

Opening up participatory spaces: a way of rethinking school practices linked to territory

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Abstract

Background: For education to be underpinned deeply by the principles of inclusion and interculturality, there is a need for school to be reconceptualised as an institution which is strongly linked to its territory and capable of being an agent of social change. As part of a wider project exploring processes of democratic participation for social transformation, this article reports on a research study that supported schools to review and reformulate their educational practices through a school-based Participatory Action Research (PAR) project.

Purpose: The study sought to support participating schools to examine, review and transform practices by using participatory social diagnosis (PSD) strategies. In particular, it aimed to explore the ways in which PSD practices enabled the review of practices linked to territory, encouraging a process of transformative participation towards inclusion.

Method: Through participatory projects across four infant and primary schools in different locations in Spain, case studies were developed to examine participation and community building in the context of each case. Data, including recordings of focus group sessions, were transcribed and analysed qualitatively, using content analysis techniques.

Findings: Across the four case studies, analysis suggested that, in a variety of ways, spaces and times were created for shared reflection, and participatory techniques generated creative forms available to the entire community to contribute to the analysis and transformation of practices. The findings indicated that PAR techniques had enabled a means of participation that led to a process of circulation and collective production of knowledge, allowing a rethinking of inclusion and territory.

Conclusions: Our small scale, in-depth study highlights the implications of opening up participatory spaces with regard to the concept of community, social change and territory. This research may provide insights for future researchers and school communities with similar goals of changing educational practices to address participation from an inclusive and intercultural approach.

Keywords: participatory action research (PAR); inclusion; interculturality; territory; citizen participation; school practices

Introduction

Increasingly, there is a need for schools to evolve and develop in response to a globalised and complex world. This requires full recognition of the diversity of students, families and communities, in line with the principles of inclusion and interculturality (Abdallah-Preteille 2006; Echeita and Ainscow 2011). Whilst inclusion refers to the right of people to participate actively in the democratic life of society, interculturality points towards dynamic and open relationships between communities, groups and persons, thus problematising, in turn, the concept of static and closed culture. This implies a conception of school as an institution linked to its territory and an agent of social change (Kincheloe and Steinberg 1999). As part of the effort against inequality and exclusion, it must provide opportunities for personal and social empowerment (Aguado and Ballesteros 2015; Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick and West 2012).

Two core ideas underlie the inclusive and intercultural approach: school understood as a space for learning about citizen participation; and educational practices understood as the interconnection of different knowledges within a dialogical process of cultural recreation (Freire 1999). Involvement between community, school and territory for social change proposes the reconstruction of schools for social justice through democratic means. Real, meaningful participation entails effective advocacy, both in decision-making and in the execution and evaluation of collective decisions, causing deep changes in the power structure (Mata 2010). The specific notion of territory is also

important here: it is used not only as an immediate geographical reference, but also in relation to “construction and appropriation of a contextualized socio-spatial symbolic system” (Boix, Champollion and Duarte 2015, 2). Territories demarcate viable spaces between groups, in accordance with their needs, and generate identities and collective symbols. Territory is, therefore, a place of meeting and cultural exchange to improve people’s lives, and democratise and innovate schools (Champollion 2015).

The research context

Although schools in Spain have democratic, decision-making bodies, there is no developed participatory culture or clear mission to improve sociocultural contexts (Echeíta 2006). There is, therefore, an opportunity to promote and encourage the review of school practices for inclusion and equity. The conclusions of our previous research allow us to highlight three key elements that are important in an approach to rethinking educational practices linked to territory: full democratic participation, student voice, and the interconnection of different types of knowledge. The aim of such an approach is to legitimise the whole educational community in a process of collaborative enquiry that can transform school practices, highlighting the role of social agents in the community and building knowledge through an ethical process of dialogue (Sales, Traver and García 2011). The study presented in this paper reports on an analysis of how schools learnt to review and reformulate their educational practices through a school-based Participatory Action Research (PAR) project. PAR’s primary goal was to create positive social change by involving participants as researchers (Fals Borda, 2001). First, though, we further contextualise our study with a brief review of relevant research that informed our work.

Background

Previous research on school processes suggests a movement towards full participation as an inclusive strategy. In this way, members of the community listen to all voices and take decisions, as part of their commitment as critical citizens who have an active role in social change (Arvind 2009; Echeíta 2006; Fullan, Quinn and McEachen 2018; Susinos and Ceballos 2012). Such studies describe the participatory research process that ‘allows participants to actively identify the core elements of citizenship and togetherness in their specific local cultures that are rooted in specific locations, and that contribute to their problem-solving and decision-making processes’ (Arcidiacono, Natale, Carbone and Procentese 2017, 45). According to the literature, PAR is conceptualised as a collaborative and democratic strategy that can be used to develop critical and transformative community learning, generating collective action in public spheres to transform practice and school culture. PAR projects link the themes and issues of interest both inside and outside the school, encouraging intercultural communication about the variety of ways practices are understood, from a range of standpoints and cultural perspectives that require an open communicative space for dialogue (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014). By developing processes to examine, review and transform school practices through participatory social diagnosis (PSD) strategies, spaces may be opened up for citizen participation in thinking critically about, and acting on, educational processes favouring inclusion (Sales, Traver and Moliner 2019; Sanahuja, Moliner and Moliner 2020).

The origins of participatory diagnostic techniques stretch back many decades and include Freire’s (1968) popular pedagogy and the participatory rural diagnoses of the popular movement in Latin America (Fals Borda 2001). In Spain, Úcar, Segarra and Mas (2008) indicated how using these participatory techniques with young people in a local community led to the creation of more sustainable support networks. In our case,

the innovative use of PSD in an educational context as a community development methodology and participatory evaluation is based, on the one hand, on its pedagogical dimension that facilitates learning to take part through participation within local structures (Cornwall 2008). And, on the other, it connects the inclusive intercultural approach with critical pedagogy of place (Gruenewald 2003), from which territory gains importance as a space in which to develop a curriculum for social change, by decolonising school practices and creating awareness about power structures. It entails creating opportunities to connect place and identity in constructing a feeling of belonging and critical citizenry. The school community undergoes a process of self-reflection, where the main objective is to support its empowerment through participation, thereby fostering sustainable development (McInerney, Smyth and Down 2011).

In this sense, external researchers' accompanying and stimulating role in these processes demands the coherence between education and inclusive research that is indicated by PAR. This is as Nind (2014) pointed out in her analysis of studies that 'involve teachers and connect with the drives for their involvement as change agents in participatory projects; studies that attempt to empower participants as producers of knowledge; [and] studies connected with the movement for pupil/student voice' (530). One noteworthy PAR initiative, involving collaboration between schools and researchers, was the 'Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools' network, developed in the UK 'to define and evaluate practices that can help to improve outcomes for marginalised learners' (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson 2004, 126). Elsewhere, in the Spanish context, Rojas, Susinos and Calvo (2013) proposed an emancipatory approach in their research, sharing control of the research process and

opening new understandings of social inclusion and exclusion, through empowering biographical narrative techniques.

Purpose

Against this backdrop, the research reported in this paper describes four PSD case studies applied in the school context, carried out in order to examine educational practices and uncover areas for improvement in infant (pupils from three to six years old) and primary schools (pupils from six to twelve years old) in Spain. The four participating schools began a PSD which was focused on analysing and reflecting on the school communities' problems, needs and potentials, to transform practices that would link school and territory (Ander-Egg, 2012). The study aimed to (a) explore the ways in which PSD practices enabled the review of practices linked to territory and (b) analyse the ways in which PSD encouraged a process of transformative participation towards inclusion.

Methods

The study presented here was part of a broader research project in Spain investigating ways of promoting educational practices with links to territory through PAR. A multiple case study (Stake 2006) was developed to describe, understand and recognise the relevance of examining participation and community building in the natural context of each case (Melero and Ballesteros, 2019). The study was carried out in four schools in the regions of Murcia (Case 1), the Valencian Community (Case 2), Madrid (Case 3) and the Basque Country (Case 4). These were selected following a survey of all schools in those regions enquiring into their willingness to review their school practices from an inclusive perspective.

Ethical considerations

In line with critical educational research, our ethical commitment to participants was expressed through an informed consent document and in the initial negotiation of aims and strategies, based on principles of confidentiality, impartiality and equity throughout the research and in the dissemination of its findings (Khanlou & Peter, 2005). The study complied with the ethical principles and permissions required by the ethics committee of the relevant university and the guidelines given by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. Participants' responses have been anonymised in the reporting, including the replacement of names with pseudonyms.

Data collection

During the PSD, the research team used a range of techniques that had already been documented in other participatory processes to facilitate increased critical awareness in the community. These were: (a) a *timeline* to build a shared awareness of the school's history (Mannay 2016) - a long timeline created by all participants helps pinpoint significant moments in the locality and school for each group (families, teachers, students and local agents); (b) *social mapping* to provide a graphic representation of relationships in the territory (Kendon, Pain and Kesby 2010) - participants indicated places in their locality that could connect curricular activities and local cultural heritage; (c) *photovoice* to hear participants' views through images (Wang 1999) - participants photographed spaces in their territory that they frequented most and that would connect to the school curriculum; (d) *Socratic wheel* to evaluate and prioritise alternatives (Chevalier et al. 2013) - elements to be evaluated in a proposal for action were noted on a wheel-shaped graph and participants scored each element from 1 to 10 in order of importance in the project and degree of achievement; (e) *the mirror technique* to share critical thinking from collective data - participants and researchers shared and contrasted the results of each technique in a final session. The information gathered was

analysed from different perspectives for collaborative decision-making. In each case, researchers and participants also designed *ad hoc* activities to explore proposals for transforming their practices.

These participatory processes were substantiated through documentary analysis of the schools' official documents, in order to determine the educational model of each school. A focus group was organised for each case study, so as to understand participants' perceptions of the PSD. Audio recordings were made and transcribed verbatim. The PSD sessions that researchers facilitated were videoed and analysed with participants after the *mirror technique* sessions. All participants consented to being recorded, but no images were to be broadcast outside the agreed objectives of the research. In all, the four case studies illustrated various ways of using PSD in different school contexts. Opening community participatory spaces set off a process of inclusive transformation of their practices to link them to territory. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants and the tools applied.

[Insert Table 1. PSD tools and participants]

Data analysis

The participatory mirror technique (as described above) was the approach used for the initial analysis. Finally, a second content analysis and feedback of information to participants were used to triangulate, validate and mobilise the knowledge acquired. The data were contrasted and triangulated using several tools and participant groups in order to guarantee the validity, reliability and rigour of the results (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The data gathered were transcribed and classified by the research team and then fed back to the educational community for participative analysis. The ATLAS.ti program

was used as a tool in order to analyse the data by themes. This analytical process enabled us to identify the most relevant themes by comparing data according to their saturation and potential to respond to the research aims (Elo and Kyngäs 2008).

Findings from the case studies

Summaries of the four case studies resulting from the analysis are presented below.

They highlight and demonstrate various ways of using PSD in different school contexts.

Where relevant, anonymised quotations from the data have been included to illuminate and clarify the descriptions of the case studies.

Case study 1: Building collaborative networks

Case study 1 was located in the city of Murcia, in a neighbourhood with good infrastructure and health, education and cultural services. The families were of mid socioeconomic status, although the purchasing power of the neighbourhood as a whole had decreased since the financial crisis. Around one third of the school's students had immigrant backgrounds. The school had over 400 students divided into six infant classes, more than 10 primary classes and a small number of classes for children with specific needs. According to documentation, the type of teaching in the school was guided by the encouragement of aspects including creativity and criticality, and the fostering of community and citizenship competencies. The school supported cultural collaboration and continuing professional development (CPD).

In terms of the PSD process, the meetings that were held with the school management team, teaching staff and community agents revealed a demand for greater participation in the school. The PSD was therefore regarded as an opportunity to evaluate the current state of the school, analyse its barriers and begin a process of

improvement. The process began with the activity ‘My ideal school’ to gather proposals around the question ‘what would you like to do in the school to encourage everybody to participate?’ In the first stage, in the informative class assemblies at the beginning of the school year, spaces were created on the walls of each classroom where families, students and teachers could write their proposals for improvement on different coloured stickers. In the second stage, the research team compiled and classified the proposals from the school community and transferred them to the management team, who, together with the teaching staff, then analysed them. Finally, a second class assembly was held where all the information was fed back to the families and students. Before prioritising the proposals, further contributions were collected from local agents in the community. Further, ‘The travelling book’ activity was designed to gather suggestions from people at the local senior citizens’ centre with whom the school had frequent contact. This book of blank pages was passed around to gather their opinions about the ways they would like to participate with the school. In the final stage, all the information was analysed by a committee made up of representatives from the participant groups. The proposals that coincided with suggestions from the senior citizens centre were prioritised and a joint plan of action was drawn up.

Analysis of the PSD activities revealed a need to foster a collaborative network among all the participating agents in order to establish sustainable mutual support relationships and build a collective identity. First, priority was given to the need to encourage relationships and communication between families and the school, and to work towards reconciling school activities and family life. Focus group data indicated that the families proposed ‘carrying out activities that will encourage participation in the classroom’; the students wanted ‘more teamwork activities’, ‘more joint assemblies’ and ‘more values’; the teachers called for ‘more respect between students and teachers’

and the ‘ability to undertake important things together as a whole school’. Further, the people at the local senior citizens centre offered to ‘guide [students] from their own professional experience’ and transmit ‘life experiences’. In addition, the suggestions proposed shared knowledge building - a collaborative effort involving the whole school community and external agents - in a joint project that would be manifested in shared responsibilities such as ‘greater family involvement in school work set as homework’; ‘families taking responsibility in the school library so it can stay open in the evenings’ or ‘combining their life experiences with aspects of the curriculum to bring theory into practice from this context of life experience, which the senior citizens will relate to the students’.

The use of the participatory strategies discussed above entailed shared leadership. This aspect became evident in the management team’s support for the process, by ensuring that other participants expressed their points of view in the participatory activities, attempting to make the local agents feel ‘useful and active’, taking a positive approach to support the changes, and encouraging relationships among teachers, and between teachers, families and external agents through collaborative teams. After the participants’ analysis of the PSD strategies, a decision was made to relaunch two activities that had attracted little participation in previous academic years and that could incorporate the changes proposed to promote more inclusive practices linked to the territory. These two activities, ‘Storytelling’ and ‘The experience workshop’, were initially carried out in year 5 classes (**eleven years old pupils**) working together with people from the local senior citizens centre. This pilot experience would then be evaluated with a view to extending similar practices across the rest of the school in the future (Lozano, Cerezo and Castillo 2017).

The PSD process in case study 1 resulted in a small collaborative network between the school and the local senior citizens centre in which participants could evaluate what changes were needed in the school, in order to establish sustainable relationships in the locality.

Case study 2: Community building

The setting for the second case study was a rural school in the province of Valencia located on two sites in neighbouring villages. This arrangement had been designed to optimise the available educational resources on the two sites. The school had over 150 pupils and both villages had cultural, sports and musical associations that played an active role in school life. The school defined its education model as a democratic one, valuing openness and inclusivity. In the previous five years, the school had become a significant educational reference point in the area: it has developed a range of strategies for democratic participation and cooperative methodologies in the classroom, organised open days and introduced self-management strategies including a coordinating committee to take collective decisions. Over the last three years, there had been a gradual increase in the number of students from other local villages, attracted by the innovative project. This was reshaping the composition of the educational community and the conception of territory.

The school habitually began the academic year with a community welcome day, usually held at a local site of natural beauty or one of the village schools' facilities, where the inclusive school model aspired to was explained. The path towards inclusion was understood to involve greater participation: 'In fact, it is all about opening up our doors and making [the school] more participative and that's what makes it more

inclusive because we don't leave anybody out. Actually, all of us from all sections of the community are represented without necessarily being on the school council'.

Following on from this idea of learning to take part through participation, the research team organised a social mapping activity during the welcome day. Large maps were displayed on panels; students, families, teachers and local agents identified on these what they considered to be the most representative and most frequently visited places, suggesting how these could be used for educational purposes. The mirror session dealt with how local spaces and organisations could be linked to curriculum activities.

Methodological proposals were suggested for building links through the school: one of these, put forward by the teachers, was service learning as a way of connecting the students' learning with service to the community. The photovoice technique was used to inform this service learning proposal: mixed groups were created (teachers, families and students) to visit some of the places identified on the map, and they were tasked with taking photographs and coming up with ideas for possible activities and suggestions for collaborating organisations.

The twelve proposals resulting from the photovoice process were prioritised using the Socratic wheel technique, and the ones to be implemented throughout the school year were selected. The proposals were presented in the form of a wheel, in which each spoke represented an option to evaluate according to related curricular content, the quality of the service to be offered and the project's viability. Small groups of participants discussed the evaluation criteria and rated the options. The results of this activity were presented at an assembly held at the end of the year to take stock of the school year. The PSD activities had gradually filtered into the school's activities, as reflected in the students' comments; for example: 'I think everyone participates, and now we're more democratic in the school; we didn't use to get asked [what we think] as

much before'. Although more involvement from families would be desirable, building links with the territory was regarded as an ongoing process. It was evident that the families and associations wanted this participation to lead to change, as one local agent explained: 'It's a process of social transformation, that's what you said, and in that sense we can feel quite lucky to participate from the beginning of what can eventually be a transformative process; of course, this is a very gradual process'.

At the beginning of the next school year, in the first assembly, the prioritised proposal entailed designing school reform as a service learning project shared between the two villages. It was felt that this way forward would unite them as a school and create a sense of community. For the teachers and families, it was important to link this service to curricular content. Primary year 6 (12-year-old) tutors agreed to start off the service learning project in their classes, together with the students and families, with the commitment that the whole school would learn from this experience through accessible electronic channels of communication. As a curricular practice in the community, the service learning became a cohesive initiative in the locality and a way for everyone to reflect on the type of school they wanted, by establishing shared values and embedding them in the school's educational activities.

Case study 3: Rethinking participation

Case study 3 was set in a public infant and primary school located within the metropolitan area of Madrid. It had one of the youngest populations in Spain; a consequence of the migration process begun in the 1980s. This school served more than three hundred families and the students were split into two groups per year group. The school described itself as an inclusive and open school, supporting community and participative approaches. It had become a point of reference for public education in the

area, a model of civic and democratic activism in a decade of political conservatism and authoritarianism in the autonomous community of Madrid. The school's participation project had attracted teachers and families with a commitment to this model. These families were mainly professionals and/or people with academic qualifications; no students were enrolled in the school from either immigrant or Roma families. Questions raised in discussions with the teaching staff included why, and in what way, do we contribute to the inclusion of all or, rather, the school segregation process which has taken place in the Madrid region in recent years? The school's initiatives included a participation plan, drawn up by one of the school's teachers, which defined priority lines and actions to promote the participation of families, teachers and students in the school. The management team explained how 'we have shifted from suggesting initiatives to the families, to a situation in which the families themselves are proposing new targets to be met by everyone in the school'. The new family profiles, new demands associated with participation, the increasing initiatives from parents and the teachers' accumulated experience were all factors that gave rise to the need to reflect, question and reformulate the current participation plan which, at that time, had not managed to connect with the cultural diversity of the locality.

During the school year of the study, the research team joined the school's academic committee, where issues regarding participation were traditionally dealt with. This committee proposed and discussed which PSD activities to carry out. From the outset, it was clear that participation in the school was understood as involvement primarily by the families, and that the students had a limited voice. It was implicitly assumed that the students were participating simply by their presence in the classroom. This conception of participation as being present, accessing and being taken into account in specific activities, prevailed over the democratic conception of participation

as capacity and practice to influence decision-making. This was a key aspect, as some of the families had identified the need to know why they were participating, what achievements were desired and who would benefit from them in a broader community and socio-political context.

Accordingly, the project began with the students via photovoice and ‘A coffee with...’ activities and the assemblies. The students were invited to take photographs of the place in the school where they participated most and explain their choice. The places they identified were outside the classroom, and they were chosen as places where they could speak freely without adult control. It was evident that they valued the feeling of wellbeing deriving from activities with no divisions based on gender or age. In the year 2 (eight-year-old) and year 5 (eleven-year-old) assemblies, students discussed what it meant to participate: ‘saying what you think’, ‘contribute ideas and imagination’ ‘enjoying ourselves’, ‘learning, lots of things, English, division, times tables, learning to make biscuits’. The students derived satisfaction from contributing ideas that were considered valid, because they were helping and felt appreciated. They also explained that they did not participate in the children’s council meetings because they were held at the same time as mandatory curricular activities that some did not want to miss. It was noteworthy that the PSD techniques made students realise the limitations on participation resulting from space and time organisation by the teaching staff.

In the ‘A coffee with...’ activity, the families met frequently in an informal setting to discuss the issues that concerned them. A timeline was drawn up to identify, visually, the channels of participation used in recent years in order to analyse strengths and weaknesses and make proposals for improvement. The families expressed their concern that many parents could not participate in activities designed to include them; for example: ‘Those who can come to the school and speak with other parents, or with

the teachers, give their opinions and participate, but many others can't come and nobody knows what we think...there have to be other channels in place'. They called for a participation protocol that would prevent people from feeling overwhelmed and having a sense of disorganisation. What was needed was a broader perspective of territory to link the school's objectives with the needs of the context, to organise participation from a more global and community-based viewpoint. On the positive side, they recognised the many activities for families and opportunities for everyone to collaborate and contribute their own knowledge and thoughts. In the PSD process, it was evident that families felt listened to and valued as members of the educational community. They recognised that they were given space to express themselves and take part in the educational project. However, they suggested systematising this kind of participatory dynamic in order to give voice to local groups and to accommodate the different sociocultural profiles of families.

Given their already high level of commitment in family participation activities, the infant teachers expressed some sense of reservation at the new proposals for participation, as the integration of families, community and curriculum was already standard practice in the infant education model. Teachers of older pupils voiced their concern about 'losing' classes and important content if they were expected to devote time to students' participation; for example, the student assemblies set out in the participation plan were held in class time and some students did not want to miss their maths or language classes. In general, the primary level teachers expressed serious doubts about encouraging family participation in classes, questioning the reasons and practicalities of such a measure. It therefore became clear that the connection between participation and inclusive education was not obvious and had not been debated sufficiently.

The outcomes of the PSD activities were presented and discussed in the academic committee, where three basic conclusions were drawn; namely, the need to: identify how to include families in such a way that their participation leads to greater inclusion and meets curriculum objectives for everyone; give the children a voice and demonstrate that participation activities are also part of the curriculum; and redefine the participation plan, bearing in mind the diversity of family and social needs in the context.

Case study 4: Debating the curriculum

The setting for case study 4 was a state infant and primary school located in a town in the province of Guipúzcoa. It had a strong rural identity but, at the same time, was one of most industrial municipalities in the Basque Country. With one of the highest immigration rates in the Basque region, more than 25 languages were spoken in the school, although Basque was the lingua franca. The town was a member of a city educational network which took a participatory approach and aimed to forge links between all education community agents. The school also belonged to a group network of schools which was formed to promote research, experimentation and innovation, advocating flexible organisation in forming groups and active methodologies that prioritise approaches including peer-to-peer learning and project work.

The purpose of the PSD process was to start a participatory project with the entire educational community, in order to explore the degree of coherence of their school practices with their educational model (very close to a place-based approach) within the framework of the educational network. Homework was the practice chosen for scrutiny. In the first stage of the PSD, the teaching staff began their enquiry with the ‘Blank book’ activity, in which a shared document was drawn up on needs regarding the

use of school homework. Over a period of one week, 14 teachers provided reflections (22 comments) that illustrated their concern about a range of aspects and their need for training on the objectives, functionality and typologies of homework, and its impact on students and families.

The research team designed three activities to gather the students' opinions in a one hour session with each of the 12 groups. In the first activity, adapted questionnaire 1, students identified the places where they usually did their homework on a panel of photographs (most commonly the bedroom and kitchen). For the second activity, adapted questionnaire 2, a calendar was designed showing the days of the week and different times of the day on which students could mark the time they spent on their homework. This activity identified the tendency to do homework at midday, after school and before dinner. Students spent between one and two hours in the week and many did their homework at the weekends. In the third activity, 'Works–Doesn't Work', students identified positive and negative emotions about homework, using emoticons. The panel revealed the subjects in which they felt they learned more and those with what they considered to be more boring or excessive homework. The participatory activities about when and how the students did their homework enabled them to express their opinions, become aware of the situation and feel empowered by actively proposing improvements. Two sessions of the panels activity were run to gauge family participation. All the issues raised in the previous activities on homework were displayed on the panels, where the families wrote down their opinions and proposals for improvement on sticky notes.

Criticisms of homework derived from the lack of information about how it should be done and suggestions that it was 'repetitive and in need of updating'. Most of the families opted for interdisciplinary homework, which they claimed helped students

learn more and more effectively, by connecting homework with civic and solidarity-based projects being implemented in the city. The research team then gathered, ordered and categorised the information prior to feedback sessions using the mirror technique with the three groups, where final reflections were made. The teachers took note of the information and understood the need to readjust the type of homework. The PSD process helped them to understand the meaning of the curriculum from a more social perspective and to listen to the constructive criticism of families and students, as the following comment suggests: ‘The students say homework is boring, but according to the families and some of the children, it is useful. We should reflect on what we are giving them and how we are doing it’. In the mirror sessions, a debate opened up around building knowledge and to whom the school curriculum belongs. These issues had never been put to the entire community and generated some differences of opinion between families and teachers. It was felt that the school logic of homework invades domestic life, causing conflicts with regard to family logistics and basic needs. As a consequence of this deep reflection, most of the teachers decided to set optional homework or eliminate it altogether in the summer holidays, with the commitment that they would continue exploring the matter in the following school year and put more far-reaching measures in place.

At the beginning of the school year, the school’s management team facilitated the project by providing core continuity, accompanying the participant agents because they were concerned about the coherence between the principles of the existing educational model and the meaning of homework. To this end, a table was provided with two columns: one with the school’s pedagogical principles and the other where each teacher could note down homework set and the degree of coherence (from 1 to 4) with each principle from the existing model. The proposal arising from this activity

was to make changes in maths homework for years 5 and 6 (11–12 year-olds) that would emphasise the principle of activity and individualisation, to promote different levels of situated learning, connecting curricular content with social projects and environmental concerns. This PSD thus demonstrated the importance of student and family participation in taking decisions in the organisation and culture of the school and the curriculum, in order to safeguard coherence with the principles and educational values of an educational model that foregrounds student activity and contextual needs.

Discussion

The diversity of contexts and strategies in the four case studies we have described reflects the richness and complexity of the analysis of participatory processes. The interest of this multiple case study is not to generalise from the findings – but, rather, to learn from the particularities of each context. In this way, we hope to provide insights for future researchers and school communities who have similar goals of changing educational practices in order to address participation from an inclusive and intercultural approach.

Our analysis of the case studies suggests that, as a participatory strategy to examine territory-linked school practices, PSD processes facilitated the opening up of spaces for reflection in which to clarify shared values and implicit educational models. The PSD processes in this study were undertaken in different contexts and formats, but all gave rise to fundamental questions for rethinking inclusion and territory. Across the four case studies, in a variety of ways, spaces and times were created for shared reflection, and participatory techniques generated creative forms available to the entire community to contribute to the analysis and transformation of practices.

PSD techniques provided a collaborative and inclusive space to reflect on methodological change, curriculum negotiation, leadership change, family involvement in school matters, the school's relationship with its social environment and the conception of diversity as a resource for improvement and not as a deficit. This approach challenges the platitudes and dominant discourses in education (Woolner and McCarter 2012). All the groups involved in the PSD process perceived their co-responsibility in the practice review and the need to share a common project, managing conflict and dissent through democratic participation and a culture of collaboration.

The study highlights some important aspects of the *what*, *why* and *what for* of participation. Although some families and students, and even community agents, were able to participate, it must be recognised that this was not the case for everybody. Authors including Gillet-Swan and Sargeant (2018) point to the ethical difficulties in developing participatory research with students in school contexts where unintentional power relationships can limit those involved from freely expressing their perspectives. How participation is defined and put into practice is key to whether or not everyone can take part. Participation in the PSD stimulated a collaborative gaze and critical thinking that can challenge narrower definitions of democratic learning (Hardy and Rönnerman 2011). The democratic and inclusive potential of the school comes into constant conflict with the resistance and barriers generated in its practices and discourses (McCowan, 2010). As an intervention, PAR can challenge boundaries to participation in organisations where shared decision-making is not the norm when generating new connections with the community (Dworski-Riggs and Langhout 2010).

Relationships between school and territory

Our investigation had a particular focus on exploring relationships between school and territory. In each case study, the analysis identified useful examples of the

different ways that the PSD can strengthen and support the links between a school and its environs. For instance, in case study 1, emphasis was placed on creating and consolidating natural support networks and placing value on the local knowledge of older people. The intergenerational project acknowledged the needs of the various neighbourhood groups and building a territory of cultural exchange beyond the classroom (Champollion, 2015). In case study 2, the PSD process placed territory squarely in the foreground, as a space where shared knowledge can be built for social change. Through service learning, cultural heritage was recognised as valuable content and the school curriculum was placed at the service of the community. The ‘where’ of learning gains in importance and the connection to place offers intersubjective experiences for cultural formation and spaces of youth engagement (McKenzie 2008). Further, the process followed in case study 3 led to school participation being questioned beyond the mere presence or accumulation of occasional collaborative activities. The question of where those are who do not participate and why they are not participating were significant questions in this participatory process, and a starting point to decolonise practices that still exclude some types of family (McInerney, Smyth and Down 2011). Finally, the review of homework practices through PSD in case study 4 illuminated several needs, as the type of homework proposed by teachers was questioned by students and families. By breaking down barriers between home, school and city through interdisciplinary and social projects, the participatory process can consolidate the role of critical citizenry (Fullan, Quinn and McEachen 2018).

Analysis of these case studies therefore allows us to see how the school is made visible as a space for situated learning, providing opportunities to investigate and acquire knowledge about local cultures, institutional relationships and school practices (Arcidiacono, Natale, Carbone and Procentese 2017). When schools open up to

participation, and knowledge is built together, academic and local knowledge may be integrated to form part of the social capital in the territory. PSD provided an opportunity to reflect and participate in mobilising knowledge by putting it into action and applying it in its context (Call-Cummings & Martínez 2016; Fine and Torre 2004). The PSD process made it possible to review practices and link them to the territory by creating tension between emerging issues in the school culture and teaching routines (Brion-Meisels and Alter 2018). The school is relocated in the territory as a place of dialogue, community diagnosis and shared decision-making. The participatory process is shared with multiple publics and can benefit the local community, if it is connected to the work of policymakers at all levels of responsibility (Coburn, Penuel and Geil 2012).

A transformative participatory process for inclusion

The analysis illuminated how PSD strategies can provide the opportunity to empower students and vulnerable groups by safeguarding and recognising their voices and their agency in the enquiry process (Mitra and McCornick 2017). However, it also revealed the difficulties facing schools in becoming democratic arenas and spaces for social transformation. It is evident that the role played by PSD strategies and researchers supports the participatory view of school change, because the process was co-constructed and informed by the needs of the community and the expectations of the institution (Kirshner and Jefferson 2015). The challenge of listening to the range of voices in the decision-making process tested the power relations in the school culture: how educational leadership is assumed, and the ways in which group representation may be guaranteed when needs are identified and decisions for transformation are taken.

Conclusions

This small, in-depth study, presented as part of a wider project, is limited by scale; generalisation is not intended. However, these contextualised case studies provide a focus on the possibilities of PSD as a participatory process which can connect school practices to their immediate surroundings. It is clear that to understand further the transformational possibilities in school culture and territory, more evidence is needed from an intercultural and inclusive model, requiring larger studies and long-term follow-up.

The transformative capacity of participation depends on the process of reflection, and on the identification of barriers to learning and envisioning of new alternatives generated in the activities (Kirshner and Jefferson 2015; Cammarota and Fine 2008). Challenging exclusion in education therefore means focusing on processes of inclusive participation and highlighting the power of collaboration in solving problems. It means giving back power and responsibility to the educational community for their processes of transformation and linking to territory (Nind 2014). Furthermore, this participatory approach to knowledge-building requires change in the traditional hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant (Ross 2017). For this reason, our task to accompany schools on this path started out with the problems in each context, in an attempt to understand the complexity of the relationships and the structure of practices. This accompanying role understands inclusive research as an ethical commitment that allows us to investigate, hand-in-hand with schools, communities and their territories (Sales, Traver and García 2011).

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SCHOOL	PSD TOOLS	PARTICIPANTS
CASE STUDY 1	'My ideal school'	teachers: all teaching staff students: years 1–6 primary education families: all families 3 management team members
	'Travelling book'	15 local agents
	Focus group	6 families 8 local agents 6 students 3 teachers
CASE STUDY 2	Social mapping	18 teachers 80 students 97 families 6 local agents
	Photovoice Socratic wheel Mirror technique	21 families 13 teachers 8 students 4 researchers
	Assembly	teaching staff 25 families 15 students
	Focus group	2 students 4 teachers 2 families 2 local agent 2 researchers
CASE STUDY 3	Photovoice	16 students (years 4–6)
	'A coffee with...'	75 families 7 teachers 3 management team members
	Timeline	130 families 15 teachers 12 students and 6 former students
	Focus Group	23 teachers
CASE STUDY 4	'Blank book' Adapted questionnaire	131 students (years 3 and 4) 115 students (years 5 and 6)
	'Works-doesn't work'	families (years 3–6)
	Panels Mirror technique	34 teachers students (years 3–6) families (years 3–6)
	Assembly	3 researchers maths teachers students (years 5 and 6) families (years 5 and 6)
	Focus group	maths and language teachers

Table 1. Overview of PSD tools and participants in the four case studies

