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ENABLERS, BARRIERS AND PROPOSALS FOR CHILD PARTICIPATION IN SPANISH MUNICIPALITIES

Facilitadores, barreras y propuestas para la participación infantil en el ámbito municipal en España

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INTRODUCTION. The EU Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027) has highlighted the importance of strengthening working relationships between the political authorities and children population to defend youth rights and inclusion in local, national and European decision-making. This paper aims to identify enabling factors and barriers to participatory practices with children and to make proposals for developing these practices in the context of the network of municipalities belonging to the International Association of Educating Cities (IAEC) and the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative (CFCI). Identifying these factors will enable to propose strategic actions leading to a full children participation in political and democratic life. **METHOD.** The study was part of a nationwide project with a mixed-method approach. Data were collected via two self-administered online surveys with ad hoc design. The sample consisted of 136 girls, boys and adolescents, 191 local government officers and 88 elected representatives. The resulting data was analysed via a content analysis using Atlas-ti software. **RESULTS.** Respondents agreed on the need for greater political commitment towards child participation, and to increase the arenas where under-18s can make decisions and carry out initiatives to transform their social environments. **DISCUSSION.** The obtained results support the importance of valuing child participation and highlighted the need to promote cooperative actions between girls, boys and adolescents and policy makers to influence municipal policy. The need for child participation as an indispensable element of the public sphere was made visible, for it to be articulated in settings where children can work together with elected representatives, and for it to have a tangible impact on municipal policy, as recommended by the Council of Europe.

Keywords: Barriers, Children's rights, Enablers, Local government, Qualitative research, Participation.

Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1990) stipulates that children have the right to have their voices heard in all decisions affecting them in the different settings in which they grow, develop and learn (articles 12-13, 15-17). “Participation” is defined as the right of under-eighteens to be involved in matters and decisions affecting them and to have their views taken into account by policy makers. The CRC also recognizes the right to collective child participation through assemblies and associations (Article 13). The political and community spheres are identified as genuine spaces for child participation.

The community and political spheres offer plentiful opportunities for the exercise of the children’s citizenship rights (Novella *et al.*, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). However, putting these rights into practice is a complex issue and remains a major challenge facing the CRC and democratic societies in general, as recognised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009, 2016) and the Council of Europe (COE, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/home>).

The current COE Strategy for 2022-2027 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2022) continues to stress child participation as a strategic objective in the European policy agenda, since entrenched practices, sociocultural attitudes and political and economic barriers persist in circumscribing this right. Local policies play an important role in promoting child participation (Tonucci, 2018). Firstly, local actors are in close contact with the child and adolescent population and can develop context-specific initiatives which are more likely to have a direct impact. Also, they can furnish the infrastructure (human and economic resources, facilities, advisory services and time) to ensure this. In Europe, municipal policies promoting child participation have a tendency towards, on the one hand, legal regulation, and on the other, broad autonomy in decision-making, which depends on local policy priorities (Augsberger *et al.*, 2018; Forde *et al.*, 2020). In Spain, according to the results of the 2nd National Strategic Plan for Childhood and Adolescence 2013-2016 (PENIA, Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality [MSSSI], 2015), in this period child participation was the least valued objective among administrators and elected officials. This shows that child participation is currently more an idealised discourse than a genuine conviction, at least in the Spanish context. In order to make progress in this area, then, certain obstacles other than those involving resources and infrastructures must be overcome; among them, society’s collective image of children and their political empowerment (Agud *et al.*, 2014).

Enablers of and barriers to children’s participation in the public sphere

Research on the enablers and barriers to child participation in the public sphere is scarce, and there are even fewer studies focusing on this issue in local politics (Derr and Tarantini, 2016). The documentary sources available are from international bodies such as the COE and the CRC. Both hold the idea of child participation as a constant, comprehensive, multi-setting process that unfolds at international, national, regional and municipal levels and centres on the development of participatory arenas in which children and adolescents (CAA) can acquire greater control over decisions and actions affecting their lives and environments.

This study starts from this international discursive and regulatory context. The very concepts of participation and citizenship impel us to do so, since it is not the same to theorise child participation—or indeed, citizen participation—from the standpoint of liberalism than from the community perspective, although in both cases citizen participation is key. Despite this, in political practices of all ideological stripes, the type of participation given least priority is that of children (Jäntti and Kurdela, 2021), with all likelihood because they do not provide votes.

To analyse the enablers and barriers to child participation, this study adopts two different conceptual frameworks. First, the ecological model of child participation proposed by Gal (2017), and second, the model developed by RAND Europe and Eurochild (2021), which analyses child participation in the democratic and political life of the European Union.

The ecological approach (Gal, 2017) argues that child participation in the public sphere is furthered when the macrosocial system (the sociocultural and political environments), the meso-system (school, municipal and community settings), the microsystem (the family) and the personal environment (individual capacities) act in synergy to position child empowerment at the core of their concerns. The participatory model, in addition, proposes a coordinated, sustained approach with permanent mechanisms giving CAA the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes (RAND Europe Report, 2021). A study by Forde *et al.* (2020) highlights as major obstacles the narrow social image of child citizenship and the scarcity of resources (both economic and human) allocated to it. The findings of the European Network of Youth Advisors Forum (ENYA, 2020) are similar to those obtained in the former study.

The studies consulted all identified four major categories of factors that facilitate or hinder child participation (Crowley *et al.*, 2020; Hub na nÓg, 2015; Ministry of Education, Social Policy and Sports [MEPSD], 2008), namely: (a) institutional and organizational commitment; (b) training and community competence; (c) resources (economic, human, infrastructural and time); and (d) the use of process evaluation as a tool for improvement and knowledge transfer that can work more systematically and rigorously towards developing CAA participation.

The main objective of this study was to analyse the enablers and barriers perceived by CAA, local government officers and elected officials regarding participatory practices for children at the municipal level. Further, the study aimed to outline concrete action proposals to enhance children's participation in the community and local politics. Contrasting the three points of view—of local government officers, elected representatives and CAA—made it possible to identify specific needs in the exercise of child participation and to extrapolate recommendations for actions.

Method

The study formed part of a larger research project of mixed-method design (Wood and Smith, 2018). The data collected were yielded by a descriptive study on the state of child participation in municipalities belonging to IAEC and CFCI and represented phase one of the wider project. The study consisted of an online self-administered survey (Díaz de Rada, 2012, 2021) designed to explore the enablers, barriers and challenges regarding child and adolescent participation practices as perceived by CAA, local government officers and elected representatives at the municipal level.

Sample

A total of 415 people participated in the study. Of these, 191 were local government officers and 88 were elected officials working in departments or areas of local administration with direct involvement in child participation policies. Respondents came from 179 Spanish municipalities belonging to the total of 386 that are members of IAEC and/or CFCI. 35.8% of the councils participating formed part of the CFCI network and 24.2% of IAEC, while 28% belonged to both networks and the remaining 12% to other networks. The adult informant sample had a sampling error of $\pm 5.4\%$, with a confidence interval of 95% and a p-q of 0.5 (with probability sampling).

The local government officers were mainly middle-aged (61% from 36 to 55) and mostly women (61%). 90% held university degrees or higher and more than half (53.9%) had specific training in CAA participation. The elected representatives were also mainly middle-aged (52.6% from 36 to 55 years old) and mostly female (58%), with 30% from departments of education, 20% social services, 14.3% children and youth, 11% culture and community development, and 1% sustainability, participation and urban planning.

Turning to the children and adolescents, 136 aged 10 to 14 were surveyed. Of these, 69 identified themselves as girls, 63 as boys, and 4 did not provide this information. The CAA were from 15 Spanish municipalities belonging to three Autonomous Communities (Galicia, Andalusia and Catalonia).

Two-stage cluster sampling was used, selecting the primary units (municipalities) by convenience, and the final units (individuals) by non-random routes and by convenience.

Instruments

The data-gathering instruments were as follows:

- The Childhood and Participation Questionnaire (in two parallel adapted versions). This was designed for the elected officials and local government officers and comprised closed demographic questions and open questions on: (1) the forms of CAA participation in their municipalities; (2) the practices and experiences of child participation in local politics; (3) the opportunities, obstacles and challenges associated with child citizenship and their participation in the community, institutions and governance.
- CAA Questionnaire (in a single version) addressed to the children and adolescents (aged 10-14). This comprised closed demographic questions and open questions exploring their participation in terms of: (1) its meaning and value; (2) its possibilities and realities in the municipalities; (3) the importance attributed to it by local councils; (4) enabling and hindering factors; (5) proposals for boosting it.

Procedure

The questionnaires for the elected officials and local government officers were administered online using the Alchemer platform (February-September, 2020). Respondents were contacted previously, inviting them to take part and apprising them of confidentiality, informed consent

(Organic Law 3/2018 of December 5) and the commitments of the research team. For the CAA, data were collected using Microsoft Forms from November 2021 to June 2022. The study complied with the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Framework Program (H2020), the Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) model and the Keeping Children Safe Standards, and was approved by the University of Barcelona (Spain) ethics committee. Once the data had been gathered and validated, two databases were designed with the labels and weightings corresponding to each questionnaire, and the data were analysed as described in the following section.

The quality of the study was ensured by triangulation of respondents (Flick, 2015) and researchers (Cresswell, 2013) and a stakeholder review (Stake, 2013). IAEC and CFCI managers were involved in the design of the instruments, the data collection process, the contrasting of results and their return to respondents.

Data analysis

The statistical analysis program SPSS was used to process the demographic data, while those yielded by the open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively (Martínez Miguélez, 2004) via specialized Atlas.ti software. A category map made up of twelve categories was created. As Table 1 shows, some of these were identified by the three groups surveyed, while others were not.

TABLE 1. Categories used for qualitative data analysis

Categories	Identified in local govt. officer responses	Identified in elected official responses	Identified in CAA responses
Adaption of initiatives to CAA needs and rights	x	x	x
Interdepartmental cooperation	x	x	
Inter-council cooperation	x	x	
Culture of CAA participation	x	x	x
Skills and training	x	x	
Social impact of projects	x	x	x
Implementation of proposals	x	x	x
Political commitment and leadership	x	x	x
Planning and organisation	x	x	
Resources	x	x	x
Sustainability	x	x	
Visibility and dissemination	x	x	x

Note. Table designed by the authors.

The categories were defined by means of a prior analysis of the data based on the main categories from the study objectives (enablers, barriers and proposals). Lastly, a number of analytical reviews of the materials were performed, which yielded new categories and subcategories related to each other in an abductive or hypothetical manner.

Results

Results took as a reference the dimensions analysed in the study, namely: (a) enablers of child participation; (b) barriers to it; and (c) proposals for developing it. Table 2 shows the subdimensions that were identified for each of these, outlined below.

TABLE 2. Subdimensions identified from the content analysis

Factors that ...	Content
Enable CAA participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having structures and bodies of CAA participation • Specific CAA participation strategies implemented • Political commitment and leadership • Cooperation with schools • Other important factors
Hinder CAA participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence and/or inefficacy of existing structures and mechanisms and lack of adaptation of initiatives to CAA needs and rights • Social representation of CAA citizenship • Limited commitment from politicians and other actors • Lack of resources • Invisibility of forms, settings and structures of participation • Impact of COVID-19
Emerge as proposals for development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address CAA more, working together • Boost participation practices for and with CAA • Reframe CAA citizenship and participation • Strengthen participatory practices and the functioning of participatory bodies • Increase number of settings for dialogue with authorities and peers

Note. Table designed by the authors.

Enablers of child participation

Having structures and bodies for child participation

This was the factor most often cited by the three groups surveyed. Participants referred to the local child and adolescent councils (LCAC), their regulation and their status as a consultative body; to children's plenary sessions; to participation commissions; and to CAA participation bodies in general. They stressed the importance of "active participation with the government team" (elected officials), not linked exclusively to an area/department for children or youth, but "in all aspects of the city" (local government officer), and with real impact, in which "they ask the LCAC to work with us and we are taken into account" (CAA). The government officers and elected representatives coincided in highlighting the institutional backing that the programs they had put in place received from joining the Network of Educating Cities and the Child Friendly Cities Initiative.

Specific CAA participation strategies implemented

CAA referred to initiatives of a consultative nature such as "voting", "surveys", "collecting proposals via an app"; activities involving dialogue and debate, such as "social media forums" and

“school assemblies”; direct communication actions, such as “visiting the city council”, “video call with the mayoress”, “writing letters to the city council”; and actions of dissent, such as “complaints to the council” and “demonstrations”. Both the government officers and elected officials coincided in highlighting the importance of consultative processes for CAA on matters affecting them, for example by involving them in the design of initiatives through “organizing meetings, dialogues among professionals and CAA to exchange opinions and enhance initiatives” and via actions involving the design of local facilities and resources management, such as “park design” and “participatory budgets”. The boundaries between child participation at the municipal level and other forms of participation were blurred, however, since numerous responses from CAA and elected officials referred to other forms of participation (culture, leisure, sports, etc.).

Commitment and political leadership

Much importance was given to the proactivity of government personnel. Discussing this, respondents used concepts such as keenness, belief, complicity, conviction, will, dedication and engagement. CAA affirmed that “the mayor is aware that that children and adolescents can contribute a lot to the municipality” (CAA). Elected officials stressed that “sustaining political will over time” (elected official) should not be disrupted by changes in government. The administrative officers emphasized the “political engagement and commitment of key actors” (local government officer). Likewise, reference was made to leadership and the importance of supporting, empowering, being a driving force, showing trust, interest, sensitivity, and seeking consensus and collaboration. On many occasions, when CAA mentioned these factors, they did so in the form of proposals and not as a recognition of something they saw as established fact.

Working with schools

CAA stressed the role of schools in promoting participation: “It’s the only place where they ask us questions”; “It increases children’s participation”. Schools were cited to a greater extent than other actors (families, associations or local government itself). The government officers also highlighted the importance of working with schools, where they found support, cooperation, alliances and engagement, seeing them as “allies and as suppliers of assets to the council” and “a bridge between children and the local administration”.

Other important factors (participatory culture; closeness to CAA needs and interests; safe and friendly spaces; resources)

The three groups of informants also coincided in highlighting three further factors: sociocultural progress in ways of seeing children and their participation (i.e. seeing them as citizens and taking their opinions into account); the promotion of initiatives and actions adapted to their needs and interests; and cultivating the communication and dissemination of the settings and potentials of CAA participation. As opposed to the other two groups, CAA stressed the importance of having safe settings where they were well treated, valuing positively “being treated well and working together without discrimination”, being able to “go without fear”, and finding “respect for the LGTB community” and “people who can help, listen and understand”. On the other hand, the government officers and elected representatives referred more to the importance of organizational issues and human and economic resources.

Barriers to child participation

Most of participants' responses concerning hindrances to CAA participation were formulated as "lack/absence/scarcity of" or "need for", thus clearly indicating the path to take in terms of proposals for improvements that they saw as important.

Absence and/or inefficacy of existing structures and mechanisms and lack of fit between initiatives and CAA rights and needs

This was one of the factors most frequently cited by all three groups surveyed. Firstly, they remarked that it was difficult to find a place for participation in the children's schedules due to an excess of school and extracurricular activities. Secondly, they highlighted methodological rigidity and adult resistance to modifying long-established activities, formats and content that were unappealing to children: "They don't work, but they're kept up for symbolic reasons" (elected official). CAA cited specific issues to be addressed, namely, the brevity of meetings, since "in one meeting we can't do everything we've planned"; limited numbers of places; discontinuity in projects; the digital gap; lack of representativeness; and unequal access to participation.

Social representations of child citizenship

Local government officers and elected representatives coincided in highlighting a tendency to see CAA as objects of protection, thereby denying them their status as subjects with full rights. CAA recognized their legal minority as a barrier and stated that they felt they had no influence, also identifying certain adult-centric attitudes and beliefs among the older generations, such as hypocrisy, lack of respect, mistrust, belittlement, unwillingness to listen and understand, denial of opinions, appropriation of decisions, etc.: "They don't believe that we children can contribute anything good to the municipality", and: "They think it's not necessary to take young minds into account". Likewise, all three groups surveyed noted the absence of a participatory culture, a generalized lack of knowledge about its meaning, scope and implications, and a scarcity of participatory habits. CAA stated: "We don't understand it, we don't care and it's difficult", identifying attitudes such as lack of interest and motivation, reluctance, apathy, discouragement, lack of commitment, etc.; and they also saw shyness, distrust and "fear of doing it wrong" or "not knowing how to do it" as handicaps to involvement.

Limited commitment from politicians and other actors

The absence of political engagement and the tendency not to respond to demands or to do so only partially and late were criticized by respondents. The government officers remarked that, in many cases, "The projects presented by both children and adolescents' councils are really interesting and offer ideas, but in the end they don't get any further than being proposals". They remarked that "An immediate response is needed —positive or negative, but well-founded and argued— so that the council can have a participatory and not just consultative role". The elected officials acknowledged that changes in priorities stemmed from governmental changes and CAA stressed that "the mayor is too busy to attend to CAA". They also referred to the need for greater collaboration with families, due to the need for CAA to seek family authorization to participate in certain settings.

Lack of resources

While CAA made this point in a general sense, the local government officers specifically remarked on the insufficiency and inadequacy of the existing economic and material resources available. They criticized the fact that they had “few human resources to carry out the participatory processes with these age groups” and that “the working day is overloaded with bureaucracy”.

The invisibility of the forms, settings and structures of participation was perceived as an aspect to be improved, via communication and dissemination campaigns that would counteract widespread public lack of information.

The impact of COVID-19 (anti-contagion measures, for example) was seen as a barrier to CAA participation.

Proposals for developing child participation

Children and adolescents’ ideas for promoting their participation were more specific than those of the government officers and elected representatives, who focussed on more generic issues. From the triangulation carried out, the following proposals were identified.

Addressing children more and working together

All three groups of respondents concurred on this idea, and it was one of the most often mentioned. CAA stated that their opinions should be taken into account and there should be opportunities to “involve kids more in the things that are done in our municipality”. Specifically, they called for “the mayor to ask for our opinions and act on them, otherwise it’s useless” and for “the city council to reach out to us so we can work together more”. The elected officials agreed on this, specifying that it was necessary “to respond to long-standing demands”, and stating that participation should be binding and have an impact on local policy, “to improve the feedback process regarding the proposals made by the CAA who participate in the children’s plenary session”. As proposals, the government officers highlighted involving more children and recognizing their civil rights: “bearing their opinions in mind when making decisions”. The elected officials remarked that advances could be made by acting on CAA suggestions, thus agreeing with the CAA; however, CAA and local government officers recalled that it was necessary to ensure a more basic level of commitment, such as taking CAA more into account and listening to them.

Boosting participatory practices with and for CAA

The local government officers and elected representatives focused on setting up participatory practices that did not yet exist in their municipalities. Non-specific actions were mentioned, such as “opening new participation channels” or “creating a platform for working together” (government officer), in addition to more concrete ones, such as the creation of councils, forums, debates, participatory processes, multivalent groups and digital media. The CAA agreed with the adults’ proposals, but stressed that such initiatives should be ones “that can interest us more” and “can inspire society” and be age-appropriate, motivating and “appealing to kids”. They proposed

“having fun events, saying more cheerful stuff so that we’re entertained, and not explaining too much because in the end that gets boring”.

Reframing child participation and citizenship

The elected officials proposed “placing children and adolescents at the heart of our policies, adjusting them to their needs”, as well as developing the concept of child participation. The local government officers suggested “seeing CAA participation as a permanent process and not an isolated event”, and described such participation as stable, concrete, feasible, applicable, binding, future-oriented, etc. They also proposed “facilitating listening to children’s voices and positioning them as full citizens” on political agendas. For their part, the CAAs’ ideas tended more towards making themselves and their activities more widely known. They proposed “sending a letter to everyone to let them know that we have participation” or “getting a voice through celebrities on TV”.

Consolidating participatory practices and strengthening the functioning of youth/children’s councils

This proposal emerged from the elected officials and local government officers and concerned the CAAs. Elected representatives suggested that practices be “more dynamic and participatory” for CAA. They also proposed reaching out to more CAA in the municipalities, either by increasing communication channels and/or “expanding the number of participating centres and organisations”. They also suggested meeting more often with CAA, “creating channels to improve feedback”, embracing technological media and fostering CAAC self-management. The government officers proposed making internal changes in favour of children’s participation and “strengthening the role of multipliers (peer education) among the members of the children’s council”. These changes would include: “greater frequency of working meetings with the council”; “structuring working groups”; regulating the number of topics discussed and activities carried out; improving communication with the CAA represented by the councils; organizing plenary sessions; coordinating with other councils, agents or organisations; boosting autonomy for developing their own projects and promoting CAA leadership. With regard to other initiatives, it was proposed to give continuity to and/or strengthen the participatory practices already in operation in order for them to gain stability and durability. Reference was mainly made to official organs, but also to other practices as part of municipal projects or programmes. The government officers formulated proposals such as: “increasing CAA participation in municipal programmes and projects”, “boosting child and adolescent participation in the municipality and facilitating and optimizing participatory processes” or “giving child participation continuity beyond the children’s council”.

Increasing the number of platforms for dialogue with authorities and peers

The CAA suggested cooperative and co-responsible actions, increasing relationships with the municipal authorities and planning public policy jointly. They also proposed actions to reach out to a larger number of CAA in the municipality and interact with them.

Discussion and conclusions

The initial objective of this study was to analyse the enablers, barriers and proposals perceived by CAA, local government officers and elected officials regarding the practices implemented in their municipalities to promote child participation.

The most significant finding was that there was strong agreement among respondents — CAA, government officers and elected representatives— on the enablers, hindrances and proposals for action regarding child participation practices at the local level. Another important finding was that the responses of each of the groups surveyed were highly congruent and consistent with each other. The results of this study therefore coincide with the prior literature review on factors promoting or hindering child participation (Collins *et al.*, 2016; Crowley *et al.*, 2020; Hub na nÓg, 2015; Ministry of Education, Social Policy and Sports [MEPSD], 2008).

The fact that an inductive coding exercise on facilitators, barriers and proposals produced similar results, albeit in the opposite direction, leading to results that might appear to be “redundant”, shows the existence of elements that both children and technical and political figures consider central to promoting child participation.

In the area of enablers and barriers, findings highlighted the following factors: “political commitment and leadership” (as the RAND Europe Report 2021 also concluded), provided that it was stable over time and not affected by changes in government; comprehensive and well-coordinated “strategies” linking the different actors, with the creation of arenas and platforms for horizontal dialogue and planning; and sufficient “allocation of resources” —economic, human, infrastructure and time. “Making the forms, settings and structures of all CAA participation visible” was also recommended, along the lines formulated by Brown *et al.* (2019) and Crowley *et al.* (2020). As Author *et al.* (2021, p. 72) remark, “An environment where children’s participation in municipal government is multiple and plural means an overall context with greater possibilities and opportunities for participation”.

The study identified the absence of a participatory culture as a salient barrier. In relation to this, the need to overcome “dominant social representations” in our culture was mentioned, since these are underpinned by a reductionist conception of childhood and participation (Crowley *et al.*, 2020; Forde *et al.*, 2020). The authors cited see it as essential for local governments to offer specialized training in children’s rights and approaches to enhancing them.

Turning to proposals for boosting child participation, participants indicated the importance of child empowerment, participatory culture and platforms for dialogue and cooperation with authorities and peers. An important finding was that the CAA suggested “doing things together” with adults, and that they should be taken more into account and involved more in municipal affairs. This proposal corresponds to the principle of child agency, contrasting with our culture’s dominant “social representation of childhood”, which positions it as inferior to adult citizenship (Krechevsky *et al.*, 2014 and Ramiro and Alemán-Bracho, 2016). Amongst the proposals, the importance of increasing “settings and arenas for dialogue with local authorities and other children” was also mentioned, along the lines indicated by Andersson (2017), Cahill and Dadvand (2018), Kay and Tisdall (2021) and Messina and Valdés-Cotera (2013). Much of the social impact that local participatory experiences have is the result of the empowerment of CAA in the co-design and implementation of municipal initiatives aimed at developing the community and strengthening the social fabric (Egli, 2020; Sant and Davies, 2018; Novella *et al.*, 2013; Wong *et al.*, 2010).

In light of the literature consulted and the study findings, we would suggest that approaches to advancing child participation in municipalities should focus on the following areas: institutional and political commitment; reframing views of childhood and child participation; training;

resources; horizontal coordination and collaboration; and boosting genuinely participatory processes with CAA. In agreement with Lay-Lisboa and Montañes (2018), McMellon and Tisdall (2020) and Riggio (2002), we see this as the only way to progress towards a participatory model of child participation, in which the empowerment and leadership of children can go beyond paternalistic, protectionist or hegemonic models.

The results referring to facilitators, barriers and proposals correspond to a general analysis differentiated by groups. It would be interesting to complement this with an exploration of the relationships at a particular level between what each of the subjects identifies in these three dimensions, as well as the cross-referencing with information on the forms, practices and experiences of child participation that they develop in their municipality, insofar as the opinions expressed on these issues by the people surveyed may differ according to their accumulated experience.

The results of this study are subject to at least two limitations. First, the absence of similar previous empirical studies on this topic that triangulate data among the three groups of informants surveyed here (elected officials, local government officers and CAA). Second, the data from the sample of elected officials and government officers came from six autonomous communities, while data from the CAA sample could only be collected from three; thus it is possible that this may have led to a bias in results.

Conflict of interests

The authors of this study declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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Resumen

Facilitadores, barreras y propuestas para la participación infantil en el ámbito municipal en España

INTRODUCCIÓN. La Estrategia para los Derechos del Niño (2022-2027) ha señalado la importancia de fortalecer las relaciones de colaboración entre las autoridades políticas y la población infantil para defender los derechos de los niños y su inclusión en la toma de decisiones locales, estatales y europeas. El objetivo de este trabajo es identificar los elementos facilitadores, barreras y propuestas de las prácticas participativas con la infancia en la red de municipios que forman parte de la Asociación Internacional de Ciudades Educadoras (AICE) y de Ciudades Amigas de la Infancia (CAI). Identificar estos elementos posibilitará proponer acciones estratégicas que redunden en la participación infantil en la vida política y democrática. **MÉTODO.** Este estudio que se presenta forma parte de un proyecto nacional sustentado en un diseño de métodos mixtos. Los datos se recogieron mediante dos encuestas autoadministradas en línea diseñadas *ad hoc*. La muestra la conformaron 136 niñas, niños y adolescentes, 191 figuras técnicas municipales y 88 cargos electos. Se aplicó un análisis de contenido mediante el Atlas-ti para el análisis de los datos. **RESULTADOS.** La muestra encuestada coincide en destacar la necesidad de un mayor compromiso político a favor de la participación infantil, así como extender los espacios donde los menores de dieciocho años puedan tomar decisiones y llevar a cabo acciones que transformen su entorno. **DISCUSIÓN.** Los resultados obtenidos apoyan la importancia de valorar la participación infantil, así como la necesidad de impulsar acciones colaborativas entre niños, niñas y adolescentes y los responsables políticos a fin de incidir en la política municipal. Se evidencia la necesidad de que la participación de la infancia en la esfera pública sea visibilizada como imprescindible, se concrete en espacios de acción colaborativa con los cargos electos e incida de forma real en la política municipal, como recomienda el Consejo de Europa.

Palabras clave: Barreras, Derechos del niño, Facilitadores, Gobierno local, Investigación cualitativa, Participación.

Résumé

Facilitateurs, obstacles et propositions pour la participation des enfants à niveau municipal en Espagne

INTRODUCTION. La Stratégie pour les Droits de l'Enfant (2022-2027) a signalé l'importance de renforcer les relations de collaboration entre les autorités politiques et la population enfantine afin de défendre les droits des enfants et leur inclusion dans les décisions locales, nationales et européennes. L'objectif de ce travail est d'identifier les éléments facilitateurs, les barrières et les propositions de pratiques participatives avec les enfants dans le réseau des municipalités qui font partie de l'Association Internationale des Villes Éducatrices (AIVE) et des Villes Amies des Enfants (VAE). L'identification de ces éléments permettra de proposer des actions stratégiques qui aboutiront à la participation des enfants à la vie politique et démocratique. **MÉTHODE.** Cette étude fait partie d'un projet national basé sur des méthodes mixtes. Les données ont été collectées au moyen de deux enquêtes en ligne auto-administrées conçues ad hoc. L'échantillon était composé de 136 enfants et adolescents, 191 techniciens municipaux et 88 élus. Une analyse de contenu utilisant Atlas-ti a été appliquée pour l'analyse des données. **RÉSULTATS.** L'échantillon interrogé s'accorde sur la nécessité d'un plus grand engagement politique en faveur de la participation des enfants, ainsi que sur la nécessité d'étendre les espaces où les enfants de moins de dix-huit ans peuvent prendre des décisions et mener des actions qui transforment leur environnement. **DISCUSSION.** Les résultats obtenus confirment l'importance de valoriser la participation des enfants ainsi que la nécessité de promouvoir des actions de collaboration entre les enfants, les adolescents et les décideurs politiques afin d'influencer la politique municipale. Il est clair que la participation des enfants à la sphère publique doit être rendue visible comme essentielle, prendre forme dans des espaces de collaboration avec les élus et avoir un impact réel sur la politique municipale, comme recommandé par le Conseil de l'Europe.

Mots clés : Barrières, Droits de l'enfant, Facilitateurs, Gouvernement local, Recherche qualitative, Participation.

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