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**GOTALK**

INCLUSIVE CHILDREN'S COUNCILS  
LEADING TO DEMOCRATIC EXCHANGE

**DELIVERABLE D4.3**

# **FINAL METHOD (13-18 years old)**

Project number: 101100841

**GOTALK**

**Inclusive children's councils leading to democratic  
exchange**

**CALL: CERV-2022-CHILD**



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## Technical References

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## Version and contributing history

Version	Date	Modified by	Modification reason
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2	23/5/2025	Anouk Van Der Wildt	Report of cross-border pilots, evaluation and lab added

## List of attachments

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## List of abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviation/Acronym	Meaning

# **1. Executive summary**

## **1.1 Executive summary of the GOTALK project**

The GOTALK project focuses on making decision-making processes in school and leisure more inclusive and sustainable. The project aims to look for ways to strengthen and render participation at school and in leisure time inclusive, impactful and sustainable. GOTALK is running in Belgium and Italy, but the GOTALK team wants to share ideas about child participation with other countries as well.

Earlier research demonstrated that, although child participation is organized with the best of intentions in different organizations, there are still children who do not get a chance to be involved or even heard. In addition, children's perspectives are not always taken seriously, which means that policymakers do not take their voices into account.

The two-year GOTALK project wants to change this and test various ways of child participation. In the first project year (2023-2024), a pilot project is conducted in elementary school in Flanders, focusing on organized leisure activities (BOA decree). At the same time, a pilot project is conducted in secondary education in Northern Italy, focusing on citizenship education. In both trajectories, researchers will work with schools to connect and weigh in on policies together with the children. In the second project year (2024-2025), the participatory approaches are reversed. In Flanders the trajectory will run in secondary education, while in Northern Italy we work in primary education.

The goal of the research is to strengthen child participation, both in Northern Italy and in Flanders. Therefore, the GOTALK team wants to involve all possible partners in different networks, both at local and international level. GOTALK wants to try out and describe innovation in child participation so that it is accessible to as many organizations working with children as possible, also outside Flanders and Northern Italy. GOTALK is a project within the European CERV program 'Citizenship, Education, Rights and Values' and is co-funded by the European Union.

## **1.2 Executive summary of deliverable (English)**

This deliverable is the result of two years of research and experiences with participation practices in pedagogical contexts (schools and extracurricular contexts). The GOTALK project conducted two rounds of pilot studies to investigate how the inclusiveness, sustainability, and policy impact of student councils and children's participation can be strengthened.

In the first series of pilots (December 2023 to April 2024) the GOTALK team in Reggio Emilia ran a program in one secondary school and one out-of-school care service for children from 14 to 19 years old. The first series of pilots was based on a prototype participation practice in which five steps were followed (discussing the meaning of participation, how participation should be sustained, elaborating ideas for participation in school and city, documenting experiences and present the proposals to policy makers). From the beginning, the project took a multidisciplinary approach based on specific methodologies: observation and active listening, maieutic dialogue, and the valorisation of plural intelligences and 100

languages. After the first pilot project, the insights gained from the pilots in Reggio Emilia were incorporated into an adapted method and discussed with the GOTALK team in Italy. The adapted method abandoned the hypothesis of the five-step consequentiality and assumed a "three-dimensional" and core-based approach, integrating different levels of participation practice (Why? How? What?), in six steps: context analysis and networking stakeholders; mapping the ideas of participation in the group; searching for other views; assembling different perspectives; design of action and products; dissemination of results and policy impact.

Using the adapted method, the GOTALK team in Antwerp set to work in two secondary schools (November 2024 to March 2025). Testing the method yielded new insights that were integrated into the final method described in this deliverable. The new model also takes into account the ownership of each of the different steps, which is always balanced between adults and children and young people. In addition, the final model also places more emphasis on the flexible application of the various steps of a participation process.

Important insights are described at the end of this deliverable for each of the pillars of the GOTALK project:

Lessons learned by the GOTALK team about **inclusive participation** concern the use of the '100 languages' and multiple intelligences among children and young people as well as adults. This reveals a wide range of perspectives. It is essential to listen genuinely and deeply: to slow down, ask active questions, and value all forms of expression, including less conventional ones. The 'living wall' supports this process as a collective, reflective tool for gathering voices and connecting perspectives.

**Sustainable participation** requires the explicit exchange of ideas between children, educators, and policymakers. Pedagogical documentation can help make sensitive topics discussable. Children and young people must be involved from the outset to ensure sustainable results. Participation requires support from the entire organization and relevant external stakeholders. Clear structures make a pupil council more sustainable. Differentiation in forms of participation increases engagement. An external perspective stimulates reflection, breaks through blind spots, and supports joint vision development.

Young people are uncertain about the commitment of adults and institutions to **impactful participation**. Genuine involvement requires open discussions about representation and power. Adults can critically examine their role as gatekeepers: giving space, not controlling too much, having realistic expectations, and making sensitive topics discussable. Institutionalization provides structure but can also stagnate participation. Balance between roles, tasks, and communication is crucial. Written agreements and ongoing follow-up by adults are necessary to ensure participation.

GOTALK makes it clear that adults play a crucial role in how young people experience participation and engage with it. The GOTALK project supports and inspires adults to take responsibility, listen deeply, and work with young people to strengthen their voice, self-confidence, and influence. Adults in education and leisure hold the key: they can help children and young people experience that their perspective is important.

## 1.3 Executive summary of deliverable (Dutch)

Dit document is het product van twee jaar onderzoek en ervaringen met participatiepraktijken in pedagogische contexten (scholen en buitenschoolse contexten). Het GOTALK-project heeft twee rondes van pilootstudies uitgevoerd om te onderzoeken hoe de inclusiviteit, duurzaamheid en beleidsimpact van leerlingenraden en kinderparticipatie kunnen worden versterkt.

In de eerste reeks pilootstudies (december 2023 tot april 2024) heeft het GOTALK-team in Reggio Emilia een programma uitgevoerd in een middelbare school en een buitenschoolse opvang voor kinderen van 14 tot 19 jaar. De eerste reeks pilootstudies was gebaseerd op een prototype van participatiepraktijken waarin vijf stappen werden gevolgd (bespreken van de betekenis van participatie, hoe participatie moet worden volgehouden, uitwerken van ideeën voor participatie op school en in de stad, documenteren van ervaringen en presenteren van de voorstellen aan beleidsmakers). Vanaf het begin hanteerde het project een multidisciplinaire aanpak op basis van specifieke methodologieën: observatie en actief luisteren, maieutische dialoog en de valorisatie van meervoudige intelligenties en 100 talen. Na het eerste pilootproject werden de inzichten die uit de pilootprojecten in Reggio Emilia waren verkregen, verwerkt in een aangepaste methode en besproken met het GOTALK-team in Italië. De aangepaste methode liet de hypothese van de vijfstappenconsequentie varen en ging uit van een “driedimensionale” en op de kern gebaseerde aanpak, waarbij verschillende niveaus van participatiepraktijken (Waarom? Hoe? Wat?) werden geïntegreerd in zes stappen: contextanalyse en netwerken met betrokkenen; in kaart brengen van de ideeën over participatie in de groep; zoeken naar andere standpunten; samenbrengen van verschillende perspectieven; ontwerp van acties en producten; verspreiding van resultaten en beleidsimpact.

Met behulp van de aangepaste methode ging het GOTALK-team in Antwerpen aan de slag in twee middelbare scholen (november 2024 tot maart 2025). Het testen van de methode leverde nieuwe inzichten op die werden geïntegreerd in het definitieve model dat in dit rapport wordt beschreven. Het nieuwe model houdt ook rekening met de verantwoordelijkheid voor elk van de verschillende stappen, die altijd in evenwicht is tussen volwassenen en kinderen en jongeren. Bovendien legt het definitieve model ook meer nadruk op de flexibele toepassing van de verschillende stappen van een participatieproces.

Aan het einde van dit rapport worden belangrijke inzichten beschreven voor elk van de pijlers van het GOTALK-project:

De lessen die het GOTALK-team heeft geleerd over **inclusieve participatie** hebben betrekking op het gebruik van de ‘100 talen’ en meervoudige intelligenties bij kinderen en jongeren, maar ook bij volwassenen. Dit onthult een breed scala aan perspectieven. Het is essentieel om oprecht en aandachtig te luisteren: vertragen, actieve vragen stellen en alle vormen van expressie waarderen, ook de minder conventionele. De *living wall* ondersteunt dit proces als een collectief, reflectief instrument om stemmen te verzamelen en perspectieven met elkaar te verbinden.

**Duurzame participatie** vereist een expliciete uitwisseling van ideeën tussen kinderen, opvoeders en beleidsmakers. Pedagogische documentatie kan helpen om gevoelige onderwerpen bespreekbaar te maken. Kinderen en jongeren moeten vanaf het begin worden betrokken om duurzame resultaten te garanderen. Participatie vereist ondersteuning van de hele organisatie en relevante externe betrokkenen. Duidelijke structuren maken een leerlingenraad duurzamer. Differentiatie in vormen van participatie verhoogt de betrokkenheid. Een extern perspectief stimuleert reflectie, legt blinde vlekken bloot en ondersteunt de ontwikkeling van een gezamenlijke visie.

Jongeren zijn onzeker over de inzet van volwassenen en instellingen voor **impactvolle participatie**. Echte betrokkenheid vereist open discussies over vertegenwoordiging en macht. Volwassenen bekijken hun rol als *gatekeepers* best kritisch: ruimte geven, niet te veel controleren, realistische verwachtingen hebben en gevoelige onderwerpen bespreekbaar maken. Institutionalisering biedt structuur, maar kan participatie ook doen stagneren. Evenwicht tussen rollen, taken en communicatie is cruciaal. Schriftelijke afspraken en voortdurende follow-up door volwassenen zijn noodzakelijk om participatie te waarborgen.

GOTALK maakt duidelijk dat volwassenen een cruciale rol spelen in hoe jongeren participatie ervaren en ermee omgaan. Het GOTALK-project ondersteunt en inspireert volwassenen om verantwoordelijkheid te nemen, goed te luisteren en samen te werken met jongeren om hun stem, zelfvertrouwen en invloed te versterken. Volwassenen in het onderwijs en de vrijetijdsector spelen hierbij een sleutelrol: zij kunnen kinderen en jongeren helpen ervaren dat hun perspectief belangrijk is.

## 1.4 Executive summary of deliverable (Italian)

Questo rapporto è il frutto di due anni di ricerca ed esperienze con pratiche di partecipazione in contesti pedagogici (scuole e contesti extrascolastici). Il progetto GOTALK ha condotto due cicli di azioni pilota per indagare come rafforzare l'inclusività, la sostenibilità e l'impatto politico dei consigli studenteschi e della partecipazione dei bambini.

Nella prima serie di azioni pilota (da dicembre 2023 ad aprile 2024) il team GOTALK di Reggio Emilia ha condotto un intervento in una scuola secondaria di secondo grado e in un centro giovanile per adolescenti dai 14 ai 19 anni. La prima serie di progetti pilota si è basata su un prototipo di pratica partecipativa in cui sono state seguite cinque fasi (discussione sul significato della partecipazione, su come la partecipazione dovrebbe essere sostenuta, elaborazione di idee per la partecipazione a scuola e in città, documentazione delle esperienze e presentazione delle proposte ai responsabili politici). Fin dall'inizio, il progetto ha adottato un approccio multidisciplinare basato su metodologie specifiche: osservazione e ascolto attivo, dialogo maieutico e valorizzazione delle intelligenze plurali e dei 100 linguaggi. Dopo il primo modello pilota, le intuizioni acquisite dalle sperimentazioni a Reggio Emilia sono state incorporate in un metodo adattato e discusse con il team GOTALK in Italia. Il metodo adattato ha abbandonato l'ipotesi della consequenzialità di cinque fasi e ha assunto un approccio "tridimensionale", basato su un focus centrale e sei azioni, integrando diversi livelli di pratica partecipativa (Perché? Come? Cosa?): analisi del contesto e creazione di una rete di stakeholder; mappatura delle idee di partecipazione nel gruppo; ricerca di altri punti di vista; assemblaggio di diverse prospettive; progettazione di azioni e prodotti; diffusione dei risultati e impatto sulle politiche.

Utilizzando il metodo adattato, il team GOTALK di Anversa l'ha utilizzato in due scuole secondarie superiori (da novembre 2024 a marzo 2025). La sperimentazione del metodo ha fornito nuove intuizioni che sono state integrate nel metodo finale descritto in questo documento. Il nuovo modello tiene conto anche della titolarità di ciascuna delle diverse fasi, che è sempre equilibrata tra adulti, bambini e giovani. Inoltre, il modello finale pone maggiore enfasi sull'applicazione flessibile delle varie fasi di un processo di partecipazione.

Alla fine del presente documento sono descritte importanti intuizioni per ciascuno dei pilastri del progetto GOTALK. Le lezioni apprese dal team GOTALK sulla **partecipazione inclusiva** riguardano l'uso dei "100 linguaggi" tra bambini, giovani e adulti. Ciò rivela un'ampia gamma di prospettive. È essenziale ascoltare in modo sincero e profondo: rallentare, porre domande attive e valorizzare tutte le forme di espressione, comprese quelle meno convenzionali. Il "muro vivente" sostiene questo processo come strumento collettivo e riflessivo per raccogliere voci e collegare prospettive.

La **partecipazione sostenibile** richiede uno scambio esplicito di idee tra adolescenti, educatori e responsabili politici. La documentazione pedagogica può aiutare a rendere discutibili argomenti delicati. I bambini e i giovani devono essere coinvolti fin dall'inizio per garantire risultati sostenibili. La partecipazione



richiede il sostegno dell'intera organizzazione e delle parti interessate esterne. Strutture chiare rendono più sostenibile un consiglio studentesco. La differenziazione nelle forme di partecipazione aumenta il coinvolgimento. Una prospettiva esterna stimola la riflessione, supera i punti ciechi e sostiene lo sviluppo di una visione comune.

I giovani sono incerti sull'impegno degli adulti e delle istituzioni nei confronti di una **partecipazione efficace**. Un coinvolgimento autentico richiede discussioni aperte sulla rappresentanza e sul potere. Gli adulti possono esaminare criticamente il loro ruolo di gatekeeper: dare spazio, non controllare troppo, avere aspettative realistiche e rendere discutibili argomenti delicati. L'istituzionalizzazione fornisce una struttura, ma può anche stagnare la partecipazione. L'equilibrio tra ruoli, compiti e comunicazione è fondamentale. Per garantire la partecipazione sono necessari accordi scritti e un follow-up continuo da parte degli adulti.

GOTALK chiarisce che gli adulti svolgono un ruolo cruciale nel modo in cui i giovani vivono la partecipazione e si impegnano in essa. Il progetto GOTALK sostiene e ispira gli adulti ad assumersi la responsabilità, ad ascoltare attentamente e a lavorare con i bambini e giovani per rafforzare la loro voce, la loro autostima e la loro influenza. Gli adulti nel campo dell'istruzione e del tempo libero hanno un ruolo chiave: possono aiutare i bambini e i giovani a capire che il loro punto di vista è importante.

## 2. GOTALK: Foundations of the project

### 2.1 Children's participation

Children have a right to participate in those decisions that affect them. That is stated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. (UNCRC, 1989)

Children and young people do indeed participate in various councils and share their views about their surroundings. However, this participation is unequally divided among children. The European Study on Child Participation, published in 2021, concluded, for instance, that vulnerable children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate systematically in political and democratic life, as are children younger than twelve years old. (European Commission. Directorate General for Justice and Consumers. et al., 2021)

Although nearly every country on the globe has ratified the UNCRC, it does not mean that participation itself is taken for granted. Historically, the UNCRC took root in another social and political timeframe and mindset, when the belief that democracy would prevail globally was far greater than it is now. Democracies internationally are vulnerable nowadays. Additionally, children's right to participation has not always been easily implemented. In a much-cited paper, Laura Lundy stated for instance, that adults' knowledge about the width of Article 12 UNCRC is lacking, and that

the enactment of this article needs the support of a strong use of other rights<sup>1</sup> covered by the UNCRC. (Lundy, 2007) The participation right needs to be supported by a sound attention to four cornerstones: space (the opportunity to express a view); voice (the support to express a view); audience (the view must be listened to), and influence (the view must be acted upon).

In this context, the GOTALK consortium wanted to test a specific approach to strengthen participatory practices in organized contexts, such as schools. The GOTALK team believes it is particularly important to offer children enough solid experiences to allow them to experience participation and democracy. Schools as pedagogical systems have to play a role to support this participation right of young people. Not only because school is one of the most important environments where children spend a lot of time, but also because participation does not necessarily come naturally. Not for children, but not for adults either.

## **2.2 Three GOTALK challenges: inclusiveness, sustainability and policy impact**

The GOTALK project experimented with formal participation in schools and youth organizations. Eight piloting contexts took part in the project, four for children between 6 and 12 and four for young people between 13 and 18 years old. In Belgium, the schools had a pupil council; a representative body of around 20 pupils that convened regularly to discuss school activities and policy recommendations for the school. In Italy, these representative bodies were not organized at the level of the school. But there, the GOTALK facilitator-researchers worked with young people around the same topics; participation and policy influence by and with children. Policy documents and previous research show that participatory trajectories with young people, suffer from various challenges (e.g. ChildFund Alliance et. al., 2021; Peleman et.al., 2014; UNICEF & Eurochild, 2019). The main goal of GOTALK was to address three specific and problematic challenges in adolescents' and children's participation in decision-making: inclusiveness, sustainability and tangible impact on decisions.

### **1. Inclusiveness: Pupil councils do not ensure participation for every pupil**

Although not intentional, there are a lot of barriers to pupil councils that make participation not always inclusive and accessible (Van Daele et.al., 2021). Not all pupils find it equally easy to have their opinions heard, while others feel very comfortable during a pupil council. It is often the older,

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<sup>1</sup> Lundy points specifically to the following rights: Art.2: Non-Discrimination; Art. 3: Best Interests of the Child; Art.5 Right to Guidance from Adults; Art.13 Right to Information; and Art. 19 Right to be Safe. (Lundy, 2007, p. 932)

white pupils who have the school language as their home language who make their voices heard. Younger pupils, children from families with a background in migration, pupils with a different home language or pupils with special needs are less likely to be heard (EC, 2021). This is unfortunate, because every voice and perspective is needed for an honest discussion.

## 2. Sustainability: Pupil councils are fragile

For children's participation rights in decision-making to work, a clear governance model is needed for sustainability and continuity (Van Daele et.al., 2021). In schools, there are a lot of tasks to divide, and pupil participation is seen as one of the tasks teachers can fulfil at school. However, how sustainable is a pupil council when those teachers are absent? Although schools are required to involve their pupils in decision-making (Flemish Participation Decree, 2008), continuity is not evident due to staff capacity and training (Childfund Alliance et.al., 2021). The art of sustainability might be to find more team members to support the pupil council and embrace the pupil council as an obvious aspect of school life. For participation to be sustainable, it cannot be treated as an isolated project or the responsibility of individual school staff and pupils. A clear governance model is needed, adapted to the scale of a school or youth organization.

## 3. Policy impact: Children meeting in a council does not mean their voice also has impact.

Children's participation tends to be restricted; they are not often involved in agenda setting and their recommendations remain merely non-binding (EC, 2021). Children are quick to recognise when their involvement is merely symbolic, and repeated experiences of empty consultation can lead to disillusionment and withdrawal. In a study by Peleman and colleagues (2014) more than half of children indicated they felt the staff listened to their opinions but less than 1/3 of children stated they could participate to decision-making. To ensure that participation is both credible and effective, it must be structured around clear goals, supported by decision-makers with the authority to act, and followed up with feedback that shows how children's input has influenced outcomes.

## **2.3 Pedagogical views and practices supporting participation**

The GOTALK project assumed that several conditions have to be met to make participation 'work'.

Firstly, children's *right to participation is the core of the project*, meaning that time and again the GOTALK team of facilitator-researchers needed to reflect on the activities and pilots as they were deployed. Issues of tokenism, symbolic participation have been documented and discussed in

practical and scientific literature (e.g. Cahill & Davdand, 2018; Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2001; Lundy, 2007). Therefore, the project team needed to make sense of the question: Is what happens here conducive to or restrictive of participation? For this, the GOTALK team experimented with participatory practices within the piloting activities inspired by scientific work from different fields. The work of different scholars to conceptualize children's participation in programs led the GOTALK teams not to take the meanings of participation for granted.

Hart's (1992) '**Ladder of Participation**' and the subsequent reworked models support a wider questioning of participation discourses (Treseder 1997; Lansdown 2001). These later approaches proposed a non-hierarchical order of the degrees of participation, or focused on the effect(s) of participation, rather than just on its modality, and on the role that surrounding adults and institutions play in shaping 'pathways' to participation (Shier 2001), and focused on the fluid nature of participation, with its ongoing responses to context, circumstances and to the shifts in relational power dynamics that can evolve, ebb and flow within a given experience (Cahill and Davdand 2018). Our field work and reflections have brought to independently develop a synthesis representation that has several points in common with Cahill and Davdand's **P7 model** that represents a thinking tool for youth participation, assembling seven inter-acting domains i) purpose, ii) positioning, iii) perspective, iv) power relations, v) protection, vi) place, and vii) process. The purpose of the initiative is understood to orient all other domains, but activity in one domain influences what happens in other domains. For example, if power relations are managed well, diverse perspectives will be included and valued.

The work of Karen Lundy also shaped thinking about participation. Her **rights-based approach** describes that participation rights are so much more than inviting children to 'give their voice' (Lundy, 2007). Children's participation should be supported by adults, by granting space, an audience and influence to children. During the piloting experiences, the framework of **child-friendly information** by Stalford, Cairns and Marshall (2017) also proved supportive. They state that the right to information (which is a crucial cornerstone for the right to participation), implies more than giving children procedural and practical information. They coin the term 'agency asserting information'.; Information should not only be given, it should be given in such a way that children can use the information in real life situations that matter to them. (Stalford et al., 2017: 212).. The concept of **boundaried participation** (Waters-Davies et.al., 2024, Murphy, A. et al. 2022) turned out to be very helpful for the GOTALK team as well. Participation can only 'work' insofar as adults that are involved in participatory processes have the idea that children are capable beings. (Instead of, for instance, beings that are considered too young, or too unknowing.) Participation becomes boundaried when adults work from a more restrictive set of beliefs about children in their agency and capabilities.

This circumstance, in our view, further contributes to validate our conclusions on the importance of key factors and on the fluidity of the participatory process.

Secondly, the GOTALK consortium employed a pedagogical approach that is based on ideas and fosters participation. In general, the idea of the GOTALK project is rooted in the **pedagogy of Reggio Emilia** (Fleet & Machado, 2022; Malaguzzi, 1996; Rinaldi, 2021). This pedagogy adheres to the idea that children are agents in their own lives, that their views are important and that community-building is part of pedagogy. Moreover, the Reggio Emilia Pedagogy employs methods that encourage participation and foster it. One core element of the pedagogy is the idea that children have ‘a 100 languages’ (Malaguzzi, 1996; Rinaldi, 2021, Gardner, 2011). Children do not only express themselves with words and adults should remain attentive to understand any ‘other language’ that children also ‘speak’, such as mimics, gestures, body language. This idea was used to enhance the inclusiveness of participatory processes. A second core element in the pedagogy or Reggio Emilia, is the practice of ‘pedagogic documentation’, which is in essence a cycle of *observation, documentation and interpretation*. Used first and foremost as a practice to reflect on children’s learning, the project team wanted to use the practice to shape profound participatory practices. The practice of pedagogic documentation could strengthen the inclusiveness, the sustainability and the policy impact of participatory processes. Central in GOTALK was the planned use of a *Living Wall*, (Bjartveit, Carston, Baxtor, Hart & Greenidge, 2019), a place where the participatory process would be documented, and that could make the voices and opinions of children visible and invite several participants to consider their perspective (Van Daele & Piessens, 2021).

The Reggio Emilia Pedagogy in the GOTALK project proposal (Van Daele et al., 2022) was strengthened by the use of the validated ‘**mosaic approach**’ (Clark & Moss, 2011), a participatory method that puts the agency of children and other participants central and invites them to partake in decision-making processes following a photo voice and pedagogic documentation design. It has the potential of involving young children, children with specific needs and children, families and stakeholders from different linguistic backgrounds, strengthening the probability of inclusiveness of the participation trajectories.

Thirdly, the GOTALK project looked into the role of **governance** as a strengthening or undermining force for children’s participation. The GOTALK project started from the observation that a clear governance model strengthens strong mechanisms for participation and mostly functions at a broader level than schools or youth organizations (Van Daele et.al., 2021). However, some sort of governance is needed in schools to guarantee participation for pupils, as pupil participation often

suffers from issues of sustainability due to a shortage of staff and resources (Childfund Alliance et.al., 2021). Children's participation gains in sustainability when procedures are put into place to facilitate, protect and ensure participation. Cahill and Dadvand (2018) advocate for a balanced protection: when it comes to procedures put into place to protect those participating, we should be careful not to overprotect young people as this might hinder them in their participative opportunities. Shier (2001) focused on the importance of necessary resources for participation, and categorizes openings, opportunities and even obligations for organizations: When procedures and policy requirements are put into place, there is no option of not letting young people participate. In that way, school workers can make sure the system of their school is ready for participation.

## **3. Piloting experiences**

### **3.1 Insights from the first piloting year**

#### **3.1.1 Method prototype**

In the first piloting year of the project, the Italian working group observed the characteristics of the possible intervention contexts and listened to the stakeholders in the area. Starting from the analysis of the collected data, a prototype intervention was elaborated. This first model was designed to work on the theme of participation in two different contexts:

- formal contexts: secondary school, in which representative bodies (class and school representatives, student council) are provided for by law;
- non-formal contexts: out-of-school, where normally there are no representative bodies, but, especially in the context of Reggio Emilia, there are numerous opportunities to experiment with participation within and outside the group to which one belongs.

Shifting the sphere of intervention also outside the school was chosen in order to explore the different ways in which participation can be supported and developed: on the one hand, in secondary schools, exploring how participation can be expressed in the everyday life of the classroom and school, also in relation to the bodies present in the institution; on the other, in the territory, to understand how non-formal aggregation spaces can help participatory processes in the city even where there are no children's councils.

Both schools and youth aggregation spaces, moreover, have a specific focus on inclusion in their regulations: in Italian schools there are no special classes for vulnerable subjects, but pupils with special educational needs can benefit from specific projects and in some cases from the presence of teachers added to the teaching team to support the class. Youth centres, on the other hand, often describe among their aims the choice of welcoming and accompanying everyone, with a focus on combating inequalities and offering everyone the same opportunities. This is why it immediately

seemed interesting to take the project to both areas to see how inclusive the participatory processes were.

Finally, the 2019 legislation on citizenship education in schools was an opportunity to dialogue with teachers and educators on the link between the content and knowledge that children need to master in order to become competent subjects with respect to democratic processes and the ways and contexts in which they can experiment and acquire their personal skills. In this sense, the Gotalk project proposed new ways of thinking about participation within the school and innovative stimuli for active citizenship education. In the out-of-school environment, the Gotalk project was part of an already active pathway on the participatory dynamics of young people, but broadened its gaze on the issues of inclusion, sustainability and impact of youth activation.

In order to start the experimentation, a prototype intervention was developed in five steps (D4.1, D4.2):

1. Discussing the meaning of participation and how participation works or does not work.
2. Discussing how participation should be characterised and how it should be sustained.
3. Elaborating ideas for participation to be developed at school and in the city.
4. Documenting experiences and reflecting on their transferability.
5. Discuss the proposals with policy makers.

From the initial confrontation with the stakeholders and with some of the teachers and educators present in the two groups involved, it immediately emerged how important it was to give girls and boys confidence, to be consistent as adults and to involve them in the participation process from the outset, monitoring and observing their response to the activity proposals and recalibrating objectives, themes and methodologies from time to time in the light of what emerged in the meetings.

This choice is consistent with the general framework and objectives of the Gotalk project, it is decisive for work with minors in general and it is essential when adolescents are involved: Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child declares the child's right to be heard and to participate in decisions that affect him or her; Italian law, from the age of 14, considers boys and girls capable of looking after themselves and being responsible for their own actions.

In order to give everyone the opportunity to find their own role within the participation process and to express themselves in the most self-confident language, the project took a multidisciplinary approach that made it possible to identify a number of specific methodologies: observation and active listening, maieutic dialogue, and the valorisation of plural intelligences and 100 languages (Malaguzzi 1996; Rinaldi 2021).

### 3.1.2 Piloting experiences

The piloting experiences were carried out in a first class of a human sciences high school in Reggio Emilia and in a youth aggregation centre, which hosts adolescents aged between approximately 14 and 19. In both groups there were adolescents with different characteristics and affiliations. The work was conducted in both groups with the collaboration of the adults of reference (teachers and educators).

The school chose to involve a first grade class in the project, with the intention of starting a longer process aimed at supporting the young people towards a more conscious presence in the spaces of delegation and representation provided within the school. The youth centre, on the other hand, was chosen both because of its declared interest in promoting and supporting participation skills in its objectives and because it has always been attentive to welcoming and including adolescents who are very different in terms of age, interests, and social, cultural and economic background.

In the initial planning, the five steps were thought of as consequential and it was hypothesised that the largest part of the process would be devoted to step 3, linked to the development of a project and its implementation. During the meetings, however, it soon became clear that the five steps were coessential and intertwined, and that there was a need to broaden one's view, not considering only the output of the project as an objective, but rather to value the participatory process itself as the main outcome of the project.

The experimentation of the two pilots made it clear that, before any kind of intervention, it is important to always be clear that it cannot be taken for granted that all those participating in an experience share the same idea of participation and inclusion. Time and again, differences in ideas emerged at both intergenerational and inter-individual levels. Before proceeding, it was therefore appropriate to make the different points of view explicit and bring them into dialogue.

In the school, for example, girls and boys initially showed coldness and mistrust with regard to the topic of participation. The class had recently come out of the first experience of electing their representatives, but they were largely lukewarm or not at all interested in this opportunity, declaring that they did not understand its meaning or how it worked. Even the presence of some groups of students who, in the school and outside it, were expressing their dissent with regard to some of the ministry's choices concerning the school system was met by most with coldness and diffidence. In the youth centre, on the other hand, in the face of a general motivation with respect to the issue of inclusion and an almost common sharing with respect to the value of democratic participation and the expression of one's own points of view, there emerged a distrust with respect to the actual possibility of being listened to by adults and institutions, and thus, in some, the temptation to abstain from decision-making processes, leaving others to deal with it (the educators, the more open-minded comrades and those more committed to certain ideals).

Precisely for this reason, the development of the pilots in the two groups led to giving ample space to points 1 and 2, to accompany the explication of the different meanings of the key words of the project both on a theoretical and ideal level, and in the concreteness of the life experience of girls and boys: with friends, at school, in the family, in the city. Starting from participation and inclusion, the following were thematised: exclusion, representation, delegation, abstention, democracy, unity, multiplicity, group, individual.

With these two steps, the fourth and fifth steps also necessarily intersected: the ideas that emerged in the groups, the doubts and questions, were put down on paper and made visible, not only through words, but also through images, so that everyone could have them clear in their minds, to make them their own or to disassociate themselves. These ideas and questions, but also the answers that followed, could not then remain within the groups, who began to wonder who could help them find answers and grow the argument. This is why the confrontation with policy makers and student representatives became more necessary and urgent. In order to make sense of the words (step 1), to understand how they are realised (step 2) and to proceed to devise something of their own (step 3), the two groups needed to meet others, to clarify their ideas, to understand the mechanisms of operation and the meanings behind the participation they were invited to express. It was therefore decided to set aside a number of meetings to: describe and understand the mechanisms of delegation and representation; meet people who had already chosen to participate actively (class, institute and council representatives, municipal administration); and discuss with others (school manager, schoolmates, neighbours).

In both paths, it was precisely the opportunity to pause for as long as necessary to reflect (with words and with the 100 languages) on the meaning of participation and to share ideas and questions with others (peers and adults) that allowed the desire to achieve something to arise in the two groups, giving further concreteness to participation and communicating it.



In the school, the intertwining and recurrence of the various steps (meeting with the representatives and discussion with the headmaster, reflection on some student protests that had no appeal in the classroom, ideas that emerged from the expressive activities and the construction of a real small school with wooden blocks) led to the young people deciding to install a notice board in the school corridor to allow communication between students and discussion with the school and council representatives. In the youth centre, going deep into the search for the meaning of certain words apparently common to all members of the group (explored with movement, images, listening to the other, photography, staging) made it possible to 'think the unthinkable' and to put oneself in everyone's shoes, even those who do not see participation and inclusion as a value or priority. This is why the group chose to communicate in a video their own whys, telling, each in their own mother tongue, their personal motivations for participation, but also for non-participation.

Participation, therefore, was the starting point, but also the arrival point of the pathways and allowed each group to be bequeathed both a product to take care of and share, and a treasure trove of viewpoints from which to start again for new participative projects.

All the activities and steps of the two pilots were conducted giving ample space to the plurality of intelligences. Dialogue, always present, was thus able to lean on other languages and benefit from this possibility. Girls and boys in many cases emphasised their difficulty in not being able to express themselves and understand best using only verbal language: people with language deficits, but also with difficulties in relating to others or in self-awareness stated that they had benefited from the possibility of experiencing the topics in question through a multiplicity of languages and channels of expression. Even the adults, observing the progress of the work with the groups, appreciated the opportunity and chose to confirm in their work a style more attentive to the plurality of languages and the flexibility and relaxation of working time.

### 3.1.3 Lab 2 and Sanremo partner meeting

The process and contents of the prototype experimentation were monitored in itinere and in conclusion through a brief moment of comparison at the end of each meeting with the groups and during some meetings with educators and teachers. In addition, the research group shared its reflections with professionals, administrators and stakeholders in the area.

The choice of working with the 100 languages was appreciated, extending to adolescents an approach already known to the educational realities of Reggio Emilia, but usually proposed to children and not to adults. Also interesting was the possibility of offering the rituals of welcome and closure that gave space to the emotional dimension, an important component to support the processes of participation and integration.

Great attention was paid to the role of adults and institutions, which can support or hinder participatory processes depending on how flexible, coherent and capable of listening and motivating they are.

These contents were brought to the partner meeting that took place in Sanremo in October 2024. On that occasion, the working group identified some points of convergence, especially in respect to the centrality of the role of adults as facilitators or obstacles to participatory processes. Particular attention was paid to the importance of consistency, flexibility and the ability to give confidence and space to the requests and ideas of younger people.

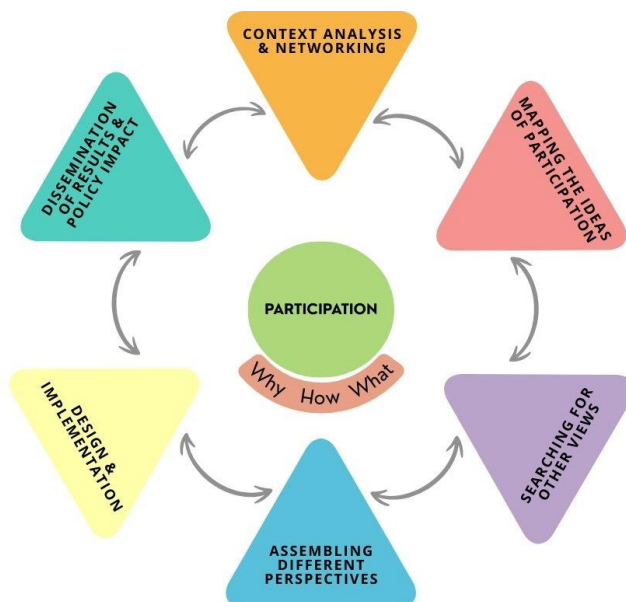
The comparison with respect to the development of the four pilots also made it possible to take up some suggestions and to hypothesise the experimentation of certain tools used more in one context than in another. In particular, the Italian group chose to introduce the living wall and peer interviews more systematically and asked the Antwerp group to try out more proposals for activities that would enhance the 100 languages and bring out the meanings of the word participation present in the group.

Finally, in the light of these points of convergence, it was decided to work even more in parallel for the second year, so as to mutually monitor the subsequent experiments, with particular attention to the strengths and weaknesses that would emerge in the application of the adapted methods.

#### 3.1.4 Adapted method

The conduction and monitoring of the two pilots, on the one hand, and the discussion of the contents with stakeholders and project partners, on the other, were the starting point for reworking the prototype method, adapting and perfecting it in view of the continuation of the work in the second year.

In the light of what emerged and was observed in the two pilots, it was necessary to abandon the hypothesis of the five-step consequentiality and start thinking in a "three-dimensional" manner. The approach therefore shifted from a step-by-step process to a core-based approach, illustrated in a chart designed to summarise the method and guide its application in the second pilot planned by the Gotalk project.



In a practical application of the method, it is not necessary to have a single starting point or to proceed in a linear way. Knowledge of the context, emerging needs or specific objectives will allow you to decide where to start. Once this first step has been identified, the design and monitoring work will allow you to decide which other tasks to cross and how much space to devote to each one during the project. The arrows highlight the possibility of creating interconnections between actions, either by crossing them in a sequential manner or by returning to some and reaching others directly.

Once the task to start from has been identified, it is then possible to reach all the others and, by bringing them into synergy, contribute to achieving participation, which is at the centre of the model. In the same way, participation can be the method and means by which the actions of the various tasks are set up.

Participation is, in fact, the focus of every intervention:

- it is the goal to strive for, as the basis of democratic processes and cultural production and reproduction in which minors and adults take part together;

- it is the starting point, as the project is proposed to a group which, as such, is already a space for participation;
- it is the process itself, which in its unfolding makes participation concrete and active;
- it is a process that proceeds in a spiral. The advancement of a project is recursive and in the reiteration of certain steps and mechanisms it acquires robustness and meaning; its conclusion opens up new perspectives that, with new recursiveness, allow one to proceed ever deeper.

The core elements identified around participation give meaning, substance and perspective to participation itself. Here too, the process proceeds in a spiral, but also through intertwining and overlapping:

- participation arises and is made concrete and defined by each task but, at the same time, nurtures them and gives them meaning;
- all actions are interconnected both through the common central point, participation, and in a reciprocal relationship;
- depending on the path taken, some groups may be more prominent than others, but all will have a role to play in supporting and defining participation.

The tasks revolving around participation are the evolution of the five steps of the prototype method and the subsequent work of discussion with the stakeholders and observation of the contexts and actors involved. In detail:

1. Context analysis and networking stakeholders: Participation does not take place in the abstract. Every project needs to be based on a clear knowledge of the contexts and actors involved and the needs and objectives it aims at. For it to be effective and sustainable, it is crucial that it interfaces with a network of actors who support it, nurture it and give it perspectives. We therefore decided to make explicit this task, which had been carried out but left implicit in the first prototype.
2. Mapping the ideas of participation in the group: the word participation is broad and polysemic. There are inter-individual and inter-generational differences as regards both its meaning and the motivation behind it. Some individuals do not feel the desire to participate, do not find the opportunity to do so, do not trust. It becomes crucial to understand what ideas and representations young people have of participation. The word participation then has to do with other words: inclusion, exclusion, group, goals, and the interweavings need to be explored.
3. Searching for other views: Children's councils must relate to those around them and gathering the views of other peers is important to nurture democratic representative processes. Encountering the other is an asset because it broadens points of view, calls for consensus and dissent, helps awareness and divergent thinking, opens up the unexpected (questions, ideas, proposals).
4. Assembling different perspectives: each individual's personal point of view and capacity for agency must necessarily intertwine with those of others. In some cases, it is possible to synthesise, in others the participatory process implies having to accept the views of others while renouncing one's own or to defend and justify one's own perspective: this is where democratic processes (delegation, abstention, majority and minority, representativeness) come into play. Putting viewpoints together and making choices leads the group to 'take the toy apart' and understand the mechanisms governing participatory processes.
5. Design of action and products: observe, design, realise, verify, return to observe and design again. Participation has to do with agency and the subjects' sense of self-efficacy. The conception and realisation of something concrete allows participation to be experienced and lived. It is not possible to think of it only in the abstract, that would be inconsistent. This is even more true for children and

young people who, due to the characteristics of their intellectual and relational functioning, need concreteness, to see and touch processes and the results of processes.

6. Dissemination of results and policy impact: the outcomes of the processes developed with and by the children through their intelligences must be welcomed, listened to and recognised. First of all, by the children themselves, but also by adults. The dissemination of the results (contents emerged and products realised) makes the participatory process tangible, increases the sense of self-efficacy of those who have experienced it, and obliges adults and policy makers to take a position on it. The task of adults and stakeholders is to remain credible and consistent and to take on the children's demands, transferring them to other contexts and giving them a sustainable perspective, if appropriate. Children can also be active in this phase, participating as protagonists in the dissemination of outcomes and in the interlocution with policy makers or stakeholders.

Encouraging and enabling the participation of minors is possible by promoting a pluralistic approach that involves both children and young people and adults. They will play different roles and have different levels of influence in the process depending on their level of autonomy, motivation and competence. The coexistence and balance between young people and adults may vary, but those supporting the process will have the task of ensuring that minors are active participants and not puppets in the hands of adults (from manipulation and tokenism to full participation in decision-making; Hart 1992). Depending on the type of process activated and the different stages, the best balance between the contribution of minors and adults must be decided (Lansdown 2018). This will depend on the conditions of the learning environment and the social context in which participation is being experimented, but also on an awareness of the power relations that, even invisibly, weigh on the relationship and must therefore be monitored.

In the diagram, the importance of the presence of children and adults in the participatory process is shown by the angles dividing each triangle: the comparison between the two widths highlights the extent to which adult intervention and children's actions affect each core. This adult-child ratio may change during the process, so it is useful to monitor it.

Each task of the model can be approached by valuing the 100 languages, which are not the prerogative of childhood but, on the contrary, appear to be important allies in supporting the autonomous growth that is central during adolescence. Not only reasoning and dialogue, but also concreteness, body and movement, to broaden perspectives and ensure greater inclusiveness. For adults too, the enhancement of the 100 languages is an opportunity, both to better understand what is being offered to children and young people, and to exercise a divergent gaze and allow for a fuller experience of participation, even for adults.

These are the elements that were considered significant for the application of the model, the continuation of the pilot and its transferability to new contexts:

- do not take for granted the meaning of the topics covered by the project nor the meaning of participation: if the final objective is to increase participation and improve the inclusion of young people in their contexts, it is essential to start from an understanding of their point of view on these dimensions
- pay attention to the role of adults: they too are part of the learning environment in which young people experience participation. It is necessary that they also make their views on the topic explicit, that they are consistent in their demands and interaction with young people, that they take seriously the demands and actions made by young people concerning participation;

- be aware of the contexts in which participation takes place: school is the place where young people live a large part of their time both in real terms and on a symbolic level, it is a privileged context because it welcomes everyone and enables them to experience encounter and coexistence even with those they have not chosen, it has suitable tools to propose and support participation . It is, however, more rigid in its structures, and compulsory attendance may not encourage participation, which by its very nature requires a strong intrinsic motivation rather than a context in which to take place in an obligatory or evaluative manner. The out-of-school environment makes it possible to avoid the risk of restricting and rigidifying spaces for participation by institutionalising them, and encourage spontaneous participation, but the lesser structuring may be a limitation in terms of the effectiveness of the processes: children may experience positive participation within the out-of-school group, but this opportunity could be not supported or appreciated by the community ;
- give space to the 100 languages: dialogue, listening and the emergence of ideas and objectives can be truly inclusive and innovative when they are not based only on words and reasoning skills, but move from the valorisation of the plural intelligences present within the group, but also in individuals. Concepts are better understood and ideas are better expressed when we value the fact that they are always embodied. This is even more true when working in a group where not everyone masters the Italian language and rhetoric to the same degree. Encouraging teenagers to express themselves through the 100 languages also promotes divergent thinking, listening and acceptance of everyone, greater effectiveness of the process and the products it can achieve. In this way, everyone can find their place in the experience.
- Meeting and listening to others allow us to broaden our horizons and discover unexpected perspectives. For adults, putting themselves in a position of listening and observing, leaving aside any judgemental attitude, allows them to better identify tools and methodologies, but also objectives and issues to work on. For young people, discovering and accepting other points of view, whether from peers or adults, allows them to remain open-minded, exercise critical and divergent thinking, and support and motivate their own points of view. This makes participation inclusive and allows for innovation and a break from pre-established or predictable patterns, leading to more effective and shared choices and plans. For everyone, documenting the experience allows them to share the product, but also the participatory process, with the group and the outside world.
- In addition to constraints, motivation also plays a decisive role in participatory processes: girls and boys must feel that the topic and objectives in question concern them and are challenging for them. At the same time, they must clearly perceive that adults take them seriously, that they are open to listening, that they support their participatory process.

## 3.2 Cross-border pilot experiences (year 2)

### 3.2.1 Piloting contexts

#### 3.2.1.1 Recruiting schools for the cross-border pilots (year 2)

Two secondary schools participated in the cross-border pilots in Belgium. To ensure a smooth start of the cross-border pilots, the recruitment process started in February 2024, long before the pilot starting date of November 2024. Seven schools were contacted with the invitation to join the GOTALK project. All of them were in reasonable distance from the KdG campus and all of them had a functioning pupil council.

After a first introductory phone call, a member of the GOTALK team met with members of five school teams. After the meetings, three schools indicated they wanted to join the project. Pseudonyms are used to name the schools. In the yellow school, the pupil council was firmly embedded and a focal point in the school's functioning. In the blue school, the pupil council was a point that urgently needed improvement. The green school had a well-functioning pupil council that needed to be reinvigorated. The GOTALK team decided to go with the yellow and blue schools. A first consideration for this choice was the diversity in the cases. The difference among the schools enabled the GOTALK team to gain broader insights on formal pupil participation at school. On the other hand, these two schools welcomed very diverse pupil populations, also serving disadvantaged young people.

#### 3.2.1.2 The yellow school

The yellow school is located outside the city center of Antwerp. It consists of a primary school and a secondary school. The school has several active pupil councils, of which the pupil council of the first grade of the secondary school participated in the project. The GOTALK team only interacted with principals, teachers, and pupils from that first grade. Thus, the report on the piloting experience in this deliverable mostly reflects that first grade.

In the yellow school, the principal and teacher team were very proud of integrating pupil participation in the policy structure of the school. Not only did the school have an active pupil council, but they also made efforts to include other pupils to weigh in on the school's policy. Two years before the start of the project, the school had organized a summit in which all pupils (grades 1 to 6) participated. In that summit, they were asked about their perceptions of the school's performance as an organization and the priorities they would take in school policy. The summit results were used to draft a vision for school development for the upcoming five years.

The pupil council consisted of 25 representatives, one for each class in the first grade of the school. If the class representative could not attend the pupil council, a follow-up classmate joined the council. Generally, most classes would be represented in the council. A team of seven teachers supported the pupil council. One of the teachers was involved more than the others, since he drafted the council agenda, chaired both preparatory and pupil council meetings and connected the pupil council with the principal. Traditionally the pupil council organized some activities during the school year, such as a candy sale and a school ball. The pupil council was also involved in the introductory days for primary school children and their families.

When asked about the challenges in pupil participation for the school, the teachers supporting the pupil council indicated they would like to give the council and its accomplishments more visibility. Also, they would like to involve a broader range of teachers in the pupil council. The principal voiced his ambition to collaborate more intensely with the pupil council and give the council a more prominent role in school policy. Overcoming these challenges was why the school wanted to participate in the GOTALK project. They also welcomed the financial support they would receive for participating in the project.

Teachers and principal indicated two policy themes that were particularly relevant to pupils when the GOTALK trajectory started. A first policy theme was the ban on wearing head scarves at school. This is a widespread policy in Belgian schools, and a theme that was also elaborated on extensively in the public debate for more than a decade. A second policy theme was the ban on smartphones at school. Many pupils felt invisible with their opinions about the matter, as the ban continued even with resistance from the pupils. In the course of the project, the smartphone ban became general in all of Flanders following the national education department's decision.

#### 3.2.1.3 The blue school

The blue school is located near the city center of Antwerp. The school has three campuses, of which the two major campuses participated in the GOTALK project. The school received an unfavorable inspection report the previous school year. One of the remarks in the report was about pupil participation. This means pupil participation was a mandatory point for the school to improve. In the years before the project started, a new principal team was assigned in the school. The principal team was motivated to overcome the remarks in the inspection report. They indicated that taking part in the project would provide them with extra support and follow-up for the start-up of the pupil councils and the teacher team supporting them.

The two participating campuses had a pupil council, but only 2 or 3 pupils continued to attend in one of the campuses. On the other campus, the pupil council functioned more smoothly, but improvement was still due. The principal estimated it essential to set up a joint pupil council for the two campuses. In general, the school is not in the most comfortable position: When the school entered the GOTALK project, the drop-out rate of pupils was high, and the school had 8 vacancies for teachers.

Motivating teachers to take up extra tasks apart from their teaching assignments was not evident. The school had a system in which all teachers should take up an extra task and teachers could indicate their preferences at the start of the new school year. Facilitating the pupil council was one of those additional tasks. However, the GOTALK project and its impact on the teacher team around the pupil council was not clearly communicated to the teachers. Some teachers committed themselves to facilitating the pupil council and remained unaware of the project that was part of the deal.

During the initial meetings with the school principal, she voiced detailed plans about how the pupil council should be organized in the school. However, the GOTALK team urged the principal not to impose those ideas onto the teacher team facilitating the pupil council. A possible topic to discuss in the pupil council was the use of smartphones at school, a topic that, in the course of the project, was overruled by the Department of Education when they decided to ban smartphones from all school environments.

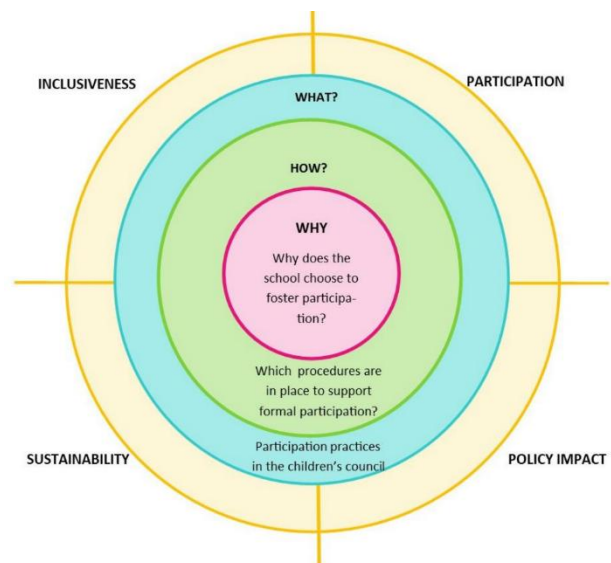
### 3.2.2 Cross-border testing of GOTALK methodologies

#### 3.2.2.1 Cross-border piloting: 'Translating' the method from Italian to Belgian

Starting the cross-border piloting experiences in the two Belgian schools, the collaboration with teacher teams was very different from the initial piloting experiences in Italy. The Italian GOTALK team had directly worked with pupils, being the main actor facilitating and deciding on the participatory process. The GOTALK team in Belgium collaborated with teacher teams, who facilitated the pupil councils. Working directly with pupils was not evident in the cross-border pilots in Belgium.

In the yellow school, the facilitating teachers led the pupil council. Being present for a pupil council meeting, let alone facilitating, was not evident for the GOTALK team members. In the blue school, the pupil council did not have a plan and an evident procedure yet. The GOTALK team trusted that these situations would place the agency and ownership with the school teams, which could enhance the project results' sustainability. In the first project year, the Antwerp team had played a steering role in the pupil councils and facilitated the councils alongside the teachers. However, this situation caused concerns about sustainability after the pilot ended.

Due to the limited access to working directly with pupils, the GOTALK team started the cross-border piloting by working with the teachers' teams. Although trying to inspire teams on what methodologies could be used when working with pupils, the focus was mainly on the procedures of the pupil councils and later on also on the schools' views on participation. This thus resulted in an initial focus on the 'HOW?' layer of the Golden Circle (Sinek, 2011), later adding the focus of 'WHY?' and eventually, in one of the schools also experimenting on 'WHAT?' activities to conduct with pupils on participation. Throughout the pilot trajectories, vision exercises ('WHY?') were linked to concrete practices at school ('HOW?' and 'WHAT?'). The cross-border pilots looked at what kind of vision was expressed in the current participatory practices at school. Also did we explore other ways to express certain values about participation in the pilots.



The GOTALK team started in the two schools with the intention to follow the six step plan as described in the method prototype: (1) understanding the context, (2) mapping the current situation, (3) searching for different views, (4) assembling different views, (5) forming policy advice and (6) sharing policy advice and results. However, it became clear that indeed, the steps do not need to be followed in a specific order, and some steps might require a lot of time and attention compared to others. In what follows, the story of the cross-border testing will be elaborated on for the different concentric circles of the Golden Circle. The six steps of the method prototype will be touched upon in the different circles.

### 3.2.2.2 Procedures in school that either support or hinder pupil participation (How?)

As the cross-border pilots took off in November, this meant the school year and the pupil councils had already started. The facilitating teachers had several meetings before the arrival of GOTALK, and the GOTALK team was challenged by joining the teacher team at full speed.

At the yellow school, the fullness of the agenda of the pupil council and the pace of decisions and information gathering were obvious. The facilitating teachers indicated struggles with this tempo at several points in the cross-border pilots. The pupil council mostly convened in plenary at the start, and later on in the meeting, the children gathered in smaller groups of 6 to 10 pupils to evaluate past activities or brainstorm sessions on pupil council activities with one or two facilitating teachers. Teachers thought pupils were not allowed enough time to orient themselves to the theme and develop valuable ideas beyond the obvious aspects. Often, the reality was that if two agenda points were expected to be treated, only one point was actually treated in the smaller groups. As all of the smaller groups were supposed to treat the same points, each was treated in the end, but not by all of the pupils. A first intervention of the GOTALK team in this school, was on the level of procedures (the how?), trying to find a solution with the teachers challenged by the overflowing agenda of the pupil council. Proposals of the GOTALK team included creating focus by prioritizing only a limited number of activities while cancelling others. In this school, the pupil council organized a lot of activities, such as the carnival ball, a candy sale and many more activities and these activities became a tradition in the school. However, the multitude of activities caused the agenda of the pupil council to be overly full. Another proposal was to create focus within the smaller groups and distributing the agenda points over the different groups instead of having all the groups working on the same points. A third proposal was to extend the time available for the pupil council, by organizing more



meetings to address all the points. All proposals were accepted and immediately implemented, except for the first proposal of cancelling some activities. Some teachers had the impression cancelling some activities was possible and was within the decision making mandate of the pupil council and their facilitating teachers. Other teachers, however, felt cancelling some activities was not a choice they could make. As the school community expected their efforts to organize those activities and the decision to cancel some activities would face disappointment or even refusal from people outside of the pupil council. This situation made clear that although the team of facilitating teachers wanted to set the agenda by choice, a large part of the agenda was filled with semi-mandatory points leaving limited space for new topics. Participation in the pupil council is in this way boundaried (Waters-Davies et.al., 2024, Murphy, A. et al. 2022), as the possibility to decide about what the pupil council would do was limited.

At the **blue school**, a teacher working group on pupil participation had started in September. With the arrival of the GOTALK team in November, the teachers in the working group were not very keen to slow down and reflect on the set-up of the pupil council. Some teachers in the working group refused to focus on vision building (the WHY?) but rather wanted to continue working with pupils and organising activities. The members of the GOTALK team and the teachers did not easily agree on how to proceed with the cross-border piloting trajectory. For the GOTALK team, it seemed a priority to align perspectives and expectations of pupil participation, while for the teacher team, the priority was in motivating pupils by making the actions of the pupil council visible. This teachers' priority was understandable, as they had difficulty getting pupils to attend the pupil council. No consistent group of pupils attended the pupil council meetings: sometimes four pupils attended, the next pupil meeting, six other pupils attended. This situation challenged a long-term perspective in and for the pupil council.

One of the urgent issues that came up in the pupil council was the new daily schedule introduced in September. The school day started 5 minutes earlier than the previous year. This issue kept some students occupied. They complained about the lack of public transportation; some felt they were unfairly punished for arriving late to school due to a delayed bus. On one campus, the student council decided to organise an action: they wanted to collect votes to plead with the administration to stop the new daily schedule. They handed out hot chocolate in the morning and tried to gather votes. A student made a flyer: "give your vote for a hot chocolate." On the day of the action, several students showed up. A few asked for more information and asked: "What do I vote for?", but the majority made a mark or an autograph and took a hot chocolate. The main principal objected vociferously to the action, claiming it was poorly conceived and the pupils were ill-informed. She said, "The pupils do not consider the consequences of adjusting the school day." This incident opened discussions on different roles for pupils, teachers, and the principal. Was this action indeed ill-conceived? What could the teachers have done to prevent this? Is it fair to expect pupils to inform themselves and consider the consequences? What can be expected from a principal or school policy theme when a new daily schedule is implemented? The 'hot chocolate incident' had made procedures and implicit beliefs explicit.

#### *Cross-pilot reflection about participation*

In both schools, it was clear that a shared view of participation or of pupil councils cannot be taken for granted. Rather than diving into a topic or organising activities, both teacher teams at this point saw the necessity and urgency of explicitly talking about participation. The cross-border pilots showed that the six-step plan also applied to the policy topic of participation in pupil councils. It was now time to understand the context of the school and map the current situation of pupil participation in both schools.

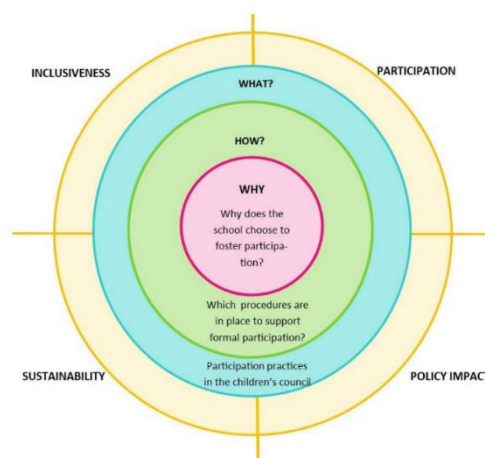
The difficulties with agenda-setting in the yellow school and the 'hot chocolate incident' in the blue school helped to create openness for exchanging views on the core concepts of a pupil council. These struggles enriched the vision exercise on pupil participation and rendered the discussions less abstract.

### 3.2.2.3 The school's views on the core concepts of pupil participation (Why?)

Addressing the topic of participation explicitly allows pupils, teachers and principals to align as a school community on what participation means for them. Equally, it grants the opportunity to adapt the organisation of participatory processes to their specific needs. When a school community starts this 'conversation' about participation, they must come to a shared understanding of participation. The word 'conversation' is to be understood in the broadest sense possible, including talks, posters, written statements, games, .... Everyone implicated in a participatory practice is ideally involved in this conversation: teachers, pupils and principals. Talking about participation should be done with everyone involved in pupil participation. It can be done in various constellations: teachers and pupils talking, teacher teams talking, addressing pupils specifically about the topic and pupils and principals connecting. Different constellations require different ways of addressing the topic of participation, although in the end it is important to interpret and conclude on the insights together.

#### *Exploring what participation means with teachers*

With teachers, an adapted version of the Golden Circle (Sinek, 2011) was used as a prompt to start the conversation. The GOTALK research team selected different observations for each quadrant to make the meaning of each quadrant concrete for each participating school. Teachers chose the quadrant that was most meaningful to them to bring the conversation to a deeper level. For instance, in the quadrant 'participation', the researchers had selected various pictures of the pupil council meetings. In some of the pictures, the pupils talked in smaller groups with each other and a teacher. In that way, talking to other pupils was facilitated. Other pictures showed pupils who were looking in the direction of the blackboard. In that way, pupils were more inclined to speak and address their thoughts towards the facilitator in front of the classroom rather than towards their peers.



The pictures or observations were helpful in this exercise with teachers, as they showed and confronted teachers with possible blind spots in their participation practices. As these observations were presented factually, most teachers did not show feelings of resistance or offence. During the vision exercises, the GOTALK team asked repeatedly: 'For which problem was this practices an answer?'. That question triggered teacher teams to reflect on the roots and history of school decisions and practices. The answer helped to see all aspects and arguments for decisions clearly, often making space for change. The GOTALK team combined a research approach with hands-on facilitation of a process and activism for pupils' perspectives.

This was particularly interesting when the team noticed that teachers operated, not always explicitly, as gatekeepers of 'feasible topics for the pupil council'. For instance, in the yellow school, pupils repeatedly said they wanted the freedom to wear a headscarf at school or wanted to organise a sleepover in school. The council meeting reports, however, did not reflect these statements. These topics were not even edited out, but just not recorded in the reports. When reports did not fully mirror what had been said during a pupil council meeting, the GOTALK researchers tried to fill in the blind spots. Sometimes this triggered a

discussion about what should be mentioned in the pupil council reports and the gatekeeping role of teachers. In that view, a meeting report can be an interesting artefact of what is deemed valuable for a pupil council and what not.

For some of these issues, the GOTALK team decided to step up and actively advocate for the pupils' voices. Specifically when the school staff did not pick up, or ignore a topic. In the blue school, for instance, pupils wanted to go on a multiple-day field trip with the school. Principals and teachers shut down this discussion at the start for several reasons (difficulties in the school of having invoices paid and ingrained practices of working groups deemed difficult to change). This topic was put back on the agenda by the GOTALK team members.

These observations hint towards the surplus value of external facilitators in addressing certain issues, as they might remain blind spots for teams if no external facilitators are involved.

One of the key reflective questions throughout the vision exercise for teachers was: 'What is the school teaching pupils about participation through this practice?'. Throughout the project, the entire GOTALK consortium came to the understanding that schools are constantly teaching their pupils something about participation. Whether they are consciously teaching or engaging participation or not. The lessons for pupils might be:

*Participation does not have a place at school, or*

*Participation is only reserved for certain pupils and certain topics, or*

*Participation is an important value and my opinion is valued and acted upon at school.*

Therefore, a school that does not invest in pupil participation still teaches pupils about it. Becoming aware of the messages pupils get when attending a school can be an interesting perspective for teachers to start from to reflect and change participation practices at school.

In these vision exercises, the GOTALK team used as much as possible different 'languages' to communicate about it: pictures of pupil council meetings were used to reflect on the relationship between teachers and pupils in a pupil council, quotes from pupils to discuss about, drawings and photos produced by pupils to revisit. In this way, the GOTALK team tried to inspire teachers to also use the different languages with pupils as well.

Another topic that the GOTALK team addressed with the teachers, was about the boundaried participation that also appeared during the pupil councils. Boundaried participation is understood as restrictive of the possibilities of children to participate because of boundaried or restricted beliefs in their agency and capabilities (Waters-Davies et.al., 2024, Murphy, A. et al. 2022). The concept 'Schoolification of Participation' became in use for referring to boundaried participation in schools. The right to participate became channeled in the pupil council and was in that way manageable for the school and its teachers. There was a specific procedure through which pupils were supposed to participate: Participation is done in the pupil council and only through a specific procedure, agenda items could be added to the pupil council's agenda. The same goes for the decisions of a pupil council. In the blue school, the principal explained the procedure to be followed when the pupil council wanted to take action to the researchers: present ideas, researching topic, requesting if any rules or deadlines should be respected, requests for help, finding or developing a roadmap for the action. Although these procedures seemed very transparent to the principal, they were new to the teachers supporting the pupil council and the pupils themselves. Also in the yellow school, a flow of information was imagined by teachers, while for pupils this flow was not clear.

The GOTALK team was engaged in planned moments of reflection and vision building, but also interfered in unplanned conversations about pupil participation. Interacting with the teacher teams as 'critical friends', allowed the researchers to break unwanted patterns of thinking and behavior. For instance, in the 'hot chocolate action' event, the principal expressed her anger about the action towards both teachers and pupils. As an outsider, one of the GOTALK researchers also asked to listen to pupils' perspectives, breaking the principal's monologue and turning the moment's dynamic into a conversation.

However, it is not enough to address the topic of pupil participation and pupil councils with the facilitating teachers. Pupil participation should be a mission for the whole school, wherein all teachers and the principal have a role to play. In the yellow school, the flow of information between the classroom floor and the pupil council was discussed with the teachers. Teachers mentioned that it is not evident for every pupil to report about the pupil council in their class. Sometimes, these difficulties were attributed to the pupil, shyness or uncertainty were mentioned as challenging to speak in front of the class. However, sometimes a pupil did not get to talk in front of the class since the teacher did not allow time for it. This issue was mainly at play for teachers with limited time with a particular class group, because they teach smaller courses such as chemistry or German, that are not attributed many hours per week. Although this issue was evident for the facilitating teachers of the pupil council, they could not solve it and needed to discuss it with the full teacher team. Making pupil participation and the pupil council a part of the teacher team agenda, makes the pupil council more visible for the full teacher team.

#### *Exploring what participation means with pupils*

As mentioned before, the GOTALK team did not evidently get access to work directly with pupils. In the blue school, workshops specifically for pupils were organized. The workshops were organized with the intention to foster enthusiasm in pupils to join the pupil council and addressed the three main concepts of GOTALK: inclusion, sustainability and policy impact. During the workshops, the concept of participation was also unpacked. Throughout the different seminars and methodologies, the pupils were invited to participate using a wide range of possible 'languages' in which to express themselves. As these methodologies are applicable to the work being done with (possible) pupil representatives in a pupil council, the specific methodologies will be treated in the next chapter on the participation process within the pupil council.

The conversation between teachers and pupils about participation and the pupil council was also encouraged during the cross-border pilots. In the yellow school, the few members of the pupil council and the facilitating teachers did a joint vision exercise. Pupils expressed their views on the role of the pupil council, what topics should be addressed during a pupil council meeting, and which activities should be done by the pupil council. Although the GOTALK facilitators also recommended talking specifically about the role of facilitating teachers, this question was only addressed in two of the six groups.

After each council meeting in the yellow school, the GOTALK researchers interviewed three pupil council members about their experiences. In one of the meetings, this interview could not be done, and it was done by one of the teachers at another time. Afterwards, the teacher commented that hearing the pupil's perspectives on the meeting was very interesting, as it clarified which aspects the pupil valued more and understood fully. At other times, teachers also talked to their pupils about the pupil council. For instance, one of the teachers in the yellow school indicated that most pupils have no idea about what is done during the pupil council meetings but refrain from joining the pupil council because they do not want to give up their break. Enforcing those small conversations about pupil participation have been very inspiring during the trajectories.

#### 3.2.2.4 The participation process within the pupil council (What?)

The adapted method from which the cross-border piloting started, included three important frames. The first frame, is the steps to take for inclusive, sustainable and impactful participation. The second frame focused on valorizing multiple languages to express pupil's opinions and perspectives. The third frame is the frame of pedagogical documentation, with the living wall as essential cornerstones. In what follows, we will reflect on these three frames and elaborate on how they supported the pilot experiences.

Six steps were drafted as stepstones for participation: (1) understanding the context, (2) mapping the current situation, (3) searching for different views, (4) assembling different views, (5) forming policy advice and (6) sharing policy advice and results. The first piloting experiences taught the GOTALK team that the steps are particularly helpful when used flexibly, allowing the pilot to jump steps, come back to them and be flexible concerning the time investment for each step.

After attending the second lab, one of the teachers of the yellow school indicated that this was very inspiring for him. He stated working with the different steps ensured a deeper understanding and better policy advice in the pupil council about policy themes. The cross-border piloting started from this intention. The policy theme of breaks and outdoor spaces was chosen at the yellow school. During the first few pupil councils, the council engaged in activities to understand the context (step 1) and map the current situation (step 2).

After the first few meetings of the pupil council, the GOTALK team noticed that the chosen policy theme of breaks and outdoor spaces received less attention and time in the pupil council agenda than before. This was due to several reasons: Teachers had the impression that decisions and adaptations had been made based on pupils input, some urgent activities got priority on the agenda as the dates were approaching. The living wall was being designed with the pupils during the pupil council, leaving limited space to work on the policy theme of breaks and outdoor spaces. Several teachers in the yellow school also indicated they found it challenging to follow the pace and path of pupils' choice, as allowing that flexibility required them to prepare the pupil council more intensely in terms of time investment. At the same time, the job of teachers is already demanding, which causes them to resort to their usual, routine way of working to be able to do the work in a sustainable and balanced way. Also, teachers indicated they felt the need to guide pupils in a certain direction during participative moments, as they fear that if they don't guide them, pupils' ideas would be less useful for the school.

In both the yellow and blue schools, taking action and organising activities in the pupil council was deemed important not only by the teachers, but also by pupils. Both teachers and pupils valued organizing activities at a steady pace in the pupil council. They indicated it was essential to motivate pupils and teachers for the pupil council, providing them with quick wins. The visibility of such activities for the rest of the school community was important, as it put the pupil council and its members in the spotlight. Pupils were proud and felt agency and ownership by organizing activities. Some pupils indicated that being able to organise activities at school was the main reason for joining the pupil council.

Another important frame of the adapted GOTALK method was the valorisation of the multiple languages pupils can use to express themselves. In the yellow school, the idea of using multiple languages motivated them to organize the pupil council differently. They started working more often in smaller groups to allow for other languages to be used. They took pictures of their favourite places at the playground during the breaks and drew possible living walls as a first step in designing the living wall together.

In the blue school, 'Start-to-Participate' workshops with pupils were organized after the cross-border pilot ended. The workshops were intended to support the (re)start of student councils by motivating class

representatives. The sessions focused on key GOTALK themes: inclusion, sustainability, and policy impact, and started with exploring the concept of 'participation'. During these workshops, pupils were invited to practice using other ways of communicating apart from verbal communication by taking a specific space in the room and documenting their thoughts on a living wall. The pupils also practiced taking the perspectives of others and active listening. The workshops, however, did not only target the pupils but also targeted the teachers and the whole school community. Observations of the researchers were shared with principals and teachers, aiming to reach a confronting effect in an attempt to make the school team aware of the messages they communicate to pupils. After reading the report, one teacher said the task of the school community is to learn to listen more deeply to pupils.

The GOTALK team has used various strategies to inspire teachers during the cross-border piloting. This report also mentioned suggesting and posing reflective questions. Another important strategy was to develop materials for A to Z, this strategy was used in both schools, handing them ready-to-use materials, and it also happened with the workshops in the blue school. This strategy is a strong one for several reasons. Firstly, it enabled the GOTALK researchers to develop the materials exactly as intended. Secondly, the approach shows a respect for the already full workload of teachers, thus not burdening them with extra preparation work. Finally, it allows teacher teams to step into a learning position. Teacher teams experienced this as a refreshing position as they did not bear the final responsibility and could stand aside from the GOTALK researchers and learn. In the case of the workshops, this was very motivating as they expressed their intention right after the workshops to organize the workshops independently in the next school year.

Pedagogical documentation of the participation process on a living wall was a third important aspect of the adapted method. The living wall has been very attractive to teacher teams from the start of the cross-border pilot. In both schools, teachers indicated that installing and using the living wall was a priority for them. Still, in both schools, the installation of the living wall took some time. The location of the living wall was extensively discussed with teachers and principals. The design and content for the living wall was taken up with pupils. Mostly, the living wall was understood as a way to communicate, and that communication was mostly interpreted by school teams and pupils as communicating from the pupil council to the rest of the school community. The GOTALK team provided examples and showed the possibilities of what could be done using a living wall. In the yellow school, a temporary living wall was installed. This was very helpful to experiment and see the effects of using the living wall on other pupils and also parents. Pupils provided their ideas through spoken discussions and through drawings of the living wall. They also expressed their concerns about the attractiveness of the living wall to other pupils and came up with ideas on how to make the wall more attractive. The living wall mainly was filled with papers neatly printed by teachers, during the first experiments of the living wall, the pupils did not have a very active role in updating and designing the living wall. Apart from informing their classmates about what is done in the pupil council and what policy results the pupil council has made, the living wall could also function as a way to promote the pupil council. Pupils had various ideas about how to increase the popularity of the living wall: adding a mirror on the living wall, adding a tv screen for announcements or providing updates on the



*Figure 1: pupil council at the living wall*

The living wall could also function as a way to promote the pupil council. Pupils had various ideas about how to increase the popularity of the living wall: adding a mirror on the living wall, adding a tv screen for announcements or providing updates on the

menu or the absent teachers of the day. The living wall also creates more visibility for the pupil council at school, both in teachers and in pupils.

### 3.2.3 Evaluation and reflection on the pilot experiences

#### 3.2.3.1 Responsive evaluation with school team members

The responsive evaluation with school team members is the result of interviews with team members. In November 2024, a first interview took place with two teachers, one of each participating school. This interview focused on their intentions after the San Remo lab in October 2024. In May and June 2025, another round of interviews was done. In those interviews the pilot experience was reflected upon with extra attention to the three pillars of the GOTALK project: inclusion, sustainability and policy impact. In the second round of interviews five school workers participated, including the two teachers that were interviewed in the first round. In total the second round of interviews included three teachers, one principal and one member of the school policy team. Two are part of the yellow school, three work at the blue school.

##### 3.2.3.1.1 General reflections on the pilot experience

School team members have appreciated the experiences granted during the pilot. They feel their pupil council has received an extra impulse, sometimes just because they were forced to work on the pupil council as GOTALK researchers were visiting their schools. They have felt the GOTALK researchers added an extra layer to their team meetings, going to a more profound level of understanding pupil participation. The experience has helped them to structure the work on the pupil council better, set clear goals, draft a planning and take steps forward. Some teachers indicate they feel the feedback of the GOTALK team was not always guiding enough, sometimes putting the framework more clearly was something that has been missed. One teacher indicated the pilot was too short. The external perspective the GOTALK team brought was also appreciated, as it provided the team with a mirror to reflect on themselves. The question was: 'We mean well, but do we do well?'

Lessons learned for the school teams included the following:

- By following the steps of the GOTALK- method, pupil councils can make a solid analysis of the policy topic.
- Teachers saw their pupils in their full participative potential throughout the activities (interviews, GOTALK lab, workshops in blue school). This made them proud of their pupils and give them positive energy to continue working on the pupil council.
- The San Remo lab experience was seen as very valuable for the attending teachers. A specific event to start the piloting experience was strongly appreciated.
- The main question in participation for pupils is 'Why are things the way they are?' Pupils deserve an honest and complete answer to that question.
- The workshops where teachers and pupils warmed-up together on the topic were strongly valued. GOTALK team members have provided teachers with a manual for the workshops and teachers in both schools indicated they will continue the workshops for the next generations of pupils.

The school team members are continuing to work with their pupil councils after the project finishes. They will keep in touch with the project team as they want to continue to professionalize themselves in participation. Teachers have suggested organizing a professional learning community and exchange moment between schools as valuable ways to mainstream the insights of the project. Both GOTALK team members and teachers are willing to continue to exchange experiences with the living wall as well.

In what follows, the insights based on the interviews will be elaborated on. The three GOTALK pillars will structure the results of the responsive evaluation.

#### 3.2.3.1.2 Inclusion

##### RECRUITING PUPILS FOR THE PUPIL COUNCIL

Similar to the experiences in the Italian pilots in secondary schools, the recruitment of pupils for the pupil council was not evident in the Belgian secondary schools either. The difficult recruitment was mostly felt in two higher grades of secondary education (14 to 18 years of age). In the blue school, one of the teachers remembered a pupil council where only 6 pupils showed up and commented “You can do very little like that. That does not speak for the whole school’. In the yellow school, the GOTALK pilot focused on the first grade. But also there the issue existed and the interviewed teacher noticed a difference in recruitment for the first grade and the higher grades. In first grade, he argued, pupils still listen when teachers say they think the pupil council is important to join. He also indicated that some pupils have joined pupil councils in their primary schools and find it more evident to join the pupil council when they start secondary school as well. He also indicated the difference in commitment between teacher teams, indicating the third grade did not have a pupil council as there were no teachers that wanted to commit themselves to facilitate the council.

Teachers play an important role in the recruitment of pupils. Having teachers in the team that see different groups of pupils in class, helps the pupil council to be more diverse as well. In the blue school, pupils that joined the pupil council in the previous year, join forces with the facilitating teachers and visit all classes to invite new pupils to join the pupil council. In the yellow school, new pupils are already addressed before they enroll to the school: When the school organizes an info day for new pupils, they are guided around the school terrains by the pupils of the pupil council. During the course of the GOTALK pilots, the guided tour also stopped by the living wall, where new pupils could get acquainted for the first time with the pupil council.

Another challenge to finding a big group of pupils joining the pupil council are logistics. Particularly in the blue school, it is not easy to bring all pupils together as they are often doing their internships outside of school grounds. As do many Flemish schools nowadays, not all pupils at school have their lunch break at the same time due to lack of space. This is another challenge to bring a pupil council together. In the blue school, pupils need to move between campuses to gather for the pupil council. In both schools, pupil council is organized during lunch breaks. In both schools, the idea of organizing the pupil council during class hours was considered, but not yet put into practice.

However, only gathering a limited number of pupils in the pupil council also has advantages. It facilitates hearing all opinions in the group, while in bigger groups some pupils tend to disappear in the masses and their voices are not captured. Both schools see the living wall as a way to include more perspectives in the pupil council.

##### UNDERSTANDING PUPILS’ 100 LANGUAGES

Pupils can use 100 languages to communicate their opinions and views. Teachers however, need to be open towards their messages and the languages in which they communicate. It is not evident for teachers to be open towards all languages, when it means bathroom doors are damaged or pupils use a demanding tone when articulating their needs and wishes.

In the blue school, this was a challenging topic. One of the teachers named the different modes of communicating as a ‘pedagogical mismatch’, she explains there are different cultures at home, at school



and in the streets. The teachers states that 'the street culture does not have a place at school'. For this teacher, this is not only linked to the participation in the pupil council but it also links to policy impact when the teachers says ' When can you get things approved? Not if you behave like that.' Another teacher at the blue school, differentiates between pupils from different campuses. In one campus, the vocational tracks are located, on the other campus the academic tracks take place. This teacher indicates that also shows in differences between pupils, for the former being more practical and doing stuff is more important while pupils of the latter campus want to invest in long term challenges like the well being of pupils at school. The pupils of the vocational track did not have a direct talk with the principal during the pilots, while the pupils of the academic track did. The teachers explains this by stating that the former pupils do not believe that the direct talk with the principal was important. While a colleagues stated that it might also be the case that pupils did not show up for the talk because it was organized during the month of Ramadan and they were explicitly invited to have breakfast together.

Negative ideas of teachers about pupils, limit their possibilities to participate. For instance, pupils are not allowed to send messages to each other on the school online platform. As this setting is not available to them, it means pupil representatives can not communicate directly with their peers about the pupil council. One of the teachers that was being interviewed, indicated he wanted to change school policy on the school online platform for pupils in the pupil council. Another rule that limits pupils' possibilities to express themselves is that white board markers in the school always stay with the teachers. This means there is no possibility for pupils to write something on the white board to express their opinion. In the yellow school, pupil representatives slept on school grounds. The teacher indicated it all went perfectly and he indicated 'as it all went perfectly, it will be allowed again in the future'. In that way the behavior of pupils of current generations, opens or closes doors for future generations of pupil councils. One of the teachers in the blue school talks about this demand for flawless interactions, as she indicates that after the pupil council took an action, the principal reacted very strongly. The teacher believed this to be inappropriate as pupils are learning and should be allowed to make mistakes. Instead of reacting overly strictly, she believes those moments should be used as learning opportunities for pupils.

During the pupil councils, pupils used different languages in order to express their views. One of the teachers listed the methodologies he had found most interesting during the pilots: 'Taking pictures at the playground was a big one. The use of the paddlets at the end of the pilot where we brainstormed on the living wall. Pasting post-its during evaluation of activities, but mostly drawing together, I especially liked: Making drawings of what pupils see for our school, drawing rather concretely something that is visual.' He concludes that 'The threshold to participate actively in the pupil council has become lower.'

In both schools, teachers also expressed being in awe of pupils capabilities, when getting to know them better and allowing them to use their 100 languages. In the yellow school, one of the teachers had evaluated the pupil council with one of the pupils and he expressed being amazed about how well the pupil understood what was going on in the pupil council. He even indicated that evaluating the pupil council in such a way could be a powerful way to reflect for the teacher team. In the blue school, a group of pupils followed workshops organized by the GOTALK team at the end of the pilot. All three teachers of the school indicated they were looking forward to continuing the pupil council with the pupils that were present.

#### INCLUDING PUPILS BEYOND PUPIL COUNCILS

Many teachers that organized the pupil council at their school, also attended the pupil council when they were pupils themselves. Sometimes they refer to how it was done at the time and the idea of how a pupil council should be organized was rather narrow. In both schools, those ideas were questioned and throughout the pilot teachers were willing to try out new ideas. Those ideas entailed not only working in a

plenary group at pupil council meetings, but sometimes distributing agenda points and tasks. But it also entailed opening the select group of pupil representatives, and allowing more pupils to come in. At the yellow school, the pupil council started organizing open sessions where every pupil was welcome to join. In the blue school, teachers were very pleased to see that some pupils show up voluntarily to the pupil council. Although their number was rather limited, this was an indication for them that those pupils felt connected to the school.

A difficult point for including all pupils, was the flow of information between the pupil council and the classroom floor. In the yellow school, pupils were supported to report on the pupil council when back in class. However, not all pupils managed to report back to their peers and collecting information from them to bring to the pupil council. In the blue school, one of the teachers spoke about the drip down effect of the pupil representatives to their peers that was not working yet. He indicated 'that another line of communication is needed, but it is not yet in place' and uttered the wish to discuss this the upcoming school year with the pupils.

Both schools saw potential in using the living wall as an instrument to strengthen the link between the pupil council and the other pupils that they represent. In the yellow school, teachers were very enthusiastic about the potential of the living wall. They thought it was a good way for the pupil council to interact with other pupils and indicated the living wall made the pupil council more visible as an important part of the school. They saw the living wall as a way to transparently communicate about what is done at the pupil council and indicated the implicit message it send to the pupils: 'I am part of my class, but we are all together part of our school'. In the blue school, teachers focused rather on what should be altered in order to make the living wall more alive. They indicated it was not placed in an ideal place as not all pupils walk by the living wall now. They also indicated that pupils are not that interested any more in the analog world, and tend to pay more attention to digital screens. As next year, mobile phones will not be allowed at school any more, this might be a possibility to use the digital announcement screens at school as an invitation or teaser for the living wall. In both schools, teachers indicated, the needed investment to keep the living wall up to date and attractive: pupil representatives could invite their peers to the living wall, for instance to indicate their preferences through a QR-code visible on the living wall. The pupils need to be the owners of the living wall, but this should be facilitated by teachers. For instance by providing templates for posters that can be placed on the living wall and by adding the living wall as a fixed item on the agenda of the pupil council. One of the teachers indicated the living wall added extra credibility to the pupil representatives as the pupil council now also has a visible place at the school. Besides being helpful for connecting pupil council and peers, one of the teachers also expressed it to be an instigator for reflecting in the teacher team: 'Maybe it seems as if you just go and write, but I think that it also includes an exercise when writing something down. It will entail a lot of reflection and you will realize a lot, how are we doing things actually? Because, how can you make it explicit? That is not always straight forward. I think you will see a lot of things by doing that (writing something on the living wall, red.).'

#### 3.2.3.1.3 Sustainability

##### A SUPPORTIVE TEACHER TEAM FOR THE PUPIL COUNCIL

In both schools in the cross-border pilot, the value of a teacher team supporting the pupil council was very important. The pupil council was supported by 6 to 8 teachers in the schools, and these teachers gathered during preparatory meetings on the pupil council and chaired and facilitated the pupil council meeting itself. In the yellow school, the teacher team welcomed a lot of new members at the start of the pilot. The more experienced teachers were very happy with these extra team members. In the blue school, the pupil council team was a new team of which most teachers chose to be part of, while others were obliged by the

principal to participate. In both schools, the continuity of the team was valued in the interviews. Particularly in the blue school, a lot of work has been done to build a common vision, manuals for building policy recommendations in the pupil council and to align expectations about the teacher team, the pupil council and the policy team at school. Throughout the interviews, teachers agreed on several important aspects of a strong teacher team behind the pupil council: (1) the team should take meeting notes and have them available for other colleagues to read, (2) the team should align expectations with principals, (3) the team should be led by one of the team members as main responsible, (4) teachers should attend all pupil council meetings in order to follow up on the pupil council, (5) the teacher team should have a evaluative cycle in place to evaluate their work and (6) reaching out to each of the teachers' personal network of colleagues makes sure the pupil council can count on the support of many teachers (also beyond the official supportive teacher team for the pupil council).

#### CLARIFYING THE LINK BETWEEN PUPILS AND POLICY MAKERS AT SCHOOL

One of the principals that was interviewed stated that 'the pupil council is a full-fledged participatory body at school and deserves to be treated in that way'. Treating them as a full fledged participatory body entails some effort for the school policy team. One important aspect of the effort is to explain pupils why decisions are taken. In order to do that, the link between principal and pupils should be strengthened. Principals should know what topics are important to pupils, and therefore be attentive of any signals pupils send and talk directly to pupils with care and curiosity. Having clear procedures that are aligned between pupils, teachers and principals helps policy makers at school to communicate those procedures in a clear way.

In the yellow school, one of the principals was explicitly assigned to follow up on participatory body's at school, including the pupil council. Making this assignment explicit, helps the principal to actually attend to the task as well.

In the blue school, the pupil council took action against a decision of the policy team at school during the pilot. After the action, a conflict arose between teachers, pupils and the principal that made explicit the expectations of each of the actors towards one another. All three teachers interviewed, were very happy with the conflict, as it was taken as a starting point to further clarify how to organize pupil participation at school. A member of the policy theme mentioned during the interviews that she foresaw the conflict but did nothing to prevent it. In that way the teachers and policy team got the chance to set clear expectations towards one another. On the one hand, the resistance of some of the colleagues was not appreciated by the policy team and was seen as being disloyal towards the school. It might, on the other hand, also be interpreted as being loyal towards pupils in the pupil council to stand with them when this conflict arose. One of the teachers noted during the interviews: 'The policy team should know that pupils will not agree with any new rule right away.'

#### PROCEDURES THAT SUSTAIN THE PUPIL COUNCIL

Procedures are important, as they support both the pupil council and the teacher team around it. In both schools these procedures were made more explicit during the pilot. They entail the way pupil council and the school policy team is linked, in what way they communicate and what they can expect from one another. It also entails ensuring the pupil council and the rest of the pupils at school are linked. One of the instruments for this could be the living wall, as explained in section 3.2.2.4. It is also important to plan the pupil councils in the school agenda, and plan when principals and pupil council can meet. Even policy themes can be planned. One of the principals of the yellow school, suggested during the interview, to chose 3 or 4 policy themes per year, that can already be planned in advance. In that way the pupil council would not only organize fun stuff, but also participates in school policy actions.

The pupil council should also be connected to other participatory body's in the school, like the school council or the pedagogical council. Adding the pupil council as a fixed agenda point on other councils' agenda's helps to sustain them and take them serious. In the blue school, the project worked on transparency in policy recommendations, by clarifying what a good proposal needs and how to prepare to pitch the proposal to the school's policy theme.

In order to facilitate for pupils to understand the process of participation, it seemed a good idea to make procedures as transparent as possible and involve pupils in as much meetings as possible. Even when those meetings entail speaking to partners external to the school, it is good to have at least a few pupils at the table. Teachers can support pupils to attend external meetings by preparing them well and setting expectations of external partners realistically.

Participation is however a responsibility of all teachers at school. All teachers can support and contribute to the pupil council. A very important commitment is to provide time for pupil representatives to speak with their classmates about what is happening in the pupil council.

#### 3.2.3.1.4 Policy impact

##### EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT PUPIL COUNCILS DO

All interviewees commented on what a pupil council should do: What is the ideal balance for a pupil council between organizing fun activities and impacting on school policies? And if pupil councils target influencing school policy, which topics are most suitable to advice on? Organizing activities makes the pupil council visible and impacts school life in a positive way, but a pupil council is also an participatory body that could influence school organization and rules. In the blue school, teachers would like to make the space for policy influence more clear. At the time of the pilots, pupils questioned the 'why?' of school rules a lot. Teachers that were interviewed also recognized the need for a clear explanation by policy makers. One of the teachers paraphrased what pupils told him: 'They think very often a decision is taken due to mistrust, while mostly decisions have other practical reasons. But they never hear those reasons, so they think, it's just like this. They do not trust us, so they do not change.'

In the same school, pupils had a lot of requests, and teachers had the expression that pupils expected them to honor every single request. This situation was frustrating for both pupils and teachers. During the GOTALK pilots, workshops were organized in the schools and pupils practiced finding and expressing arguments. On the other hand, did the GOTALK team invite teachers to not nurture this 'shopping list' situation, by leaving the ownership of the request with the pupils instead of taking it out of their hands. One of the teachers believed filtering the questions of pupils was necessary to avoid demotivation, while other teachers indicated the importance of explaining pupils why a proposal was not appropriate or feasible.

In the yellow school, the school principal indicated that being flexible in the policy topics a pupil council addresses is important. He states 'I see in various participatory bodies, that some topics are being discussed but than solve themselves, or turn out to be less acute than anticipated.' The same principal also advocates for addressing more complex, structural questions in the pupil council. He noted that most questions that arrive to the pupil council are unidimensional questions (such as: Can we buy a sandwich with chocolate spread at school?), while the principal would like to focus more on structural and complex questions which invite the pupil council to investigate a specific topic and then take a decision. The teacher at the yellow school that was interviewed indicated he felt enthusiastic about the different steps of the GOTALK method, as it helps the pupil council to analyze a policy topic profoundly.

## WHAT PUPIL COUNCILS COULD EXPECT FROM POLICY MAKERS AT SCHOOL

Pupils have the right to have their views taken into consideration in matters that affect them, also at school. Schools can support that right for children and youngsters in various way.

Firstly, school teams and school policy makers can show their supportive attitude in how they respond to pupils. A principal of the yellow school expressed it like this: 'If you ask pupils to give their opinions, to give you their input, than you should at least, independently of their idea, be appreciative, I think. Because you are teaching something very, very, very important there: [...] If you do not speak, someone else will speak for you. That is actually the most important life lesson to learn, I think, from everything that has to do with participation. Your idea can exist next to another idea.' The principal visited the pupil council during the piloting period and when reflecting on that moment he indicated thinking this moment was very important. A teacher of the same school indicated he considered it a big gift from the principal to not bother with making adjustments to the school rules and organization based on pupils' suggestions. On the other side, teachers also indicate it to be very important to hear why ideas are not feasible or appropriate. By giving them an honest explanation, they can understand why not and in this way they are also taken seriously with their opinions and suggestions.

A second aspect in which a school can support children's right to participate is to provide them with resources. The idea of resources was understood in many different ways throughout the interviews: Most teachers do not mean financial budget when they speak about resources, although one of them indicates releasing a small budget for the pupil council would be meaningful for pupils as an



*Figure 2: Principal and pupils discussing participation practices*

appreciation and motivation for their investment in the pupil council. Mostly, teachers mean time, when they refer to resources for a pupil council. Both time to work on it in the teachers team and also time to meet with pupils both with and without school policy makers. Dedicating time, attention and energy shows pupils what they do is appreciated. In parallel, it also appreciates teachers for their efforts for a pupil council, as most teachers go beyond their actual assignments when supporting and facilitating pupil councils. Various teachers also indicated providing pupils with a save space to take initiative and try things out while participating and to be mild towards pupils when things do not work out as they expected. Teachers stressed participating is also learning. A teacher of the yellow school gave the example of the temporary living wall they build at school, while waiting for the permanent living wall to be installed. He indicated that experimenting with this temporary living wall was a powerful tool to convince the policy team of the added value of a living wall and why they should invest in such a thing. A teacher in the blue school suggested providing additional expertise to pupils in the pupil council as a resource: he suggested inviting an expert on a policy theme to guide students in formulating recommendations for school policy.

A third aspect that helps guaranteeing the right to participate in school policy decisions for pupils is clarity, transparency and honesty. A question that came out of the interviews is who should take initiative for this. In the blue school, a conflict arose after an action of the pupil council where the policy team did not appreciate the action because pupils did not talk to them before taking action against a policy. Reflecting

back on the incident, it became clear pupils reacted mainly because they did not understand why the policy decision was taken. This raises the question who is responsible for clear communication: Are the pupils responsible for bringing up a topic about school policy with the policy team before protesting about it, or is it rather the policy team that needs to communicate clearly about why they make certain decisions and provide a forum for pupils if there is space for policy recommendations from them?

Pseudoparticipation or tokenism is to be avoided, as it demotivates pupils to participate. This is an idea that various teachers express during the interviews. One of the teachers tells about how it not only frustrates pupils, but also herself as a teacher: 'I think it can be an interaction between both, and that is a very important word there: interaction between both. And now I have the feeling that is not done. So we [the policy team] will ask you [the pupils] sometimes what you think about something, but it is not as if we are going to listen to your ideas. I notice that sometimes.'

Clear communication between pupils, teachers and policy team should be transparent. One of the teachers in the blue school indicates the teacher team wrote a vision text for the pupil council, but it was not discussed with pupils yet. This is something the teacher intends to do when the new school year will start. Overlooking pupils happens sometimes with the best of intentions. Teachers get enthusiastic about an idea and forget to run it by the pupils in their enthusiasm or because taking pupils opinion about it into account will take a lot of time.

### 3.2.3.2 Antwerp local stakeholder lab

#### 3.2.3.2.1 Lab set-up, participants and agenda

In the local stakeholder lab in Antwerp, which was held on April 23rd, seventeen stakeholders gathered to discuss the insights of the cross-border piloting experience and their potential for mainstreaming the insights to other contexts, schools and youth centers. Representatives of the two piloting schools were present: one principal, three teachers and four pupils participated in the lab. Two teachers from the primary schools that participated in the GOTALK project in the first project year joined the lab. Three members of the Flemish Student Union were present, including one adult staff member and two pupils. Both AGSO and KdG were present as GOTALK partner organisations, with KdG facilitating the session.

During the session a living wall was installed with different prompts for participants to leave their thoughts. Five posters were distributed across the room with these prompts on them:

1. Which aspects in school life do you like to brainstorm about?
2. Which aspects in school life do you NOT want to co-decide on?
3. Who in your school is a good listener?
4. What is genuine listening?
5. Which skills do teachers and pupils need for participation? How should a pupil and teacher feel in order to be able to participate? What is the role of pupils and teachers in participation?

After an introductory exercise to make all people and organizations acquainted with one another, the participants each chose a topic to work on. They chose between the following options:

1. Connection in the pupil council
2. The principal attends the pupil council
3. Agenda setting with a pupil council
4. Supporting the pupil council

## 5. The pupil council taking action

For each of the topics, a short description of a situation at school was provided. These situations were based on the experiences in the cross-border pilot, but were simplified for didactic purposes. Each of the situations came with some reflective questions looking into inclusiveness, sustainability and policy impact. The participants discussed the questions and worked towards recommendations for the GOTALK mainstreaming guidelines.

### 3.2.3.2.2 Insights from the local lab

During the lab, participants talked a lot about motivation and sense of belonging to a school community. Motivation and sense of belonging is not only important for students, but also for teacher teams.

#### ABOUT TRUST, AGENCY AND AUTONOMY

Receiving trust, agency and autonomy are building blocks for healthy connections to the school environment. During the lab, autonomy of pupils was underlined by both youngsters and adults. The young people participating to the lab agreed that participation should not be obliged, that meetings should rather be open to anyone who wants to join. In that way, pupils can participate based on their own agency on these matters. One of the participating teachers commented on another aspect of trust, agency and autonomy. She said 'Give them responsibility, and they (the pupils) will take responsibility.' Her experience had taught her that pupils want to take matters in their own hands, but can only do so when given the trust and autonomy to do so. Another aspect that enforces pupils agency, is receiving clarity on expectations and roles. All parties involved in participation, should know what to expect from one another and that should be clearly communicated. Pupils should within that distribution of roles get the autonomy to decide how they would like to participate. Ideally they are also granted a designated space at school to do so. The space for participation has been a challenge in a lot of schools throughout the different pilots. Due to limited space at schools, the pupil council had to convene in spaces that were not adapted to the needs of a pupil council or spaces that needed to be used for other school functions as well.

Autonomy also means that, both for teachers and pupils, different ways and intensities to commit with a pupil council should be allowed for and facilitated. For pupils, this might mean that some pupils participate in organizing a specific activity while not participating through the pupil council meetings and vice versa. Also for teachers, different ways to invest in pupil participation is needed. Some teachers are drawn to taking a facilitating role for the pupil council, while other teachers are supportive of the pupil council in other ways, for instance by showing attention, allowing for time to speak about pupil council issues during their classes or being present at pupil council actions and activities. While some strongly committed teachers are needed, also the small commitments in a teacher team count and make sure the pupil council is embraced by the school community as a whole.

#### ABOUT RELATEDNESS, COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

Participants in the local lab were convinced of the responsibility of all pupils and teachers at school for the pupil council. One of the pupils stated "Pupil participation is everyone's responsibility, also of the pupils in the background." Still, it was understood that not all pupils have the same ease to speak in a pupil council, but pupils indicated the importance of connecting with pupils that are not present at the pupil council to learn about their views. This idea was linked to the need to make the pupil council visible for the whole school. In that way, learning about other pupils' views becomes easier. If pupils know what the pupil council does and who is representing the pupils at the pupil council, it is easier for them to share their

perspectives. The responsibility of sharing ideas goes two ways: Representatives in the pupil council need to talk about their pupil council tasks in order to find other perspectives, but also pupils that are not part of the pupil council need to actively share their perspectives. Both in the yellow and blue schools, the GOTALK project supported interventions to make the pupil council more visible. In the yellow school, a lot of ideas surged to make the pupil council more visible and easier to approach. The school started organizing Friday sessions, in which pupils could come and talk to their representatives in the pupil council. The Friday sessions were not very popular at the moment the GOTALK team left the school, but there were various ideas to boost their popularity. In the blue school, every class had a pupil responsible. Those responsables were not necessarily part of the pupil council. In the school, a lot of discussions about the role of the class responsables have taken place. After the pilot, the school had talked through a lot of the misunderstandings and unmatched expectations about class responsables and their link to the pupil council.

Overall, the ideal of roles and responsibilities, was thought to be important when it came to creating a school community that the pupil council could contribute to and also benefit from. Apart from discussing the role of pupil representatives, the expectations about teachers facilitating the pupil council was also discussed. There was consensus between the participants of the lab, about the idea that the role of the teacher in a pupil council differs from their role in the classroom. Facilitating a pupil council, requires a rather coaching stance, pupil-driven and rather facilitating more than teacher-driven and sticking to a predetermined plan. However, teachers participating to the lab indicated two obstacles with these ideas. The first obstacle was that not every teacher was able and willing to step into the facilitating role. The second obstacle was that in their school teams, there was no alignment about the idea of different roles. Some teachers indicated their principals disagreed with the facilitating role of teachers.

#### ABOUT COMPETENCE, SKILLS AND THE RHYTHM OF LEARNING

Teachers at the lab, indicated pupils being allowed very limited space to experiment with participation and to make mistakes while participating. One of the teachers of the blue school, where the hot chocolate story took place, said “Pupils are learning, they should be allowed to mess up.” This indicated the teachers’ disapproval of the principal’s tough reaction after the hot chocolate gathering. Pupils should explicitly be taught participatory skills. Teachers of the blue school indicated their pupils could benefit from explicitly teaching them about how to communicate a need or request to an adult at school. A teacher from one of the primary schools that joined the first pilot, explained how she explicitly taught pupils to listen to each other and to direct their speech towards one another rather than towards the teacher only. It was clear that pupils nor most teachers were used to the different dynamic with one another during the pupil council, indicating both pupils and teachers were learning together how to relate to each other during pupil council.

The lab participants indicated some other domains that they saw pupils growing in while participating in pupil councils: asking questions and understanding complex situations, taking the floor in the pupil council but also in the classroom when reporting on pupil council matters. Teachers also indicated some learning opportunities for them on the matter: Learning to really listen to pupils, allowing space for pupils to build the pupil council on their own terms and advocating for pupils’ ideas with their colleagues and principals.

Overall, the main conclusion of the lab was that pupil participation is not an easy matter. It is a complex task, that involves a lot of actors and requires time and patience to grow. Pupil participation is a powerful domain to develop at school, as it touches a lot of school procedures, structures and cultural aspects. Although the lab gathered people from different contexts and different profiles, underlying struggles and questions had a lot of similarities. School staff and people working outside of schools learned from each



others' perspectives, pupils and teachers understood each other's challenges and primary and secondary school teams recognized themselves in stories shared.

## **4. Final analysis: Bringing contexts and different piloting years together**

The overview of pilots on participation in schools and out-of-school settings in this deliverable, as well as the parallel deliverable from the GOTALK project regarding young people between 13 and 18 years of age (D4.3), reveals a wide variety of participation practices that differed significantly in their histories and throughout the course of the GOTALK pilots. It became very clear to the GOTALK facilitators that no one-size-fits-all recipe for pupil participation exists. However, some topics returned, time and again, throughout the analyses of the piloting experiences. In what follows, this chapter discusses recurring topics from the piloting experiences, linking them back to the three initial challenges the GOTALK project started from: sustainability, inclusiveness and policy impact.

GOTALK based the right to participation on a pedagogy of participation. In elaborating the GOTALK methods, we have been inspired by some core elements of the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, explicitly suitable for our aim, since it assumes and fosters participation (Fleet & Machado, 2022b). We drew also on Gardner's idea of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011), which was particularly useful in reinforcing the aim of inclusion. In GOTALK, we used these pedagogical insights to build a community of participation, to promote inclusiveness and to enhance policy impact through a solid understanding of - often - difficult policy topics. This approach is not particularly innovative in itself, as we stand on the broad shoulders of a research and practice community. It is, however, radical in its consequences, because it disrupts habits and ingrained practices of boundaried participation (Waters-Davies et al., 2024).

### **4.1 Boundaried participation**

Throughout the project, the GOTALK team encountered several boundaried participation practices that have already been widely documented and reported on by other colleagues in the field of participation. (Dedding & Aussems, 2024; Lundy, 2007; Percy-Smith et al., 2003; Waters-Davies et al., 2024; Woodhouse, 2003) Adults should be aware of their impact in participatory processes, since they can take a facilitating stance but can also be an obstacle for genuine participation. Consistency, flexibility, and the ability to trust and grant space to the requests and ideas of young people is pivotal. When facilitating participation, teachers and educators need to step out of the pedagogy of teaching and into a pedagogy of participation.

Here are some of the more common boundaries, encountered in schools and out-of-school setting during the GOTALK pilots:

- 'The children are too young' or 'the little ones have more difficulties with participation'.  
It is, of course, true that children are in different stages of development and therefore have different capacities. However, the funny thing in this statement is that the 'older children' in one context are considered 'the little children' in another. In other words, the children who are in the final grade of primary school are considered as 'most fit' for participation but may very well be considered as 'not yet fit for participation' in the first grade of secondary school. This makes no

sense. The question, then, is not if children are 'fit' for participation, but how a context can elicit and support participation with a diverse group of children.

- Teachers and educators only want to invest in participation in the ideal way. And because those ideal ways are often unrealistic (e.g., difficult to schedule meetings, unstable pupil attendance,...), the tendency to expect perfection undermines the possibility for genuine participation: meetings are cancelled, methodology is adapted to a less effective form, the few pupils that show up to participate are sent away, ... Instead, there needs to be consistency between what teachers say and what they actually do with regard to participation. Children and young people notice inconsistencies and may feel annoyed or disappointed.
- Throughout the pilot experiences, different levels of institutionalization were represented. Although institutionalization can provide participation processes with strong procedures, it can also be a risk as institutionalization has the tendency to make the participation process more controlled, rigid and therefore boundaried. For instance, if pupils are told to only participate through the pupil council, pupils that are not a member of the pupil council can only exercise their right to participate in an indirect way, through their representatives. Or, if pupils are only allowed to talk about topics that are on the agenda, they lose the chance to speak about other topics that are also on their minds.
- Agenda setting is another important area of adult gatekeeping. Adults may impose their own ideas or plans on young people. Participation activities might be used by adults to achieve results that are useful to the school and the children, but which should be obtained by other means. In the GOTALK pilot experiences for instance, in one of the schools, teachers suggested ideas that emerged elsewhere to pupils. In this way, teachers hoped the GOTALK funds would cover the expenses of pupil tablets or school uniforms. On the other hand, adults often feel themselves not to have full freedom about agenda setting for pupil participation because of an assumed idea of what pupil participation should entail. This causes agendas that are too full and a pace that is too fast for genuine participation. Additionally, it is not always evident to include sensitive topics on the agenda. Also, facilitating teachers feel uncomfortable addressing those topics in a participatory body.
- Adults in the piloting trajectories have voiced that they feel the need to guide or steer pupils towards specific ideas or perspectives. The rationale for this is that pupils need to be guided because otherwise they might not or only after a vast amount of time come up with 'useful' or 'good' ideas for the school. Even when teachers guide or steer pupils, they sometimes feel the participatory process takes up too much time and is not efficient enough.
- Some of the teachers in the GOTALK pilots believed not all pupils are fit for participation. Many teachers can easily pinpoint which pupils are 'very well suited' for a pupil council, focusing their attention and encouragement less on pupils that 'do not think about the topics that are discussed in a pupil council', have difficulties expressing themselves, pupils who do not always follow the school rules or pupils who are shy or silent.

## 4.2 Preparing the setting for participation

In the school communities the GOTALK team worked with, elements of boundaried and genuine participation for children co-exist. It can be seen as a continuum, rather than a black or white trait of schools. Participatory activities can be nice and beautiful. However, they need to be supported by a system that encourages participation. Stated otherwise, if a school wants children to participate, then it should be prepared for them to do so.

Building a school community where participation can exist fully and is not boundaried, is a step-by-step, conscious and reflective process. Laura Lundy (2007, p. 939) said this asks for ‘a culture shift in school life’. In participation processes, power mechanisms should be more outspoken and visible. In that way, adults can be more vigilant and reflective about their own practices not to obstruct or put too many boundaries on participation. They need to be ready to see in what ways pupils are not allowed to participate and openly reflect on that. The reflection should be deep and honest, as children are quite astute in remarking on how a school or context looks at them (Peleman et. al., 2014).

For genuine participation to grow, young people and adults must make an effort to understand each other's perspectives. This also applies to the perspective on participation itself and how it is organized. A balanced organization of participation must be sought, taking into account the perspectives of young people and adults alike. All of this, with special attention to the perspectives of the child, as those are more at risk being forgotten or overlooked (Koziel, et.al., 2023). Involving young people from the beginning of the participation process is pivotal. It ensures a shared vision between all actors on what is being done and how to reach a decision. Some areas to which this can apply:

- Balance between participation in school decisions and organizing activities
- How to distribute tasks, expectations and roles - between peers but also between adults and young people.
- How should communication flow between policy makers and young people? Who is responsible and what can be expected from each actor?
- Who is in charge of aligning with young people that are not part of the participatory process? How can adults and young people support each other in this endeavour?

Pupil participation depends on adults taking responsibility for it. Both in the Italian and Belgian setting, youngsters have asked for a written agreement signed between young people and adults, as a starting point of a participatory process. Through that agreement, young people can count on the commitment and get the rules of the game clear from the start. Adults also need to take their responsibility during the process. For instance, when preparing youngsters to speak at adult meetings of policy makers or mediating that conversation. Apart from internal school actors, stakeholders and policy makers outside of the participation context should also be involved. They also have a role to play in reaching sustainable results and making sure collaborations are continued over the long term. Additionally, after a participatory process has concluded, adults have a crucial role to play in ensuring that results are visible and sustained. In general, young people should be able to have a genuine conversation with adults about their initiatives and receive maximal support, even when those initiatives go beyond what adults have imagined for a participatory process.

## **4.3 A journey from boundaried to genuine participation**

The GOTALK pilot trajectories identified different possibilities to reduce boundaried participation. In many cases the GOTALK facilitators worked with schools to make them aware and ready for participation, diving into the “Why?” and “How?” of participation with teachers, school policy makers and pupils.

### **THE NEED TO SLOW DOWN AND LISTEN**

One of the key conditions to start the journey towards a more genuine participation for children is to slow down and make space for reflection and deep listening. Listening to each other and meeting each other is important and not easy for young people, and adults alike (see also Chicken et.al. 2024). GOTALK invested in discovering the 100 languages to express perspectives in participatory processes (Malaguzzi, 1996; Rinaldi,

2021; Gardner, 2011). The 100 languages were not only used to better understand and express about policy topics, but also about concepts of participation itself. They are not only valuable to young people but also proved to be worthwhile when working on vision building with adults. All actors benefit from practising asking questions and active listening exercises, for all of the 100 languages. Slowing down allowed teachers to more easily step into a pedagogy of participation, as they could take the time to be curious, listen actively, pay attention to the different languages pupils use to express themselves, and honestly integrate all the messages they capture while facilitating the participatory process. Pedagogical documentation – pictures, pupils' quotes, drawings, living wall extracts – can open doors to discuss sensitive topics, as also indicated by Cahill and Dadvand (2018) who refer to different methods to be used in the process of participation. Listening always pays off, even listening to those messages that are not expressed desirably or appropriately. Sometimes these messages are even more valuable than direct messages because they highlight points of view, emotions, and struggles that would otherwise not be expressed. On various occasions, the GOTALK team advocated for more time and space for teachers facilitating pupil participation, as teachers investing in participate deserve more support than having to sacrifice their breaks to do so. The endeavour of investing in genuine participation should be invested in and valorised properly, not only in terms of time and budget, but also in opportunities for professionalisation. This finding aligns with the need for adult knowledge building on children's rights, also indicated by Barbara Woodhouse (2003) and Laura Lundy (2007).

An attitude of listening can also help to take a more inclusive perspective: putting oneself in someone else's perspective. This inclusive perspective was important for children and youngsters, in order to integrate the voices of their peers who could not attend participation sessions. This finding is parallel to the P7 model of Cahill and Dadvand (2018), who also include perspectives as one of the domains in their model of youth participation. Also, for adults, it was important to open ears and eyes to all pupils' messages. Children, youngsters and teachers all expressed that using different languages to express themselves enabled participation to grasp more perspectives of a wider range of pupils. Teachers consistently told the GOTALK facilitators that the pupils they had worked with, and that they saw expressing themselves in various languages were very ready for participation. This could be seen as an expression of a change of "positioning" of the children (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018) as teachers had changed their expectations and image of those children. Teachers can also exercise real and deep listening when they have a look at their own voices at school, in order to critically analyse the messages they convey towards their pupils.

Slowing down is also important for motivation. For pupils of higher secondary education, motivation to step into the participatory process was not evident and varied greatly. Motivators not to participate were a lack of understanding of how participation works and what it means, and a distrust in adults' or institution's willingness to take their perspectives into account. Taking the time to honestly discuss these issues and concepts around participation such as exclusion, representation, delegation, abstention, democracy, unity, multiplicity, group, individual, ... could motivate some of the youngsters to commit to the participatory process and address a specific policy topic with peers and adults. Once again, this confirms the importance to take the time to discuss into depth with young people while asking them to participate (Lundy, 2007).

#### ALLOWING THE WALLS TO LIVE

The living wall was used in the GOTALK project as a tool for collecting and reviewing perspectives where different languages can be used to express points of view (Clark & Moss, 2011; Fleet & Machado, 2022; Malaguzzi, 1996; Rinaldi, 2021). During the different pilots, the living wall was used for many different purposes, showing the multidimensionality of it. It can be used for searching different views, assembling different perspectives, keeping peers and school staff involved with the participation process. The living wall makes it explicit that participation is a collective process where everyone can add, contribute, inform and be informed.

The usage of the living wall is perceived as a reflective practice in itself. By deciding what to add to the living wall, actors are triggered to take the perspective of the other, to reflect on the participation process and its outcomes and purposes. However, using the living wall requires space in a considerably chosen location that is accessible and usable for all school actors. It also requires time and a sustained willingness and dedication to do something with it.

#### FACILITATING DIFFERENT FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Pupil participation needs the support of the entire organization. Getting the full team committed is important and can take different forms: the core team around the children's council is strongly committed and actively involved, while the rest of the team is at least informed and supportive of pupil participation.

The participatory body of pupils should be given a full place within the organization and needs to be linked to other bodies in the organization. The children's council needs planning, meeting facilities, agenda, etc.

Motivating pupils from higher secondary education have greater agency than their younger peers and might therefore be reluctant towards participating. Presenting them with different options and intensities for their contributions can enable them to participate in a way that suits them. Or, when pupils confirm that they are not interested in participating, this is another message of pupils to reflect on by the teacher team. It might give them information about how to improve participation at their school. Anyhow, the doors to future participation should remain open to all pupils, also those who opt out initially.

#### NEED FOR AN EXTERNAL POINT OF VIEW

During the GOTALK pilots, facilitators and teams of educators and teachers have noticed the value of an external point of view. This external view can be a driving force forward for experimenting and reflecting on participation. The involvement of an external point of view thus seems to be a point to be considered when working with teams if no external facilitator is available. Teams could explicitly seek critical friends and go into dialogue to find their blind spots throughout the participatory processes.

Gathering pedagogical documentation and discussing it together can be a strong starting point for vision building exercises that touch upon sensitive or taboo topics. Feeling uncomfortable with specific situations should not be avoided but should be embraced as a possibility to move forward as an organization.

## **4.4. Integrating the lessons learned into the final model**

#### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ITALY AND BELGIUM

The Italian and Belgian piloting contexts showed very different realities, which enabled the facilitator-researchers to inclusive and transferable conclusions on participation practices. The Italian context did not work with formal children's councils, but rather had to put new participatory bodies in place in both schools and out-of-school contexts. The choice to include schools and out-of-school contexts showed the facilitator-researchers differences in institutionalization and their impact on participation processes. In the Belgian contexts, each of the primary and secondary schools involved already had a pupil council in place. However, the facilitator-researchers chose to invite schools with different practices of pupil participation granting them a broad spectrum of piloting experiences. Since in Belgium, pupil council were already in place, questioning those practices resulted being more sensitive and rigid than in Italy, while not being less interesting.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AGE GROUPS

Although we can distil some differences between the age groups in children and youngsters we worked with, we want to stress that none of these differences is absolute, and many more differences exist inside of cohorts of children and youngsters.

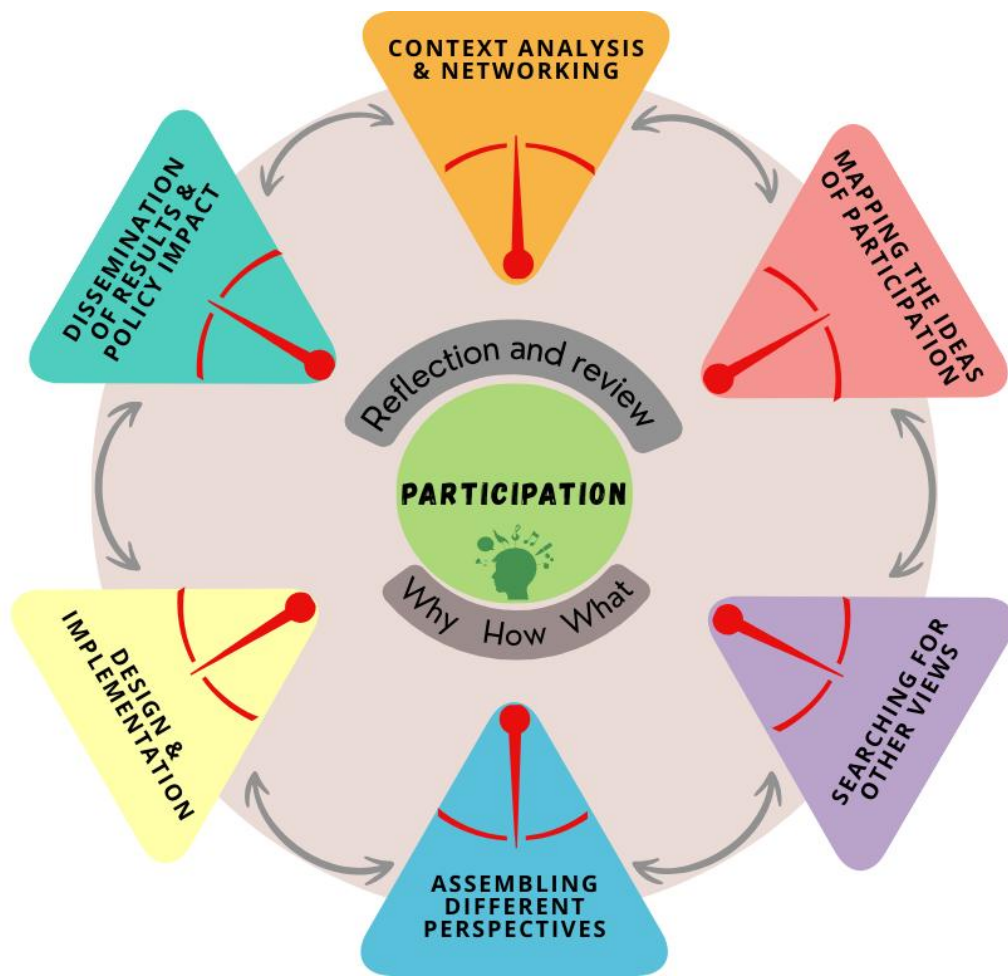
- For pupils in higher secondary education, motivation seemed to fluctuate more as their agency is mostly broader than that of younger pupils. This situation can be addressed explicitly by adults with curiosity and wonder. A space to talk about motivation for participation can be created so that obstacles for motivation can be understood and relieved. Although, like Laura Lundy (2007) noted, the right to participate is not a duty, but a right: the decision of young people to opt out should be respected.
- For younger children, it is more important to quickly get started with concrete policy themes and put them into practice immediately, rather than diving into conceptual discussions about participation without applications. This balance also exists for older pupils but might be less outspoken than for their younger counterparts.
- Different ways of organizing primary and secondary schools also showed in the pilots: connections between educators and pupils and within teams of adults function differently, resulting in different practices of participation.

## ADAPTING THE MODEL

The final model was developed starting from the initial prototype model that guided the first period of piloting and the adapted model that was developed for the second period of piloting. Different adaptations aligned the model with the insights the GOTALK team got throughout the different piloting experiences:

- The steps were initially seen as consequential, but later interpreted as overlapping and intertwined cores that can be used flexibly to deepen participation.
- More focus was put on the process of participation than on the outcome.
- The extra dimension of the Golden Circle (Sinek, 2011) of Why? How? and What? are added to the model

The graphics underneath show the final model and the explanation of each of the elements in the model. This final model is also part of the conclusive part of the mainstreaming guidelines, deliverable D2.3 of the GOTALK project.






## **PARTICIPATION**


### **PARTICIPATION IS THE FOCUS, THE CENTRAL CORE OF YOUR ACTION:**

- It is your objective
- It is both the premise and the tool from which to begin
- It is the process itself, which becomes concrete and active through its development



**SIX TASKS ARE POSITIONED AROUND THE CORE:  
THEY GENERATE, SUSTAIN, AND GIVE CONCRETE FORM TO  
PARTICIPATION  
THEY ARE ALSO OUTCOMES OF PARTICIPATION AND DRAW  
MEANING FROM IT**

- Observe the context and be fully aware of your objectives: Now you can decide whether to start from the core or from one of the other tasks
- Each task has its own autonomy: You may develop it to a greater or lesser extent depending on the characteristics of the environment and the main actors involved in your participatory process
- The tasks are all interconnected and may intersect through the central common point
- Some tasks may emerge as more prominent than others, but all will play a role in supporting and shaping participation
- The six tasks are not sequential but rather interconnected: You will likely find yourself returning to the same point multiple times



### **CONTEXT ANALYSIS & NETWORKING**

### **PARTICIPATION DOES NOT HAPPEN IN THE ABSTRACT**

- Observe and monitor the characteristics and needs of the group (both children and adults)
- Examine the context and identify strengths and needs
- Broaden your view: What kind of environment surrounds your working context? Which other actors could engage with you?

### **FROM OBSERVATION, OBJECTIVES AND PERSPECTIVES EMERGE**




### **MAPPING THE IDEAS OF PARTICIPATION**

### **THE TERM PARTICIPATION IS BROAD AND POLYSEMIC**

- What does participation mean for the children and youth in the group?
- What does participation mean for the adults who accompany them?
- What does participation mean for other stakeholders (institutions, funders, families...)?

### **BUILD A COMMON LANGUAGE AND MAKE DIFFERENT MEANINGS EXPLICIT**



### **SEARCHING FOR OTHER VIEWS**

### **IDEAS FOR PARTICIPATION DO NOT COME OUT OF NOWHERE: SHARE AND ASK QUESTIONS**

- to other peer groups
- to other adults
- to experts on the topic you want to address
- to those who might support or oppose your ideas

### **EXPAND YOUR PERSPECTIVES AND BE OPEN TO THE UNEXPECTED**



#### ASSEMBLING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

### PARTICIPATION IS BORN FROM DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW

- Support your arguments
- Listen to others' arguments (both within and outside the group)
- Can a synthesis be reached?
- Are some perspectives prevailing?
- How can minority perspectives be valued?
- Is it possible to change or give up your point of view?
- What must be defended and is non-negotiable?

**THIS IS WHERE DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES COME INTO PLAY**  
(Delegation, Abstention, Majority and Minority, Representation)

#### DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION

### MAKE IT CONCRETE: IT IS IMPORTANT TO SEE AND TOUCH YOUR PARTICIPATION AND ITS RESULTS

- Questions arise from observation
- Questions lead to ideas
- Ideas are discussed and used to plan
- Projects are implemented and monitored
- In the end, results are reviewed, celebrated, and new observations begin

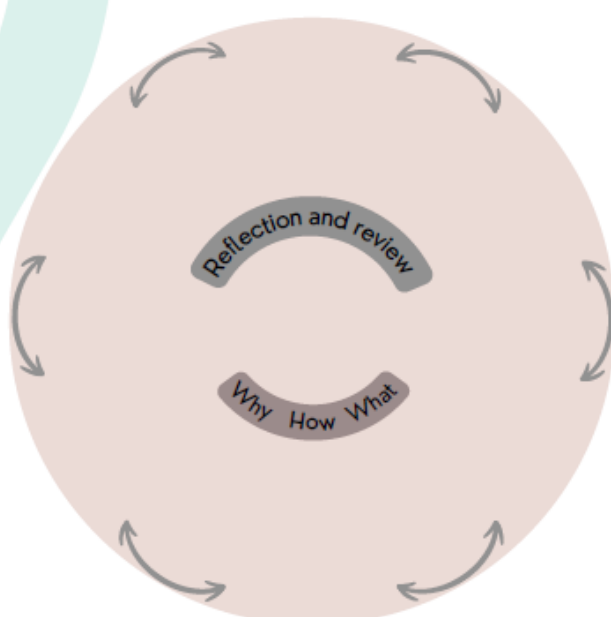
**THINKING ABOUT PARTICIPATION ONLY IN ABSTRACT TERMS WOULD BE INCOHERENT**

#### DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS & POLICY IMPACT

### PARTICIPATION MUST BE WELCOMED, LISTENED TO, AND RECOGNIZED BY PEERS, STAKEHOLDERS, AND INSTITUTIONS

- Give space to documentation
- Share the outcomes of your participatory process
- What left a mark? What has changed? What is transferable?
- Pay attention to coherence and listening: Are adults taking children and youth seriously?
- Can the process continue? Who and how will carry it forward?

**GO BEYOND YOUR OWN GROUP:**  
**HOW DO OTHERS POSITION THEMSELVES AROUND YOU?**



### PARTICIPATION IS A CONTINUOUSLY MOVING PROCESS

The grey zone connects all the elements at play. It is your area of reflective intervention: The progression of the participatory process allows you, from time to time, to understand where to pause, when to move forward or return, and with which tools to do so.

### THREE QUESTIONS CAN GUIDE YOU IN REFLECTION AND REVIEW:

- **Why?** Why does the school choose to foster participation?
- **How?** Which procedures are in place to support formal participation?
- **What?** Which participation practices and tools are used by the children's council?



**PAY ATTENTION TO THE 100 LANGUAGES:  
THEY ARE THE BEST ALLIES IN PARTICIPATION**

- Reasoning and maieutic dialogue are always connected to direct experience
- To explore a concept and answer a question, words alone are not enough — and sometimes are not even necessary
- Artistic, visual, and bodily languages offer alternative ways to express oneself
- Remember that intelligence is plural and thinking is embodied

**IN EVERY STEP OF YOUR PARTICIPATORY PROCESS — EVEN WITH ADULTS!**

**THE PARTICIPATION OF MINORS IS POSSIBLE BY PROMOTING A PLURALISTIC APPROACH, WHERE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE MAIN ACTORS, SUPPORTED BY ADULTS.**

Keep a close eye on the balance between the contributions of young people and adults. This balance may vary depending on the context and needs, but children must be protagonists, not puppets.

**HOW MUCH WEIGHT DOES THE ADULT INTERVENTION CARRY, AND HOW MUCH DO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE CONTRIBUTE?**

**HOW DOES THE BALANCE SHIFT WITHIN EACH PART OF THE PROCESS?  
AND ACROSS THE WHOLE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS?**



## 4. Conclusion

Both schools and out-of-school settings are constantly teaching young people about participation. The message pupils get can go from 'Your opinion contributes to our organization as a whole and is strongly valued' to 'Your perspective is disturbing to us and you will be punished for expressing it'.

Adults working in educational settings are therefore pivotal, because they have the power to enable and enforce the voices of children, together with their self-esteem and ability to express themselves. Taking young children seriously is vital for their development. Taking responsibility as an adult for this task includes reflecting on the work with young people. Although this task can be challenging and confronting, the GOTALK project celebrates and encourages all adults that continue to listen deeply to and advocate in alignment with young people's perspectives. The GOTALK project has shown that children's contributions are vital and that, if given the right opportunities, they can express their full potential.

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