)

The GUIDE study was included on the 2021 European Strategy Forum of Research Infrastructures roadmap (ESFRI 2021) and in the same year was awarded further funding to enter its preparatory phase. The Cohort Community Research and Development Infrastructure Network for Access Throughout Europe (COORDINATE) project was set up with the main aims of bringing to-

gether scientists and policymakers, enabling access to existing data resources, facilitating comparative analysis of survey data, and initiating the GUIDE study through the completion of large pilot surveys in Croatia, Finland, France, and Ireland. As with the previous projects, an important objective of COORDINATE was the establishment of youth advisory boards (YABs) in order to systematically engage young people in the work conducted by GUIDE from the beginning, ensuring that the research tools produced and approaches taken are effectively child centred.

The COORDINATE YABs are facilitated through workshops, designed by Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and organised by partners in Croatia, Finland, Portugal, and the UK, to overview and advise researchers on key questions regarding the GUIDE research infrastructure. The YABs in Croatia and Finland focus on content and challenges associated with piloting questionnaires with children and young people. The YABs in Portugal and the UK are responsible for the consideration of youth participation in research infrastructures and complex research projects. YAB members in the involved countries meet a minimum of once a year to overview, review, and advise researchers on key questions regarding access, networking, and joint research activities. Inter alia, this comprises ethical issues, research tool development, or support with dissemination activities. During the course of the COORDINATE project, there have also been international YABs, with one or two representatives from each YAB meeting virtually. To participate meaningfully, the young people involved in the international YAB have an intermediate level of English.

As with previous YABs, the COORDINATE YABs are not intended to be a representative structure. Therefore, recruitment uses purposive sampling methods. Six to ten young people are recruited per country, aged 14 and above, and from diverse backgrounds. Diversity refers to a mixture of ethnicities, religions, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultures. In cases whereby this was not possible, given the challenges to recruit young people in research, partners were advised to avoid having all members

within one YAB from the exact same background. The data collected through the COORDINATE YABs are FAIR, meaning that the data are findable, accessible, interoperable, and re-usable. The YAB workshops are all audio-recorded, but these recordings are kept confidential and destroyed after some time following transcription. In terms of legality, COORDINATE follows the GDPR regulations to ensure compliance with EU and national data ethics and privacy regulations. The COORDINATE YABs can be considered an innovative endeavour, which engages prominent stakeholders that are too often sidelined in complex pan-European projects, but have the clear ability to improve design and relevance.

The COORDINATE YABs have been designed with a feedback loop. This means that the YAB members are routinely updated and kept informed with regards to what was done with the recommendations provided by them. As part of the COORDINATE project, young people have advised researchers nationally with regards to refining the safeguarding protocol created to protect children in research contexts, matters related to data protection and administrative data linkage, data access, migration, attrition, interviewer training, the interview process, collaboration with external agencies, questionnaire implementation, as well as questionnaire content, including topics covered by the questionnaire, word choice, style expression, readability, and comprehensibility. On an international level, the opinion of YAB members has been sought with regards to issues impacting young people, the future of GUIDE, foresight exercises, interconnected global issues, as well as themes such as future advisory boards, engaging youth in science, gender disparities, technology advancement, and nurturing a sense of self since the early years of life.

Children have also been consulted through cognitive interviews as part of the COORDINATE pilot, which was carried out in Croatia, Finland, France, and Ireland. The cognitive interviews were conducted with 68 eight-year-old children from the four aforementioned European countries – Croatia (n=20), Finland (n=10), France (n=18), and Ireland (n=20). The aim of the cogni-

tive interviews was to pre-test the well-being-related questions of the GUIDE main study. It was indicated that special care should be given to create a safe and comfortable environment for children. Specifically, the interviewers should be trained to establish a positive relationship with the child and rapport-building questions should be added before the main questions. Additionally, it should be determined how to approach parents' presence during the interviews since their attendance seems to interfere with children's unbiased answering, especially when the questions are sensitive. Creating parents' briefs, conducting interviewer training, and using showcards or self-completion modules were some of the proposed methods that could be used to resolve this issue.

The most recommended changes that children proposed concern the instructions and the wording of the questions with the intent to simplify them. Namely, they should use child-friendly vocabulary and tangible examples, as well avoid long or complex sentence structures, such as negative statements. It was found that children faced difficulties understanding abstract time frames. Therefore, when time frames are necessary, they should be explained explicitly and concretely. Moreover, children struggled with determining average values. Thus, it was recommended that questions based on estimating mean values be avoided when possible. Finally, it was found that children are able to use three-point and five-point Likert-type scales. However, special concern should be given to the wording of the middle neutral descriptors, since children often do not understand how the neutral descriptors differ from one another. Additionally, children appeared to need some time to adapt to using this type of scale. Therefore, a minimal number of different scales should be used, and practice questions should be included to enable children to get accustomed to the response format.

5. Challenges, lessons learnt, and future plans

As mentioned previously, the main aim of YABs is to enable the voice of children by integrating youth perspectives and experiences in research and practice (Arunkumar et al. 2019). Nevertheless,

in reality, there are several hurdles which inhibit the successful implementation of YABs. First, recruiting children and young people in research activities requires the approval of several ethical boards, which can delay access and involvement. Second, attendance can be low given that children might have other competing school-related or non-school-related priorities. Third, the use of complicated language could reduce young people's engagement with the advisory board (see Collins et al. 2020). Fourth, active engagement of young people in research can pose financial and time constraints on researchers. Fifth, there can be a possible lack of trust and respect between children, adults, and advisory group members (Hohenemser & Marshall 2002). This can be a result of the imbalanced power dynamic, which has the potential to prevent meaningful participation of young people and to misconstrue their opinions (James 2007).

In the context of GUIDE, several challenges have arisen, particularly in relation to the longitudinal and international nature of the project. Keeping hold of children and young people within the GUIDE YABs from one year to the other poses a difficulty, for two main reasons. First, children and young people may change neighbourhoods or schools, or lose interest in the study. This leads to attrition and increases the costs of recruiting and training new YAB members. Second, as years go by, children and young people will become adults and not be eligible to participate in the YABs anymore, meaning that their continued contribution will be interrupted and hence lost. By way of example, 16-year-old children will be 26 years old in ten years time and officially adults, thus making it impossible for them to continue participating in the GUIDE YABs. This will further increase the costs and burden of recruiting new YAB members to the GUIDE project. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the process of engagement with children and young people will change and what might be considered as a helpful contribution now, might not be helpful in the future. Taking the example of technological advancement, children's and young people's suggestions on the impact of so-

cial media on child well-being now might not be relevant for an unknown future whereby the development of social media could take various unpredictable paths.

Meaningfully and credibly incorporating children's and young people's suggestions becomes complex in an uncertain future. It is not recommended to establish YABs following the tokenistic approach of it being "the right thing to do," which results in children giving up their time for little value (Kennan & Dolan 2017). At the same time, it is also important to evaluate children's and young people's opinions and suggestions. Granting children and young people autonomy while determining how their contributions could bring value to the project can be tricky to balance. A way to address this would be to give children and young people a voice within the governance structure of GUIDE, more precisely in the Children and Youth Advisory Group, which sits aside the Scientific Advisory Group composed of social science methodologists across Europe. In line with the advice of Arunkumar et al. (2019), GUIDE has striven to adopt the strategy of the feedback loop whereby researchers of each national team feedback to each YAB member in their team on how their recommendations have been applied to and contributed to the project.

The second set of main challenges is related to the fact that GUIDE is an international project, with partners from across Europe. The scheduling of international meetings as well as the coordination across countries, partners, and schools has proven to pose a significant challenge, particularly given the differences in education systems and time zones. In addition to the challenge of doing things collectively, international collaboration implies that all attendees are required to speak English at an intermediate or upper-intermediate level. This requirement, coupled with the issue of purposive sampling and self-selection bias, has the potential to lead the population of YABs to be skewed towards elitism or "the best of the best." Such potential lack of representation of the general population of children and young people can prevent equal contribution to decision-making. Another factor that might

impede a balanced participation and involvement of children and young people in YABs is age variability. For example, children aged eight years old might feel intimidated and/or excluded in discussions by older peers in their early teens who might appear to be more confident and knowledgeable.

To address this issue, groups with a wide age range should be avoided, and researchers should invest time and continuous effort to build rapport and gain trust. To achieve that, researchers should aim to be non-judgemental, compassionate, friendly, welcoming, and approachable. Ground rules need to be formulated, which must be followed by all members of the group, including researchers (INVOLVE 2016). These ground rules can also be set by the YAB members themselves. Given that not all members may feel comfortable speaking in a group setting, advisors should be provided with opportunities where they can individually provide feedback, for example, through emails or speaking to a researcher alone after the session (INVOLVE 2016). Children should be provided with clear explanations with regards to the reasons why they are being invited to give their opinion, how they will deliver their opinion, and what type of impact their participation is likely to have. Young people will also need to understand the limitations that are associated with their role and the level of impact they can have on the project. These issues should be established from the beginning of the project. It is important for there to be measures in place for adult researchers to be held accountable throughout the project for the promises they make to the YAB members.

Throughout GUIDE's work with children and young people, it has been noted that wording and survey content is an ongoing issue of concern. To tackle this issue, it is important to always include children in every step of the decision-making process in order to capture and implement the child-friendliness aspect of the project correctly. While keeping hold of the children throughout the years was pointed as a concern earlier, it is also important to acknowledge that having new children engaging with the project helps diversify the range of opinions and contributions. When

the same children and young people are retained in YABs for a long time, there is the risk of "panel conditioning." This refers to the bias introduced when participation in a longitudinal study changes respondents' attitudes and behaviours and/or the quality of their reports of those attitudes and behaviour (Warren & Halpern-Manners 2012). The responses of a person who has already taken part in a study previously may differ from the responses that the person would have given if they were taking part for the first time given that the study questions may prompt participants to consider issues they would have otherwise not considered. For these reasons, the inclusion of new YAB members continuously throughout the span of GUIDE has many benefits in addition to the above-stated disadvantages.

Another challenge that the GUIDE YABs have encountered is the recruitment of children and young people from the most vulnerable communities, including children from very financially poor areas, children whose parents suffer from mental health disorders, and children with caring responsibilities (also known as young carers). Notwithstanding GUIDE's aims and ideals to create inclusive YABs, one has to admit that YABs are inherently an elitist approach to engage children and young people in international research projects. To capture the opinions and viewpoints of the most vulnerable children and young people, it is worth considering alternative methodologies. Such methodologies could employ qualitative, ethnographic, or anthropological approaches, and could strive to have a smaller sample size than the international YABs. It would be ideal for the longitudinal aspect to be preserved.

In terms of lessons learnt, through the work on the YABs, the GUIDE team has appreciated the importance of effective communication. Clear and precise communication, particularly in the context of international projects, can address a range of matters related to cultural differences, collaboration, team cohesion, and conflict resolution, ultimately contributing to project success. As previously mentioned, international YABs have proven particu-

larly difficult to organise. It might be worth considering whether international YABs are eventually valuable and beneficial, in proportion to the effort put into organising them. While all the international YABs to date have been held online, it would be worth reflecting on whether inviting international children and young people in the UK, so that all members meet in person, would be a better approach. This strategy could have the impact of increasing the commitment and motivation of young people across Europe.

As far as the future is concerned, GUIDE can make use of the rapid development of technology and artificial intelligence (AI) to help organise the YABs. For example, AI can be employed to help with the design of the YAB teams, including with the random recruitment of children and young people as well as with the sample size. AI can also help with the translation of the YAB workshop content from one language to the other and with the adaptation of the language to account for the participants' age variability. GUIDE should also strive to implement further activities that are in line with the ECDP *Children and Young People Advisory Group Manual*, which was developed in 2019 as part of the ECDP deliverable 6.1. (Brajša-Žganec et al. 2019).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the establishment of youth advisory boards (YABs) within the Growing up in Digital Europe (GUIDE) study represents a significant achievement in the integration of youth perspectives into research processes. By actively involving children and young people, GUIDE not only adheres to the standards set forth by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), but also enriches the quality and relevance of its findings. The collaborative efforts between researchers, policymakers, and youth have demonstrated that young people possess unique insights that can profoundly influence research outcomes, ensuring that studies are not adult-centric.

The challenges faced in implementing the GUIDE YABs, such as recruitment difficulties, maintaining engagement, and address-

ing power dynamics, highlight the complexities of youth participation in research. However, these obstacles also present opportunities for growth and innovation. By fostering an environment of trust and open communication, researchers can empower young participants, allowing their voices to be heard and valued. The feedback loop established within GUIDE ensures that youth contributions are not only acknowledged, but also integrated into the research framework, thus enhancing the overall impact of the project.

Looking ahead, the GUIDE project must continue to adapt and evolve, leveraging technological advancements and innovative methodologies to engage a diverse range of children and young people. This includes exploring alternative recruitment strategies to incorporate marginalised voices and ensuring that the advisory boards reflect the rich tapestry of youth experiences across Europe. As the landscape of youth engagement in research continues to shift, the lessons learned from GUIDE's YABs will serve as a valuable framework for future initiatives.

Ultimately, the success of the GUIDE project rests on its commitment to placing children and young people at the forefront of its research endeavours. By prioritising their involvement, GUIDE not only contributes to the academic discourse on youth well-being but also champions the rights and agency of young people in shaping their own futures. This chapter underscores the importance of youth participation as a vital component of meaningful research, paving the way for a more inclusive and responsive approach to understanding the complexities of growing up in a digital age.

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5. Participatory Qualitative Research on Attitudes of Isolated Roma Communities to Family Models, Education, and the Personal Development of Young People in Bulgaria

Ralitza Sechkova

1. Rationale: The purpose of and the need for the research

Despite the substantial recent improvements in the educational integration of Roma communities there is still a long way to go to close the gap between the level of education of Roma and that of the majority in Bulgaria. Diversity in origin and character are factors that determine the situation and act as strong barriers to education: discrepancies in the educational system still allow for the existence of segregated schools and cases of segregation in mixed schools; inadequate knowledge and understanding of the inclusive goals of education and the absence of innovation in the practices of many schools; prejudice and discrimination; poverty and social exclusion of isolated communities, etc. One of the crucial internal barriers to the education of Roma girls are the pre-modern social norms and behavioural models that still dominate in many isolated Roma communities and negatively influence the perception of the value of education and the motivation of young generations for education. Pre-modern family models condemn Roma girls to early marriage and childbirth and keep them confined within the boundaries of their isolated neighbourhood without the right to choose, without prospects for education and a professional career, without the autonomy of the individual and of the young family, making them dependent on their mothers-in-law and the older generations.

The adequate support for better education of Roma girls and youth requires that these barriers be addressed with a deep understanding of the attitudes and internal motives that predetermine

the repetition of these behavioural models and pre-modern life strategies. This knowledge and understanding are missing from both the educational and social systems operated predominantly by professionals from the majority – teachers, social workers, and specialists with limited skills for working with socially excluded ethnic communities like Roma.

The necessity to equip the professionals with innovative methods and tools, knowledge, understanding, and skills for tackling the social and educational exclusion of young Roma generations necessitated in-depth qualitative field research on attitudes and family models in isolated Roma communities. The purpose of the research results required a more practice-oriented field survey, rather than an academic one. Standard qualitative research methods like focus groups and structured interviews are applicable to register the issues, but can hardly reach the internal motivation, priorities, and ways of thinking of girls and boys, of parents and grandparents in closed ethnic communities, in particular, regarding such sensitive issues as social norms and family models. Considering these well-known challenges, the experts preferred applying a non-standard participatory methodology of thematic group discussions, reducing the distance between researcher and respondents in order to build trust and provoke a sincere sharing of opinions inside the closed Roma communities.

A non-standard participatory field survey of the attitudes in isolated Roma communities was designed and delivered twice in different neighbourhoods within the implementation of larger projects. The first one – let's call it the "Shumen survey" – was carried out in Shumen Province in 2017–2018 within the framework of a huge project, Family for Every Child (2010–2019), carried out by UNICEF Bulgaria, focused on the deinstitutionalisation of child care in Bulgaria and implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Agency for Social Assistance, the State Agency for Child Protection, the Ministry of Health, and other relevant institutions at national and local levels, municipal authorities, and NGOs.

The second one – let's call it the "Dream Up survey" – was carried out in 2023 within the Dream Up, Aim Up Project: Integrated Community-Centred Services for the Prevention of Child Marriages of Roma in Bulgaria (2023–2025), funded by the EU and implemented by a consortium of Bulgarian civil organisations, the coordinator being the CEGA Foundation (Creating Effective Grassroots Alternatives) and its partners, the Roma-Lom Foundation and the Zakrilnitsi (Protectors) Association. The project aims to contribute to ending the harmful practice of child marriages in Bulgaria by arming professionals with a community-based methodology for prevention of harmful practices that encourages Roma girls to strive for personal achievements beyond the boundaries of isolation and changes pre-modern traditional attitudes in the excluded Roma communities. Education is highlighted as the best alternative for Roma girls to child marriage and as the pathway for them to achieve their dreams.

2. The framework of the research teams

The designed concept and participatory approaches of the research, as outlined in the next section, was based on cooperation, support, and interaction with all the parties intended to benefit from the research results. Accordingly, the methodology design and the research teams required the participation of the key stakeholders, although in different intensity and form. On the one hand, these were professionals from the social/educational systems, who were expected to apply the tools, elaborated on the basis of research findings and conclusions, in their work. On the other hand, they were targeting members of the Roma communities, who were considered not just the object of the research, but key actors who had the potential to make a difference in their own lives. The experience proves that community change can be performed only by the community itself. The external professionals can only support the process, but cannot impose visions or pathways for improvement without the active participation and commitment of the members of the community itself.

The methodology of both surveys was developed with the contribution of stakeholders in the social system, the schools, and the Roma communities. Cooperation with relevant stakeholders for the Shumen survey was easily reached on the bases of memorandums of understanding at national, regional, and local levels, and agreements with mayors in the region, signed by UNICEF Bulgaria for the implementation of the project. The research objectives, approaches, and methods were discussed and agreed on meetings with social service providers, municipal experts, managers, and teachers at schools (segregated and mainstream) attended by Roma children in the region.

The methodology design for the Dream Up survey was discussed, consulted on, and fine-tuned with the input from professionals along with a rapid assessment of the challenges/difficulties faced by them in the provision of services in isolated Roma communities and cases of child marriages in Bulgaria. Two focus groups were organised (in person and online) with professionals in the social system at national and local levels, involving experts from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Agency for Social Assistance, the State Agency for Child Protection, UNICEF Bulgaria, and 31 specialists, social workers, and service managers from 19 service providers working in isolated Roma communities in Sofia and in the countryside. In addition, the project experts consulted the scope and expected outcomes of the survey with teachers, educators, and youth workers interested in the development of programmes for promoting education as a desirable alternative to child marriages and the dropout of Roma girls from school.

The Roma involvement at the stage of methodology design occurred via individual and group discussions with representatives of the target Roma communities – local NGOs, informal community leaders, Roma health/educational mediators, and Roma experts at local authorities. The consultations with Roma contributed to adjusting the key research questions and, in particular, to specifying the adequate methods/tools for how to build trust

between the field researchers and the communities selected for the field survey and how to ensure an open and frank dialogue with the Roma participants who were willing to share their opinions and self-reflection on the sensitive issues of traditional social norms and family models. In Shumen Province, the Roma involvement was ensured by the multiethnic teams of the innovative family consultative centres in the towns of Shumen, Novi Pazar, and Veliki Preslav, which were established in the framework of the Family for Every Child project and included Roma as social workers and assistants, providing outreach services directly in Roma communities on the territory of all ten municipalities in Shumen Province. The Roma contribution to the methodology of the Dream Up survey was ensured through consultations with Roma activists and Roma health, educational and labour mediators in various regions in the countryside.

Establishing cooperation with a wide-range of stakeholders made the formation of larger research teams easier. In addition to professional researchers, the teams included supporters and volunteers from Roma communities, service providers, and educators.

The team for the Shumen survey was led by Ralitza Sechkova, PhD. Supported by the UNICEF experts, Sechkova was responsible for the overall project. The team also included nine community facilitators from Roma and *millet* origin from the family consultative centres, who supported the leading researcher in the fieldwork (in teams of two persons in a selected community) with logistics and in the facilitation of discussions and translation from Roma and Turkish languages when necessary. The engagement of the nine community facilitators in the field research was agreed to be considered as part of their regular work duties as social workers/assistants, contracted in the family consultative centres.

The team for the Dream Up survey was also led by Ralitza Sechkova, PhD, and it consisted of experts from the project partners: the CEGA Foundation (Rumyan Sechkov, PhD, and Venzislav Kirkov), the Roma-Lom Foundation (Nikolay Kirilov, Tatiana

Kirilova, and Anita Marinova), and the Zakrilnitsi Association (Milen Gechovski and Sigridur Kamenova). The team also included ten volunteers – local Roma representatives who participated in the facilitation of discussions and supported the field researchers with logistics and translation from Roma or Turkish languages when necessary.

Attracting volunteer support for the fieldwork occurred in a more or less informal way due to the recognised long-term experience of the project partners in Roma community development and, in particular, to the wide contacts between the Roma-Lom Foundation and the local leaders, the National Network of Health Mediators, priests, and Roma community activists all over the country. Such a survey can hardly be performed by a professional research agency alone or by a university/academic team unless they have strong connections within the local communities and a trust-building history of joint interventions and partnerships.

3. Participatory research methods and approaches

The methodology is designed in line with the purpose of the research. The different goals, strategic interventions, and targets of the two projects described above predetermined some differences in the scope of the two surveys. In the framework of the Family for Every Child project, the field research in Shumen was part of a comprehensive analysis of the situation in the region regarding services for children and families at risk from the most vulnerable communities and groups. Hence, the Shumen field research was regional, but with wider objectives covering all the topics related to parental care, child abandonment, perceptions of child welfare, etc.

The territorial scope of the Dream Up field survey targeted Roma communities all over the country, but it was specifically focused on the community attitudes to pre-modern family models and social norms. Nevertheless, essentially the purposes of the field research were common in both cases. In a few words, the research findings and results were intended to equip professionals

in the social system, schools, and NGOs, as well as community workers with knowledge and practical tools to prevent child marriages and provide adequate support for the young generations in isolated Roma communities to access new development opportunities through education and professional careers, ensuring their personal autonomy and ability to choose their own future.

Accordingly, in both surveys the teams followed a common methodology, which is rooted in the concept for encouraging the self-reflection of participants on the research topics, involving them in discussion on solutions, and self-help initiatives for community development, thus melting the distance between the field researchers and the respondents. The participants were invited to share opinions and life stories, to analyse their own attitudes, to identify the key opinion makers in the community, to debate social norms, to describe the situation in their community, and to discuss how to mobilise the internal potential for change in the community.

The specific methods were designed according to the scope of the field research, the local contexts, the level of involvement of different communities in external interventions from social services, existing school-based programmes or NGO support, etc. In addition, based on the gained experience in Shumen, the methodology for the Dream Up field survey was upgraded and developed in greater detail. Here we will present in brief the main concepts and the key research questions, methods, and tools, highlighting the specific differences between the two surveys when applicable.

4. Research objectives and tasks

The objectives of the field surveys were to identify the challenges and the existing internal potential for addressing early marriages in isolated Roma communities. In this context, the qualitative field surveys aimed to analyse the attitudes in isolated Roma communities regarding social norms and pre-modern family models with a special focus on child cohabitation/marriage and early births, as well as the attitudes and expectations of different age

groups towards education and the prospects and alternatives for future realisation of young people from isolated communities. From the point of view of isolated Roma communities, the field surveys aimed to establish and analyse:

- The current situation and factors that influence the practice of child marriage in the contemporary context and current trends in the attitudes of Roma communities regarding the advantages and disadvantages of traditional social norms and family models
- The barriers and the internal potential in Roma communities for change, including identification of key opinion makers inside the communities having the potential to become change players, mobilising the communities for change
- The best channels for influencing the attitudes and behavioural patterns of different generations in the community regarding education, what services, support measures and sanctions can help end the harmful practice of child marriages and early births
- The complexity of demotivation/motivation for education and internal barriers to the access of Roma girls and boys to better educational opportunities and professional careers (making a distinction in attitudes towards employment and income generation from temporary or occasional jobs for making their living)

In accordance with the objectives and development of integrated services for the prevention of child marriage and programmes for keeping Roma youth at school, the key research questions of the field surveys have been defined:

- What are the deep underlying reasons for the preservation of traditional social norms for child marriage and early births in isolated Roma communities? How are the trends towards the modernisation of family models perceived by the older generations of parents and grandparents? To

what extent are they inclined to accept them or to oppose the changes?

- What are the priorities in the dreams and expectations of Roma girls and boys for the future? What are their interests and desires for a completed education and professional career? What is their perception for the benefits and losses from early marriage?
- What is the young Roma view of success in life? What paths of personal realisation can be promoted as an alternative to early marriage and birth, in particular, discussing the core alternatives ensured by education, professional qualification and career, independence and autonomy of the person, the right of choice in their life, the balance between the family and personal development beyond the boundaries of the isolated community?
- What are the ideas and expectations of parents for a successful life realisation of their children?
- What, according to adolescents and their parents, is the preferred age for marriage? To what extent have indications of the modernisation of family models in terms of the desired number of children and preferred age of marriage registered among adolescents from isolated ethnic communities? How is this perceived by older generations?
- To what extent do adolescents from ethnic communities show a tendency to separate the young nuclear family from the large family community, preferring to live separately from their parents, including outside the neighbourhood? What are the attitudes towards the young family's exit from dependence on parents (housing, financial, other)?

5. Key concepts and clarifications on the focus of the research

At the very beginning, it is important to specify some essential concepts that are used in the analysis in order to avoid the risk of misunderstandings and inaccurate interpretations.

Pre-modern family models and Roma identity. The survey is based on the understanding that child marriages are not a "typical Roma tradition" characteristic of the Roma identity, but are in general characteristic of pre-modern societies and pre-modern family models. From this point of view, the researchers are convinced that ending the practice of child marriages and early births in no way affects the essential Roma identity, but will only help the transition from a pre-modern traditional society to the opportunities for development in the modern world. Pre-modern family models dominated Bulgarian society a century ago, as well as European societies in earlier times. Currently, they are widespread in many countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, etc. where child marriages are a huge problem. In today's Bulgaria, the pre-modern family models are still preserved mostly among segregated Roma/ethnic communities, where the belated processes of modernisation are due to decades of social exclusion, spatial segregation, low education, and isolation from the macro society. For that reason, Roma people often recognise child marriages as "their tradition," without distinguishing pre-modern family models from the essential ethno-cultural specifics of their own identity. Such a mix-up is not surprising for socially excluded groups, but is unacceptable for teachers, social workers, media, police, prosecutors, or central and local institutions.

Therefore, it is important to emphasise that the target groups of the field surveys is not the Roma community in general, but the detached Roma and other closed ethnic communities, where pre-modern family models and social norms still rule. It is these communities that should be covered by the intensive programmes to overcome the "pre-modern" behavioural models, for the purpose of widespread prevention of child marriages and keeping Roma girls at school.

Child marriage. In the research, child marriage is understood as the premature cohabitation of children and young people under the age of 18, including in cases where only one partner (most often the girl) is under 18 years of age. Child marriages and early

pregnancy are considered a harmful practice within the context of Joint General Recommendation no. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women/General Comment no. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Marriage and marital age. The concept of marriage (and marriageable age, accordingly) is used in the analysis as a generalising concept, both for civil marriage (officially legally registered) and for cohabitation on a family basis, which according to traditional social norms in the isolated communities is accepted as marriage after it is announced and legitimised before the community by the parents and/or the newlyweds.

Roma communities, ethnic communities of historical Roma origins. The Roma in Bulgaria are a diverse and heterogeneous community, composed of metagroups and subgroups with their own identity as Roma, *millet*, Turks, *kalaidgii*, *kaldarshi*, *rudari*, and many other diverse subgroups (between 20 to 80 according to different classifications), specific traditions, different mother language, religion, cultural codes. With respect for the right to self-identification, the general term "Roma and other groups in a similar situation" has been adopted in the National Strategy for the Integration of Roma in the Republic of Bulgaria (2012–2020). In the current National Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of the Roma (2021–2030), "the term 'Roma' is also used as a general term. It includes groups of people who have more or less similar but not identical cultural and social characteristics. Their self-identification can also be different." Here, we use "Roma" as a general term for brevity only in reports summarising the findings, but the detailed analysis of research results as a rule takes into consideration the specifics of diverse Roma subgroups. As well, with respect to self-identification, the field researchers use the preferred name and identity declared by each community itself.

Marginalised groups and families. Each isolated Roma community is heterogeneous also in terms of social status, levels of social exclusion/inclusion, education, and income of the families.

In order to prevent the stigmatisation of Roma, the researchers reject the classification of the entire neighbourhood/community as marginalised. Marginalisation has its specific characteristics stemming not only from levels of poverty and isolation, but also from dominant patterns of behaviour, attitudes, and life strategies. Within vulnerable communities, there are areas of highly marginalised groups/families that are doubly isolated and unaccepted, both by their community and the macro society, with permanently broken connections, widening disparities in living standards, persistent unemployment and isolation from the labour market of all generations, having dominance of survival priorities at the expense of development and personal fulfilment.

6. Methods

The methods and participatory approaches of the field research are designed to involve the studied Roma communities in a self-reflection process on the pre-modern social norms, family models, behavioural patterns, perception of success, and on their visions about the opportunities for personal development of young generations in their community. The transforming of respondents into active participants in the research is achieved throughout two main methodological choices: 1) the expanded role of the "entry points" of the professional researchers to the studied community – the Roma co-facilitators involved in the research; 2) the methods of the thematic group discussion encouraging the open sharing of opinions and provoking the participants to critically self-assess their own perceptions and debate on the research topics.

6.1. The involvement of local Roma as "entry points" and co-facilitators in the field research

The "entrance" of field researchers to the closed community was provided by the Roma facilitators, included in the extended research teams. These Roma were well-known in the studied communities: activists at a Roma NGO, health and educational mediators, pastors, and social workers. They provided invaluable

support for selecting and inviting the participants, getting their consent to participate, and providing translation for participants who do not speak Bulgarian. They were involved as co-facilitators of the discussion. In standard studies, the choice of such an approach can be treated as "polluting the environment," but in these field surveys on attitudes towards child marriage it confirms the expected advantages and benefits. The support of a local Roma provides the necessary trust of the participants to the fieldworkers: firstly, for their agreement to participate in the thematic group discussions; secondly, to overcome their fears, to share their candid opinions and personal stories and openly discuss the issues. Support from a local Roma as an "entry point" to the trust of the local closed community is necessary even for the Roma researchers (i.e., those from the Roma-Lom Foundation), who are part of the Roma community. Although to a lesser extent than the field researchers from the majority, they still remain outsiders to the closed community.

6.2. Thematic group discussion: Methods and approaches

The qualitative method of the thematic group discussion to a certain extent is based on the method of the semi-structured in-depth group interview, but introducing several substantial differences aimed to involve the respondents as participants in the research. Firstly, each participant is invited not only to share and register her/his opinion, but to analyse it from the personal point of view and in the context of the community environment. Secondly, the group is encouraged to openly discuss the issues between themselves, assessing the situation in their families and community, arguing and comparing their opinions on the family models, benefits, and losses. Thirdly, considering the group dynamics and reached level of trust between researchers and participants, the field researchers can (in appropriate moments) go outside of their role of neutral moderators and gently raise arguments, either pro or con regarding the dominating opinions, asking the group to justify in detail their arguments and way of thinking. This dis-

cussion helps going in depth in analysing the attitudes to the most sensitive issues, such as the social norms for virginity of Roma girls, the preferable age for marriage, the health and development risks for child mothers, the power of the mother-in-law to rule the household, etc. Fourthly, the participants in the thematic group discussions are provoked to suggest solutions, in particular, on how the community itself can self-mobilise its internal potential to change the situation, trying also to identify the key actors and community opinion makers that might push ahead the process of modernisation – how the solutions can be found by the community, what kind of support will be adequate and really helpful. Thus, the thematic group discussion isn't limited at all to the collection of qualitative information, but it aims also to stimulate the continuation of discussions inside the closed community after the field survey is over and possible self-help actions of the families.

The target participants in the thematic group discussions are Roma, separated into four groups in each community in order to avoid interfering with the opinions of different generations and gender. From the generation of adolescents and young people they are a) Roma girls and young women and b) Roma boys and young men, married and unmarried, aged 16–25 years. From the older generations they are c) mothers/grandmothers and d) fathers/grandfathers, aged over 30 years (in cases of early marriage, adults over this age can be expected to have adolescent children).

A detailed questionnaire was developed for the thematic group discussions, listing all the research questions, issues, and topics of interest, but it remained open for adjusting and adding new aspects and questions raised by the participants during the fieldwork. It is used as a reminder for covering all topics, but the order of the topics is not mandatory.

The frank sharing of authentic opinions of young people and parents from closed communities requires an informal environment, a soft facilitation style, creating a relaxed atmosphere and the opportunity for free conversation without significant inter-

ference. The field researchers flexibly adapt to the dynamics of the group without strictly limiting the topics discussed. Questions and topics for discussion are asked according to the way the conversation goes. During the discussion, participants very often open the intended topics themselves, then the moderators continue on them and, when appropriate, the next questions will be asked.

6.3. Methods of included observation

Political anthropology methods of included observation are applied for collecting information about the situation, social disparities, and features of social exclusion in Roma communities and in the internal zones of deep marginalisation, the relations inside the communities and between the different Roma subgroups, the levels of self-organising and local community leadership.

6.4. The ethical rules respected in the field survey

Ethical standards and norms were observed in the study and in the analysis of the data: voluntary participation, documented informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality when presenting the results, respect for human rights, non-discrimination and respect for the personality of the respondents. The "do no harm" principle guarantees the inviolability of the respondents' personality, avoiding trauma and possible negative consequences arising from their participation.

In accordance with ethical rules, data on the ethnicity of the participants is collected – without direct questions or pressure from the fieldworkers. In the comfortable environment of a group from their neighbourhood, most often the participants state their ethnic origin in passing in the course of the conversation as implicit information ("We, the Roma…," "We are from the minority here…," "You know what the others think about us, the Roma…"). The field researchers observe the participants, taking into account the language spoken in the group and the neighbourhood.

6.5. Activities performed and the capitalisation of research results

6.5.1. The strategies and interventions of the projects

The Family for Every Child project of UNICEF Bulgaria has been part of UNICEF's strategic interventions for demonstration modelling in support of the process of the deinstitutionalisation of children and building the capacity of the social system for support of the most vulnerable families and communities in Bulgaria. The project was funded by donations from individuals and companies, the resources of UNICEF Bulgaria, subprojects supported by the Velux Foundation, and other sources.

Family for Every Child: Closure of the Infant Home in Shumen Province was a huge project that ran from 2010 to 2019. It developed and updated interventions at every stage of implementation, according to the needs of social reform in Bulgaria. It consisted of several big components. The first component was the closure of the infant home in Shumen Province. This involved individual assessment of the children's needs, assessment of their parents' capacities, and assessment of the personnel involved; improvement of the care for babies in the infant home; removal of the children one by one from the institution and into foster care or reintegration in their families or relatives; and the provision of support services to children, families, and foster parents, in particular, for the care of children with disabilities.

The second component was establishing services for preventing child abandonment through designing and piloting of innovative outreach family-centred social services on the spot in isolated Roma/ethnic communities to address family separation and child abandonment, the improvement of parental care, social inclusion, the prevention of child marriages, support for access to education, the provision of healthcare and public services to the most vulnerable families and groups. The main activities included: rapid needs assessment in isolated Roma communities; methodology design; construction/renovation of premises; capacity building of local teams, including training and ongoing methodology advice; and the provision of services covering the whole territory of

Shumen Province. In 2011 three family consultative centres were established to provide services in the province. In 2016 the model was rolled out in Montana Province by the establishment of two more family consultative centres.

The third component was capacity building of the social system through development of methodology resources, trainings, hiring extra personnel for the child protection departments in Shumen Province, etc.

The fourth component was advocacy for scaling up the effective models of social services; for introducing the good practices and experience gained in Shumen to the nationwide programme for closing the infant homes all over the country and their transformation into complexes of services for children and families; efforts for ensuring the sustainability of established innovative centres with funding from the state budget. Research, analysis, monitoring, and evaluation activities were performed at various stages of the project.

Along with the core team of UNICEF experts, a number of specialised teams, service providers, and NGOs were involved in the project implementation. It is difficult to name all of them. The expert leading the field research presented in this case study has been involved in the project as a UNICEF consultant for development of innovative outreach services in Roma communities, including the research related to Roma.

The strategy of the Dream Up, Aim Up project follows the logic of demonstration modelling, which has proven its effectiveness in transforming social policies and services, with the following basic steps/interventions. Firstly, research, including desk research (on existing data, analysis and studies, legal frameworks, documented experiences, and good practices for prevention of child marriages in Bulgaria and other EU countries), qualitative field research (on attitudes, social norms, and pre-modern family models in Roma communities), and analytical report writing and publication of results. Secondly, methodology development, that is, designing an innovative methodology for social services and community work

with a set of tools to prevent child marriages and change traditional attitudes in the excluded Roma communities to encourage Roma girls to strive for education and personal achievements beyond the boundaries of isolation. Thirdly, testing the toolkit by getting experienced operating centres for social services and NGOs in six sites to pilot the methodology and tools in their regular service provision inside Roma communities. To start the process a joint training session prepared their teams for how to apply the designed methods and tools. Expert discussion with professionals contributed within the consultation process to finalise the toolkit. Fourthly, dissemination and advocacy for scaling up, in particular, promoting the toolkit and the findings of the field survey and advocacy and capacity building for its implementation by professionals in social services and community development organisations in Bulgaria.

6.5.2. Performed research

The field research within the Family for Every Child project was performed under the second component of the project. A comprehensive thematic analysis of the situation in Shumen Province regarding services for children and families at risk from the most vulnerable communities and groups was carried out. The participatory field research was included as a crucial section of the analysis with the purpose: 1) to justify the need of state-delegated funding for the innovative mobile services directly in socially excluded Roma communities; and 2) to help develop programmes for the prevention of child marriages and access of Roma girls to education, implemented by the established family consultative centres and by the schools in Shumen Province.

The field survey in Shumen Province was held in October–December 2017 in 14 Roma and *millet* communities with mothers, fathers, and grandparents. The young generation wasn't involved in the field survey, because a few months earlier (in April–June 2017) Roma students from the same communities were involved a quantitative sociological survey registering their "Attitudes and

Dreams of the Future: Education, Family, Work." It was held through a direct individual enquiry, i.e., filling in a standard questionnaire form by 795 pupils – fifth to twelfth graders in 11 segregated and mixed schools in Shumen Province (UNICEF 2018). Conducting the surveys in the same localities allowed to a great extent to compare the opinion and visions of different generations.

Thematic group discussions specifically focused on child marriages were carried out three groups of women, two groups of men, and one mixed group. The findings were complemented with opinions on child marriages shared by Roma and *millet* parents participating in nine other group discussions on the wider topics of child care, parental practices and skills, access to social support, education, health, income generation and public services, and visions on the welfare of children, youth, and communities.

Along with the described methods of the thematic group discussions in Shumen, the technique of the "life calendar" was applied which connects the risks with key stages and events in the child's growth, through group discussion and visualisation of the opinions of the participants, who successively take on the roles of sharing their personal experiences and the views of "experts" for their community. A long arrow is drawn on a flip chart – a lifeline, starting in the year zero – the birth of the child, and together with the group the main stages of his/her growth and development are traced. For visualisation, the field researchers use coloured sheets of paper: pink (the best for the child and desired goals); orange and light orange (risks, problems, and threats); yellow (trends and factors in the community environment); green (necessary actions and decisions to overcome the risks). The lifeline is continued for the following years and stages – marriage, birth, and raising children, starting work, etc. During the discussion, the participants are invited to highlight the differences between Roma and the majority in terms of key years – completing education, professional qualification, and starting work, career, marriage, and

having children. Illustrating the lifeline stimulates participants to think about how child marriage deprives Roma girls and boys of childhood, of time for learning, dooming Roma girls to enter the labour market without education and without a profession at the age of 29–30, when their children are already in kindergarten and school, to look for low-paid work, without opportunities for personal fulfilment and economic independence in the future. The life calendar technique is suitable for participatory understanding on the harms of child marriage/early birth, the school dropouts, violation of human rights, and depriving girls and youth of opportunities for personal development. Regardless of the simple wording of the group opinions, the participants usually reach the conclusion that child marriages are preserved in isolated communities due to the social isolation, but in turn this practice is generating further exclusion of the community from the macro society.

The Dream Up field survey was conducted in July–December 2023 in ten locations all over Bulgaria, representing the diversity among Roma communities, determined by ethnic and subgroup self-identification, mother tongue, traditions, religion, levels of poverty, social exclusion, and trends towards marginalisation. Three communities were in regional centres (the Stolipinovo neighbourhood in Plovdiv, Vidin, and Lovech), another five in smaller towns/municipal centres (Tvarditza, Sredets, Novi Pazar, Samokov, and Rakitovo), and two locations were in villages (Lehchevo and Rozino). A total of 38 thematic group discussions were conducted with a total of 319 participants.

The designed methodology for the thematic group discussions was followed in the Dream Up field survey. There were certain deviations only in the composition of the groups in relation to the research methodology. Due to the voluntary nature of participation, the division of respondents by gender and age couldn't be strictly observed: 20 groups were made with a "pure" composition in relation to the categories of participants, and the rest were mixed by gender or age.

7. The research findings and conclusions

Comprehensive reports were developed for analysing the research results:

- The findings from the field research in Shumen were embedded in the assessment of the needs and risks of the target communities in the report *Thematic Analysis of the Situation in the Shumen Province Regarding Services for Children and Families at Risk from the Most Vulnerable Communities and Groups*. Along with the analytical review of existing services, the field research results also provided substantial justification of the effectiveness of innovative family and community-centred services as a model able to reach out to isolated Roma communities.
- The results of the Dream Up field survey were analysed in a comprehensive report, published in the book *Dream Up, Aim Up: The Challenges of Combating Child Marriages in Bulgaria* (Dream Up, Aim Up Project 2024a).

The field surveys outlined the detailed pattern of diverse opinions and attitudes of the participants, but here we will highlight only a few summarised findings and conclusions.

The practice of child marriages, inherited from the past, is gradually phasing out in Bulgaria, but it is still preserved in isolated Roma and other vulnerable ethnic communities. According to data from the National Statistical Institute, early births are decreasing, but Bulgaria continues to be among the EU countries with a relatively high share of early births to mothers under 18. As of the end of the previous century, modernisation marked progress and there are clear signs of rupture in the pre-modern traditional community. Until 1994, about 80% of Roma started families before they reached adulthood (Tomova 1995), but after that, this share sharply decreased and early marriages persisted mainly among the poorest and least educated families and young people. The field surveys confirmed the positive trends towards a decrease in child marriages and a gradually increase in the usual

age of marriage, the persistent trends towards a reduction in the number of children, the emergence of the young family beyond the apparent security of the parental community and beyond the dictates of the mother-in-law and older generations. Nevertheless, the problem is far from solved. Child marriages are mostly widespread among the poorest, uneducated, and marginalised families, but as an exception in some highly segregated communities child marriage is practiced as a rule even by wealthy families with relatively high living standards (like those living in the Stolipinovo neighbourhood in Plovdiv, which is the biggest segregated neighbourhood in the EU and has a compact ethnic population of people from the *millet* subgroup and Roma, about 45,000 to 50,000 people).

The attitudes towards early marriages vary in the studied communities from strongly negative, to vaguely criticising, neutral, somewhat acquiescent, and absolutely uncritical, accepting child marriages as natural practice. Most participants more or less accept the negative consequences of child marriages and early births regarding education dropout, deprivation of access to work and profession, poverty and lifelong financial dependence of the girl on her husband and/or mother-in-law, the risks for the children, for the stability of the young family, etc., but the health risks of early births to child mothers are not understood and do not make sense to almost all of the participants.

Various factors determine the repetition of pre-modern family models. The field survey highlighted specifically the impact of the dominating social norms. The concept of marriage and family is key to understanding the phenomenon of child marriages in isolated Roma communities. In pre-modern social norms, cohabitation on a family basis was considered marriage. As a rule, a couple that has the intention to or had already engaged in sexual intercourse is perceived as a family – in effect, the couple is already married and is expected to have a wedding and children. "When the drum is heard in the neighbourhood, " the announcement of the cohabitation of a couple in front of the community, either with

a big wedding or a modest celebration, is an important legitimisation of the couple as a new family. The separation of a couple is also announced to the community in the same way and from then on the couple is perceived as "divorced."

The traditional social norm of girl virginity as an essential element of the pre-modern family model is extremely persistent in isolated ethnic communities. This is also the most sensitive issue on the subject of child marriages. It should be noted here that the moral value of this norm is by no means underestimated by the researchers, but it leads to extremely unacceptable and harmful consequences for the fate of Roma girls and young women. Premature marriage to "save the honour" of girls deprives them of education, autonomy, and choice regarding their future. Humiliation and rejection by the community condemns non-virgin child brides to prostitution, poverty, and human trafficking.

Due to the preserved tradition of virginity of the girl, in the isolated communities, as a rule, the couple having a relationship is perceived as a family, both by the parents and by those around them, and by the young people themselves. Even when the girl is "stolen" without her consent, she is considered already married, regardless of her opinion and wishes. Roma girls usually accept the situation, faced with the alternative of being branded as "fallen women" with no chance of starting a family in the future. The strict social norm of virginity applies only to Roma girls and does not affect boys. This inequality is commented on by the participants only when a question is explicitly asked, but it is not perceived as discrimination against Roma women and is rarely questioned, according to what the respondents shared about the social norms in the segregated communities.

The customs of proving the honour of the bride are known by all generations and continue to apply, but the most humiliating forms of direct observation are now the exception. Confirmation of virginity is usually made public in the community. In some communities, these customs are now rarely observed, and less strictly. But even when the check is done more discreetly within

the family, the women then share the results with each other and eventually everyone learns of it. "Negative" results continue to be made public in most communities, punishing the "dishonourable bride" in a humiliating and violent custom. Even if the "damaged bride" is not returned to her parents, all her life she suffers the harassment of the mother-in-law and the nagging of the family. The girl's family also perceives the violation of the virginity norm as their own disgrace. Parents, despite wishing for better educational opportunities for their daughters, in cases of risk or suspicion of violation of virginity agree that child marriage is the mandatory solution.

The participants confirm that child marriages almost inevitably lead to early pregnancy and teenage births. An accepted norm in the pre-modern community is for the bride to give birth in the first year after the wedding, because "the mother-in-law wants grandchildren." From the perspective of young brides, early birth is an important decisive step in their struggle for higher status (as a mother) in her new household and for a chance to participate in family decision-making.

Understanding of the family patterns and the hierarchy of authority in the family is crucial for identifying the key decision-makers in the household, who should be targeted at the first place by prevention programmes and social work for changing attitudes and combating the practice of child marriage. In all studied groups, both female and male participants admit that, as a rule, "mothers-in-law rule the household"; they are the key factor in decision-making for the family and the children, including for the future life, education, career, and marriage of young people. As the modernisation process progresses, traditional roles and power hierarchies in the family are slowly transformed. The absolute authority of mothers-in-law is gradually being diluted with the understanding that "young people have the right to choose how to live their lives."

The shared perceptions and dreams for the future indicated increasing recognition of the importance of education as a value

and resource for the future realisation of young Roma. Diversity of opinions is registered between the younger and older generations, but, as expected, deeper differences emerged depending on the degree of social exclusion and isolation.

Detailed recommendations are outlined embedded in the analysis of the research findings regarding the scope, approaches, target groups, and types of interventions for prevention of child marriages through innovative community-focused social services and school-based programmes.

8. Capitalisation of research results

In line with the initial purpose of the field surveys, the research results (key findings, conclusions, and recommendations) were widely used in advocacy actions for the improvement of social services in Bulgaria. The efforts in the framework of the Family for Every Child project were carried out as integral part of the advocacy strategy of UNICEF Bulgaria:

- Wide dissemination of the thematic analysis among the stakeholders and service providers in Shumen Province.
- A regional discussion meeting in Shumen Province (2018) for the presentation of the results of the thematic analysis and of the quantitative survey with youngsters at schools was aimed to revise the regional situation analysis regarding the needs and services for children and families at risk from the most vulnerable distinct ethnic communities and justify the continuation of the family consultative centres. It was attended by representatives of all relevant stakeholders: the deputy regional governor, regional and municipal directorates of the Agency for Social Assistance, labour bureaus, the Regional Directorate for Education, the Regional Inspectorate for Health, service providers, mayors and municipal experts, NGOs, local Roma leaders, and community activists.
- At working groups and meetings at national level the research results were used to justify the need of ensuring

state funding for a) the model of innovative outreach services on the spot in isolated communities (Roma and other), which proved its effectiveness through the piloting in Shumen and Montana, and b) community-centred social services for wide-scale prevention of social exclusion, child marriages, pre-modern parental practices in child care, etc.

Finally, the social service community work and the mobile preventive community work were regulated in the new Social Services Act (in force since 2020). The reform in the system of social services is still ongoing in Bulgaria, creating challenges, temporary difficulties, and discrepancies, but innovations now have a chance to scale up.

Specific activities utilising the research results and advocacy were held within the Dream Up, Aim Up project:

- The *Toolkit for the Prevention of Child Marriages in Bulgaria* (Dream Up, Aim Up Project 2024b) was designed on the basis of the research results. The book can function as a knowledge resource for building capacity, skills, and understanding of the processes. It gives a detailed methodology for professionals engaged in social service community work and mobile preventive community work. These services are regulated by law, but still missing a comprehensive methodology for preventive community work targeted at changing the attitudes of isolated Roma communities and overcoming pre-modern social norms and family models.
- The toolkit is promoted at national and local levels; advocacy efforts are targeted to be accepted as recommended methodology for service providers.
- Nationwide promotion of the research results and capacity building of service providers for applying the toolkit in practice is performed through six regional trainings, attended by over 180 professionals – social workers, specialists, youth workers, municipal experts, NGO

activists, educators, and Roma mediators from all over Bulgaria.

With regard to educational system, the research results were used also for promotion of targeted programmes of educational institutions and youth centres for the prevention of child marriages and keeping Roma girls at school. Practical steps were taken by schools covered by the quantitative survey in Shumen Province, which developed their own initiatives to motivate Roma youngsters for education and career. Out-of-school events, extracurricular activities, and group work were aimed to encourage Roma youngsters to reassess the benefits of better education and professional qualification as a strong alternative to child marriage, able to ensure better quality of life in the future. A book presenting the results of the Dream Up field survey was recently promoted to teachers and schools as knowledge resource for deeper understanding of pre-modern social norms in isolated Roma communities and adequate focusing of their work with parents and youngsters. Applying the proposed approaches and methods in the practices of schools is hopefully still to come.

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6. Participative Research to Address School Inequalities: Exploring Gender Perspectives in Civic Education in Albania

Eriada Çela

1. Introduction

Educational inequalities, especially those linked to gender, remain a pressing issue in many educational systems worldwide (Farago et al. 2022). Despite progress in educational access, gender inequalities persist, particularly in classrooms where teaching practices and curricula often reflect and reinforce societal norms and biases, where the role in shaping children's gendered classroom experiences, perceptions, and beliefs is unique (Hilliard & Liben 2010; Kowalski 2007). Civic education, which plays a crucial role in shaping students' understanding of democracy, rights, and social responsibilities, can either challenge or perpetuate gendered expectations (Haste 2010). Without a gender-sensitive approach, civic education may reinforce traditional gender roles, limiting students' potential for critical thinking and perpetuating an unequal educational environment. Girls, in particular, may experience reduced levels of engagement, self-confidence, and agency in advocating for their rights. At the same time, boys may benefit from teaching practices that implicitly favour them, reinforcing gender inequalities both in the classroom and in broader society.

This study aims to explore gender dynamics within civic education in Albanian schools, focusing on how teachers' practices and classroom interactions shape students' gendered experiences. More specifically, it examines how unequal attention is given to boys and girls, and how teaching styles influence these dynamics. The research uses a participatory approach, emphasising the active involvement teachers in the research process. Participatory research, which prioritises collaboration, co-learning, and reflection, allows those most affected by the issues under study to ac-

tively contribute to identifying and addressing them. By including teachers as co-researchers, this study aims to generate insights that are grounded in the lived experiences of those directly impacted by educational inequalities, while also fostering empowerment and critical engagement among participants.

Twenty teachers were selected through stratified sampling to assess their students' civic education practices, and they were invited to participate in focus groups. These groups were designed to collect qualitative data, uncovering deeper insights into the impact of civic education on students' perceptions of justice and gender equality. Furthermore, all teachers consented to participatory classroom observations, enabling direct insights into classroom dynamics and teacher–student interactions. By focusing on participatory research, this study not only seeks to better understand the gendered dimensions of civic education but also contributes to practical recommendations for fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. Through this collaborative process, the research adds to the growing body of knowledge on how participatory approaches can promote social change in education, particularly in addressing deep-rooted gender inequalities.

1.1. Description of the need and purpose

The need for this project arose from the awareness that gender dynamics in educational settings significantly impact both students' learning experiences and their social development. In many classrooms, traditional gender roles and biases influence participation, behaviour, and interactions, often leading to inequalities in how students engage with the curriculum and with each other. The underlying problem addressed by this research is the unequal treatment and the subtle but pervasive gender biases that shape classroom interactions. This research aimed to investigate how these dynamics manifest in the classroom and to explore strategies for fostering more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

Globally, studies have shown that gender inequalities in classroom participation are not a new phenomenon. Girls and boys

often exhibit different patterns of interaction in classrooms, influenced by broader societal expectations. For instance, boys are frequently encouraged to speak up, dominate discussions, and display leadership qualities, while girls are more often expected to be quiet, attentive, and cooperative. These patterns are further reinforced by teaching materials and pedagogical practices that may unconsciously favour one gender over another. The long-term effects of these inequalities can be detrimental, potentially hindering students' confidence, academic achievement, and social development. In many educational contexts, these gender inequalities remain largely unchallenged, and it is often assumed that traditional classroom dynamics are neutral or fair. However, as education systems continue to evolve and address broader issues of equity and inclusion, it became clear that gendered expectations and biases in classrooms require focused attention.

The specific problem addressed by this project is the influence of gender dynamics on student participation and engagement in the classroom. Observations and previous research indicated that girls often spoke less during class discussions, while boys dominated the conversations. Additionally, gendered expectations in teacher–student interactions often led to unequal opportunities for girls and boys to participate in leadership activities or receive individualised attention. These dynamics can limit the potential of all students, especially those who may not conform to traditional gender norms. A significant gap was also identified in the existing body of research on gender in classrooms, specifically regarding the subtle, often unconscious, ways that gender roles shape interactions between students and teachers. While there have been studies on gender biases in textbooks and curricula, less attention has been paid to the day-to-day classroom environment and its influence on student behaviour and learning outcomes.

The primary goal of this research was to investigate how gender dynamics manifested in the classroom, to foster more inclusive and equitable learning environments. The research aimed to identify the key factors that contributed to unequal participation and

interaction based on gender and to develop strategies for promoting balanced participation. Moreover, the intended outcomes of this research were to transform classroom practices by addressing unconscious gender biases and creating an environment where all students – regardless of gender – feel equally valued and empowered to participate.

A key feature of this case study is the active participation of teachers throughout the research process. The teachers who were involved in this study were not simply subjects to be observed in their classroom domains, but they were actively involved in shaping the study. They were invited to participate in focus groups where they shared their insights on how gender dynamics played out in their classrooms and how their teaching practices influenced students' perceptions of gender and justice. Teachers were also directly involved in participatory classroom observations, enabling them to reflect on their own practices in real time and contribute to the data collection process. By involving teachers in these ways, the research aims to ensure that the findings are not only grounded in the real-world experiences of teachers but also reflect their active roles in addressing gender inequalities. This participatory approach empowers teachers to critically examine their own teaching practices, challenge unconscious biases, and explore strategies for fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

2. Literature review

Educational inequalities, particularly those related to gender, have been widely documented across various contexts globally. Despite advancements in educational access and policies, gender inequalities persist, particularly in how boys and girls are treated within the classroom. Research consistently demonstrates that gender stereotypes and societal expectations deeply influence students' educational experiences. Studies have shown that girls often face a range of barriers that hinder their educational success, including lower expectations from teachers, limited opportunities to take

leadership roles, and being disproportionately directed toward traditionally "feminine" subjects, such as languages or arts, while boys are steered toward STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects or leadership roles (Leach & Humphreys 2007; Unterhalter et al. 2014). These inequalities contribute to unequal opportunities for critical thinking, which is vital for democratic engagement and active citizenship.

The work of Heyder et al. (2017), Skelton (2007) and Espinoza and Strasser (2020) discusses how gender biases in the classroom, from curriculum content to teacher–student interactions, create an environment that reinforces traditional gender norms, limiting the potential of both boys and girls. For instance, studies have highlighted that teachers often unknowingly give more attention and encouragement to male students, while female students are frequently overlooked in subjects like mathematics and science, which can negatively affect their self-esteem and academic performance (Sadker & Sadker 1994). These gendered practices, compounded by broader societal inequalities, result in a learning environment that perpetuates existing gender stereotypes rather than fostering a more inclusive educational experience. Research by Martin and Huebner (2013) further points to how these biases extend beyond classroom interactions and can affect the curriculum, with gender stereotypes often embedded in textbooks and learning materials.

In the context of Albania, gender inequalities in education are still present, as traditional societal values about gender roles still significantly influence students' educational experiences. While Albania has made progress in increasing access to education for both genders, there remain significant challenges, particularly in rural areas, where gender roles are more rigidly defined. The National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021–2030 has been embraced by the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sports, but the gendered aspects of teaching practices and curriculum design have not been fully addressed, especially in subjects like civic education, which have the potential to shape students' attitudes toward

equality, justice, and citizenship. This context makes it crucial to explore how gender dynamics operate in the Albanian educational system, particularly within civic education, which is often seen as a transformative subject for promoting democratic values.

2.1. The role of civic education in addressing gender inequality

Civic education plays a fundamental role in fostering democratic citizenship, rights awareness, and critical engagement with societal issues. As such, it holds significant potential for addressing gender inequalities by promoting the values of equality, justice, and human rights. However, if not taught inclusively and sensitively, civic education itself can inadvertently perpetuate gender stereotypes. A critical examination of civic education programmes shows that they are often gender-neutral at best, failing to address the specific barriers and challenges that girls face in accessing equal opportunities in education and society. Civic education, therefore, has both the potential to perpetuate inequalities and to challenge them, depending on how it is framed and implemented (Berkowitz et al. 2005; Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Siegel-Stechler 2021).

Many scholars have emphasised the importance of gender-sensitive teaching in civic education, arguing that gender equity should be a central focus of any curriculum aimed at fostering democratic citizenship (Arnot 2006). Civic education offers students the tools to critically analyse power structures, inequalities, and issues of social justice. By including gender equality as a core issue within the curriculum, civic education can foster critical thinking, helping students recognise how gender inequality operates in their lives and in broader society. Research by Yuval-Davis (2006) has shown that gender-sensitive civic education can empower girls by increasing their participation in class discussions, encouraging leadership, and building their confidence in advocating for their rights.

Moreover, studies (Tibbitts 2017) suggest that when gender equality is emphasised in civic education, it not only benefits

girls but also encourages boys to challenge traditional notions of masculinity. These approaches contribute to breaking down rigid gender roles and encourage all students to participate equally in democratic processes. Thus, civic education has the unique potential to reshape societal norms and challenge entrenched gender stereotypes, promoting a more just and equitable future.

2.2. Participatory research and its role in addressing educational inequalities

Participatory research methods are particularly effective in addressing educational inequalities because they actively engage those who are most affected by these issues – such as students, teachers, and community members – in the research process. Unlike traditional research, which often views participants as subjects to be studied, participatory research empowers participants by involving them as co-researchers. This approach ensures that the perspectives and experiences of marginalised groups are central to the research process and the development of potential solutions (Vaughn & Jacquez 2020).

In the context of education, participatory research has been shown to enhance the relevance and applicability of findings by focusing on the lived experiences of those in the classroom. For instance, Murray (2024) explores three main participatory research models: Participatory action research (PAR), community-based participatory research (CBPR), and participatory research (PR). Each model offers unique benefits and challenges but collectively empowers stakeholders, transforming them from subjects of research to active contributors. The article emphasises the democratic potential of participatory research, advocating for a shift in power dynamics within educational research. This methodology allows for a deeper understanding of the subtle ways in which gender biases manifest in the classroom, from the curriculum to teacher–student interactions, and it enables the development of strategies for addressing these biases inclusively and democratically.

Participatory research also fosters critical reflection and dialogue among participants, which can lead to transformative change. By engaging teachers and students in the process of data collection and analysis, participatory research promotes collective action and empowers participants to contribute to the development of solutions. As argued by Kinsler (2010), participatory research is particularly effective in educational settings where the goal is not only to understand the problem but also to actively involve those who are most affected in finding solutions. In this way, participatory research is not just a method for generating knowledge but also a tool for social change, making it an ideal approach for addressing gender inequalities in civic education.

3. Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative method approach, integrating participatory research through focus groups and participatory observation. Focus groups were conducted with teachers to gain deeper insights into their teaching practices, especially their awareness and handling of gendered dynamics within the classroom. These discussions allowed teachers to reflect on how they perceive and address gender inequalities in their civic education lessons and explore challenges or biases they may face in promoting gender equality. Additionally, participatory observation in classrooms provided firsthand insight into teacher–student interactions, classroom organisation, and gendered behaviours. This collaborative model ensures the research reflects the real-world classroom experiences of teachers while empowering them to identify strategies for promoting gender equality.

3.1. Participants and sampling

The study involved 20 fifth-grade teachers and their students from ten schools in the Elbasan District of Albania. The participants were selected through stratified sampling to ensure diversity across various factors such as urban versus rural location, school size, and the socio-economic background of the schools. Strati-

fied sampling was chosen to ensure that the study captures a wide range of educational settings, as gender dynamics in education can vary significantly depending on these factors. By selecting schools from both urban and rural areas, the research acknowledges the influence that traditional societal values and gender norms may have on the educational experiences of boys and girls in different settings.

The 20 teachers were specifically chosen because they taught civic education, a subject that plays a critical role in shaping students' understanding of equality, justice, and citizenship. These teachers were invited to participate in focus group discussions, where they reflected on their classroom experiences, the role of gender in their teaching, and the ways in which they address or overlook gender inequalities, enabling the researcher to examine how gendered expectations might differ for male and female students in the same educational context.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

The data collection process involved focus groups and participatory observations, both of which were designed to engage teachers as active contributors throughout the study. The focus group discussions allowed teachers to express their perceptions of gender dynamics, reflect on their teaching practices, and explore how they address gender inequalities in their civic education lessons. This process was not just about data collection, but it was an opportunity for teachers to critically analyse their own practices, with the researcher and teachers working together to identify key themes and strategies for promoting gender equality. Through participatory observations, teachers also played a role in the analysis of their own classroom dynamics. Teachers were encouraged to reflect on the classroom observations and share their thoughts, making the research process interactive and ensuring that their perspectives were integrated into the final analysis. This collaboration between the researcher and teachers reflects the participa-

tory research model, where teachers' insights are central to understanding and addressing the gendered aspects of civic education. Data were collected using a combination of focus groups and participatory observations, focusing on the teachers' perceptions of gender dynamics in the classroom, the teaching methods they use to engage both male and female students, and their strategies for fostering gender equality. The focus group discussions with teachers provided qualitative data on their lived experiences, their challenges in addressing gender equality, and their approaches to promoting inclusivity in the classroom. These discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analysed to identify key themes related to gendered teaching practices and classroom dynamics.

The participatory observations took place in the classrooms of the selected teachers, where the researcher observed interactions between teachers and students, particularly looking at gendered patterns in teacher–student interactions, classroom organisation, and student engagement. The aim was to see firsthand how gender bias might manifest in the teaching process, including whether boys and girls receive equal attention, how they interact with the teacher, and how the classroom environment may reflect broader societal gender roles. The qualitative data from focus groups and observations were analysed thematically. The thematic analysis helped identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights that shed light on the ways gender influences the civic education experience. The qualitative analyses provides not only a comprehensive understanding of the research topic but also contextual insights into gender dynamics in the classroom.

3.3. Participatory observation

The participatory observation methodology in this study offered direct insight into the classroom dynamics while enabling the teachers to actively reflect on their teaching practices. The teachers were not only observed but also engaged in reflecting on the findings from the observations, as they were encouraged to provide feedback on their own actions and classroom interactions,

thus contributing directly to the data collection and analysis process. This approach allowed the teachers to explore how gender roles were enacted in their classrooms and allowed them to reconsider their teaching methods in a more reflective, participatory manner. Through this method, the researcher was able to gain firsthand insights into the everyday workings of the classroom environment, focusing specifically on how teachers and students interacted and how gender roles were enacted through these interactions. The researcher took an active role in the classroom environment, observing not only the overt actions of teachers and students but also the more subtle, implicit behaviours that contribute to the construction of gendered expectations.

The participatory observation was conducted over several weeks in multiple classrooms across different rural and urban schools in Elbasan. This allowed for the observation of teacher–student interactions from a unique perspective, where the researcher could witness not only the formal teaching moments but also the informal exchanges that often reveal deeper, more ingrained gender biases.

4. Findings

The study explores the gender dynamics within Albanian primary school classrooms, focusing on teachers' practices, student interactions, and the physical organisation of learning spaces. The findings are organised around three main themes: 1) teacher practices and gender sensitivity, 2) classroom organisation: physical space and gender dynamics, and 3) teacher–student interactions and gender bias. These findings highlight the complex interplay of conscious and unconscious gender roles in education, illustrating how gender is socially constructed and reinforced in the classroom. In this section, the analysis brings together insights from participant observations, teacher focus groups, and classroom interactions, offering a multifaceted view of gender dynamics in Albanian primary schools.

4.1. Teacher practices and gender sensitivity

One of the core findings of this study was the prevalence of gendered practices among teachers, even when they claimed to practice gender equality in the classroom. During focus group discussions, teachers generally insisted that they treated boys and girls equally. However, observations of their classroom practices revealed subtle but significant, gender biases. The teachers' statements about non-differentiation in their teaching methods appeared to contrast with actual practices, where gender stereotypes were often reinforced.

Teachers tended to assign different types of tasks based on gender, often unintentionally perpetuating traditional gender roles. For example, girls were often expected to be more attentive and to complete written tasks, whereas boys were sometimes given more hands-on activities or were called upon more frequently to answer questions aloud. Although some teachers consciously made efforts to counteract these tendencies, their behaviour often reflected an embedded cultural bias. This tendency for teachers to unconsciously accommodate gender stereotypes speaks to the broader issue of implicit bias in the educational system, which can influence students' academic outcomes and perceptions of gender roles.

Moreover, teachers displayed different levels of awareness regarding gender equity in education. While some teachers explicitly stated their commitment to gender equality and actively worked towards creating an equitable environment, others struggled with unconscious biases and a lack of training in gender-sensitive pedagogy. One particular case was that of an older teacher nearing retirement, who regularly reinforced gender stereotypes. She would often reprimand girls for untidy desks while ignoring similar behaviour among boys. She also regularly asked boys to assist with heavy tasks such as hanging maps, reinforcing the notion that physical tasks were masculine and more suitable for boys. Furthermore, she later openly expressed her belief that boys were better students than girls, highlighting a direct contradiction to her previously expressed claims of neutrality.

This reflects the gendered expectations teachers hold, and how these expectations shape student experiences. As Davis (1993) pointed out, unconscious bias in teacher–student interactions can contribute to alienation and hinder the personal, academic, and professional growth of students. The way teachers unknowingly reinforce these biases might affect students' self-perceptions and their academic engagement, especially in subjects traditionally viewed as gendered, such as math and science for boys, and language and the arts for girls.

4.2. Classroom organisation: Physical space and gender dynamics

Classroom organisation plays a crucial role in shaping students' learning experiences, and gender dynamics are often embedded in the way physical spaces are structured. The layout of desks, seating arrangements, and group formations have significant implications for how gender is enacted and perceived in the classroom. In the majority of the classrooms observed, desks were arranged in traditional parallel rows, with each desk containing two or three chairs. These rows faced a blackboard, and the teacher's desk was positioned in a place that allowed the teacher to maintain a clear view of the students. This traditional setup has long been the norm in Albanian schools, and while it can facilitate teacher-centred instruction, it does not necessarily encourage interactive, student-centred learning. Some teachers suggested that this seating arrangement was familiar and allowed them to manage their classrooms more effectively. However, the passive nature of this layout limits opportunities for collaboration and communication among students.

Gender segregation in seating arrangements was also observed across multiple schools. In many classrooms, boys and girls chose to sit separately, often forming gender-specific groups. This tendency was not actively enforced by teachers but rather emerged naturally among students, perhaps due to internalised social norms about gendered behaviour. Some teachers attempted to break this pattern by encouraging mixed-gender seating or by consciously placing a boy and a girl together at each desk. How-

ever, this practice was not always consistent or effective in challenging traditional gender roles. In fact, many teachers felt that seating boys and girls together was a strategy to foster equality, even though it did not necessarily lead to more equitable interactions or an equal distribution of speaking opportunities in class.

Interestingly, there were a few cases in which classroom space was organised differently. For instance, in one high-performing urban school, two teachers who had obtained master's degrees in education had arranged their classrooms with desks in pairs, where girls and boys worked together. This layout was designed to encourage cooperative learning, and it was observed that students engaged positively with each other, regardless of their gender. This arrangement supported the idea that classroom space can be organised in ways that promote equality and reduce gendered distinctions. However, in many classrooms, particularly in rural areas, traditional seating arrangements remained dominant, with limited effort to foster gender-inclusive teaching strategies through the organisation of space.

In another case, a teacher of an urban class with moderate performance had arranged the classroom so that students sat in a large rectangular formation, with desks joined together. While this configuration appeared to be conducive to group collaboration, it also posed logistical challenges, as students struggled with disorganised piles of personal belongings and school materials. This example highlighted the importance of considering both the physical and pedagogical needs of students when designing classroom spaces. The seating arrangement, while promoting a sense of community, could also become a source of distraction or hinder the smooth flow of activities.

Interestingly, some teachers expressed awareness of gender issues in classroom space organisation but often failed to implement meaningful changes. The issue of gender segregation was often acknowledged during the focus groups, but few teachers actively engaged in rethinking their teaching methods or classroom layout in a way that would break down gender norms. The find-

ings suggest that even though teachers may acknowledge gender issues, their actual practices tend to follow traditional, culturally ingrained patterns.

4.3. Teacher–student interaction: Gender bias and role reinforcement

Teacher–student interaction plays a pivotal role in the educational experience, shaping students' perceptions of themselves, their peers, and their abilities. The way teachers interact with boys and girls, both verbally and non-verbally, can reinforce or challenge traditional gender norms.

In the observed classrooms, teachers often displayed unconscious gender biases in their interactions with students. For example, in one classroom, a teacher was observed consistently calling on boys to answer questions while ignoring the girls, even though the girls were equally active and vocal in class. In another case, the teacher often praised boys for their performance but would only provide minimal feedback to girls, which created an imbalance in the way students were treated. These instances exemplify the subtle but powerful impact of gender bias in teacher–student interactions.

Furthermore, gendered expectations were apparent in the types of roles that teachers assigned to students. Boys were frequently asked to assist with physical tasks, such as moving furniture or distributing materials, while girls were more often asked to help with organising the classroom or assisting the teacher in less physically demanding ways. This division of labour reflects broader societal gender norms, where physical tasks are considered masculine, and organisational tasks are viewed as feminine. Even in cases where teachers actively sought to ensure gender-neutral roles, the reinforcement of traditional gender roles often occurred unconsciously through their actions.

The most significant findings related to teacher–student interaction involved teachers' responses to student behaviour. Boys, particularly in rural schools, were often given more flexibility when it came to behaviour management. Teachers were more likely to

reprimand girls for speaking out of turn or for being disruptive, while boys were often allowed more freedom to express themselves in ways that would have been deemed unacceptable for girls. This behaviour reflected a broader societal pattern, where boys are often granted more freedom to exhibit assertive behaviour, while girls are expected to remain passive and compliant.

However, there were exceptions to this pattern. In one classroom, a teacher made a concerted effort to ensure that all students, regardless of gender, received equal opportunities to participate. This teacher was also noted for her positive reinforcement of both boys and girls, frequently using praise to encourage student engagement. Her approach was particularly notable in the context of students with special educational needs. She was observed providing extra support to three boys with learning difficulties, who had repeated grades and were significantly older than their peers. Her commitment to inclusivity and equal opportunity in student participation was a positive example of how teacher–student interactions can be reframed to promote gender equity and support diverse learning needs.

The active involvement of teachers by sharing their reflections also had a transformative effect on their teaching practices. Many teachers expressed that they had not been fully aware of the subtle gender dynamics that shaped their classrooms until they were directly involved in this reflective process. This raised awareness led some teachers to experiment with new strategies, such as ensuring equal participation in discussions, offering leadership roles to both boys and girls and designing classroom activities that were more inclusive and sensitive to gender differences. It helped teachers feel more empowered to make these changes, as they were actively involved in identifying the issues and finding solutions.

5. Conclusion and reflections

This case study reveals that while many teachers in Albanian primary schools may openly express a commitment to gender equality, the practices observed in classrooms often reflect unconscious

gender biases that reinforce traditional gender roles. Despite these challenges, the study also revealed positive examples of teachers who actively worked to challenge gender norms and promote inclusivity. These teachers were more aware of their actions and how these affected both boys and girls in their classrooms. The findings suggest that raising awareness about gender biases, providing professional development on gender-sensitive teaching practices, and rethinking the physical and organisational layout of classrooms are key steps toward creating more gender-equitable educational environments.

This case study revealed significant gender inequalities in classroom dynamics, particularly in the areas of teacher–student interactions and student participation. It was found that male students received more teacher attention and dominated classroom discussions, while female students often took more passive roles. Teachers, despite promoting equality, exhibited unconscious biases, favouring male students in terms of praise and participation. To address these inequalities, it is essential to implement teacher-training programmes that raise awareness of gender biases and equip educators with strategies to ensure equal participation. Curriculum development should also be revised to incorporate more inclusive content that challenges traditional gender roles and promotes diverse role models. Moreover, schools could benefit from promoting inclusive group work and classroom activities to encourage equal involvement from all students. These actions are crucial for creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments where both male and female students can increase their chances for higher accomplishment in educational environments.

This case study provides valuable insights into the gender dynamics that shape classroom interactions and the subtle ways in which educational practices can perpetuate gender inequalities. One of the key takeaways was the realisation that gender bias often operates unconsciously, with teachers unintentionally favouring male students through increased attention and engage-

ment. We also learned that even in an environment where equal opportunities are encouraged, the implicit cultural and societal norms around gender roles can affect students' participation and self-confidence. Observing these dynamics in real time reinforced the importance of creating a classroom environment that actively challenges traditional gender roles and promotes inclusivity.

Furthermore, this study highlighted the critical role that teachers play in shaping students' understanding of gender and social justice. Teachers, through their active participation in the research, became key agents of change, demonstrating that participatory research is not only about gathering insights but also about transforming the educational practices that perpetuate inequality. Their involvement in the study helped them see the importance of creating gender-sensitive teaching practices, fostering an environment where both boys and girls feel equally valued and empowered to engage in critical discussions about civic responsibility and justice.

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7. Participatory Critical Pedagogy in a Theatre Education Project with Marginalised Students in Hungary

György Mészáros

1. The history, purpose, and context of the theatre education project and the research process

In the 2010s, the Krétakör (Chalk Circle) Theatre in Budapest, Hungary, initiated a shift in its theatrical approach, embracing forms that transcended the conventional theatrical boundaries. Its leadership and staff did not view the theatre as an art form that was the preserve of the elite but rather as a vehicle for social action, participation, and emancipation. A number of related programmes were initiated during this period. One such programme was the "Free School," which ran for three seasons (2013–2016). The aim of the programme was to engage young people in reflection and action on social issues through the medium of theatre education. Each year, a different project was linked to the programme. This chapter presents a segment of the second season project and its experiences from the perspective of participatory methodologies.

The four-month-long project (September–December 2014) was financed by the Goethe Institute in Budapest and the Krétakör collaborated with a theatre in Berlin. The project was designed to engage with three distinct youth groups. In addition to young people from Budapest and Berlin, the explicit aim was to recruit members from a distinctly disadvantaged region, with the intention of establishing a new group with them. This part of the project was conducted in Miskolc, a northern Hungarian city. The project leader requested my collaboration as an education expert. I proposed that the process should also be treated as a participatory research project. As a researcher, I assumed responsibility for the research component of the project, which was limited to this section in Miskolc.

No prior needs analysis was conducted in relation to the project. The Goethe Institute's support enabled the continuation of the Free School programme, which had already commenced. The theatre's managers sought to engage not only middle-class young people interested in theatre or drama, but also those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is how the Miskolc theatre education process was initiated. Following the recruitment of participants, efforts were made to ascertain their desired activities and areas of interest. In this process, attention was drawn to pertinent issues and problems, with the objective of fostering social consciousness. The project was based on critical pedagogy, employing the principles of this approach and the methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed in the planning and development of pedagogical activities: weekly group work with students, project work, meetings, excursions, and a final participatory conference (see below in section 4).

2. Leaders and participants

In the Miskolc segment of the project, the male project leader engaged the input of three additional experts, two of a pedagogical and one of a technical nature. The team also included two female experts: a local Roma cultural anthropologist, an educational specialist and university lecturer, and myself, who had previously worked with marginalised youth near Miskolc. I later became a university lecturer and ethnographic researcher in Budapest, focusing on education. Furthermore, on the occasions when video recordings were made, a technician from the theatre was present. The selection of the project leader was deliberate. The project leader sought to include professionals with slightly different competencies and backgrounds, and also ensured that the management team was equally representative of men and women. The diverse experiences and competencies proved to be a valuable asset, complementing each other effectively. The project leader, Bálint, was an expert in theatre education and had previously led a number of drama education projects with young people. Klára, a cultural

anthropologist, had conducted research on marginalisation and the Roma community, thereby enabling her to contribute her own experience of discrimination to the programme. Virág taught in teacher education and conducted research on education. However, her experience in local child protection institutions (with young people in state care) was also significant. I also taught in teacher education, with one of my research topics being educational inequalities. Additionally, I had extensive experience as a teacher in the area with marginalised (mostly Roma) young people.

We four professionals had to grind together in the process. I had previously collaborated with Bálint and Virág, whereas Klára was a new addition to our professional circle. Our shared objectives and methodology enabled us to establish a unified voice with remarkable swiftness. The weekly planning and discussion sessions provided an invaluable opportunity for the sharing of experiences and the development of a deeper understanding of one another's perspectives. During the sessions, we were consistently able to facilitate the group in a well-coordinated manner. When disagreements arose, we could engage in constructive debate and identify strategies for enhancing our coordination. To illustrate, Klára found it challenging to interact with us, given her lack of familiarity with us. Following a less than optimal second group session, we engaged in constructive dialogue to address the issues that had arisen. Subsequently, she extended an invitation for us to convene at her residence, which proved an invaluable opportunity for us to gain deeper insights into her character and integrate her into the team on a more intrinsic level. I maintained a diary throughout the research process, which I then shared with my fellow leaders for their input and feedback. This also facilitated our collective interpretation and reflection on the events that occurred. Reflection on the power dimensions was crucial. There were latent power dynamics at play within the group of leaders, such as those between the principal leader and their subordinate, between men and women, and between residents of Miskolc and those in the capital. However, these were brought to the fore and subjected to discussion.

The participants of the project, who constituted its target group, were young people (from some kind of disadvantaged background) who were studying in Miskolc. Through our network of contacts, we were able to successfully recruit students from three different locations. The primary partner institution was a girls' dormitory with students from rural villages in the region, many of whom were of Roma ethnicity. Furthermore, we established contact with a boys' dormitory with pupils of a similar age and background. The participants attended a variety of educational institutions, including vocational schools and church schools for disadvantaged youth. The age range targeted was 15–17 years. The majority of applicants were aged between 15 and 16 years old. The aforementioned two groups were complemented by two additional participants who had a relationship with Virág. The two young people were in state care in a children's home and consequently subjected to marginalisation. The teachers were requested to assist with the recruitment process in the two dormitories. They believed that the children had to be compelled to take part in the programme, otherwise they would not participate. However, our firm intention was that the participants should come forward of their own volition; accordingly, we placed considerable emphasis in the recruitment material on the opportunities that would be available to them as members of the group. These included the chance to enjoy a positive social atmosphere, to engage in the production of videos and photographs, and to participate in other creative activities. The requisite number of applicants was ultimately obtained, and the inaugural group sessions were conducted with a relatively low number of dropouts. A total of 17 participants were involved in the programme. Over the three-month period, in addition to the weekly group sessions, the students participated in a variety of activities (see later) and developed a strong community. A Facebook group was also created for them to communicate between meetings. It appeared that one of the most significant experiences for the participants was the sense of belonging to a community throughout the process. As one student wrote in a Facebook post after the programme's conclusion:

> When I first entered the room, I looked at all of you. I saw a lot of boys and girls, the group leaders are cool, they are cool. I'm sure it will be fun. I liked it. We had the best time, we had fun, we learned, we got to know each other. And we've gotten better and better together.
>
> When we were in Austria together, and we came back, I was even more excited for Thursday afternoons than usual! It was the absolute best part of my week! Being together was the best! I have to say, I've never been in such an amazing group! I want to thank you all for putting up with me! It wasn't easy, especially with my sense of humour XD, but you were all so understanding and patient with me. Thank you for cheering me up when I was in a bad mood. Thank you for taking care of me, for accepting me for who I am. Thank you for your kindness and the love you have given me. Thank you for the way you treated me. Thank you for the beautiful memories and experiences I have had with you – they've been the best!

In the broader context of the students, communication was established with the teaching staff in the dormitories and the foster home. While parental consent was obtained for the children's participation, there was no opportunity to contact the parents directly. Good relations were established with the two boarding houses. However, it was not possible to make direct contact with the children's schools or their teaching staff. This also resulted in a conflict. The school of one of the participants declined to permit one young person to attend the final conference in Budapest. The school staff members expressed reservations about the suitability of the student in question as a candidate for this particular form of recognition, citing concerns about his academic performance. The project leader and I arranged a meeting with the school principal and the young person's class teacher. The situation was further complicated by the presence of an interesting power dynamic. The school was seeking to punish the young person, who did not fit into the established power structure, while we, as outsiders from Budapest, were perceived as naive and elite. Upon learning

that I had previously been employed in the vicinity, the school's stance underwent a slight shift. Following a period of negotiation, we were able to persuade the educators that the programme was not primarily a reward, but rather a learning and development opportunity for the student. We also emphasised that our shared objective was the student's advancement. During the discussion, the teachers expressed discontent at not being involved in the selection of participants for the programme, which was conducted through the boys' dormitory. However, this would have been challenging to implement, given the large number of students from diverse institutions and the fact that the programmes were primarily linked to the dormitories.

It is also noteworthy that we maintained communication with the other two groups involved in the project, which included participants from Budapest and Berlin. During these interactions, we had to navigate the complexities of power dynamics. Additionally, we collaborated with the various leaders, particularly in the planning of joint programmes and the organisation of the final conference.

3. Methodology

The methodology was essentially aligned with the methods previously employed in the Free School programme. The aforementioned tools were employed in order to facilitate reflection and action on school and social issues among young people. Furthermore, the various seasons and locations employed slightly different methodologies. The methodology employed by the Berlin theatre differed the most this season. They prepared and executed a more conventional theatrical production on the subject of sustainability. The Budapest group selected their own theme, which was homelessness. This was a particularly pertinent topic given that the government had recently enacted legislation that imposed severe restrictions on homeless persons. The young people prepared and implemented a poster campaign on the streets of Budapest, thus infusing the project with a heightened social dimension. The

Miskolc group was also encouraged to produce material on a social issue that they could present to others. They could choose the topics, but we also suggested relevant ones. In addition to working on the topics, an important aim was to develop critical awareness among young people – an aspect that I represented most during the design of the project.

The ultimate goals of the project were somewhat distinct. Bálint's objective was to utilise the techniques of theatre education in order to facilitate the creation of a socially visible activity with young people. My aim was pedagogical in nature, seeking to instil in young people the capacity for social reflection, social sensitivity, and norm critique. This critical pedagogical perspective constituted an essential element of the process. In this context, Virág contributed her own pedagogical vision, while Klára introduced the perspective of discrimination. The young people's primary objectives were focused on togetherness and shared experience. However, as the process unfolded, they began to demonstrate greater awareness of social issues and a heightened sensitivity to the topics raised. Throughout the process, we sought to actively engage them at various levels, including participation in activities and balancing our agenda with their needs and desires.

A participatory approach was effectively integrated with these objectives, combining the methodology of theatre education, particularly that of the Theatre of the Oppressed, with the perspective of critical pedagogy. In particular, this entailed the following.

Participation was a core component of the project. This was understood to imply that, throughout the course of the project (and research), the participants should be regarded not as mere objects but as active subjects engaged in the activities, with their needs, goals, and perspectives duly taken into account as partners. It was also recognised that, given the financial and cultural limitations of the young people involved and the limited time frame, it was not feasible to achieve complete participation. The principles, fundamental themes, methodology, and specific occasions for the project were our own, and we involved the young people, thus

maintaining our role as leaders and theirs as pupils. Nevertheless, the young people were permitted to express their opinions on all matters, select areas of interest to them, which they then investigated in groups with the assistance of the researchers, create a video, and present it to others. Group discussion and debate were intrinsic to the functioning of the group, and the young people were also taught the fundamental rules of this, including through the methodology of theatre education.

Theatre education constituted a further fundamental dimension of the project. This entailed the utilisation of the tools of drama education, initially to address the themes that were introduced and subsequently to address the issues that were raised by the young people. The participants were encouraged to express their opinions on a range of topics, including the representation of situations and the motives for imagining the various social actors in their shoes. We employed the Theatre of the Oppressed approach, as developed by Augusto Boal, to a significant extent. This interactive form of theatre is designed to facilitate the exploration and examination of diverse forms of social injustice and oppression. Boal's concept is founded upon the pedagogical principles espoused by Paulo Freire, who posits that change can be achieved through the active participation of the oppressed, based on dialogue and action. The objective of the Theatre of the Oppressed is to transform the audience into active participants, or "spect-actors," who are not merely passive observers but also agents of the narrative. One of Boal's most renowned methods is "forum theatre," which has been employed in the presentation of scenarios pertaining to discrimination. This entailed the enactment of a scene of oppression, followed by the facilitation of a discussion wherein the participants were encouraged to propose solutions and even assume the role of the characters in order to experiment with alternative solutions. The objective of this approach is to facilitate recognition of the participants' own oppressed situation, encourage the identification of avenues for change, and facilitate their contribution to the creation of a more just society.

A fundamental perspective of the entire methodology was performativity. It is of the utmost importance to define performance in accordance with Victor Turner's conceptualisation. Performance is an inherent aspect of everyday life. It is a form of behaviour that has been codified and ritualised with the intention of influencing others. It is informed by a pedagogical perspective. Furthermore, it entails an element of initiation. In this case, the objective is to initiate critical action and consciousness. From a more profound theoretical standpoint, performativity illuminates the profound social embeddedness of human behaviour and its capacity to effect change and transformation within the same social context. In this way, the project was performative in nature, with the objective of engaging the students in the performative transformation of society through performative acts. In light of a broad understanding of performance, each element of the project can be considered a performance in itself. This encompasses our leadership, interactions with and between students, methods explicitly based on acting, students' mini-projects, the presentation of students' materials, and also the moments of research (see below). These elements were transformative and performative in their impact on the students and the context.

This approach was inextricably linked to the perspective of critical pedagogy, which posits that social transformation can be achieved through reflective and conscious action. According to Freire, the development of critical consciousness is a crucial step for those who have been oppressed to challenge and change oppressive structures. This process requires a dialogue that is facilitated by educators, both within their own community and in relation to the broader world.

As previously stated, the project encompassed not only the pedagogical process outlined above but also an accompanying research component. In fact, the research was inextricably linked to the educational dimension, with both elements being inseparable. Performativity and participativity were integral aspects of the research.

It is difficult to distinguish between the pedagogical, performative, and research aspects of the project. The inquiry was informed by the approach of Denzin's performance ethnography. The pedagogical process, the research study and its presentation, the activist aspect of the project and the students' performances were intertwined. In this chapter, I interpret the entire programme as a series of performances that may be characterised as follows:

- Everyday interactions, for example, conversations with students in corridors
- The everyday activities of students and educators that have an impact on the process itself
- The implementation of performative and dramatic practices during the regular meetings
- The educational methods employed
- Other rituals, methods, and activities that occurred during the meetings
- The behaviour of students and educators during and after meetings
- A direct correlation with the project or group dynamics
- The manner in which educators performed their roles during the meetings
- Students engaged in theatrical or pedagogical performances for others
- Research activities: my participation, my field notes, the sharing of these with others
- The field notes themselves

Nevertheless, it is not feasible to delineate a clear-cut distinction between the various elements. Some seemingly innocuous everyday interactions subsequently assumed a more profound significance. Some methods were employed for educational purposes, yet simultaneously served as research tools.

The conventional ethnographic approach, which entails the researcher's direct observation of the participants, was integrated with moments of sharing and performance, as well as a single focus group interview with the students. The research was characterised by a participatory perspective, as the various participants were able to contribute to the researcher's reflections. All field notes were shared with the other three educators, who were able to provide comments and engage in discussion about them during project meetings. Some more straightforward reflections were also posted on the project's Facebook group. Furthermore, participants were permitted to post comments, and in the group, they could also post their own reflections. As previously stated, performativity also implies transformation. The performances of the project and the inquiry itself were all for social transformation in different terms, including the students' empowerment, the formation of their subjects as critical citizens, a direct impact on the unjust situations of the city (for example, with a flash mob against a discriminatory policy of the mayor), and addressing a wider audience with the students' marginalised perspective during the closing conference and the media appearances of the project.

4. The performative process

Several important elements of the project activities have already emerged from the text so far. After describing the methodology, I will describe the project in more detail in this chapter, focusing on the processes. In this chapter, the focus is not on the research and its results but on the description of the implementation. However, this will always include a research component closely related to the pedagogical activities.

4.1. Preliminary planning phase

Implementation started with the design phase. In the summer, Bálint initiated a preliminary discussion with me regarding a project funded by the Goethe Institute in Budapest. Following the Free School programme of the previous year, there was now a focus on reaching out to marginalised young people. The project's

inaugural objective was to establish a theatre education process that would engage young people as active participants. In this context, the term "theatre" did not refer to the preparation for a specific performance. Instead, it encompassed the utilisation of drama-based techniques to engage with young people on a social issue that affects them, with the objective of presenting the resulting work to a wider audience. The project was based on a conceptual framework that integrated drama, participation, and the resolution of social issues. However, the preliminary plan was not more detailed than this. This is what we initially considered together, the two of us. I introduced the concept of social awareness and sensitisation. I proposed that a socially focused pedagogical process could be a means of promoting a Freirean transformation of consciousness, carried out in accordance with a norm-critical pedagogy. This would facilitate an emancipatory and empowerment process.

In terms of the practical implementation, it was not initially evident how this would be achieved. It was unclear whether the participants should be provided with a set of narratives for analysis or whether they should be encouraged to identify the issues they wished to address. The question thus arises as to how this could be a critical awareness training process, as well as a process of working on specific socio-political cases. Additionally, it was necessary to determine what would be appealing to young people in this process. The grant funds permitted the production of a film; thus the objective could have been the creation of a short promotional video, for instance, about the city of Miskolc. An alternative option considered was to conduct a walking tour of Miskolc for young people from Budapest and Berlin, with students from Miskolc acting as guides. Our intention was to explore a number of pertinent themes, including the imminent implementation of an eviction programme by the right-wing city government and the potential liquidation of settlements. However, it was recognised that this would only be feasible if there was sufficient interest from young people.

The two local participants, Klára and Virág, were involved in the subsequent phase of the planning process. In collaboration with them, the final design was developed, which permitted flexibility and enabled the young people who would be involved in the project to contribute to the decision-making process. A variety of levels of participation are possible. In some of them, participants are involved in the planning process. Given the target group and the objective of fostering critical consciousness, it was deemed inappropriate to involve local young people in the preliminary design. However, they were afforded the opportunity to participate and contribute during the process.

In the initial phase of the process, we did not determine the specific target group. The possibility of including a more diverse range of young people from Miskolc in the project was also considered. In addition to students from disadvantaged villages, the Jesuit high school was identified as a potential source of participants, given its intake of children from intellectual and upper-middle-class families. However, this proposal was rejected on the grounds that there would not have been sufficient time to effectively address the nuances of social habitus and the underlying power dynamics. Ultimately, we contacted two dormitories, and Virág facilitated the communication with the local "Children's City" (a facility for children in state care).

The final preliminary plan ended up as follows (and we recorded it):

Objectives:

- Raising social awareness
- emancipation, empowerment experience
- Action experience

Proposal for children:

- Meeting other young people, showing other young people: what the city is like ("students")
- Make your ideas come true: film, take photos

Possible themes:

- Why do we love and hate Miskolc?
- What do we like and dislike about Miskolc?
- Video: *This Is Miskolc*. What is Miskolc like? How do you see it?
- Miskolc 20 years from now?
- A walking tour of Miskolc

A recurring story throughout the sessions, which we work on at the beginning of each session: a) the beginnings of the black civil rights movement in the USA (Rosa Parks' story); b) the story of a homeless person.

The broad outline of the sessions:

- Warm-up, get in the mood
- Drama, norm-critical exercises
- Preparation for the action

In parallel, I also developed a research plan for the project, which I discussed with the leaders. This was a participatory research design, led by me as principal researcher, but involving at different levels in the research process both the leaders and the participating students.

A summary description of the research was as follows:

Objectives:

- To explore the process of a pedagogical-emancipatory project from the inside
- Involvement of leaders and students, integrating their goals into the research

Research approach:

- Ethnography (autoethnography): participatory, deep-drilling research focusing on cultural-social dimensions

- Critical pedagogy: emancipatory, social pedagogical approach
- Participatory research: democratic conception of research, research is not just for the "official researcher"; participants are involved as much as possible

Research questions:

- How do students experience the process? How do they express what they learn?
- How do students respond to what methods, and how do leaders reflect?
- Are the objectives being met and how?

Main elements of theoretical background:

- Emancipation, empowerment
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Theatre of the Oppressed
- Social structures, how they become embedded in consciousness and how to oppose them

Methods:

- Writing field notes to be shared with the leaders and for them to reflect on it
- An internal autoethnographic diary written just for myself
- Recording of joint planning and reflections: for later analysis
- Sharing reflections with the young people involved, to which they can respond (use Facebook group for this?)
- Interviews with participants
- Focus group with participants
- Action – reflection – action spiral

During the joint planning, we prepared a recruitment text and broadly planned the first session, which was about introduction and aligning.

4.2. First phase of implementation: Alignment and initial steps

The sessions started in mid-September and consisted of a two-hour weekly active session in a suitable room in one of the girls' dormitories, with participants coming from the two other locations (the Children's City and a boys' dormitory). Furthermore, we met regularly (typically before each session) to plan and evaluate the project together. Additionally, we, along with Bálint, held regular meetings with the entire theatre team to discuss the project as a whole, the Budapest group, and the joint sessions.

The first session constituted a pivotal point in the project's beginning. The session had several objectives. Firstly, it was important to facilitate the children's introduction to us and to each other. Secondly, we aimed to establish a positive and productive atmosphere that would set the dynamics of the sessions. Thirdly, we sought to provide an overview of the project's objectives and key events over the coming months. Finally, we aimed to create an engaging and enjoyable session that would retain the young people's interest and prevent a high dropout rate. We agreed that these objectives were met in the first session. The students enjoyed the games, and the foundation for an atmosphere that was casual, informal, yet structured was established. The role of the leaders was to facilitate the processes. Communication was based on mutual respect. Only a few individuals did not attend the second session, and 17 students completed the process.

The second occasion proved more challenging in maintaining the established framework. The participants were less disciplined than in the initial session. The programme addressed challenging social issues, such as exclusion, which proved difficult for the students to navigate within the group setting. The third session of the programme was characterised by challenges, with a number of participants being unwell and unable to attend, and others in-

dicating that they no longer wished to participate. However, the establishment of a Facebook group, with the assistance of Virág and Klára, enabled the re-engagement of the students who had previously withdrawn. The fourth occasion saw a notable improvement, with profound and intimate discussions. During this session, we also managed to get the students thinking about the issues they were interested in. By this point, we became more familiar with the participants and their interactions and were therefore able to plan more effectively. Furthermore, the leaders began to align their perspectives. There were some discrepancies in our assumptions about the children. For instance, I frequently felt that Bálint did not perceive the potential in the children, particularly when discussing more complex issues. Conversely, he claimed to be realistic. Ultimately, the depth of the content of the sessions and the profundity of the students' contributions could be situated somewhere in between our different assumptions.

At this stage, the students began to feel comfortable with working through drama pedagogical methods. They experienced several memorable games. For example, an exercise was conducted on the life of a homeless person, a dramatisation of racial discrimination on the bus linked to the Rosa Parks story (where participants were randomly assigned to be Black and White and could take a seat in the front or back of the imaginary bus accordingly), and a scene was played out using the forum theatre method, a familiar one for many of them. The participants were presented with a scenario in which they were not permitted to enter a club in Miskolc due to their Roma ethnicity while they attempted to enter with their non-Roma friends. This prompted them to consider various strategies for navigating the situation. They were confronted with the reality of exclusion and were able to move towards a collective action based on the Roma/non-Roma alliance. Furthermore, the discussion that followed the exercise also prompted reflection regarding the experiences.

In addition to the sessions held in Miskolc, participation in the discussions held in Budapest constituted an important aspect of

my activities. During these sessions, a student who had participated in the preceding year's Free School project was present and assumed a position on the board. I highlighted to my fellow leaders that she had a particular role within our group. In essence, the three adult participants were responsible for guiding the discussion. Despite her valuable input when prompted, she demonstrated the least engagement, prompting reflection on whether sufficient space had indeed been afforded to her. This led to a re-evaluation of the efficacy of the "youth participation" agenda slogan in practice. Was the atmosphere and organisation of the meetings conducive to her active involvement and inclusion? How could this be optimised? The others and I recognised the need to facilitate her integration more effectively.

4.3. Excursion to Budapest and Graz

Following the conclusion of the initial month, it was a pivotal moment in the project for the young people from Miskolc to embark on their first journey to the capital, Budapest, where they met with their counterparts from the Budapest project. They subsequently travelled to Graz, Austria, where they participated in a workshop on European problems and issues. This trip proved instrumental in fostering cohesion within the group and strengthening the bond between the leaders and the young people. The three-day journey afforded the team a unique opportunity to engage in various activities with the young people, facilitating a deeper understanding of their personal backgrounds. One of them revealed that she had never been on a train before.

The opportunity for the young people to sleep together, participate in a camp-like experience, engage in informal conversations and sing together in the evenings played an important role in fostering a sense of community among the group. Communication with the Budapest contingent also commenced, yet it was apparent that the separation between the two groups persisted. It was not anticipated that the two groups would form a unified community. However, communication was a crucial objective, particular-

ly to ensure that the perspectives and voices of the Miskolc participants, who were in a less powerful position, were heard by those in Budapest. We (the leaders) judged that this was successful.

A joint session was held for the two groups, during which several scenes were worked through using the technique of forum theatre. One such narrative was based on actual events, in which law enforcement officials halted a man attempting to traverse from the Romani settlement to another area of the village. The man lacked the requisite components for his bicycle, such as a pump, which is not explicitly outlined in the legislation. Consequently, he was sent back to the settlement. The middle-class participants from Budapest were more inclined to engage in rebellious and resistant behaviours, whereas the young people from Miskolc emphasised the necessity of adapting to the realities of their environment. The two perspectives complemented each other well, facilitating a constructive dialogue about resistance and social structure (not using this word explicitly).

The excursion provided a significant impetus to the process, facilitating the formation of a community. It effectively prepared for the following phase, which was characterised by a heightened level of intensity and focused on the specific projects and actions of the students.

4.4. Student-led projects

In the subsequent phase of the project, the ultimate objective of the Miskolc programme became more defined. During the visit, the young people selected the areas of focus they wished to pursue from the themes they had collectively identified. The objective was to examine each topic in depth, create a video featuring either participants or experts, and prepare a presentation for the visitors from Berlin and Budapest who would eventually arrive in the city.

By the beginning of November, the leaders had also become considerably more coordinated. We began to establish personal connections, which enabled us to discuss and resolve minor disagreements.

It became evident that the planned intensive participatory research process was unlikely to be as effective as originally anticipated. The leaders were unable to provide detailed responses to my field note entries due to time constraints. The Facebook group was initiated with the students, and while there were shares, there were fewer substantial comments on my diary-like posts. This approach did not allow for the action–reflection–action cycle to be fully achieved. However, a substantial amount of research data was still collected from the field notes and the generated material. Additionally, some level of participant reflection emerged on these, although it was not as intense or comprehensive as initially planned.

With regard to the sessions, the emphasis remained on marginalisation and social sensitisation practices, albeit with a shift in focus towards young people's own initiatives. The key themes explored in these initiatives were as follows:

- The issue of homelessness was addressed through interviews with homeless individuals.
- Another project focused on three key areas: the transition of secondary school students from small, depopulated villages to the city and their subsequent experiences living in dormitories; their future perspectives and the future of the villages they come from; and the experiences of a cultural anthropologist and dormitory educators on this subject.
- The issue of evictions and settlement liquidation in Miskolc was also addressed.
- The state foster care system and the City of Children as a child protection institution.

Each group was provided with guidance from a designated leader (one of us). This was necessary because the students required significantly more guidance throughout the process than those already familiar with a similar project method, such as the Buda-

pest group. The investigation, research, and development of interview questions and script for the presentation were all elements in which the students required active support, sometimes offering ready-made possibilities, ideas, and suggestions. Throughout the process, we ensured that, although we were in control, their ideas were constantly involved at every step, beginning with their perceptions, observations, and desired outcomes.

As the group process progressed, we encountered the challenge of revisiting and challenging our initial assumptions about the issue of exclusion. It appeared that the younger generation was more fascinated by the collective experience, yet the precise subject matter receded after a few weeks. Despite being initially moved by the narrative of Rosa Parks, they struggled to recall the specifics, including the pivotal moments, the intense discussions, and the dramatic elements that had transpired. Conversely, we consistently reinforced this theme, reiterating it repeatedly until the conclusion of the process.

Another significant episode occurred during this period. During the course of the sessions, a number of homophobic remarks were made by some of the boys participating in the project. Meanwhile, the leaders were aware of my sexual orientation, and one of the students disclosed his own identity as gay to us. It was considered that revealing my sexual orientation at the outset of the project would be detrimental to its success, given the prevailing socialisation of the students towards rejection. However, following the establishment of positive relations with all participants, it was deemed appropriate to come out and address the issue of LGBT rights at this midway point in the project. There was some debate about the optimal timing for this disclosure, with two of the leaders raising the concern that if it were delayed, the participants might feel misled. Ultimately, however, this decision to come out in November proved to be a prudent one. In addition to my own coming out, we conducted a series of sensitisation exercises on LGBT issues. I have considerable experience in this area, having worked on an LGBT school programme. The participants'

response to my coming out was positive, although it appeared that many of them still held reservations about LGBT issues and communities, accepting me on a personal level but not fully embracing my identity. However, the topic of LGBT issues also emerged in discussions among the students. Several of them assumed that one of the boys was also gay, but he did not feel ready to come out yet, and we, the leaders, provided support in this regard. We protected him from other boys who wanted to force him to come out. However, later, shortly after the project ended, he came out openly to the others.

4.5. Conclusion of the projects and presentation in Miskolc

The results of the projects were finalised in all groups. It was of significant benefit that the grant permitted the utilisation of a professional videographer who produced high-quality footage and edited the videos in an effective manner. The students were actively involved in the planning and filming processes; however, the post-production was conducted by the videographer. There was insufficient time or opportunity to involve the young people in this aspect.

The final event for the group projects was a two-day event (26–27 November), during which the students from Berlin and Budapest travelled to Miskolc, where the young people from this city showed them around, presented the results of their projects, and, with our help, led workshops on the themes with elements of the discussion theatre method. The two-day event proved to be a genuinely empowering experience for the young people of Miskolc. In this context, the young people from Miskolc were able to interact with visitors who occupied a higher social position than themselves. This afforded them the opportunity to express their views in a way that was genuinely heard. The presentations and discussions were conducted in an effective and productive manner. The students from Miskolc devised the debate questions on each topic, and intriguing discussions occurred between the young people from the three locations. This also meant that the

visit did not become an occasion where power relations were reinforced, as the participants would have viewed the difficulties as interesting issues from a position of relative comfort, and their top-down perspective would have dominated the discourse. This is the significant risk inherent in any such visit and encounter: that the discourse is dominated by the perspectives of those in a superior position. We were acutely aware of this possibility. A notable event during the joint meeting was the flash mob with banners organised by the young people of Miskolc in front of the city hall in relation to the issue of displacement. For many in this group, this was their first experience of openly protesting for a cause.

4.6. The concluding participatory conference

The concluding conference of the project was held in Budapest on 7 December. The initial planning stages began in October, with the objective of organising an event that would bring together students, adults, experts, teachers, and other interested parties in a single setting, with all activities designed to be participatory in nature. Thus, no specialist presentations were planned that might prove challenging for younger participants to comprehend.

It was challenging to plan a conference of this nature, particularly in the presence of the official representatives of the Goethe Institute (the donor) from Germany. Additionally, the necessity for constant simultaneous translation during the participatory process posed a significant hurdle. However, the conference succeeded in maintaining its participatory nature and provided a culminating experience that was both meaningful and worthy of the project. This outcome was made possible by meticulous planning and a keen understanding of the importance of the participatory concept among all involved parties.

The closure of the project was preceded by a meeting with the Miskolc group, during which the time elapsed was reviewed and the young people, with the assistance of Bálint, produced a summary of their experience of the project. Additionally, they reflect-

ed on the knowledge they gained from interacting with other participants. The conference itself constituted a further opportunity for community-building, facilitating enhanced connections between the members of the Miskolc group.

The conference was held at a secondary school in Budapest. In the morning session, the three groups – Berlin, Budapest, and Miskolc – presented their activities, after which participants were invited to ask questions. As the students from Budapest had organised an action in which they designed, created, and installed guerrilla posters about homelessness in the city centre (in response to the government's anti-homeless scapegoating measures), one of the activities was a walk to view the large posters that they had put up overnight. This may give rise to the question of legality, but the Budapest organisers considered that the unauthorised display of posters was within the bounds of civil disobedience and ethically justified. Furthermore, the chosen surfaces were not damaged.

A significant aspect of the conference was the opportunity for student groups to collaborate in designing a classroom that reflected their ideal vision, transformed from a real classroom. This was presented alongside a discussion on the students' vision for the school.

In the concluding segment of the conference, two drama instructors facilitated a discussion theatre session on the topics raised by each group. Following each scene, participants indicated their position – sitting on one of the sides of the room – and could contribute to the discussion. This format has been previously used and has been well received by the younger participants, who have engaged actively in the debate. The young people from Miskolc expressed their opinions just as much as those from Budapest, or the other interested parties, teachers, project leaders, and national and German experts present. Despite the different social positions and contexts of the participants, the debates and discussions were truly equal.

Following the conclusion of the conference, a final session was held in Miskolc, during which informal conversation and cake

were shared with the young people. All participants expressed sadness at the end of the event and stated that they would miss the weekly meetings. It was agreed that while the meetings would not resume on a weekly basis, follow-up meetings would be held.

4.7. Process follow-up

From the outset, it was clear that it was crucial to maintain the awareness and engagement created among the participating young people. This required a continued support structure beyond the project's conclusion. It was intended that this would be conducted in a more structured manner, with regular meetings in Miskolc, the maintenance of the Facebook group, communication, and the involvement of the young people in other events, projects, and programmes that would follow. It was also planned that the long-term impact of the project on the lives of the young people would be monitored. The research included a follow-up focus group and individual interviews.

However, only a limited number of these plans could be implemented. Two meetings were convened in the initial period following the project's conclusion. Additionally, a focus group was convened. The Facebook group was highly active during the immediate post-project period. However, no substantial follow-up or efforts to maintain the connection were undertaken. By the second meeting, it was evident that the young people had lost the close contact they had established with one another during the course of the project. It was similarly not feasible to encourage the maintenance of social awareness through subsequent activities. The issue was that the project's funding had ceased, rendering it impossible to mobilise new resources. Consequently, the follow-up, which demanded significant input, could not be conducted on a voluntary basis. The failure to do so represents a crucial lesson learned from the project, which will be elaborated upon in the subsequent section.

Nevertheless, the project did yield some noteworthy outcomes. The young people perceived the process as a profoundly impactful

community experience, one that they had not previously encountered. This was evidently a significant experience for them. The fact that they have encountered the sustaining power of a community is an integral aspect of social awareness education, albeit one that was not explicitly stated as the primary objective from the beginning. In the Facebook group at the outset, there were numerous personal reflections and poems written by the young people. There was considerable potential to continue the group in that virtual space.

Furthermore, the young people reported that it was an important experience for them to have encountered adults with whom they could establish a straightforward, more informal relationship. These adults listened to their voices, gave them space to express their opinions, and took their views into account. The young people also reported that this was a new experience for them. Having the opportunity to experience their own voice and power (empowerment) can contribute to a different quality of life and social participation for them as adults.

The concept of achieving a certain level of critical social consciousness has proven challenging to explore. The evidence from the young people's own experiences, along with the feedback from interviews and the focus group, indicated that the relatively short period of time available was insufficient to ensure that critical consciousness remained a part of their thinking and understanding of themselves and the world. Concurrently, it is apparent that several of them subsequently became socially engaged. One of the students, by embracing his own transformative narrative, sought to communicate his way out of extreme poverty with a robust social media presence. Another student subsequently became an active Roma activist, operating within the international sphere. It is also evident that both individuals exhibited ambition and aspiration from the outset of the project, which the project was able to facilitate and encourage. In particular, the Roma activist boy explicitly capitalised on the subsequent opportunities afforded by the Krétakör Theatre, for instance, in the context of international

relations. An analysis of the Facebook activity of the other young people suggests that many of them remain engaged with social issues. However, it is not possible to ascertain whether this would have been the case in the absence of the project.

The lack of resources was also a factor in the absence of any scientific publications resulting from the participatory research. The project outcomes were disseminated at the final conference and on the Krétakör Theatre website. A draft paper on the research findings was prepared for the Oxford International Conference on Ethnography and Education, but unfortunately, the final paper was not produced.

5. Lessons from the field

In the paper presented at the conference, I examined how the research process can be conceptualised as a performative or performance ethnography (as defined by Denzin), with the objective of facilitating social change. This encompasses the participants themselves, their immediate environments, and the broader context. This is still the case even if the change process has not been successful or has only been partially completed due to the limited duration of the project. The performativity is not only evident in the promotion of change and the reflection on power relations; it is also apparent in the understanding that the project was, in itself, a kind of performance. The performances, presentations, and roles played by the leaders and students were all elements that could be considered performances. The activities were characterised by a certain degree of codedness, yet it also represented an attempt to address and oppose existing codes of power and performativity.

As previously outlined, the project was able to facilitate a degree of participation and performative-transformative engagement for the participants, offering them a community and social experience. While the project did not pursue significant emancipatory objectives, nor would this have been feasible within the limited time frame, nor could it be characterised as system-affirming, it did possess transformative potential and influenced students' social perceptions through their participation.

Nevertheless, the objective of achieving norm-criticality or critical consciousness proved to be an ambitious one. The latter can be effectively pursued as a community objective, provided that there is a community capable of undertaking transformative action in conjunction with consciousness-raising. Nevertheless, the project did not succeed in fostering a genuinely community-building effect. This leads to the most significant issue and the most crucial insight. It is evident that the young people desired to maintain a sense of community and interconnectedness. An alternative approach that would have been more emancipatory would have been to either expand the community or assist the young people in joining movement networks. However, this was not done, and the leaders (and the Krétakör) effectively left the participants to their own resources after the project's conclusion. The project prompted the participants to engage with a range of social issues, yet it did not facilitate the development of a sustained platform for critical reflection and action. It is possible that the participants may have experienced a sense of lack after a strong community experience. The project was a very intense few months, which brought up the need for community connection, but there was no space for it later. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that none of the participants reported that they had been negatively affected by this sudden change after an intensive process.

A significant consideration from this experience: was the extent to which such a project is often contingent upon the donor organisation (in this case, the Goethe Institute), which has no inclination towards undertaking longer-term initiatives, but rather towards funding more circumscribed, demonstrably impactful, and shorter-term processes. This resulted in a significant discrepancy between the considerable resources allocated to the project and the virtual absence of resources available during its subsequent phase. The limited time frame did not permit a genuine exploration of long-term sustainability. Thus, despite the intention to challenge the prevailing power structures, it proved impossible to escape the constraints imposed by the very structures that shape

such projects. From this perspective, it is pertinent to question whether it is appropriate to accept such a funding structure. One might even inquire whether it was truly appropriate to implement the project in Miskolc without providing long-term assistance to a vulnerable and marginalised group of young people. The feedback, results, and retrospective views observed many years after the project's completion indicate that the project achieved its intended outcomes and that it would have been a missed opportunity not to implement it. Nevertheless, it is evident that securing funding for a comparable initiative should be pursued for an extended period. Such a strategy would have circumvented numerous potential complications inherent to the project. For instance, the project was frequently constrained by time limitations. A more extended and unhurried process would have permitted more comprehensive planning, superior quality work, and rigorous monitoring (the latter of which was only partially achieved in meetings). Additionally, more time would have facilitated the involvement of the broader community and the context of students, including more active engagement from their teachers and parents. Furthermore, more time would have allowed for follow-up and community-building activities.

A criticism of participatory approaches in the literature is that while they actively involve vulnerable groups, they also render them highly exposed. Furthermore, participatory techniques can obscure the existence of underlying power structures that persist despite the ostensible engagement of all parties. These are valid criticisms, but throughout the project, we endeavoured to address these aspects. It was acknowledged that the power relations remained inescapable. The involvement of young people did not preclude the project leaders from maintaining their own agenda or assuming a leading role in the process. Concurrently, we exercised authority in accordance with the Freirean approach to revolutionary leadership, taking care not to be oppressive. Furthermore, we tried to remain perpetually mindful of the disparate social and power positions of the participants throughout the

project, and to use participatory methods not to render marginalised young people vulnerable in encounter situations, but to facilitate their true voice being heard. We considered this to have been successful.

For a description of the programme, see Krétakör Free School, https://www.schillingarpad.com/work/118.

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8. TISZtA PART Action Research: Co-creating Solutions to Environmental Challenges and Bridging Generational Conflicts

Flórián Sipos and Zsófia Zsuga

1. Need and purpose

The original TISZtA PART project was launched in 2019 in the city of Szolnok under the coordination of the Municipality of Szolnok. The project aimed to ensure that waste generated during weekend recreational activities would not burden the Tisza riverbank and promenade but would instead be collected in designated trash bins by participating youth. This goal was pursued partly by creating the necessary infrastructure, such as increasing the number of trash bins, and partly through awareness-raising actions supported by peer collaborators and professional partners.

The TISZtA PART project can be defined as a community initiative. Its stakeholders included the police, NHSZ (waste management services), the City Student Council, the SZKTT Human Services Center's Drug Consultation and Information Center, the Family and Child Welfare Center, the DOKK Terasz pub and bar, and peer influencers among young people. A key component of the project was the TISZtA PART PONT, established along the Tisza riverbank, where professionals conducted outreach and awareness-raising activities on Friday and Saturday evenings. The project operated regularly for two years during the summer months on the Tisza riverbank and also appeared in playful formats as part of citywide initiatives (such as the 24-hour competition, "72 Hours without Compromise," and "Cycling Breakfast") throughout the year. However, the recurring tensions and blame directed at young people regarding the state of the Tisza riverbank, often expressed on social media, prompted the local government to evaluate the visibility of the project within the community and, based on various investigative criteria, renew the project.

This project, TISZtA PART Action Research, aimed to understand the opinions and attitudes of young people in Szolnok regarding the issue of weekend "party littering" on the Tisza riverbank and the generational conflicts arising from it. In collaboration with these young people, the project sought to develop questions, create empirical tools suitable for investigation, conduct research, and, finally, interpret the findings.

This approach functioned as a "research within research" – an action research initiative where the activities conducted were valuable in themselves. Furthermore, the contributions of the co-researchers to the research activities, along with their reflections on the process and findings, provided essential insights for understanding the phenomenon.

2. Methodological framework

The research was grounded in the methodology of participatory action research (PAR) and the approach of co-creation. PAR encompasses a range of research directions that share a central focus on participation, action, and reflexivity as core elements of their methodology (Koshy et al. 2011; Csillag 2016). It intentionally seeks to bridge the gap between researchers, traditionally seen as observers, and participants, typically viewed as subjects of the research, by involving participants directly in the research process. This approach aligns with the ethos of democratising knowledge production, emphasising collaboration and mutual learning.

Participatory action research builds on the foundational works of Lewin (1946), who emphasised the iterative cycle of action, reflection, and adaptation. Over time, this approach has evolved to incorporate a stronger emphasis on reflexivity and empowerment, particularly in contexts involving marginalised or underrepresented groups (Reason & Bradbury 2008). As Chevalier and Buckles (2013) note, PAR challenges the hierarchical nature of traditional research by promoting an egalitarian relationship between researchers and participants, making it particularly suited to addressing complex social issues.

Unlike conventional research paradigms, where the methods and questions are predefined by the researcher, PAR is characterised by its flexibility and openness to participant input. At the beginning of this study, neither the research method (qualitative, quantitative, or content analysis) nor the specific questions were pre-determined. Instead, decisions about the direction of the research, the questions to be asked, and the target groups were made collaboratively during meetings with the participants. This ensured that the design of research tools and the interpretation of results provided valuable insights into participants' perspectives, mental frameworks, and attitudes toward the topic.

The co-creation approach, also part of the participatory paradigm, provides innovative methods for the development of public services. According to this framework, end users of a service collaborate with professionals in its design, implementation, and realisation (Voorberg et al. 2014; SCIE 2015). Scholars like Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) emphasise the transformative potential of co-creation in redefining the roles of citizens and service providers, creating solutions that are not only innovative but also deeply rooted in the lived realities of end users.

Co-creators are not passive users or "consumers" but active citizens who mobilise their resources – such as knowledge, networks, and personal experiences – to contribute to the service's success. They participate in every phase of the process, from planning to execution and evaluation. This dynamic interaction fosters joint decision-making and collaborative problem-solving, transforming service development from a top-down process into a participatory one. As a result, co-creation leads to solutions that are more relevant, sustainable, and effective because they are directly informed by the needs and perspectives of the people who will use them.

These two methodological frameworks guided the design and execution of our study. We engaged teenagers – key stakeholders in managing the Tisza riverbank – in the development and implementation of a research project aimed at assessing public percep-

tions of "party littering" and identifying potential intervention tasks. These insights were intended to serve as the foundation for managing the Tisza riverbank in a more inclusive and effective manner. By combining these two approaches, the TISZtA PART Action Research created a framework for empowering young people while simultaneously addressing a pressing environmental and social issue. This dual focus on individual agency and collaborative problem-solving exemplifies the strengths of participatory and co-creative methodologies, offering valuable lessons for future initiatives in similar contexts.

Through this participatory process, the framework of the research was not dominated by the researcher's concepts, language, or interests. Instead, high school students, as research participants, defined the research questions, shared their experiences, and contributed to the development of measurement tools. Beyond the research outcomes themselves, the observation of the research process, including the communication that constituted its essence, served as an additional source of valuable information. These contributions offered deeper insights into the phenomenon under study and played a critical role in achieving the project's objectives.

3. Team building, primary and secondary target groups

As the primary target group for the research ("group members"), we involved 11 active high school students with the assistance of the secretary of the Szolnok Drug Coordination Forum. We sought motivated young people interested in the topic, and participation in the group was also eligible to be counted toward their school community service requirements. The group was advertised through social media platforms and in high schools. Anonymity was ensured for the group members, and their personal data were handled in accordance with GDPR principles. During the first meeting, they were informed of these measures and provided consent forms, which were signed in collaboration with their parents.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and contrary to our original plans, the discussions were conducted online via the Google Meet platform. To facilitate communication between meetings, we created a closed Facebook group, which became the primary space for discussions outside of scheduled sessions. This platform was used to coordinate meeting times, share topic-related information, and make decisions about research tools, often through online voting.

Of the 11 group members, all were students in Szolnok, but four of them did not live in the city; they commuted or resided in dormitories. The group consisted mainly of girls, with eight girls and three boys. Several members were directly familiar with the issue, as they regularly visited the Tisza riverbank for recreational activities. However, even those who were not part of this group were well aware of the phenomenon.

The secondary target group consisted of additional respondents reached through the research conducted as part of the participatory action research. This group was not defined at the beginning of the study but was determined collaboratively during the process. The investigation was ultimately carried out among the population living, studying, or working in Szolnok. In the subsequent discussions, the 11 young people who participated in group activities are referred to as "group members," while the respondents reached through the survey are referred to as "sample members" or "respondents."

4. Research activities

4.1. Co-creative meetings with team members

4.1.1. Summary of the first meeting: Problem definition and general approaches of the research

The first meeting served as an introduction for the group members and aimed to initiate discussions about the core problem. The session began with an icebreaker activity to establish rapport among the group members, followed by a presentation by the secretary of the Szolnok Drug Coordination Forum on the project's

background. The group then engaged in a collaborative discussion about the issue of littering along the Tisza riverbank. Despite being conducted online, the session was notably interactive, with group members actively reflecting on each other's ideas and maintaining their camera presence, counter to the usual norms in online education.

Key themes from the discussion

A significant outcome of the discussion was the nuanced differentiation among various youth groups regarding their attitudes and behaviours toward littering. Group members identified three primary categories:

1. Those who litter intentionally out of a sense of rebellion or to appear "cool." These individuals often act destructively, under peer pressure or in pursuit of social acceptance.
2. Those who litter carelessly due to inattention or laziness, leaving trash behind without malicious intent.
3. Those who do not litter at all, emphasising personal responsibility and environmental awareness.

The group consensus was clear: the problem cannot be stereotypically generalised to all young people. Instead, different motivations and circumstances must be considered when proposing solutions.

Police presence and enforcement

Initially, the group members suggested strict measures such as police patrols and fines, believing these to be effective deterrents. However, upon further reflection, they recognised the limitations of such approaches. Group members pointed out that police cannot monitor every individual and that offenders might simply shift their behaviour to other areas. Moreover, they observed that police patrols rarely engage directly with littering issues, focusing instead on more pressing concerns like conflicts or substance abuse. Concerns were also raised that excessive police presence

could alienate youth or create unintended consequences, such as pushing littering to less visible but equally problematic locations. These insights led the group to reconsider punitive approaches as the primary solution.

Alternative solutions
The discussion also generated innovative ideas for addressing littering. Group members proposed:

- Placing mobile trash bins closer to popular gathering spots to make disposal more convenient
- Introducing smart furniture with built-in trash receptacles to encourage proper waste disposal
- Emphasising the role of parents in instilling environmental responsibility, as some group members felt that the rising tolerance for littered spaces among youth stemmed from a lack of early guidance

Group members noted that addressing the broader societal issue of desensitisation to litter would require long-term cultural change, which parental influence could significantly impact.

Reflections on the TISZtA PART project
The group expressed overall support for the TISZtA PART project and its initiatives. Specific elements, such as cigarette butt collectors, were highlighted as successes. However, scepticism was voiced about the effectiveness of the TISZtA PART Point, a wooden kiosk intended as an outreach hub. Group members observed that most youth visit the riverbank in groups and are unlikely to approach such points voluntarily due to shyness or disinterest. Instead, they suggested a more proactive approach, with outreach workers engaging youth directly. Group members also warned that unsolicited engagement by professionals might provoke negative reactions, emphasising the need for tact and adaptability in such interactions.

4.1.2. Summary of the second meeting: A problem map

The discussion began with a presentation on a 2020 controversy over a Facebook post about littering. The post sparked polarised reactions, with many commenters stereotyping youth as the primary culprits. The group members strongly rejected the stereotypical comments about young people made by online commenters, arguing that "only 5% of people litter, yet everyone is generalised because of them." Some also criticised the news itself for framing littering as an age-dependent issue, which, in their view, it is not. They expressed frustration that the commenters making generalisations were unaware of the efforts made by the City Student Council to address the problem, stating that "they don't take into account that we young people also want to contribute." While group members considered it worthwhile to highlight positive examples, they also voiced concerns about the uncertain effectiveness of such an approach, believing that it is always easier to generalise based on negative examples. They pointed out the discursive dichotomy created around party littering, framing it as an "Us–Them" issue, where "they" (the youth) litter, and "we" (the majority) clean up after them.

It is worth noting that the presentation aimed to showcase a broad spectrum of opinions, including those that defended young people and emphasised that littering is not inherently age-specific. Nevertheless, the group members primarily responded to the negative comments, focusing on addressing these stereotypes.

As a solution, group members proposed a media campaign, sparking a lively debate about its tone and content. Initially, ideas revolved around a retaliatory strategy, such as "You litter, too," or a defensive approach, focused on reading and refuting "hateful comments." However, they ultimately agreed that such approaches could provoke counter-reactions, with responses like "Why are you interfering? You're just kids." The group emphasised, "Let's not throw the same thing back at them!" By the end of the discussion, a consensus emerged around the need for a positive message, showcasing the efforts of young people to address the issue. Addi-

tionally, the idea of organising intergenerational clean-up events was suggested as a way to bridge generational divides and prevent potential backlash from older generations feeling defensive. One participant stressed the importance of making the campaign engaging and dynamic, noting that it is not enough to simply highlight "good and beautiful" examples, as they may be perceived as boring. They argued that the campaign should also reflect on the ongoing debates and controversies to capture attention and resonate with people, ensuring it crosses their threshold of interest.

The second meeting focused on creating a problem map to guide the research's dimensions. This identified several thematic areas:

- *Police and enforcement*. Evaluating the necessity, effectiveness, and potential drawbacks of police presence and fines
- *Parental influence.* Assessing the role of parenting in shaping behaviours versus the influence of peer groups
- *TISZtA PART project evaluation.* Reviewing existing elements and exploring new solutions, such as smart furniture and better trash bin placement
- *Meanings for littering.* Exploring whether behaviours stem from rebellion, laziness, or other factors
- *Generational dynamics*. Analysing whether littering is genuinely age-specific or a scapegoating phenomenon
- *Role of the media.* Addressing how media narratives reinforce stereotypes and exploring how campaigns can challenge these narratives constructively
- *Generational conflict.* Identifying solutions to reduce tensions and highlight shared goals

It was also decided during the meeting that, given the pandemic situation, the group would conduct an online survey, aiming to include the entire population as much as possible. They rejected

the idea of limiting the survey to young people, emphasising the importance of involving all age groups in the research. To this end, it was also agreed that special attention should be paid to reaching harder-to-access demographics, such as younger individuals less active on Facebook and older adults with lower digital literacy.

By fostering open dialogue, the group identified actionable strategies to address littering while promoting generational reconciliation and shared responsibility. These outcomes set the stage for further research and practical interventions, reflecting the participatory ethos of the TISZtA PART project.

4.1.3. Summary of the third meeting: Developing research instruments

The third meeting, held over two sessions, focused on finalising the research framework, including defining the dimensions, formulating questions and item lists, and establishing sampling strategies and background variables.

Group members revisited insights from previous meetings to refine the research framework. Using a Google Jamboard, they collaboratively outlined the primary dimensions and themes for the questionnaire. These included:

- *Awareness of the problem.* Assessing how informed respondents were about littering along the Tisza riverbank
- *Perceived severity.* Evaluating whether respondents viewed the problem as significant and comparing it to other environmental concerns
- *Perceived changeability.* Assessing to what extent respondents believe that the problem can be effectively addressed
- *Solutions and interventions.* Collecting feedback on the TISZtA PART project's initiatives, such as the use of cigarette butt collectors and the outreach kiosk but also asking open questions on possible further solutions

- *Responsibility.* Exploring perceptions of responsibility among parents, peers, and the broader community
- *Generational conflict.* Investigating whether respondents believed littering was age-dependent and the extent to which it contributed to generational tensions
- *Meanings of littering.* Examining whether littering is understood as rebellious behaviour or laziness
- *Role of law enforcement*. Gauging opinions on police presence and fines as deterrents to littering

Group members identified key demographic variables to include in the survey:

- Age (recorded as year of birth to ensure precision; special attention was given to engaging demographics less active on digital platforms, such as older adults or youth with limited access to social media)
- Gender
- Connection to Szolnok (e.g., resident, commuter, or student)
- Employment status (student, working actively, pensioner, unemployed)

The group emphasised the importance of including respondents from all age groups to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the issue. To achieve this, group members committed to personally recruiting 15–20 respondents each, leveraging their networks to achieve a balanced sample. This participatory approach reinforced the group's sense of ownership and responsibility for the research process.

A second session focused on refining the questionnaire. Group members reviewed and debated the phrasing of questions and the accompanying item scales, ensuring clarity and relevance. Open-ended questions were included to allow respondents to share additional insights.

4.2. The survey

4.2.1. The research instrument

The questionnaire, finalised on the third meeting, was not based on standardised or previously validated questions (except the block on demographic data). A key outcome of the research was that the dimensions, questions, and items were the result of the group members' work, reflecting their areas of interest and the questions they deemed important. Several variables were suggested for inclusion but ultimately rejected due to opposition from the group members. For example, background variables related to social status, such as subjective social status and highest level of education, were deemed irrelevant and unfamiliar to them. The group members did not view respondents' educational background or financial situation as sources of valuable information.

The questionnaire consisted of seven main blocks of questions:

- *Demographic background variables.* This block collected basic demographic information about the respondents.
- *Opinions on littering.* Respondents were asked to rate their opinions on littering using a five-point Likert scale; for some dimensions, multiple questions with potentially contradictory statements were included to encourage nuanced responses (e.g., "Only a small fraction of young people litter on the streets; most do not" versus "Youth do not care about the cleanliness of their environment").
- *Perceptions of the importance of party littering.* This block explored the significance of party littering in the context of other environmental issues, such as illegal dumping, pollution in the Tisza River, and littering in urban areas.
- *Evaluation of proposed solutions.* Respondents were asked to assess the potential usefulness of various proposed solutions using a five-point scale. An open-ended question also allowed them to suggest additional measures.
- *Use of the Tisza riverbank.* Questions focused on how frequently respondents used the riverbank for various activities.

- *Waste collection practices and opinions.* This block explored respondents' behaviours and attitudes toward litter collection and disposal.
- *Evaluation of existing TISZtA PART project elements.* Questions assessed the familiarity with and perceived effectiveness of the project's implemented measures.

The questionnaire was created and administered using the Google Forms online application and was only accessible online. Before finalising the questionnaire, an online vote was held in the group members' Facebook group to decide its format (e.g., grid-based or individual question display).

4.2.2. Sampling and data collection

Each participant was tasked with distributing the questionnaire to at least ten friends or family members. The goal was to achieve a sample size of at least 200 responses. Data collection took place between 15 July and 1 September 2021, during which the online questionnaire remained open. The target population included residents of Szolnok aged 14 and older, as well as individuals studying or working in Szolnok. Respondents could only complete the questionnaire after confirming they were at least 14 years old and acknowledging that they had read and understood the data protection notice.

By the close of the survey on 1 September, 283 responses were collected. Among the respondents:

- *Gender distribution*: The majority were women (68.6%, 194 women) compared to men (31.4%, 89 men).
- *Connection to Szolnok*: Most respondents (75.3%, 213 individuals) were residents of Szolnok, while 20.1% (57 individuals) studied or worked in Szolnok but lived elsewhere, and 4.6% (13 individuals) had no direct ties to the city.

- *Primary activity*:
  - 54.8% (155 individuals) were employed
  - 26.1% (74 individuals) were students
  - 12.4% (35 individuals) were retired
  - 4.9% (14 individuals) were unemployed
  - 1.8% (5 individuals) were stay-at-home parents
- *Age distribution*:
  - 15.9% (45 individuals) were over 60 years old
  - 50.9% (144 individuals) were aged 25–60
  - 29.7% (84 individuals) were under 25

The sampling method was non-probability-based and thus does not represent the entire population of Szolnok or those studying or working in the city. Consequently, findings are applicable only to the specific sample analysed.

4.2.3. Survey results: Cluster analysis

The statistical analysis of the database was performed using the SPSS software. After logical data cleaning – where respondents with incompatible age and occupation data or those who clearly indicated in open-ended questions that they did not take the survey seriously were filtered out – 279 valid responses remained.

Using the K-means algorithm, three homogeneous groups were created based on responses to the following question blocks:

- Block 2: Opinions on littering
- Block 3: Perceptions of the importance of party littering
- Block 4: Evaluation of proposed solutions

Respondents rated each item on a five-point scale, indicating the extent to which they agreed with a statement, how severe they considered a given problem, or how helpful they perceived a proposed solution to be in mitigating the issue of party littering. The

cluster analysis excluded five respondents due to missing answers, resulting in three approximately equal-sized groups.

The analysis results are summarised in Table 8.1, which presents the average response values for each item by group, the overall sample mean (n=274), and the differences between group averages and the overall mean. These differences are highlighted using shades of red (below average) and green (above average).

Table 8.1. Average Response Values from Group Members and the Full Sample, along with Their Differences

	Question	Average response values of group members			Overall average of all responses	Difference between the overall average and the group members' average responses		
		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
OPINIONS ON LITTERING	The Tisza riverbank is littered because of the young people partying there in the evenings	4,3	3,4	4,3	4,0	0,3	-06	0,3
	The police should take stricter action against litterers	4,6	3,0	4,7	4,2	0,4	-1,2	0,5
	Those who throw trash on the riverbank do it to show off	3,6	2,4	3,6	3,3	0,3	-0,9	0,3
	Fines would help address the problem	4,4	2,5	4,2	3,7	0,7	-1,2	0,5
	The police cannot always be there and cannot solve the issue	4,0	4,2	3,0	3,7	0,3	0,5	-0,7
	Littering is not dependent on age	4,7	4,6	4,3	4,5	0,2	0,1	-0,2
	Parents are responsible for what their children do, including littering	3,8	3,2	3,8	3,6	0,2	-0,4	0,2
	Those who throw trash do so out of carelessness	4,4	3,9	3,9	4,1	0,3	-0,2	-0,2
	Peer influence is stronger in the matter of littering than parents' educational efforts	4,1	3,3	3,5	3,7	0,4	-0,4	-0,2
	The issue of party littering on the Tisza riverbank is more exaggerated than its actual significance	2,6	3,4	1,8	2,6	0,0	0,8	-0,8
	Littering has always existed, and nothing can be done about it	2,2	2,4	1,4	2,0	0,2	0,4	-0,6
	Only a very small proportion of young people litter on the streets; most do not	3,0	3,3	2,7	3,0	0,0	0,3	-0,3
	Youth do not care about the cleanliness of their environment	3,2	2,3	3,1	2,9	0,3	-0,6	0,2
	Young people are scapegoated for the problem of littering	3,3	3,8	2,0	3,0	0,3	0,8	-1,0

PROBLEM	Party littering on the Tisza riverbank	4,4	3,5	4,3	4,1	0,3	-0,6	0,2
	Party littering in the city center	4,5	3,6	4,4	4,2	0,3	-0,6	0,2
	Littering in Szolnok in general	4,5	3,9	4,5	4,3	0,2	-0,4	0,2
	Illegal dumping	4,8	4,2	4,7	4,6	0,2	-0,4	0,1
	General pollution of the Tisza River	4,8	4,4	4,7	4,6	0,2	-0,2	0,1
SOLUTION	Fines	4,3	2,8	4,1	3,8	0,5	-1,0	0,3
	Installing more trash bins	4,3	4,1	3,3	3,9	0,4	0,2	-0,6
	Bringing trash bins closer to the littering spots	3,8	3,8	2,8	3,5	0,3	0,3	-0,7
	Trash collection campaigns involving all age groups	4,3	3,6	3,5	3,8	0,5	-0,2	-0,3
	Awareness campaigns involving well-known influencers	4,3	3,1	3,2	3,6	0,7	-0,5	-0,4
	Increased police presence	4,5	2,8	4,3	3,9	0,6	-1,1	0,4
	Smart furniture (solar-powered, battery-operated, allowing phone charging, etc.)	3,8	3,1	1,6	2,9	0,9	0,2	-1,3
	School campaigns about environmental awareness	4,4	3,6	3,7	3,9	0,5	-0,3	-0,2
	The local public cleanliness company should clean earlier	3,7	3,5	2,5	3,3	0,4	0,2	-0,8
Number of respondents		**97**	**82**	**85**				

Note: In all cases, responses were given on a 1–5 scale, where the scale value represented the level of agreement with the statement in Block 2: Opinions on littering, the perceived severity of the mentioned environmental issue in Block 3: Perceptions of the importance of party littering, and the estimated usefulness of the proposed solution in Block 4: Evaluation of proposed solutions.

4.2.4. Cluster insights

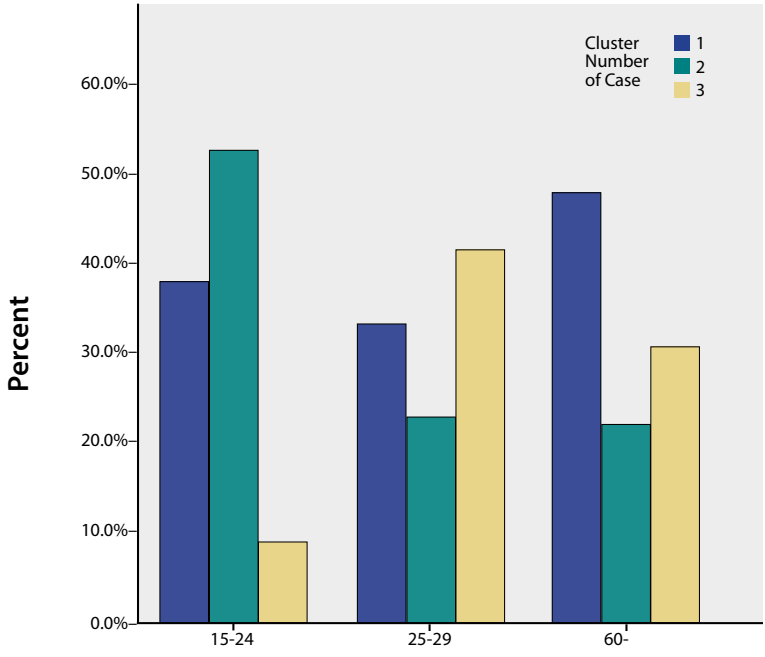
Based on these findings, the groups were named as follows:

- *"The Solution Seekers"*: Open to a variety of interventions and supportive of all proposed solutions
- *"The Understanding"*: Less concerned about the severity of the issue and more supportive of harm-reducing and creative measures over disciplinary ones

- *"The Disciplinarians"*: Favouring strict enforcement measures like fines and increased police presence while expressing scepticism toward other proposed solutions.

The demographic characterisation of the clusters provides interesting insights. Chart 8.1 shows the percentage of individuals within each age group (which are represented in differing proportions) belonging to each cluster. Notably, the youngest age group, 15–24 years old, is significantly overrepresented in the second cluster, the "Understanding," while being scarcely present in the third cluster, the "Disciplinarians." More surprisingly, within the 60+ age group, the majority belong to the first cluster, the "Solution Seekers." Conversely, members of the 25–59 age group are most frequently found in the third cluster, the "Disciplinarians."

Chart 8.1. The Relationship between Clusters and Age Groups



Note: The percentage distribution of cluster membership within each age group (as a percentage of the total age group).

4.2.5. Cluster descriptions with illustrative quotes from open-ended questions

Below, the clusters are presented based on the analysis of the ranking of specific items based on the average scale values provided by the cluster members, along with illustrative responses to open-ended questions.

"The Solution Seekers" (first cluster)

Members of this cluster prioritise environmental issues and are open to all types of solutions. They particularly favour school campaigns and community clean-up initiatives over disciplinary measures, and they even accept alternative solutions (e.g., smart furniture, influencers) that other clusters typically reject. They oppose generalisations about young people and view the problem as manageable. Retirees and women are more likely to belong to this group.

The open-ended responses reflect their proactive and solution-focused attitude:

> Waste collection could be used as volunteer work for high school community service hours. I'm sure there are kids who don't know where to find opportunities to complete their hours; this would simply be a great option.
>
> Instead of fines, use community service as punishment.
>
> The entire city should be cleaned up with the involvement of the public, hearing opinions and ideas from everyone. Inform residents widely about these initiatives. It deeply bothers me that Szolnok is so dirty. I'd gladly participate in making it cleaner. Research is fine, but action is also needed.
>
> I wouldn't call it party littering. The whole city is dirty – train station, József Attila Street, everywhere – not just young people litter.

"The Understanding" (second cluster)

Members of this cluster reject generalisations about young people and disciplinary solutions. They are sceptical about the effec-

tiveness of police interventions and prefer practical solutions, such as placing trash bins closer to gathering spots or increasing their number. They oppose fines and active police presence. Compared to other environmental issues, they view party littering as significantly less problematic. Young people and students are commonly part of this group.

Their open-ended responses emphasise practical solutions, opposition to generalised blame, and recognition of young people's need for safe spaces. Concerns about excessive police presence and its counterproductive effects are also evident:

> Don't target young people! This is finally a good community space where they feel comfortable. Let's not chase them away! Instead, make it more vibrant and appealing with useful features: party lighting, acoustic concerts by young Szolnok bands, slam poetry, a simple small stage.… Have volunteers in the early hours to help young people get home safely, watch over their health, and provide support like first aid, emotional counselling, or rest tents with beds.

> I'm glad young people have a fixed outdoor place to meet and party. This only happens during summer weekends. The waste, especially glass, is left behind like it is on tables in nightclubs. The placement of trash bins was a good idea; some people use them. A controlled police presence for safety is also a good idea. Let the young people party there, and clean up earlier. I agree it's bad they don't throw away trash, but that's an upbringing issue. Here, they feel good, they're visible, and they're safe.

> The issue lies with the number of trash bins. Although there are more now, it's still insufficient for the amount of waste generated by 100–150 young people every party night. From personal experience, we can't stomp enough trash into one bin. More bins are needed, especially closer to the water, not just up on the bank. If the city involves the police, young people will just find another quiet place to hang out.

> No suggestions, but from experience, other festivals also leave public spaces littered, and it's not only young people partying.

"The Disciplinarians" (third cluster)
This cluster differs significantly from the others, with members strongly supporting disciplinary (and to a lesser extent, educational) measures. They are much less accepting of alternative solutions, especially those aimed at making trash disposal easier or more attractive. Compared to others, they are less likely to agree that young people are scapegoated and reject the idea that littering is inevitable or unchangeable. Men, individuals aged 25–60, workers, and unemployed people are more likely to belong to this group.

Their open-ended responses reflect outrage and a strong demand for punishment and strict enforcement:

> For four weeks, every Saturday, from 10 pm to 4 am, station one police officer every 100 metres. Not in pairs, but alone. If they hear glass breaking, they should approach and hold the person accountable. If no one takes responsibility, note down all their names and order their parents to come and clean up at 6 am. Having parents pick up litter might be a deterrent.
>
> Patrols should be present from 4 pm to 3 am. That's it.
>
> Throw the litter they leave behind into their homes.

4.3. Co-evaluating the survey results
The final meeting with the group members was held after the first analysis of the results. During this session, frequency distribution charts and the results of the cluster analysis were presented, and group members were invited to reflect on these findings.

The results surprised the group members in several ways. First, the generational divide they had anticipated based on Facebook comment wars was significantly nuanced by the finding that members of the older generation were not most frequently rep-

resented in the third "Disciplinarian" cluster, the one favouring punitive measures. Throughout the presentation, group members focused primarily on this aspect and continued to reflect on it during their comments, despite other noteworthy differences in the demographic composition of the clusters, such as the high proportion of men in the third, "Disciplinarian" group. Nevertheless, the generational dimension of the study was what captured the group's attention the most.

Although we repeatedly emphasised that the responses were not representative of the entire population, group members were particularly struck by the finding that respondents aged 60 and older were more often part of the "Solution Seekers" group than the "Disciplinarians." This challenged their preconceptions and sparked considerable reflection.

Another result that prompted discussion was the finding that respondents did not consider party littering to be the most severe issue. This contradicted the impressions created by the polemics on Facebook, further encouraging group members to rethink the broader public perception of the problem.

5. Self-reflections

5.1. Lessons learned

One of the most significant achievements of the project was the active involvement of young group members in every stage of the research process. True to the principles of participatory action research (PAR), the study was not predefined by researchers but evolved based on collaborative discussions with group members. This approach ensured that the research questions, methods, and tools reflected the lived experiences and perspectives of the stakeholders, particularly the high school students involved.

This participatory design fostered a strong sense of ownership among group members and highlighted the value of empowering stakeholders as co-researchers. For example, the development of the questionnaire and the iterative discussions about potential solutions enabled group members to critically engage with the

topic, contributing to the project's relevance and depth. This also mobilised their resources in successfully reach a wide diversity of survey respondents.

The co-creation methodology reinforced the participatory ethos of the project by encouraging collaborative problem-solving. Group members contributed ideas that extended beyond punitive measures to include practical and creative solutions, such as repositioning trash bins or using smart furniture to make disposal more convenient. These insights reflected the group members' resourcefulness and highlighted the creative potential of co-creation in designing innovative and community-rooted interventions. Co-creation fostered dynamic interactions between stakeholders, leading to joint decisions about research tools, interventions, and campaign designs. This collaborative approach not only democratised the research process but also ensured that solutions were aligned with the needs and realities of the community.

While disciplinary measures like increased police presence and fines were often seen as the most straightforward solutions – especially in early discussions – they were also acknowledged as limited in effectiveness during the course of discussions. Group members noted that overly strict enforcement could displace the problem rather than solve it and might exacerbate tensions. In contrast, more practical and widely supported measures, such as school campaigns and increasing the number of trash bins, emerged as more consensual and sustainable solutions. This finding underscores the need for balanced approaches that prioritise long-term impact over immediate control.

The study's most important outcome was revealing that generational tensions were not as deeply entrenched as initially perceived. By incorporating reflexivity sessions as a transformative practice – a core component of PAR – group members were able to challenge their assumptions. For instance, young group members expressed surprise at survey results showing that older respondents were not predominantly aligned with punitive measures.

This realisation disrupted stereotypes fuelled by social media and underscored the importance of data-driven insights in reducing biases and fostering mutual understanding.

Beyond the survey outcomes, the process itself provided valuable information. For example, observing how young group members engaged with the topic and communicated their ideas revealed critical insights into their mental frameworks and attitudes. These observations highlighted the potential of participatory methodologies to generate a deeper understanding of the research process. For instance, the role of social media in amplifying generational tensions emerged as a key theme. While media often proved a source of conflict, group members during the discussions also recognised its potential as a tool for reconciliation. The project's media campaign suggestions, which emphasised positive examples and intergenerational collaboration, reflected the co-creative methodology's ability to turn divisive narratives into constructive solutions.

5.2. What we would do differently today

While the project successfully engaged young participants, expanding the scope of stakeholder involvement could enhance the representativeness and inclusivity of future initiatives. Targeted outreach to a more stratified sample, including older adults or groups with diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, could enrich the research process and foster broader collaboration. It should be noted that not focusing on SES in the survey sampling was a deliberate decision made by the group members, who refused to draw correlations between economic status and approaches to littering.

Encouraging group members to reflect on their own assumptions and biases proved transformative in reducing tensions and fostering understanding. Future initiatives could incorporate more structured reflexivity exercises to deepen this process and encourage participants to critically examine their roles and perspectives.

5.3. Conclusions

The TISZtA PART Action Research project, carried out in collaboration with high school students, served as a meaningful platform for tackling environmental challenges such as party littering while addressing the complexities of intergenerational tensions and inequalities. The project's outcomes and process offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of participatory and co-creative methodologies. These reflections not only highlight the strengths of involving stakeholders in collaborative problem-solving but also point to areas where future initiatives can improve, ensuring even greater inclusivity, relevance, and impact. The results of the action research were well received by the municipality and the findings of the workshops contributed to ongoing discussions and informed considerations for potential future interventions.

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