

# Student Voice and Participation in Intercultural Education

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents a multi-case study in the field of intercultural education and it refers to a project named “Voice of children and young people in the development of intercultural education”. The cases are critical action-research projects developed with three groups of middle and high school students. They participated in dialogic processes and shared leadership with their teachers. They co-designed projects, debated and became aware of critical issues related to cultural diversity in their educational communities. The purpose of the research is to analyze participatory processes and associated changes in relation to intercultural education and students’ voice frameworks. Personal changes of the students, such as self-awareness and attention to others and to relationships, and group changes such as cohesion, were underlined, as well as changes extended to other actors —teachers, other students, staff, tutors, and other members of the community— creating collaborative relationships, solidarity, and mutual recognition. There were visible changes during the most active period in which projects were held, but sometimes impacts still endured and deepened afterwards. This stresses the relevance of youngsters’ participatory projects engaged in intercultural processes and change.



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## 1 INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The concept of ‘student voice’ is now receiving increased attention in educational research. Many studies have been developed by listening to students, gathering first-hand accounts from children and young people who describe their experiences, self-perspectives, interactions, and schools. However, some have ventured further, transforming listening into dialogue so that all those involved in the educational context can collaborate to acknowledge problems and define courses of action. Some have gone further still, not only listening and dialoguing but also placing students on the front line, enabling them to initiate and

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## OPEN ACCESS

lead the transformative processes, encouraging others, and favouring spaces where every voice can be heard. The present research analyses these three levels of participation: listening, dialogue, and co-design of participatory projects, exploring the ways in which ‘hearing’ students’ voices evolves beyond simply listening to involving them in co-constructions of meanings and projects.

Shier (2001) proposes a five-level model of participation for children in schools: 1) Children are listened to; 2) Children are supported in expressing their views; 3) Children’s views are taken into account; 4) Children are involved in decision-making processes; 5) Children share power and responsibility for decision-making. In the present research, three levels of participation are also distinguished: listening (corresponds to Shier’s Level 1); dialogue (Levels 2 and 3); and co-design (Levels 4 and 5).

In a similar sense, Geest (2013) proposes three levels of participation —mutual talking; involvement in doing; and co-design. Although our concept of co-design is similar to Geest’s, in our study includes another important idea: that projects are not only co-designed but also built up by young people in order to promote wider participation (by listening, dialoguing, or even co-designing some processes with their partners). Indeed, throughout the projects reported here, participants became protagonists and leaders and engaged both their schools and/or local communities in educational dynamics, promoting the participation of other pupils in organized debates, workshops, artistic experiences, Facebook pages, documentary movies and other initiatives.

Interaction, participation, dialogue, and reflection are core dimensions of the development of intercultural education: they facilitate cultural decentralisation, mutual recognition and underpin the process of learning how to socialize with people from different cultural backgrounds. They drive the dynamic construction of pathways grounded in the diversity of interests, necessities, stories, and cultures. Taken together, they promote a collective creativity where differences are acknowledged and valued, yet also relativized and integrated into a common whole (Diaz-Aguado, 2004). Therefore, the action-research case studies presented here were designed to promote these dimensions within the school context, with children and young people engaged in diagnostic and decision-making processes, leading educational activities, and evaluation processes and results (Levels 4 and 5 of Shier’s model).

The growth of cultural diversity in contemporary societies and schools poses multiple challenges to educators, schools, and researchers. These new socio-cultural contexts are receiving increased attention in both education and research, and are starting to challenge current educational theory and epistemology (e.g. Abdallah-Pretceille, 2005). In this empirical work, we intend to contribute to the questioning of the relationship between the current research line on children and young people’s voices in school and intercultural education. To this end, two main objectives were established:

- To understand the dynamics of children and young people’s participation in processes which encourage the sharing of both power and responsibility and in which their voices are integrated into decision-making processes.
- To understand how those processes promote intercultural learning and other changes within participant groups and their communities.

It was always the intention to incorporate comprehension of these intercultural processes among the student participants during the projects described here. For that reason, cultural identities, family histories, national symbols, stereotypes, prejudices, self-understanding and self-esteem were issues approached and discussed in the encounters. Thus, the intention was to develop self and collective consciousness, to mobilize and engage people in actions with the potential to transform their local realities and create conditions for the development of self-sustained social networks, operating both locally and at distance on a virtual level.

## 2 INTERCULTURAL APPROACH AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

As schools have become more culturally diverse, some educators have identified the lack of adequate curricular and relational models to meet these new realities. Others are aware of the urgency of tackling the curriculum and the relational obstacles that lead to discrimination, failure, social exclusion, and even the denial of students' cultural identities. These issues have raised a theoretical and practical discussion that prioritises changes in the educational interaction model (Diaz-Aguado, 2004; Fleuri, 2003; Loo, Trakulkasemsuk, & Jimarkon, 2019). Several studies emphasize that educational opportunities should be created for the development of student autonomy and student sharing in decision-making, which requires cooperation and co-responsibility (e.g. Børhaug & Weyringer, 2019).

In the perspective which supports our research, meanings and conceptions of intercultural education are questioned in complex ways. Therefore, before examining the cultural diversity approach within educational contexts, it is important to clarify our understanding of concepts such as 'multiculturality', 'interculturality', and 'intercultural education'. Multiculturality is a fact, an observable reality which educators address on their daily professional lives, and about which they question themselves as to the best courses of action. The term "intercultural" refers to a line of action that privileges interaction during cultural encounters in order to create opportunities for mutual (re)cognition and the emergence of learning processes to enhance co-existence, without denying the conflict. Thus, interculturality aims to uncover identification between people from diverse cultural backgrounds, which allows reciprocity. Intercultural education is a theoretical concept and a praxis which aims to create the conditions for these goals to be achieved. It seeks to engage all citizens and it defends the idea that diversity is an asset and not a problem. In this regard, intercultural education makes sense in each and every educational context, as we are all different and differ within ourselves. As Leiva and Juan (2013, p. 73) states, "the challenge of inclusion of immigrant students belongs to the extent of the attention given to cultural diversity, though intercultural education goes beyond, is related to the critical construction of interaction, and the promoting of participation and innovation in curriculum and community."

So, the intercultural perspective advocates a complex, critical, ethical, and interactionist approach to cultural diversity, in which the prefix 'inter' is understood in a broad sense. This approach is an alternative to the 'kaleidoscopic view of reality', sometimes culturalist, some-

times psychological, sometimes sociological, that has dominated the study of this problem, as Abdallah-Preteille (2005) highlights. She proposes three alternative axes of analysis of intercultural education in line with this complex approach: the *epistemological axis*, based on a phenomenological interpretation of persons, and cultures, focusing on the interactions; the *ethical axis*, based on an ethics of alterity and care, and the *methodological axis*, which refers to the adoption of comprehensive, interpretative, and critical methodologies. Therefore, the focus on interactions among persons, groups, institutions, and communities is crucial, both in educational practice and research. This educational paradigm places the human relationships and the dialectic between identity and alterity in the heart of educational practice (Meunier, 2014; Rego et al., 2007). The intercultural approach pretends to be superseding of the binomial *cultural identity - personal identity*, insofar as each human being is not only a product of culture but also a producer.

Intercultural education is also both a self-reflective and intersubjective process. This relationship between the experience itself and reflection on that experience (Dewey, 2007) are the essence and the materialization of the formative process. Resorting to Freire (1980; 2000), the education for autonomy and freedom is an enriching process of consciousness. Education is not about assuming or fighting prejudices and stereotypes in an abstract way, but “working on the notion of prejudice, on their own prejudices, so that social interactions make no room for its reinforcement” (Abdallah-Preteille, 2005, p. 111). Educators are responsible for creating appropriate environments and enabling students to think for themselves and become more aware of their own cultural references. In this sense, students must be encouraged to reflect and share simulated situations, such as ethical dilemmas, for example, or to develop projects, with teachers, that put them in the face of dilemmas, conflicts and decision-making inherent in their own lives. The projects we present here have been developed in this last line. The educators have provided situations where students could cognitively elaborate the dimensions of everyday life and to experience its affective dimensions. The intercultural education involves a cognitive, emotional and ethical work that intertwines. This requires educational environments where each student has the chance to understand and recognize others, and through them, recognize their own cultures, facilitating self-knowledge and knowledge about others in a process of identity (re)building. Thus, intercultural education also presents an ethical demand embodied in the ‘Pedagogy of Otherness’. As Rego et al. (2007), affirm, intercultural communication is “a journey that begins with the discovery of false homogeneity of the culture of the other, continues with the recognition of their own diversity and ends with the perception of cultural similarities” (p. 485). The process of accepting diversity through cultural encounters enables human beings to build patterns of thought and action that imply a negotiation of meaningfulness with others. These learning processes are reflected in the development of intercultural skills that are “global skills of active and critical participation in social scenarios characterized by cultural diversity and multi-identity in individuals” (p. 482).

So, intercultural education also involves the development of the ability to formulate problems (keeping in mind cultural situations) and to seek connections among people, groups, and communities (Perry & Southwell, 2011), in order to join them together rather

than to question the differences between them. It is about exploring complexity and demands an educational exercise focused on the here-and-now, and in which people count more than cultures.

Literature scoping teacher education refers that classic training programs have not been able to meet the needs to respond to the challenges of multi/intercultural education (e.g. Gorski, 2009). Thus, some authors have proposed new approaches like culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010), culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2014), a highly qualified teacher education for the new majority (Nieto, 2009); and teacher education for social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2005; Gorski, 2009; Zeichner, 2009).

In most of these approaches to teacher education for diversity, action research is a very relevant strategy for both training and knowledge building (Pacheco & Freire, 2019).

Really, the involvement of both teachers and students in educational research projects is crucial to the success of these changes and for the development of knowledge about these issues (Fielding, 2016; Mitra, 2018).

### 3 THE VOICE OF STUDENTS IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF THEIR CONTEXTS

Student voice is power sharing and participation (Frison & Melacarne, 2017). Recent research focused on student voice has raised a variety of questions, among them: What participatory processes have developed in schools through which students' voices can be heard? What changes are observed in people, relationships, and structures? Which conditions favour (and which obstacles hamper) these processes and changes? Thus far, researchers (notably research teams from England, United States, Canada, and Australia) have presented some answers, but these are necessarily conditioned by circumstances, agents, and dynamics.

Regarding the conditions that favour students' participation, several factors have been identified, including the importance of commitment from teachers/school boards in encouraging the involvement of all students (Luck, 2006), creating leadership opportunities for young people (Mitra, 2018) and establishing a trusting environment (Cervone & Cushman, 2014). In terms of obstacles to greater student participation, the lack of time and space in the curriculum for students to be heard is an important factor (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Quaglia & Corso, 2014). Within the context of this study, it is important to note that Luck (2006) and Mitra (2018) highlight the importance of sustaining such voices and changes, in order that they do not recede, discontinue or lead to outrage because of failure to maintain achievements.

Regarding participatory modes, the literature highlights tutorials, forums and debates, peer mediation, student-led projects (in the school and the community), and social networking through the use of technology ((Mitra, 2018). Through such dialogic spaces (Hermans, 2003) multiple voices (internal and external) emerge and are translated in listening both to themselves and to the 'Other'. Concepts such as intercultural education and empowerment are interconnected, allowing the voice of students to be heard and acted upon (Rud-

duck & Flutter, 2004). This is a path with a transformative power (Sharma-Brymer, Davids, Brymer, & Bland, 2018) to facilitate dialogue between individuals and cultures where values, intentions, conceptions, and worldviews are exchanged and reconstructed. This may affect the construction of relationships and mutual affection, the transformation of the modes of knowledge production, the empowerment of individuals and groups, and the development of more equitable, inclusive, and democratic communities.

Studies have reported positive effects for students including engagement in active and critical citizenship, the development of autonomy, responsibility, creativity, reflexivity, and social leadership, along with stronger communication skills (Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018), as well as enhanced cooperation and negotiation (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Fielding, 2016, 2018). Active participation in the learning process is related to a consequent sense of control (Mitra, 2018) and educational success (Cook-Sather, 2018). Studies also reveal a positive impact on the building of identity and self-esteem, the sense of belonging, integration, and motivation (Cook-Sather, 2018). These translate into students exhibiting a greater sense of responsibility, sense of justice, commitment, and care towards the welfare of the school and the wider community (Gordon, 2019; O'Neill, 2018; Seale, Gibson, Haynes, & Potter, 2015). Moreover, impacts on schools include improved classroom practices (Matthews et al., 2018), enhanced curricula (Brooman, Darwent, & Pimor, 2015), stronger relationships both inside and outside schools, problem-solving, mutual learning, and the development of more democratic communities (Fielding, 2016; Mayes, 2018).

#### 4 METHOD

In line with the objectives and research questions, the present project followed a participatory approach, designed by the research team, as a community of practice, which included field researchers and university researchers. Participatory action research, as an emancipatory and critical approach (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Locke, Alcorn, & Neill, 2013), was adopted as the research strategy, due both to its research and formative potential, in line with the philosophy, ideals, and educational principles of the Project. These were to promote social justice (Ledwith, 2007) and agency (Somekh, 2006) through a creative and dialogical action, as an exercise of liberty and responsibility (Lovell, 2003) by educators and young people that would continue long after the action research study was completed.

As the main Project (*Voice of children and young people in the development of the intercultural education —short title "Voice Project" —*) involved several sub-projects, the research process was conceived, analysed, and reviewed transversely. This enabled the research to build on the methodological and educational similarities that held the field subprojects together but also to clarify their particularities. Contrasting situations and distinct courses of action could be tested in the field according to the dynamics and contexts of each subproject. Thus each subproject led to a case study with its own specificity and its own intrinsic investigative value. The dimensions common to the three subprojects included: (1) children and young people engaged in participatory research processes; (2) arts production

as a means of recognizing their perspectives and contexts, and of promoting dialogue and intercultural encounters; (3) use of technology/social networks to support these dialogues and encounters and to share their artistic products.

The field researchers were teachers from three different schools —and engaged in a community of practice— working together with scholars and the coordinators of the Intercultural Education MA programme, which yielded Master dissertations[i]. Following the participatory research, researchers in the field acted as educators, developing intercultural educational processes. In such educational research processes, there is a critical agenda where participants were both actors and authors of their lives and their surroundings. Therefore, the children and young people involved took part in the conception and development of projects within their respective educational communities.

In a case study, we value every point of view within each group, the global and complex image of the phenomena we intend to study, and their relationship with the social and cultural context in which they may occur. Participants' experiences and feelings are at the heart of this type of research. Accordingly, this case-study research uses inductive methods of analysis (Yin, 2005). Furthermore, in case study action-research there is also a transformative and critical intention; thus, the testimony presented in the case studies herewith aims to contribute to a change in educational contexts and the intercultural education of the children and young people involved in the projects. "A case study, especially an action-research design, has the advantage of gathering together different plans —epistemological (understanding), pragmatic (action), and ethics" (Amado, 2017, p. 136).

The Project was developed during a period of two years. In the first school year subproject A took place (along with other 3 subprojects, not presented in this paper because data were not organised in the form of case study or of dissertation).

During this first school year, common research tools, such as initial and final focus-group interviews, were developed. This corresponds to the first cycle of action research. In the following school year, the second cycle of action research took place with two new subprojects (B and C). These benefited from the experience of the first projects through the use of tools and strategies, such as focus-group interviews and Facebook pages, which were developed and tested during the first subprojects and then adapted to new contexts. These tools and strategies, along with the artefacts produced by students during the subprojects, were a means of both education and research.

#### 4.1 Research design

The investigation process followed a cyclical action investigation scheme. Each case began with a participatory diagnosis, through a focus group interview with the young people, which aimed to: i. recognition of the respective group and of each one within the group; and ii. data collection that would allow to know the interests, suggestions, wishes and expectations of the young people in the group, in order to outline a collective project. From the objectives set collectively, strategies were defined and the decisions were made by the group of young people, led by the respective teacher-researcher. In general, these strategies were based on youngsters' participation, the production of artistic activities and the cre-



In all case studies, the procedure for content analysis was inductive and included the accounts/discourses of those participating in the interviews (in case-study A, these were students A1, A2...; in case-study B, students B1, B2...; and in case-study C, students C1, C2...). We also analysed data collected in field notes and journals, made by the teacher/s/researchers, which contained statements from students, other teachers, parents, school management boards, teaching assistants, and other community members. The data were organized and categorized through aggregation by units of meaning, respecting the categorization rules (Bardin, 2008). The reliability was sought through collaborative teamwork, both by adjusting criteria that later met the consensus of the research team and the constant sharing of data analysis processes.

The data were organized around two themes: *educational processes in the construction of interculturality*; and *changes perceived by participants during and after the project*. The theme changes generated three categories: changes in individual students; in groups of students; in school, families and local communities. Intercultural issues were present in all these change domains and it was important that they were analysed through an integrative and complex research approach which was not limited only to one kind of subject. However, students' changes were the main results observed and analysed. Changes were inferred from the comparison between the perceptions of students at the beginning and the end of the project, as expressed in focus-group interviews, and from the teachers/researchers' field notes.

### **4.3 The three subprojects: brief description of context and participants**

Despite springing from a common project with the same research design, the three subprojects were conducted in a flexible way as appropriate to each educational context.

#### **4.3.1 Case study A The Multicultural Project**

This subproject involved 18 volunteer pupils, aged between 13 - 15 years old, attending the 7th, 8th, and 9th grades in a school located in a town near Lisbon (Portugal), where 19% of attendees are migrants from diverse countries, mostly from Brazil, Portuguese-speaking African countries (Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique), and Eastern European countries (Romania, Moldavia, and Ukraine). There were also a significant number of Portuguese students from immigrant families (usually said second generation). The group of volunteers reflected the diversity of nationalities in the school. All of the volunteer students were active participants in a School Club called *The Multicultural Project*, whose main purpose was to develop intercultural exchanges within the school. This subproject was conceived in response to the significant multicultural situation of school and the willingness of the teacher/researcher and the students to transform group meetings into dynamics of mutual recognition, and to disseminate these dynamics to the wider school community.

### **4.3.2 Case study B – Class 6B**

This subproject involved a 6th grade class of 20 students, aged between 11 and 15 years old in a school situated in a suburb of Lisbon with great cultural diversity. This diversity is reflected in the school and particularly in Class 6B – with six second-generation immigrant students (the languages and cultures of their parents' origin were in some cases predominant at home) and the other students with distinct cultural origins. The leading researcher was the class teacher, who found low expectations and negative perceptions from colleagues and other staff regarding the students' performance and behaviour. In order to deal with this situation, she challenged the students to engage small creative projects, within the school and within the local community, in which they should make their own decisions based on dialogue and acknowledgement of their own desires and interests. Their enthusiasm about these projects soon extended to their peers, parents and other teachers.

### **4.3.3 Case study C - Be Different**

This subproject involved a group of 14 students, aged between 17 and 21 years old, in the 12th grade of a school located in a “dormitory” town near Lisbon with a high rate of immigrants from the Portuguese-speaking African countries, Eastern Europe and Brazil. The majority of students are from low income and low academic achievement families. The group was composed of volunteers and comprised nine Portuguese students, five of whom with foreign parents (mother, father, or both) and five students from Guinea-Bissau, Angola, Brazil and Romania. Together they were challenged by the teacher/researcher to engage in “Voice Project”, to dialogue and exchange experiences about their personal and cultural stories, and to develop an intercultural project in their school.

## **5 RESULTS**

As mentioned above, we will present the results of the data analysis considering two axes of analysis: the participation processes and the changes perceived by the participants resulting from these processes.

Several convergences and particularities among the subprojects with regard to the educational processes were found and are addressed just below. Participation was at the heart of all the processes and it was translated not only into dialogue' processes where conflict was several times present though always overcome but also in the sharing of decision-making and in shared leadership.

### **5.1 Students' participation**

Actually, students' participatory processes were at the core of the Project. Each subproject was shaped and sustained through intense dialogue, from the stage of strategy definition to the development of the activities within each group, which extended to the schools themselves. The co-design and implementation of each project aimed to engage others in activities such as debates, workshops, meetings, documentary production, and fashion show.

Students saw themselves as active participants in the process (e.g. “We all work and play together”, B16). In all three case-studies, the student groups involved other partners (e.g. schoolmates and school staff, elderly people from a local charitable institution and parents/-tutors), so that their contact with diversity was widened and revealed within a frame of cooperation and healthy human relationships. The teachers played a key role in facilitating these processes. The action of the teachers/researchers who lead these projects in the field was based not only on their professional experience but also on their post-graduate training at the university context which provided them with theoretical support. Thus, group dynamics was developed in a context of shared leadership, as children and youngsters were taking part in decision-making and promoting activities.

Take the example of a group’s decision to hold a fashion show. They decided to call the project “Be Different”, a space “where everyone can and should participate, a concept without prejudice, open to all the students in the school, and we will also invite people outside the school”(C6). After deciding on the activities, the working group developed an action plan where decision-making was shared by all. “I think we have been participating in all the project – in the preparation, the interviews, the organization, it has been amazing”, said C5 in the final focus-group. Planning the show involved intense and highly participatory work in which the group experienced confrontations and challenges, as well as very strong emotions and feelings. These demanded attitudes of care and empathy on the part of some group members to avoid conflict with their peers, but the long process of cultural decentralization-centralization involved resulted in a production comprising elements of many of the young people’s cultural backgrounds.

These initiatives facilitated encounters which led to shared knowledge and created new forms of participation that could potentially empower students and strengthen their self-image. This is illustrated through fragments of the young people’s speech and in some of the field notes, for example: “A1 taught younger students her native language: Ukrainian. She was proud of it”; “I think that organizing activities have contributed to changing our image”, said A5 in the final interview; A3 also said “preparing activities for elementary school students was also important! People saw that we could do it!”. The dimensions of dialogue and decision-making were revealed as particularly relevant to the strengthening of self-image: “It is a whole; it is about being able to talk about whatever we want, and then we show, and also listen, to others” (C1).

## 5.2 Changes perceived by the participants in the Project

One of the key aims of the Project was to create intercultural change, and changes of different scales were observed both during and after completion of the subprojects. These ranged from personal and group changes in the students themselves to wider-scale changes in schools, families, and the surrounding community, potentially impacting the way the school is perceived from the outside. The following section discusses these differing levels of change.

### 5.2.1 Intercultural learning

Intercultural learning is highlighted in our data, both at an attitude and knowledge level, with examples such as paying attention to others, acceptance of differences and mutual respect, integrating and welcoming others, searching for the common good, and increasing knowledge of cultural diversity and of each other's culture. The expansion of participants' cultural knowledge was most evident in those groups with higher levels of cultural diversity (Cases A and C). "We all have friends from different origins, different cultures! .... friends ...from Russia, Brazil, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and also Portuguese friends" (A1; A4.); "I have learned many things about the Ukrainian culture..." (A5). Working with life stories during the focus-group interviews was shown to be particularly important in enabling students to get to know each other's cultures and relativize their conditions and limitations. Comments from students reported during the interviews included: "I think I'm more understanding of some people after getting to know their stories" (C5); "(...) I also got to know more of C6's culture. I enjoyed learning her story" (C3); "I think it made us more aware of what can happen in our relationships" (C2).

Such changes in closeness, empathy, solidarity and altruism were dimensions that had manifestation in students' actions. Conviviality became clear over time, as these fragments of students' discourse reveal: "I enjoyed very much the way we are all in solidarity, some more than others" (B13); "We have helped each other, sometimes we are patient ... we are more understanding, we think about the consequences" (B14). Mutual respect and acceptance were always quite present, as these statements show: "We have to respect people as they are.... There can't be any difference if we're in the same school and if we live in the same place!". In all cases, dialogue was emphasized as the driver for respect, acceptance, and comprehension of difference, and the activities allowed participants to express themselves freely, making them more reflexive, aware and attentive to others: "even in feelings, people who seem to me to have no feelings and then after all they have!!!" (C11); "(...) it helped to know ourselves more deeply, it is interesting" (C9).

- **Group cohesion and friendship**

Changes at the level of interpersonal relations within the project groups were quite evident, both by the direct observations of the researchers/teachers and in the reflections made by the students during the final focus-group interviews.

In Case Study A, the group was very diverse, but friendships were established not only among students who from the beginning felt connected and trusted each other but also among those who discovered that they shared experiences and interests: "(...) I found out we have similar interests (...)", said A1, in the final focus group. Students got along quite well, and increasingly trusted each other, to the extent that some of the interview sessions became places where they could share confidences and intimate problems. Throughout the various activities, students felt they became closer to each other and built stronger friendships: "We've made new friends.... We've met new people" (A1); "we are more united" (A5).

In Case Study B, class members did not demonstrate any particular connections at the beginning of the project. However, by the end of the year, the students recognised the changes at this level once the topic of group cohesion was substantially explored, noting that: “the class is now more united; we’re more friendly with each other” (B2); “we’ve been closer, there have been fewer conflicts” (B7).

In Case Study C, individual integration into the group, through constructed conviviality, connection, and mutual support, was observed: “We all get along much better now” (C3); “I did not know some classmates, and this [the Project] was good so we could get to know each other better and get along” (C2); “I was not at ease before, but it made me feel more integrated into the class” (C4); “we can overcome problems and difficulties by relying on each other” (C5). It was very meaningful for the students to have responsibility for certain activities and for their voices to be heard, to know that they could cooperate with each other and improve some aspects of the school. It is also important to note here that when one of the group members decided to drop out of the school, the group’s insistence that she never give up led her back to school and she completed secondary school (12<sup>th</sup> year).

### **5.2.2 Changes in the school, the families, and the local communities**

The changes brought about through the project were not limited to the participating students. As the students’ voices became more visible at school, affirming their opinions and actively intervening in school and community life, the projects made a difference to their integration and to their schools and neighbourhoods. These changes were noticed both by other members of the school and of the wider community who directly engaged in the activities, for example, the elderly residents of the day-care centre: “SCM would like to thank you for your kind words, for a better, more reasonable and caring society, where important roles for every actor can be found. We share with you the good results of your initiative, and you can count on our support.” (director of SCM). The reaction of the families regarding the participation of their youngsters in the initiatives promoted by The Multicultural Project was also very positive: “In our opinion, all this involvement with students and teachers has been great; we feel like our collaboration has been very fruitful” (parents’ representative opinion). The students in class 6B also promoted activities open to the whole school community, allowing other students from different classes, namely younger students, to be heard as well. Parents’ and teachers’ participation on the Facebook page was also noteworthy, as they expressed their opinions about the activities, suggesting new ones and encouraging students to participate. In the case of subproject “Be Different”, a broader participation in the project was evidenced; for example, the last meeting organized by the participating students involved their schoolmates, teachers and a member of the school board and parents were very enthusiastic and encouraging.

## **6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

These results are in tune with those obtained by many other researchers focused on the voice of students who highlight the importance of participatory processes involving students and

schools (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018; Fletcher, 2005; Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018). Special attention is given to intercultural learning and to the development of an ethic of alterity and care, based on self-reflective and intersubjective processes and built on the interaction with others (Abdallah-Preteceille, 2005; Diaz-Aguado, 2004; Fleuri, 2003; Loo et al., 2019; Meunier, 2014; Rego et al., 2007). Face-to-face and online dialogues, student-lead projects and artistic and technological mediations revealed to be interdependent processes of intercultural education that give form to a creative and critical praxis.

The voices of children and young people emerge, at different levels of participation, a critical participation towards the transformation of their contexts. They are involved in co-design processes (Geest, 2013), along with their teachers (Loo et al., 2019). Con este fin, involucraron a otros. For this purpose, they involved other pupils and stakeholders within their schools and local communities. These participants are, in turn, not only passive spectators who simply listen but also active actors, involved in doing and supported to express their views, which are then taken into account (Levels 1 and 2 of Shier, 2001). Besides dialoguing and doing, they sometimes take the initiative to return, in activities they design (in Case study B, for example, the elderly also developed activities designed for the children). Therefore, they are involved in decision-making processes and share responsibilities (Shier's Levels 4 and 5). Understanding that the projects connect people, promote participation and contribute to make changes that go beyond the protagonists is a motivating factor that favours an increasing enthusiasm and involvement. However, limits, difficulties and resistances were noticed, and we would like to be able to overcome them in future cases. In particular, the difficulties of mobilizing other stakeholders in schools because of their institutional routines required a large investment of energy from teacher-researchers that was not easy to sustain. The importance of these pivotal elements seems fundamental to maintain the project in action, at least over a long period. The action-research processes, although valid and considered by participants as both challenging and stimulating, are very demanding and need collective responsibility and commitment. We detected also limits and potentialities in the sustainability of the involvement of the communities, whose ways of collaboration did not endure over time.

Therefore, we consider that is important to further explore networking and collaboration between universities and schools in order to support these projects and guide their expansion and extension.

## 7 FINAL REFLECTIONS

We change the world by changing ourselves, and we change ourselves by changing the world. Democracy, justice, and freedom are the agenda in which we are actors and co-authors of transformation processes. However, freedom requires awareness of the programs and regimes of truth that make us act according to a particular social agenda. In this sense, voice is conquered during a long quest for authenticity and intersubjectivity, a quest for the truth we create together. In the core of the Voice, we may find an increasingly holistic, intercultural and inclusive education.

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