

Advancing the democratic participatory experiences of young people: the participatory budgets

Avanzando las experiencias democráticas participativas de niños y jóvenes: el caso de los presupuestos participativos

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of participatory budgets for children and adolescents (Childhood) in municipalities within the Valencian Community, Spain. These initiatives engage young people in public resource allocation decisions, promoting civic education, and democratic socialization. This study employs qualitative methods, including surveys and content analysis, to explore these participatory dynamics. This surveys include open questions. This research reveals a prevailing adult-centric bias and a tendency to prioritize the technical aspects of democratic education. These preliminary findings highlight significant obstacles, such as adult centrism and tokenism, which undermine the genuine influence of youth on decision-making processes. The study concludes that a more inclusive and educational approach is necessary to fully realize the potential of these participatory experiences.

Keywords: political participation; childhood; citizen education; local administration; socialization.

Resumen

Este estudio examina la implementación de presupuestos participativos para niños y adolescentes en municipios de la Comunidad Valenciana, España. Estas iniciativas tratan de sumar a los jóvenes en decisiones sobre la asignación de recursos públicos, promoviendo la educación cívica y la socialización democrática. El artículo utiliza una metodología cualitativa basada en encuestas y el análisis de contenido para explorar estas dinámicas participativas. El método de recogida de datos ha utilizado preguntas abiertas y cerradas. Estos hallazgos preliminares destacan obstáculos significativos, como el adultocentrismo y el tokenismo, que socavan la influencia de los jóvenes en los procesos de toma de decisiones. El estudio concluye la necesidad de un enfoque inclusivo y educativo para aprovechar al máximo el potencial de estas experiencias participativas.

Palabras clave: participación política; infancia; educación ciudadana; administración local; socialización.



Introduction

This paper presents the preliminary results of a study of participatory budgets for children and adolescents¹ in Spanish municipalities in the Valencian Community. This is a democratic participatory experience aimed at children, which is important in the global context of a declining democracy (Meny, 2020).

The year 1989 marked a milestone for child and youth participation, after it was recognized as a right in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter, CRC). Although it has legal backing and social support, it faces numerous obstacles that hinder its implementation. The CRC urges countries to design national strategies for children and adolescents, recommending incentives for participation. The European Commission (2021) also incorporated a reference to children's participation in the political and democratic life of the EU in its Strategy on the Rights of the Child. In this context, participation is defined as a democratic task that takes place on an individual and collective level, both in private and public spaces, where playful and educational relational dynamics are articulated and the visibility of children's actions is essential. Thus, this participatory relational locus includes not only the home or school but also the local and proximity environment.

Research on the role of children in the political-administrative sphere is not new in social sciences, such as sociology and political science. Indeed, studies on political socialization and adult participation (e.g., Hyman, 1959), competence development (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960; Hess & Torney, 1968; Easton & Dennis, 1969), and the inclusion of the individual in the

group (Percheron, 1985) are well documented. The literature offers diverse experiences to support the notion that children are political subjects with agency (Lundy, 2007; Hart, 1997; Lansdown, 2005).

Most studies reveal the importance of participation from an early age because it improves competencies in the public sphere and, consequently, improves access to information, the defense of their rights, and the results of public policies, among others (Hart, 1992, 1997).

In the context of global democratic erosion, where declines in democratic performance indicators are identified in all regions of the world (IDEA Report 2023), a pattern of stagnation and democratic regression seems to be discernible. The IDEA Report 2023 highlights the role of countervailing institutions in halting the decline of democracies and advancement of authoritarianism. Countervailing institutions refer to institutions, organizations, platforms, investigative journalism, and social movements that balance the distribution of power, demand accountability mechanisms, scrutinize the activity of public authorities, and scrutinize government decision-making and public spending. One of the key trends in stem democratic erosion is public participation, which is seen as the best hope for the future of democracy (OECD, 2024; Rosanvallon, 2006).

For this reason, participatory experiences for children and young people are crucial, as education and learning for democracy takes place in a wide variety of contexts and traditionally socializes children to become responsible citizens. Civic learning is essential because, in our globalized world, we are constantly exposed to anti-democratic

tendencies or various fundamentalisms that extend to children and adolescents. It is therefore essential to explore the limits of representative democracy to enrich it with practices of direct democracy, which undoubtedly favors the generation of opportunities for democratic learning in children and adolescents. This is a way to deepen the concept of learning for democracy and apply it to both formal education and non-formal contexts in order to favor experiential learning and social and participatory learning.

It should also be noted that children and adolescents are increasingly demanding greater political participation in defining measures for issues that are in their own interests. Their contribution can go beyond this, if we consider that new forms of participation have emerged that extend to other phases of the public policy cycle (Falanga, 2024; Falanga & Silva, 2024).

With these initial ideas in mind, the layout of this article is as follows: After this introduction, the methodology used is formulated, followed by the theoretical framework and data analysis. Finally, a discussion and conclusions are presented.

Youth participation and democratic education

Political disaffection has led to individuals not engaging in public affairs (Botella, 2020) and the emergence of political choices that challenge the foundations of liberal democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2019).

The implementation of children's participatory experiences, especially in municipalities, represents not only an

opportunity to broaden democracy, but also a way to innovate in the political arena. Studies such as those by Thomas (2009) affirm that children are notable in political theory mainly because of their absence, so that beyond being political objects, they are not relevant to the discourse. It is precisely this absence of public expression that becomes a form of disenfranchise. For this reason, in the last two decades, childhood as a social sector has begun to occupy a prominent place in public agendas and attract the interest of professionals and researchers around the world (Qvortrup, 2008; Alderson, 2008; Moran-Ellis & Sünker, 2018; Tisdall et al., 2014). While progress has been made in creating spaces for the participation of children and young people, they continue to occupy a contested position as citizens (Abellán-López et al., 2022).

Research has shown that civic knowledge and participation increases the likelihood that children and young people will vote as adults. High levels of abstention suggest the need to increase political engagement and participation because, as a social practice, it is learned and must be practiced throughout life. While participation is essential to democracy, when it comes to children's participation, there is a perceived polemic relationship between autonomy and dependency, highlighting power asymmetries between adults and children (Moran Ellis & Sünker, 2018; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010).

Active participation also contributes to a better understanding of the inner workings of institutions and the forms of power distribution. From a macro perspective, it would facilitate a better understanding of the institutional context, including dominant norms, beliefs, and practices, as well as the

multilevel functioning of institutions. On the other hand, power can also be interpreted at the micro level, focusing on practices of cooperation, deliberation and/or conflict management (Blanchet-Cohen & Torres 2015). In short, it would facilitate their participation in institutional change in contexts such as schools, local governments, and associations.

Among the most fruitful lines of research are studies on the conditions that can help to configure effective frameworks for child participation in the formulation of public policies, as well as the analysis and systematization of children's participatory experiences. One of the most widely recognized forms of participation is participatory budgeting projects with children (Tomás, 2008; Gadotti, 2005) centered on the child-budgeting approach. Participatory experiences give prominence to children, as demographic changes in the Western world are characterized by an aging population, which may pose a threat to the visibility of children.

Certainly, it is a suggestive challenge to be able to value the potential of child and adolescent participation in the formulation of public policies and its impact in mobilizing change and generating debates in the political arena. In this way, collaboration between children and adult experts can bring innovative ideas into effective practice. For this to happen, the exercise of citizenship must be experienced as something real beyond well-intentioned discourses, which is why it requires the provision of adequate spaces and resources to develop the participation project, and the school appears to be an ideal place (Schugurensky & Wolhuter, 2020).

However, the road to full child participation runs up against two major obstacles: adult-centrism and tokenism.

Adultcentrism refers to the fact that adults do not take children's views seriously (Freeman, 2007) and are reluctant to share power with children, as they are often facilitator-guides in participatory processes. Some authors argue that adults must be able to identify when they need to take a back seat to allow children to take control (Mittra 2005; Bessell, 2009). Adults, whether parents, professionals, or public decision-makers, retain considerable control over what counts as children's participation, compounded by other variables such as cultural norms in different contexts and the underestimation of children's and adolescents' capacities, often masked under the guise of semantic commentary (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2015; Shier, 2010).

Linked to adultcentrism and participatory autonomy is a second concept called tokenism. Its evolution can be traced to the literature on child participation (Hart, 1997; Shier, 2001; Lundy, 2007) over the last few decades. Both Arnstein (1969) and Hart (1992) identified tokenism as one of the rungs on the ladder of participation, representing an instrument for assessing different stages of participatory intensity from the most basic to the highest levels of child autonomy. Tokenism identifies symbolic participation without the correct deployment of children's political rights, thus generating empty situations in which real participation has no impact. This phenomenon usually occurs in initial or early participatory experiences and can be overcome as skills for correct implementation are acquired. The problem arises when it becomes chronic over time, accompanied by situations of adult-centrism that can lead to disengagement from the participatory experience (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Participatory budgeting for young people

One of the most popular and innovative instruments of participatory governance of local democracy is participatory budgeting, and an indicator of its success is the high number of registered experiences (more than 11, 000) in 71 countries, according to the Participatory Budgeting World Atlas (2019). While this publication was produced on a voluntary basis by participating practitioners and is not exhaustive, it provides an overview of the impact of participatory budgeting worldwide.

Participatory budgeting is a form of decision-making that actively involves citizens prioritizing the spending of public resources. However, behind this general definition, a breadth of practices with varying levels of participatory intensity has been alluded to (Douglass & Friedmann, 1998; Abers, 2000; Souza, 2001; Avritzer & Navarro, 2003; Cabannes, 2004; Sintomer, 2005).

Given its heterogeneity and diversity in terms of purposes, methodologies, and logic, participatory budgeting presents enormous adaptive plasticity to different contexts and social situations, favoring its dissemination. It originated in Brazil with the 1989 election of the mayor of Porto Alegre, Olívio Dutra, leader of the Workers' Party, who introduced a series of reforms to define the budgetary management of municipal spending in a quest for social justice and regeneration of the political arena. The impact of his success had a spectacular international expansion and was recognized by the UN in 1994 as one of the best practices in urban management. For this reason, the Porto Alegre model is pioneer and best known (Genro

& Souza, 1997; Allegretti, 2003; Baiocchi, 2005; Marquetti et al., 2008) and has always played an important role in spreading the idea that citizen participation is a sign of political innovation.

Thus, attempts to define the concept of participatory budgeting have been numerous and heterogeneous. According to Genro and Souza (1997), participatory budgeting is a process of direct, voluntary, and universal democracy, in which the population discusses and decides on budget and public policies. From a technical perspective, participatory budgeting is an innovative public budget management methodology that transforms democracy and the efficiency of public spending (Abers, 2000). Other definitions emphasize the creation of spaces for dialogue and informal education to promote democratic learning experiences (Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007).

Given the difficulties in achieving a unanimous definition, efforts have focused on the development of classificatory taxonomies that, based on numerous empirical cases, order and characterize different experiences. Thus, the abundant literature offers a typological diversity according to different variables: according to the methodology employed (Gret & Sintomer, 2003), the geographical territorial scope (Cabannes, 2004; Avritzer & Navarro, 2003; Sintomer & Allegretti, 2009), or their different purposes: strengthening democratic values (Fung, 2006; Sintomer et al., 2008), promoting governance and public policies (Fung & Wright, 2003), reinforcing government transparency and accountability (Ackerman, 2004), subverting economic and political clientelism and corruption (Baiocchi, 2001), and redistributing economic resources to support the neediest sectors of the population (Avritzer & Navarro, 2003).

Spain implemented participatory budgeting in the early 2000s, and among the first municipalities that led these experiences are Cabezas de Juan, Rubí, Sant Feliu de Llobregat, Córdoba and Seville (Sintomer, 2005; Ganuza, 2007; Pineda & Pires, 2012; Ganuza & Francés, 2012). At present, taking the Participatory Budgeting World Atlas (2019) as a reference, there are around 400 experiences per year, and they continue to increase throughout Spain.

In general terms, it can be stated that the search for spaces, methodologies and opportunities for the participation of children and young people in advanced democratic societies represents a challenge.

For this reason, the versatility of participatory budgets has favored their adaptation to the characteristics of young citizens, thus giving visibility to children and adolescents.

Similar to the version for adults, participatory budgeting for children and adolescents refers to a methodology for prioritizing and defining public spending, which incorporates experiences of direct democratic participation of varying intensity and involves democratic educational elements. The format of the procedure may or may not include various phases such as idea generation, deliberation, and prioritization of proposals. It also varies depending on whether children and young people are included from the beginning of the procedure, which is a key observation, given that most of the time, children and young people are not considered in planning and design. The real impact of this democratic experience is young people's involvement in the construction of a participatory process adapted to their context and characteristics (Tomás,

2008; Ruiz-Morales, 2009; Abellán-López et al., 2022; Pardo-Beneyto & Abellán-López, 2023). What is certain is that the participatory nature of these experiences in Spain has left the educational and political socialization aspects of the background (Abellán-López & Pardo-Beneyto, 2023).

The propositions that guide this research are as follows:

Proposition 1: Most participatory budgets primarily aim to improve public action through better diagnostics. Consequently, they can improve public action over and above other objectives such as education. This generates situations in which adultecentrism and tokenism are common, as there is no evident continuity between the design and implementation of measures for child participation.

Proposition 2: There is a tendency towards tokenism and adult-centrism because of the active participation of different groups of adults in participatory budgeting. The participation of adult and politically interested groups such as politicians and technicians may indicate a trend towards adult-led participatory budgeting.

Methodology

This work is framed within the interpretative paradigm, as the use of discourse is part of the qualitative methodology by defining situations that are meaningful to the actors, their intentions, and objectives. Content analysis facilitates the drawing of inferences from the responses obtained and understanding of the symbolic and semantic communications of informants in the survey (Krippendorff, 1990).

The fieldwork was carried out through a survey that was distributed in two waves using an electronic form requesting responses from June 1 to December 31, 2022. The recipients were municipalities of the Valencia Region, which had held children's participatory budgets. Specifically, the survey was designed with 20 open questions and a final section in which the participants could express their opinions.

The informants who participated in this data collection were as follows, according to municipality, as shown in Chart 1.

Of the 28 responses obtained, three were merged because they were answered by different actors in the municipalities surveyed.

The remaining eight were discarded because they stated that they did not have children's participation budgets. Finally, 17 valid responses were obtained after checking the answers and comparing them with scientific literature used to generate the theoretical framework.

The data presented in the survey of Valencian municipalities shows that the size of the municipality does not constitute an obstacle to articulating these participatory initiatives.

The software used to process the data was CAQDAS, MAXQDA 2022, which made it possible to generate quantifiable evidence. Specifically, the following coding process was developed: First, a theoretical framework was constructed

Chart 1 – Participating municipalities

Name	Province
Bellreguard	Valencia
Beniarjó	Valencia
Almoradí	Alicante
Alcoy	Alicante
Torre Baja	Valencia
Picassent	Valencia
Villena	Alicante
Aldaia	Valencia
Silla	Valencia
Morella	Castellón
Fanzara	Castellón
Alfara de la Baronia	Valencia
Palmera	Valencia
Algar del Palancia	Valencia
El Real de Gandia	Valencia
La Torre d'En Besora	Castellón
Castellnovo	Castellón
Peníscola	Castellón
Castelló de la Plana	Castellón
Dénia	Alicante
Elche	Alicante
Quart de Poblet	Valencia
Silla	Valencia
Gata de Gorgos	Alicante
La Pobla Llarga	Valencia

Source: authors.

through documents consulted in databases such as the Web of Science, Scopus, and Dialnet. Second, a preliminary analysis of the responses was conducted to determine the elements that would allow the generation of a coding system. Next, a viable coding system was designed based on the article by Pardo-Beneyto and Abellán-López (2023) using a two-phase coding process to obtain all possible evidence. The research note is based on three key variables: the development objectives, and actors involved.

Both the objectives and the definition of participants take into account the public policy approach developed by Subirats et al. (2008), given its explanatory capacity for the governance of the various actors who, with concurrent and opposing objectives, are immersed in negotiation dynamics and participate in some of the phases of the public policy cycle. On the other hand, the phases and type of development have been based on the literature on participatory budgeting, such as

Chart 2 – Codes used by code group

Code System		
Development of Participatory Budgeting	Undetermined Planned Participatory Experience Institutionalized Participatory Experience Regulated Participatory Experience Participatory Experience in the Process of Regulation Experimental Experience	See Development of participatory budgeting and degree of institutionalization subsection
Objectives of Participatory Budgets	Undetermined Generate Community Bonds Open Participation Spaces for Citizens Improvement of Resource Allocation through Participation Education on Public Governance Child/Youth Empowerment Improvement of Problem Diagnosis	See Objectives of participatory budgeting subsection
Actors	Other Bodies Expert Group Educational Centers Children participatory council Consultants/Companies Uninstitutionalized Representatives Politicians Citizenship Participation of Various Age Groups • Children (0-12) • Adolescents (13-18) • Youth (16-30) Sectoral Associations Youth Associations Educators Technicians	See Actors subsection

Source: Pardo-Beneyto y Abellán-López (2023).

that developed in Spain by authors like Francés, Ganuza or Pineda, discussed in the introduction. Finally, the codes developed took into account the specificities of child participation set out in the theoretical framework.

As part of the ethical considerations, confidentiality and anonymity were preserved, although all participants authorized the use of the data for research purposes with informed consent.

Data analysis

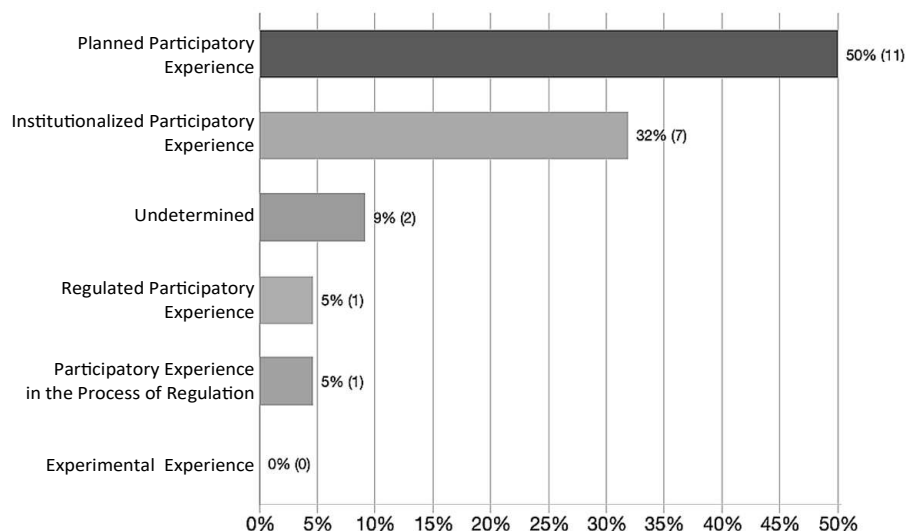
Development of participatory budgeting and degree of institutionalisation

The development and degree of institutionalization were measured through the articulation of the legal instrument used and its degree of development, as shown in

Figure 1. The most developed category includes the structures and processes within an overall or sectoral plan. Institutionalized experience has dedicated organizational structures and a regulated process, while regulated participatory experience has only a process. In addition, two transition categories were included: regulation in progress and the implementation of an experimental model. The latter is implemented so that institutions can learn from the process before institutionalization

An appreciative look reveals that half of the participants have included child participation in long-term planning (50%) or have institutionalized it in their respective municipalities (32%). From the evidence collected, one informant highlights a planning articulated through 'missions' or, in other words, through a structured plan based on projects that help to solve a complex problem.

Figure 1 – Development of participatory budgeting and degree of institutionalisation



Source: authors.

Such a way of proceeding is typical of the European programme 'Horizon Europe' and makes an effort to connect research and a transdisciplinary approach to the resolution of complex problems through public policies (Cerezo, 2021). Its inclusion is relevant insofar as child participation is one more piece in tackling major problems. This is the case for EG5, which includes this situation in its responses:

[EG5] An strategic plan based on missions.

Furthermore, most of them tend to include participatory experiences within a steering document for children and adolescents or a similar instrument. Some of the study municipalities shaped this political-administrative agenda through already consolidated programs such as UNICEF's Child Friendly Cities and Ciudad de los Niños. EP 11 responded:

[EP11] Children's city project, sectoral council for child meetings.

Another way in which the decision-making process was articulated was through sectoral councils. As discussed in previous evidence.

In addition, some participants reported that participatory experiences for children were regulated or were in the process of being regulated.

Most participatory budgets are embedded within a contextualizing strategy that provides them with depth. For the improvement of the inputs produced or for the improvement of

education or empowerment of children and adolescents, these budgets are focused on being transformative. By not being an isolated action and being articulated in a political-administrative programme, a deepening of the proposed objectives is achieved, which helps to overcome adult-centrism (Pardo-Beneyto & Abellán-López, 2023).

Objectives of participatory budgeting

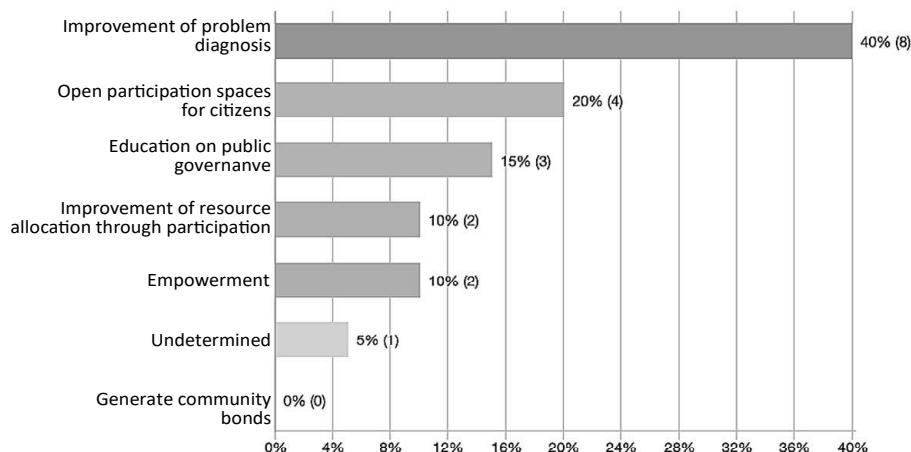
The objectives of participatory budgets represent the goals to be achieved, and allow us to understand their procedural and empirical logic. Figure 2 systematizes the objectives of the sample's participatory budgets.

We have detected that the objectives of participatory budgets consider elements related to the efficiency of public policies, such as improving the diagnosis of the public problem and improving the allocation of resources. Others have sought to improve citizen competencies through the generation of spaces for participation, education in public governance, the generation of community ties or the improvement of the empowerment of children and adolescents.

Most informants specify that the main reason for holding participatory budgets is to improve the diagnosis held in the group studied. In this way, a better diagnosis of needs is achieved to improve the quality of public services.

Some of these testimonies are expressed in the following terms:

Figure 2 – Types of objectives of participatory budgets



Source: authors.

[EP8] Knowing the concerns and needs of adolescents. We will obtain a list of proposals for improving the population that the local government is going to commit to carrying out as far as possible.

[EP14] Addressing the main demands of young people and adolescents.

The improvement of public output has an impact on a better allocation of resources, which translates into greater institutional efficiency and greater awareness of costs.

[EG8] Knowing citizens' concerns and improving activities and infrastructures.

Returning to Figure 2, it can be seen that 21% of the municipalities adopt a finalist approach in participatory budgets and conceive them as a participatory public policy with participation being the main objective. At this point, it is essential to note that the elements of political socialization take a backseat, since what is important is participation per se.

[EP11] Integrating children and young people in the city project

[EG5] Promoting child and adolescent participation.

Some testimonies highlight the role of education in public governance, as well as the leading role of children, although the objectives related to improving diagnoses are emphasized.

[EP12] Understanding the needs of children and helping build more democratic people.

[EG7] Promoting the culture of citizen participation to develop critical thinking and learning based on active listening [...] learning to incorporate other opinions different from our own.

In the preceding lines, variables related to the development of participatory budgets have been presented, such as the degree of institutionalization (Figure 1) and objectives (Figure 2).

In line with the previous assessment, it can be seen that most of the discourses have an efficiency-oriented vision of participatory budgets. In this sense, they believe that the actions carried out serve to conceptualize the problem and understand the needs of the beneficiaries of public policies. This has an impact on improving the efficiency of public policies insofar as it improves their design. Although it is a totally legitimate strategy, the lack of in-depth analysis of most of the experiences identified in later phases of public policies shows a tendency towards adult-centrism. This is so insofar as they only seek to characterize the problem and do not allow children and adolescents to be the protagonists of the solutions. Participation is understood to be technical in terms of improving public output. Approaches that seek to educate and empower children are minority or complementary (Freeman, 2007; Mitra, 2005).

Actors

The actors that have been identified have a public or private nature and can be viewed collectively or individually. In this sense, the presence of municipal technicians, politicians, citizens (both minors and adults), educators, who are the dynamizers of the participatory process, and educational centers (schools) have been detected. To a lesser extent, there have also been external groups of experts, sectoral or youth associations, individual representatives of children, consultants, and companies. Special mention should be made of dedicated bodies, such as the Children's Councils and other bodies of a similar but differentiated nature like Educational Council.

The study of the actors involved is important because it indicates the importance of participation of other groups with an active role in the generation of decision-making. In the first place, it can be observed that both technicians and politicians participate in a prominent way. Technicians are in charge of articulating the processes of citizen participation and organizing the decision-making processes of children's participation councils. They come from different areas, such as open government or childhood. They are also responsible for defining whether the proposals are viable.

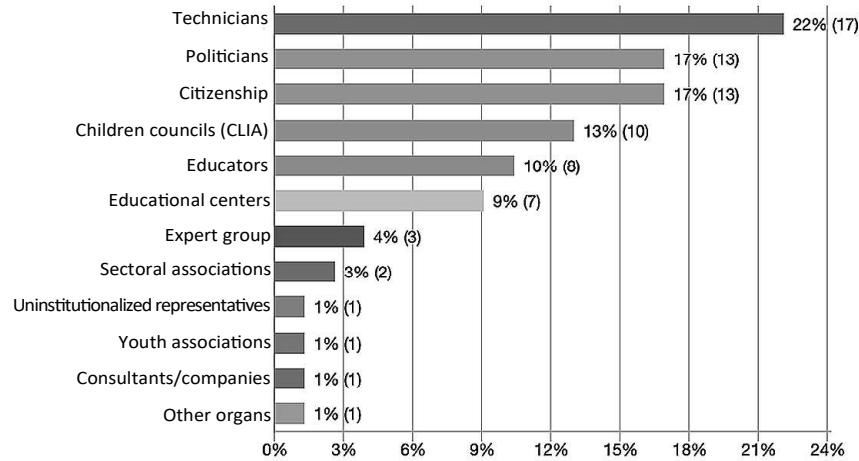
[EG7] Municipal technical staff play an important role near the end of the participation process, as they provide technical advice and draw up feasibility reports on the proposals before the final vote.

As for politicians, mayors or councillors from different areas such as education, childhood, and adolescence participate to varying degrees. Their role is variable and depends on the degree of empowerment of participatory experience.

[EP13] At the end of the process, proposals that emerged were presented to elected officials in the plenary session.

[EP1a] The Childhood and Adolescence Council, from which the proposals come to us, consists of the Mayor, the Councillor for Childhood and Adolescence, the Council for Education, the Head of the Primary School, the Head of the Municipal Nursery School, and representatives of children from 6 to 14 years of age. From this Council, proposals in the field of Childhood and Adolescence are extracted and agreed upon by all actors.

Figure 3 – Actors



Source: authors.

Children actively participate in childhood, adolescence, and youth development. It is curious how many of these municipalities include youth participation, which occurs between the ages of 16 and 35.

Local councils for children and adolescents are also important, and are a significant part of the Valencian panorama. These are collegiate bodies in which children (and other actors) can make decisions that affect them on a regular basis. The level of autonomy is variable; however, decisions, as seen above, are usually supervised by adults or groups of adults.

[EG6a] It is like a Children's Council, but every year all Primary 6 pupils take part. They are all part of the educational process, and they all go through plenary sessions to choose their proposals.

Educators usually play the role of dynamizers and facilitators in the participatory process and may even play an active role in decision-making.

[EP6] Dynamization of deliberative workshops.

The latter may be linked to schools or a part of the town council's education department. Collaboration with schools is important, although not the majority. However, the relationship between the school and local institutions can be interwoven:

[EP13] We worked together with the Education Department and schools in the municipality.

[EG2a] Collaboration with educational centers.

The participation of actors such as non-institutionalized representatives, youth associations, sectoral associations, think tanks, consultants, and other bodies is rare. Except for the first two categories, the rest denote the active participation of adults in decision-making.

Non-institutionalized representatives:

[EP12] There was a children's plenary chaired by the Mayoress [...], but the election of the proposals to the process was made by the plenary composed of pupils from the two local schools.

Youth associations: [EP12] Associations can submit proposals they consider appropriate.

Group of experts: [EG7] There is a team of experts who run the workshops, and it is the group of children who participate in the whole process.

Sectoral associations: [EG5] [...] Federation of neighborhood associations.

Consultants/companies: [EP13] The company driving the process produces a workbook.

Other bodies: [EP2] Participation Council and School Council.

The importance given by informants to actors such as technicians and politicians denotes a tendency towards adult-centrism and tokenism, which, in a certain sense, undermines a deeper role for children and adolescents in participation processes. All participation must be realistic, and this requires the action of technicians, but the frequency with which these actors appear in the informants' discourses suggests that they have a more prominent role than children and adolescents. The appearance of Local Councils for Childhood and Adolescence in the decision-making process is

an important element, as it denotes an interest in continued participation over time. However, their appearance does not necessarily indicate effective participation (Abellán et al., 2022).

Conclusions

This work has provided the results of open-ended surveys distributed among city councils in the Valencian Community using a qualitative methodology that has allowed us to identify variables of interest for the study of participatory budgets for children and adolescents.

In this sense, it has been examined whether participatory budgets for children and adolescents incorporated a political and finalistic approach or, on the contrary, were focused on as part of a broader educational and democratic socialization process.

The majority of the informants, responsible for answering the survey for their respective local entities, reported a politically significant vision to improve public actions, although leaving more pedagogical and democratic training issues in the background. The inclusion of multiple adult actors in participatory budgets, as well as the design dedicated exclusively to being developed by adults and not by children, suggests the clear presence of an adult-centric bias (Proposition 1).

Participatory experiences offer learning opportunities not only for children and adolescents, but also for all parties involved in the process. If participatory budgeting experiences do not start from an educational

project, technocratic tendencies end up silencing democratic socialization tendencies. What is observed in this study indicates that educational and democratic socialization elements are relegated to the background, since decision-making itself can be influenced by the participation of a politician or a technician in youth councils or in the definition of the problem. The inclusion of the majority in a larger scheme or the use of their own institutions is an indication of the need to further improve public instruments.

Adults can act as facilitators of these processes; however, given that they are convened by local entities with the mandatory intervention of their public employees, the result of the decision-making of children can be affected by various technical corrections. In other words, both the will and meaning of children and adolescents' opinions can be modified in the implementation phase (Proposition 2).

Thus, the extensive meddling of actors beyond children is an indicator of the tendency towards adult-centrism. Profiles such as technicians, politicians, or expert groups do not seek to energize and help children decide. Rather, they have a classic political-administrative approach, in that they seek to generate diagnoses to improve their policies. Only a small portion of the arguments emphasize democratic education and empowerment.

It might be thought that developing instruments included in a political-administrative programme could improve child and adolescent participation. Their effective development does not guarantee that children will be genuine protagonists in public decision making.

A limitation of this study is that the responses corresponded exclusively to town councils, so it would be advisable to interview educators, on the one hand, and children and adolescents, on the other, to obtain a more holistic view of the phenomenon under study. In future research, the sample will be expanded with the aim of generating more evidence and observations, which will allow a greater interpretive and discursive scope of the resulting data to identify adult-centric and tokenistic situations.

This study adds value to the knowledge of the political subsystem of the Valencian Community and the literature on child and adolescent participation. From a methodological perspective, this reinforces the use of CAQDAS programs to understand the objectives of the study. It also delves into the literature on political participation and its effects on socialization. Despite its interest, this work is still exploratory in nature and should be reinforced by increasing the number of observations and conducting in-depth interviews that would help the researcher delve deeper into child participation and its understanding.

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