GOTALK

Fostering Children's and Adolescents' Participation in Decision Making

GUIDELINES FOR MAINSTREAMING (D2.3)

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UNIMORE
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI
MODENA E REGGIO EMILIA

FONDAZIONE
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PER LA PROGETTAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE

Stedelijk
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The context, the GOTALK project, the partners and the places

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 **sustainability** of children's participation experiences is not always considered a permanent element of education to active citizenship and frequently discontinued when staff changes or educational organisations encounter other challenges.

The **GOTALK project (2023-2025)** aimed to change this and wanted to develop and test an innovative approach to participation. For this approach to 'work', practices should reflect founding principles and solid methods. Because participatory methods that are not regularly reviewed through the lens of the foundations of participation, run the risk of quickly becoming empty tools for engagement. This is also true the other way around: principles that are not translated into methods that can be used in daily practices, run the risk of being no more than slogans[1].

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). A lot of lip service has been paid to the idea of participation.

Nevertheless, children's participation is quite vulnerable to misuse and misappropriation[2]. True participation means that power dynamics and structures are challenged and that children, whatever their competences and skill level, feel heard and taken seriously. A premise of these guidelines is that it is quite a radical act to make participation 'work' in a formal context like a school. To make that possible, children of course have to be involved. Many methods focus on the question of how to make children ready for participation.

Based on the experiences in GOTALK, we want to stress that **adults** have to be ready for children's participation, too. This readiness requires different kinds of actions: are adults ready for facilitating children's participation in such a way that children are strengthened? Are organizations ready to respond to children's participation in a mature way, are they willing to devote resources so that children can form a sound understanding of policy issues, and are they prepared to adapt timelines so that children have a true chance of influencing policies?

[1]Dedding, C., Aussems, K. Participatie, het verschil tussen een methode en een kritisch paradigma. TSG Tijdschr Gezondheidswet 102, 81–87 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12508-024-00439-9

[2]Lundy, L. (2007), 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. British Educational Research Journal, 33: 927-942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

1. Introduction

The context, the GOTALK project, the partners and the places

Participation processes are not always clear-cut, straightforward, or perfect. More often than not, they involve tinkering and making mistakes. They also involve the willingness to rethink a certain approach, to take a step back, to pause. That is, in today's context, not always an easy feat to accomplish.

The GOTALK project was launched within the **European CERV program** 'Citizenship, Education, Rights and Values' and was co-funded by the European Union. It addressed the facilitation of meaningful, safe and inclusive children's participation. GOTALK aims to develop and test **consultative methods** to foster impactful children and youth participation in decision making, in both formal and non-formal participatory processes.

The GOTALK partnership is made of two Belgian and three Italian **partners**: KdG University of Applied Sciences and Arts and the Municipal Office for Education of Antwerp in Belgium, and the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Fondazione E35 and the International Institute of Humanitarian Law in Italy.

In the first year of the project, **piloting activities** were conducted in elementary schools in Flanders and in secondary schools and informal education contexts, with the support of local NGOs, in Emilia Romagna.

The second project year saw the two age groups inverted between the Belgian and Italian context, with the partners in Italy working with children aged 6 to 11 and the Belgian partners carrying out activities with adolescents aged 12 to 18. These two groups are normally referred to as children, across all age groups, while in some sections of these guidelines they are referred to as Young Citizens (YC) when the point of citizenship competences is directly addressed.

1. Introduction

The project focus and the objectives of the Guidelines

Everybody agrees in principle that participation is a basic children's right. However, despite a plethora of toolkits and practices, some issues remain unresolved.

A minority of children and young people do indeed participate in all kinds of councils and share their views about their surroundings. **However, this participation is unequally distributed among children.** The European Study on Child Participation, published in 2021[3], concluded, for instance, that vulnerable children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate systematically in political and democratic life, and so do children younger than twelve years old.

The GOTALK project addresses three specific and problematic challenges in adolescents' and children's participation in decision-making: **inclusiveness, sustainability and tangible impact on decisions.** However, in the project development, the question of how to 'do' participation emerged as a preliminary condition for engaging children, adolescents and relevant adults. In other words: nearly every participation practice needs to address the question: "How will we 'do' participation in this environment?"

Even though nearly every country on the globe 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. Children's participation is not automatically considered a positive and interesting practice by all[4]. However research studies showed the potential benefits of children's participation in terms of strengthening their agency, valuing their thinking and developing their citizenship competencies[5].

The GOTALK project adheres to the UNCRC and assumes that children's participation is an essential part of public life and that, according to the EU Council's 2023[6] Conclusions it is helpful for the development of competencies of citizenship.

Therefore, we understand that participation practices can foster several outcomes, for children, for adults and for democratic communities as a whole.

[3]European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, Eurochild, RAND Europe, Janta, B., Bruckmayer, M., Silva, A. d., Gilder, L., Culora, A., Cole, S., Leenders, E., Schuurman, M., & Hagger-Vaughan, A. (2021). Study on child participation in the EU political and democratic life : final report, Publications Office. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/388737

[4]Gallacher, Lesley and Gallagher, Michael (2008) Methodological Immaturity in Childhood Research?: Thinking through `participatory methods'. Childhood, 15 (4). pp. 499-516. ISSN 0907-5682

[5]Percy-Smith, Thomas, O'Kane, Twum-Danso Imoh (2003) A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation: Conversations for Transformational Change, Routledge

[6]Council of Europe (2023) Council conclusions on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship

The project focus and the objectives of the Guidelines

1. **Strong participation practices** show children that they are citizens and have a right of free expression.
2. **Strong participation practices** require a shift in mindset, attitude and actions, both in children and adults. A 'pedagogy of participation' considers children as capable human beings: it fosters listening, searching for different perspectives, having something to say about their living environments.
3. Children learn about participation in **democratic life** not by being taught but rather by being **immersed** in participation practices. That means - inversely - that they also learn through participation practices that are tokenistic or that misuse children's participation.

These Guidelines are based on the lessons learnt from **eight pilot experiences** conducted in Antwerp and Reggio Emilia. The Italian and Belgian piloting contexts showed very different realities. The **Italian context** did not work with formal pupil councils, but rather had to put new participatory bodies in place in both schools and out-of-school contexts. The groups involved included children with a migrant background and those with special needs, with greater homogeneity and a lower incidence of vulnerable individuals in the high school and, conversely, greater interindividual variability and a strong presence of vulnerable individuals in the other contexts.

In the city of **Antwerp**, two primary schools and two secondary schools have participated in the project. In each school the GOTALK facilitator team worked with the existing children's or pupil's council as well as with the teachers that facilitated the council. The researchers chose to involve schools with different practices of pupil participation, granting them a broad spectrum of piloting experiences. The pilots aimed to gain practical knowledge about the focus of the project.

These experiences have convinced us to start these guidelines by focusing on the **reasons why of participation** (section 2), namely by spelling out the possible objectives that children's participation may help to achieve.

For whom are the Guidelines relevant?

These guidelines are for **teacher teams and schools**, and for other adults who want to install and facilitate a solid participation practice in their organisation. Even though this project adheres to the idea that children are capable beings (and not only beings "in the making"), it does not mean that participation practices arise spontaneously and without difficulty.

Organisations which support children's rights and young students associations may also find inspiration by the reading and use of these Guidelines, and may propose new experiences in their context.
School authorities may also find interesting ideas to activate whole school approach initiatives based on a significant and well-monitored experience.

NGOs which support schools in citizenship education may find inspiration to propose some design principles and monitoring approaches that have been built by comparing formal and non formal learning contexts.

Policy makers in the field of education and youth may find inspiration to support participatory practices and establish capacity building programmes for teachers and other educators.

Finally, **researchers** may find some fresh ideas in these guidelines, although the core results of the project, in terms of data and analysis, are contained in other documents produced all along the project.

The essentials: what are the main lessons learnt through the project?

1. Every participatory experience requires a careful analysis of the **context** and of **previous experiences**: participation was not invented yesterday and carries with its name the memory and prejudice of all those who are supposed to participate and those who are invited to support, give room and follow up. Participation is also about **power**, and context analysis should pay attention to the power issues at stake. No "one-size-fits-all" model can be applied to all possible cases without a preliminary analysis phase and substantial adaptation.

2. The **age** of young learners makes an important difference, but the GOTALK experience shows that there are some common elements to be kept into account. Among these, obviously, the attitude of relevant adults in taking participation more or less seriously is probably the most important one.

3. Listening to each other and meeting each other is important for children, young people, and adults alike. However, real and deep listening needs to be facilitated by support and slowing down the process of participation.

All actors benefit from practicing to ask questions and active listening exercises. For teachers, this showed explicitly when comparing the pedagogy of teaching and the pedagogy of participation. In the latter, teachers are invited 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.

4. **Involving** children and adolescents, but also the relevant adults who are called to collaborate, in a discussion on the meaning of participation proved to be an effective way to discover misconceptions and prejudice. When doing so, groups (children/adolescents and adults) may work better if separated (also to directly tackle the power issues at stake), but it is important not to delay the creation of a common space.

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.

The essentials: what are the main lessons learnt through the project?

5. 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 a distrust in adults' or institution's willingness to take their perspectives into account. Honestly discussing these issues and concepts around participation such as exclusion, representation, delegation, abstention, democracy, unity, multiplicity, group, individual etc. could motivate some of the youngsters to commit to the participatory process and address a specific policy topic with peers and adults.

6. The issue of **inclusiveness** is extremely delicate and not understood in the same way by everyone. Representativeness and whole-group (classroom) participation are alternative models which may be used for different purposes. Inclusiveness requires reaching out to children at risk of exclusion, but also appropriate methods to encourage all to participate.

7. According to the young people involved in the pilot exercises, the **sense of belonging** to a group and a community is an important result of some of the experiences conducted, well appreciated especially by teenagers who have not many opportunities to gather for a common purpose.

8. Participation may take **different forms**, and words are not the only way to participate: many languages and forms of expressions are allowing a more inclusive participation

The essentials: what are the main lessons learnt through the project?

9. **Sustainability and impact on decisions** are two interconnected objectives of participation: if decisions are taken in coherence with the recommendations/requests of the participatory group, the interest of all parties involved will increase and participatory practices may consolidate and extend to new groups and subjects; if little importance is given to recommendations, young citizens will easily lose interest for a participatory exercise that does not produce results.

10. **Setting realistic expectations** (and possibly doing so together) is important in any participatory exercise: participation does not mean automatic deliberation, and those who accept to participate should be well aware of the existing rules and limits of their exercise. At the same time, those adults who make participation possible should be prepared to open some space to implement recommendations and, when these are not realistic, to take the time to give exhaustive explanations to motivate a refusal.

11. **Impact on decisions** is not an easy criterion to judge participation: many other benefits of participation at a young age can be identified: preparing young citizens to listen to other people's opinions, to express themselves, to transform conflicts in peaceful ways, to collaborate in taking "principled" decisions is fundamental for children's education to making choices and, more specifically in terms of curricula objectives, for citizenship education. However, it has to be stressed that the willingness of adult decision makers is a crucial cornerstone of participation.

12. The **institutionalisation** of young children's participation has both positive and risky elements: if participation is not perceived as relevant its unconditioned reproduction may be seen as an empty liturgy, a concession to "formal" democracy without impact on the important decisions. Therefore institutionalisation processes may not lead to sustainable and motivated participation if they are not including the availability to open the decision making process to YC and to revise established decision making routines.

1. Introduction

How to use the Guidelines?

> These guidelines are structured in **six sections** that can be read sequentially or can be accessed independently, following the specific interest of each user.

Section 2 is recommended to all as an introduction to children's participation according to the GOTALK assumptions and experience.

Sections 3, 4 and 5 focus respectively on the three key challenges of participation addressed in the project: inclusivity, sustainability and impact. These three sections are similar in their structure: they contain an initial main text, then some examples and points of action, then one or more activities and some stimulus on reflection applied to the reader's context.

Section 6 contains the main conclusions and suggestions for mainstreaming directed to the world of education practice, research and policy making.
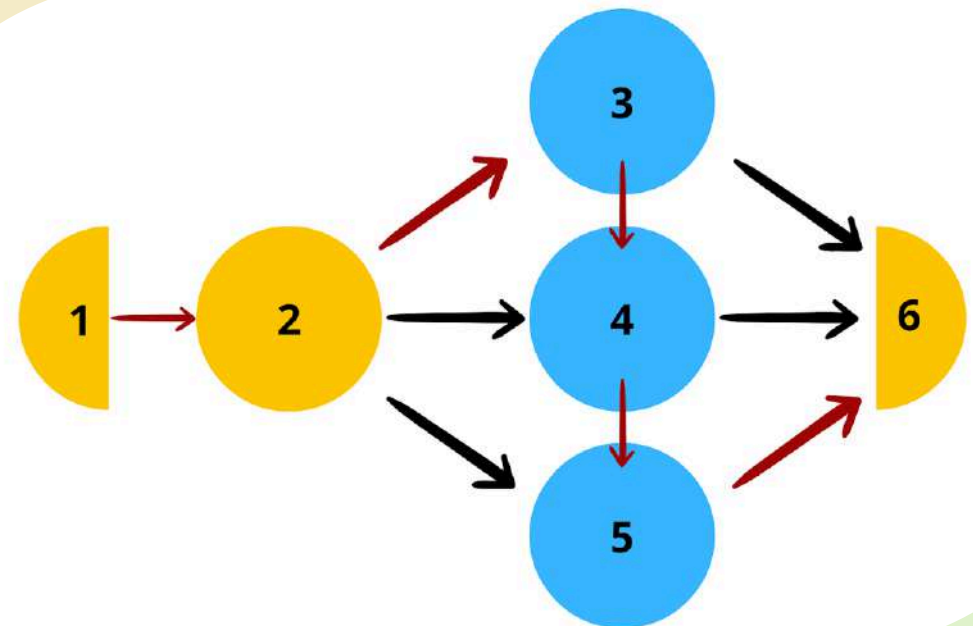
2. Why should children and adolescents participate in decision making?

It is hard to talk about inclusiveness, sustainability and tangible impact of participation without addressing the issue of participation itself. That is why this section addresses the reasons to support participation and looks into specific aspects and considerations on the participatory processes of young people.

Why support young citizens' participation?

There are many good reasons why children's participation in decision making should be encouraged and implemented:

➢ First of all, children participation is a children's right and it is part of democratic principles: children are young citizens, not future citizens

➢ Participation strengthens the sense of belonging to a community: it allows to experience the "human" scale of the structures and narratives. This includes:
- giving time and opportunity to experience conflictual situations, majority and minority conscience
- experiencing also impasse situations in which children encounter a decision difficulty and ultimately delegate to adults

▷ Children's participation has a capacity to strengthen agency in general terms, that practically means capacity to make choices, to take initiative and to make plans for the future.

▷ Participation has potential to develop, at certain conditions, some "life competence" categories (listening, expressing views, understanding conflicts and being able to transform them) and thus substantially contribute to citizenship education.
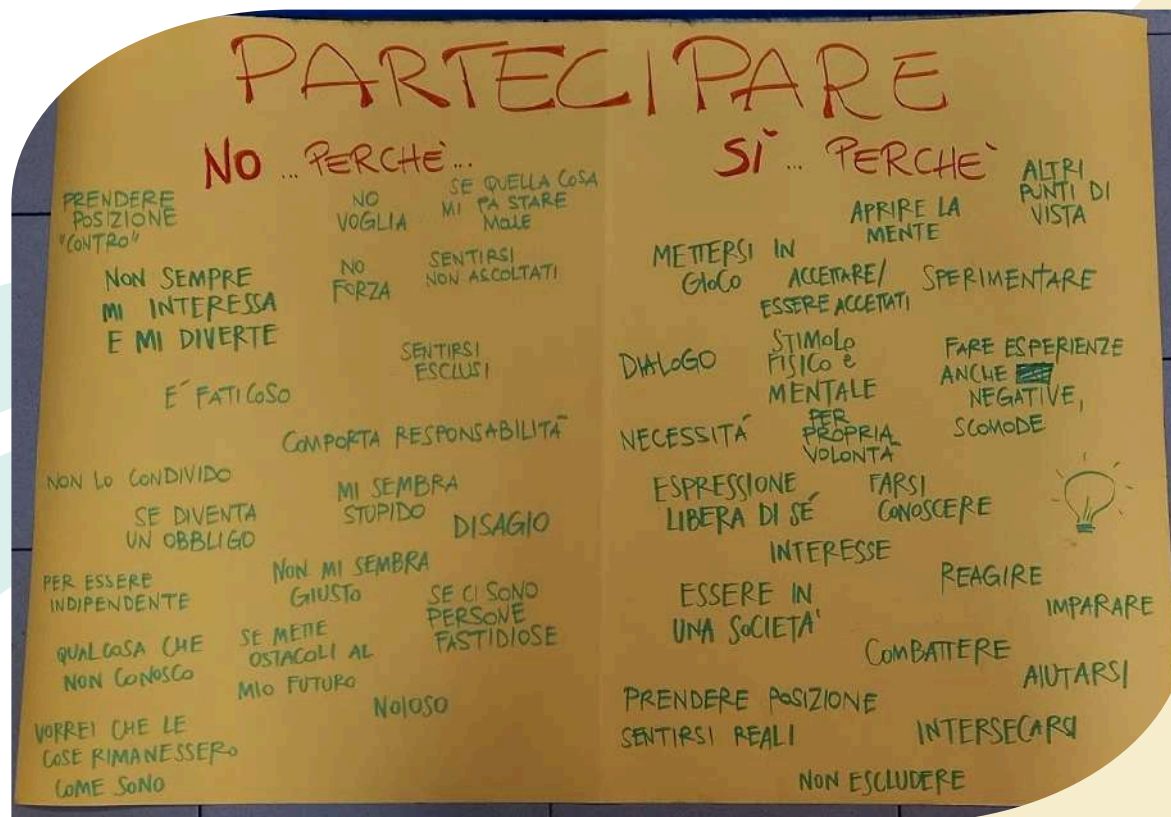
Looking inside participation

As the project involved children and adolescents, it is useful to consider the **commonalities and differences across age groups**.

Children are initially more motivated but increasingly disillusioned as they grow up and expect a broader scope for their decision making. The differences in the characteristics of thought processes need to be taken into account when reasoning about the concept of participation in the abstract: considered from a developmental psychology perspective, younger children still follow concrete-operational thinking, so they cannot reason purely in the abstract, but need to anchor their thoughts to concrete experiences related to their daily lives or connected to something they have already seen, touched, or experienced.

Adolescents, on the other hand, are in a formal-operational stage and are more capable of abstract and hypothetical thinking, so they can deal with concepts in a purely theoretical way, even if it remains important for them to anchor their thinking to their concrete experience, also to support their motivation to reasoning. Thought is always embodied.

The **peer group** is the main place in which to begin to experience participation: for younger children, the presence of the adult is normally a resource recognised and sought after by them, to be referred to even before confronting peers. For older children, adults can be facilitators, but the views and input of peers is a priority.

- **Barriers to participation: norms and participation culture in the context**

○ **Participation culture** is harder to foster in a context characterised by a lack of whole school or whole organisation approach, namely a system approach to change in which all actors within and around the school are involved[7]. Instability of teaching assignments is also a factor, as a high turnover of the teaching staff threatens continuity and can disrupt some reference points for the children as well.

○ Another factor can be the **lack of motivation** of the children, which can be due to a lack of interest, a limited knowledge or understanding of the issue at hand, or a lack of awareness of their ability to create change

[7]Carré-Karlinger, Hladschik and Weber (eds.) (2023) Democracy at school – Guidelines and Toolbox for a Whole School Approach in Citizenship Education

Looking inside participation

- Awareness of **participation methods** should be fostered in theory and practice: a key role in that sense is played by **external experts** and **school/internal staff**, as well as the **institutional leadership** which frames sustainable participation and guarantees synchronicity.

- Participation has different features within **formal, non formal and informal contexts**. Formal contexts can reach a higher number of children and youth, especially if they already have structured bodies of participation and a socially recognised role, granting greater legitimacy to both the processes and products of participation. In informal contexts the process can be more easily adapted to the needs of consensus building and progressive development of decision making skills. It may also allow more fluidity in the roles and degree of participants' involvement according to the discussed themes. From the experience conducted in Reggio Emilia, the possibility of bringing formal and informal contexts to interact seems to have potential to increase the results of participation.

- Children and Adolescents' motivation to participate is not granted: how can we make them interested?

    Participation cannot be compulsory. If the **freedom to join and take part** is lost, a contradiction would arise or, with the risk of seeing a reduction in ideas, questions and actions which makes participation alive. It is important not to assume that members of a group want to participate, to do something together, especially when the group is formal and not structured on a voluntary basis.

    When you don't feel **motivated** to participate, it can be difficult to find a goal, come up with ideas, make your voice heard and leave a mark with your actions. It may happen that, during a discussion, the group declares itself motivated to participate but in reality struggles to do so. This is probably because participation is necessary and formal, but not chosen. This makes it difficult for needs and ideas to emerge spontaneously. If this happens, continuing to talk is not very productive. The risk, for example in a school classroom, is that obvious ideas will emerge (we participate by raising our hands to ask the teacher questions) or ideas imposed from above or from outside (if there is a demonstration, those who want to participate do so, those who don't want to stay at home and sleep).

    On the other hand, when a group appears to be very active in terms of participation, it is useful to stop and ask whether and how everyone has the same motivation to take part and act towards a goal.

Looking inside participation

- **Adults' habits, behaviours and attitudes** towards participation also play a key role: how do power relations and school interaction habits influence YC's participation? How can recognition of additional teachers' efforts be rewarded? Teachers and educators are not the leading actors in a context of children participation, they should instead support and facilitate the decision-making of pupils. Teachers can ask themselves what competences and behaviours they want to see from pupils and, in turn, which attitude and behaviours are needed from teachers to facilitate that process. Actions that contribute to this include sitting on the same level as pupils, asking authentic questions and showing curiosity for what pupils have to say.

3. Inclusive participation: What does it mean?

GOTALK

The issue of **inclusiveness** is a delicate one. It refers to **'representation'**, and to **'belonging'**. Representation evokes the question of whether all children, in specific context, may participate. And, if not, the question is who is excluded?

The issue of **belonging** refers to the **'ways'** in which participation is 'done'.

The GOTALK project specifically aimed at broadening the repertoire of participation practices, so that more children could feel that participation was meant for them, too.

Whom to include and how?
The importance of voluntary engagement and the risk of marginalisation if outreach is not included

Not all pupils find it equally easy to have their opinions heard, while others feel very comfortable during a pupil council. To dare to **speak up**, a pupil needs a lot of skills and treats: self-confidence, trust in the school and teachers, fluent oral language skills, rhetorical skills and a good connection with fellow pupils. Although not intentional, there are a lot of **barriers to pupil councils** that make participation not always inclusive and accessible. It is often the older, white pupils who have the school language as their home language who make their voices heard. Younger pupils, pupils of color, pupils with a different home language or pupils with special needs are less likely to be heard. This is unfortunate, of course, because every voice and perspective is needed for an honest discussion.

To **foster inclusiveness** in children's participation requires active efforts to engage a diverse range of children, particularly those who are often underrepresented or excluded due to factors such as disability, socio-economic background, language barriers, or minority status. It is essential to recognise that **participation must be voluntary and respectful** of each child's willingness and capacity to engage, ensuring that no child feels coerced or tokenised.

However, relying solely on self-selection or passive invitations can inadvertently reinforce **marginalisation**, as more confident or better prepared children are more likely to step forward. Therefore, outreach strategies must be embedded in the design of children's participatory processes, actively seeking out voices from marginalised groups and creating accessible, supportive environments that enable all children to participate meaningfully.

An **approach that aims for the inclusion of all children** – regardless of their interest in participating – with the aim of ensuring fairness and broad representation can carry certain risks. Indeed, **forcing participation** risks disengagement, resentment, and superficial involvement, which can undermine the authenticity and effectiveness of the process. **Adults** should also always be mindful of the fact that this can impact the image that children have of democracy and of the value of participation. True inclusiveness balances proactive outreach with respect for each child's autonomy and evolving capacities.

How to be inclusive: encouraging expression, engaging in discussion, maintaining interest in all phases

Being inclusive requires creating an environment where all children feel safe, valued, and empowered to express themselves. This involves using the so-called **"hundred languages"**[8], namely varied and age-appropriate methods of communication, including creative, visual, and non-verbal tools, to ensure that children with different abilities, languages, and levels of confidence can participate meaningfully.

Facilitators must **actively encourage expression** by listening attentively, validating contributions, and avoiding the dominance of a few voices. To sustain inclusiveness throughout planning, decision-making, implementation, and feedback, engagement must be dynamic and responsive to children's changing interests and energy levels. This includes using interactive formats, rotating roles, and providing tangible outcomes or recognition that show children their input matters.

Inclusivity also means **revisiting and adapting current approaches**, ensuring participation remains a process shaped together with children, not just for them. By nurturing open dialogue and sustained involvement, inclusive participation becomes not only more representative but also more meaningful and impactful for all involved. All this should also be kept in mind when exploring and collecting different views in preparation for a participatory exercise, as representation is also a key aspect of inclusive children's participation.

[8]Malaguzzi (1996) The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education. Ablex Publishing Corporation.

How to be inclusive: encouraging expression, engaging in discussion, maintaining interest in all phases

Participation may take **different forms**, and words are not the only way to participate: many languages and forms of expressions are allowing a more inclusive participation. According to **Malaguzzi**[9], 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 etc. This idea was used to enhance the inclusiveness of participatory processes. Familiarisation with the many languages is a key requirement for adults who want to foster the inclusive participation of children.
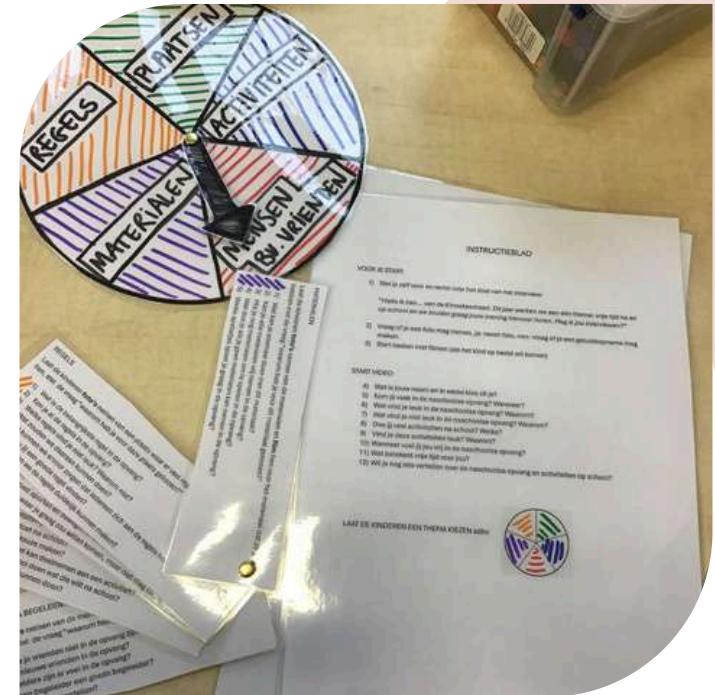
[9]Rinaldi, C. (2021). In dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, researching and learning (Second edition). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Examples and points of attention

Example 1: We are all part of the group

The group is made up of many people, each with their own individuality. Everyone can contribute and everyone is equally important. The opening and closing rituals help to emphasise this concept without having to explain it in words.

Each activity begins and ends in a circle, so that everyone (adults and children) can see each other's eyes and no one occupies a dominant position over others.

Clothespins symbolise each person's presence and identity. Each clothespin bears the name of one of the participants.

A member of the group, preferably someone who is vulnerable, if they feel comfortable doing so, distributes the pegs at the beginning and collects them at the end. As the pegs are handed out, the person whose name is written on it expresses in one word what they feel is significant to share about the experience that is about to begin or end: a mood, an expectation, an idea.

Example 2: No words needed

It should not be assumed that all members of the group are able to express themselves in the same way: if they lack linguistic skills or if emotions and relationships come into play intensely, words may not be sufficient or available. Other languages can help to explore and communicate concepts.

What does unity mean? And what does multiplicity mean? To bring out everyone's point of view without words influencing or dominating, it is possible to give space to the body. Like blocks of clay, some members of the group can shape the concept using their bodies and facial expressions. Initially, they can agree using words, but once the initial awkwardness of an unusual request has been overcome, it will no longer be necessary to communicate with the voice, while posture, gestures and contact will allow the concept to be composed and sculpted, like a statue.

The other members of the group, as in a museum, will be able to observe the concept, approach it respectfully until they touch it, and react to the stimuli they receive from sight and touch. Starting from what they have seen, and possibly touched (i.e., starting from sensations), everyone can develop their own thoughts, reasoning, and concepts without necessarily having to start from listening. In turn, the children can express themselves with their bodies, but also try to use words, which at that point will be more personal and clear to them because they are embodied.

Example 3: Embedded and grouped words

If sufficient space is given to plural languages, words also find their way to emerge and support participation. When a concept has been experienced with different intelligences, it is possible to engage in dialogue even if verbal communication or rational and abstract thinking are not fully mastered.

Proposed in a circle, so that everyone can see each other, maieutic dialogue, or socratic questioning, is the tool that allows us to think together, critically, divergently and inclusively: this approach aims to elicit knowledge from within a person through questions and dialogue, developing critical thinking and self-discovery instead of relying on direct instruction. Listening to others is more important than self-expression because ideas are the result of a shared journey and are constructed together, highlighting points of convergence and differences of opinion. The adult who moderates does not bring their own point of view, but helps to summarise and keep everyone's participation under control. It is not essential that everyone makes the same number of contributions, but it is essential to ensure that everyone is an active part of the shared reasoning.

Example 4: Images have a voice

The observation or subjective production of images allows communication to be broadened, involving different types of intelligence. Images refer to space, activate emotions, and capture moments and insights. They are polysemic, and therefore complex, but precisely for this reason they allow adults to be less inductive and deterministic in conducting an activity.

What does inclusive participation mean? When and how can it be seen and recognised? It is possible to answer this question with one or more cameras and a printer. Everyone can take the time to look around their school and life contexts in search of an initial visual response to capture with a camera. All these responses can then be printed and hung on a string inside a room so that they can be shared.

At this point, it is possible to intertwine and compare ideas by asking participants to first position themselves near the image that they feel is closest to their idea of inclusive participation, then near the one that they feel is furthest away, and finally near the one that surprised them the most. What thoughts, questions and emotions did the observation of the various positions arouse?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN...

Think of inclusion and inclusivity issues in your context.
What is most important in your opinion?

- to overcome cultural differences that prevent real participation
- to give several different options for expression in order to encourage and support shy children and children who are disengaged with school assignments and challenge school rules
- to make teachers and other adults aware of exclusion and discrimination factors
- to open a debate about inclusion meaning in our context
- to train teachers and educators about individual needs identification and support
- Other proposals (please specify)

DISCUSS YOUR REPLIES WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES AND TRY TO AGREE ON A PRIORITY LIST OF ACTIONS.
WHAT PARTICIPATORY ACTIVITY WOULD YOU PROPOSE?

How have you identified the inclusivity issues in the previous activity?
Do you feel ready to modify your own attitudes and behaviours to become more active in implementing inclusion in your context?
What would you do in this regard?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN...
use this space for your reflections
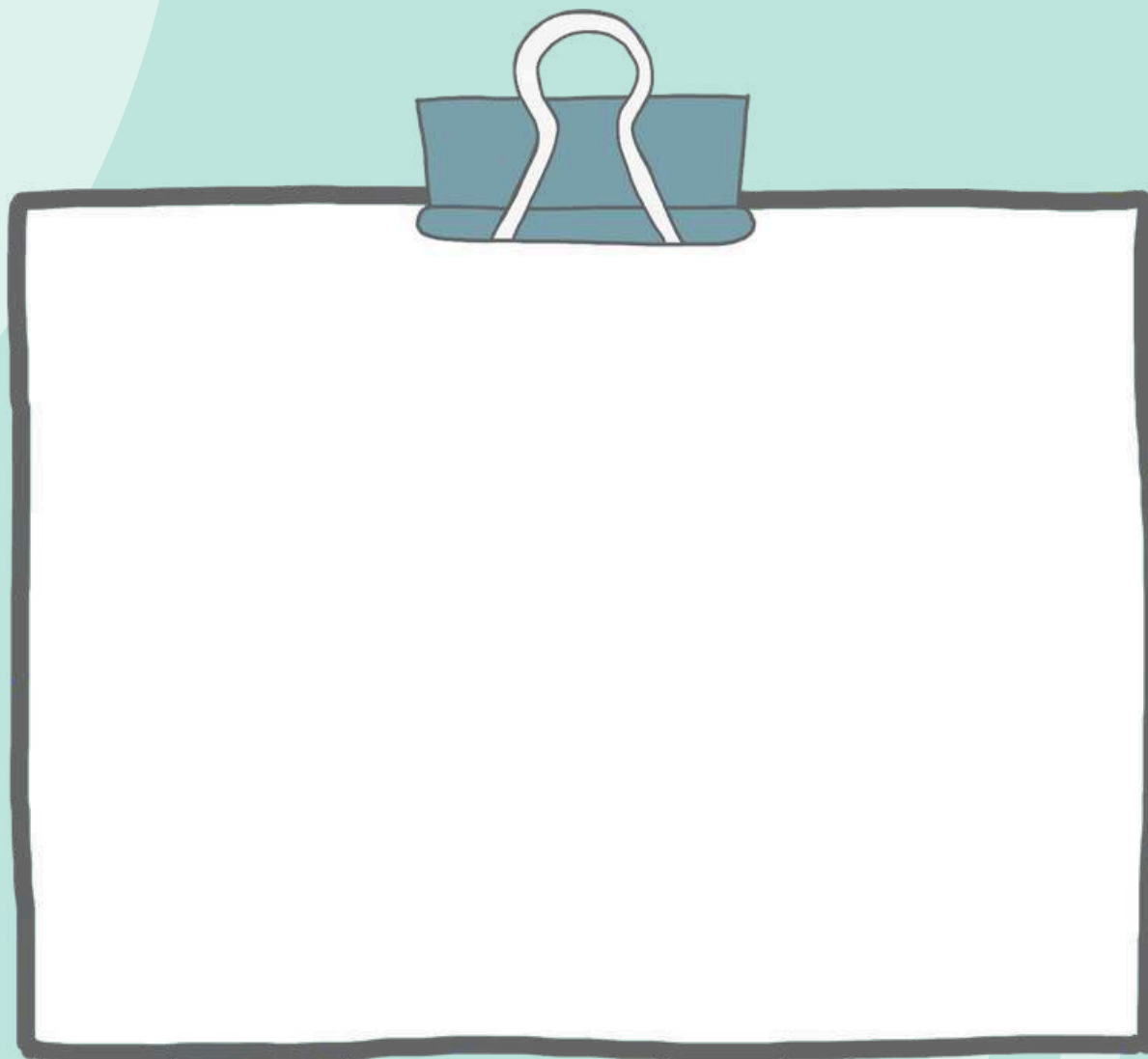
4. What makes participation sustainable?

Sustainability in children's participation means **creating processes that last beyond individual projects, events, or people**, and that continue to offer children meaningful opportunities to influence decisions over time. Too often, participation is treated as a one-off exercise, leading to short-lived enthusiasm but little long-term change. To avoid this, **participation must be embedded in the structures, cultures, and relationships** that shape children's daily lives, supported by both adults and institutions who are committed to making it an ongoing reality.

Whole organisation approach, teamwork, commitment, resources

In most schools, there are one or a few **teachers** who take an active role in supporting pupil participation. In every school, there are a lot of tasks to divide, and so pupil participation is often seen as one of the tasks you can fulfill as a teacher in school. Yet it can be done differently, because how sustainable is a pupil council when those teachers are absent? **Embracing pupil participation** means that pupil participation is a responsibility of every team member and thus is carried by all shoulders in the school team. Pupil participation works more powerfully if the board is behind it, there is space at staff meetings to also discuss items from the pupil council, and if all classroom teachers are aware of issues addressed in the pupil council or actions taken by the pupil council.

For participation to be sustainable, it cannot be treated as an isolated project or the responsibility of individual school staff and pupils. Instead, it must be **embedded within the culture, structures, and everyday practices** of the entire school and the community around it, and it must be **at the centre of coordinated efforts from all actors involved**. A whole organisation approach is a comprehensive way to consider the school, including not only the students and school staff but also the families and community actors that shape school life.

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.

Moreover, ensuring sustainability requires practical support, allocating sufficient time, funding and training efforts to consistently solidify participatory work. When participation is a collective, long-term commitment, it becomes better integrated into daily life, making the process more resilient and responsive to the evolving needs and voices of children.

Partnership with local stakeholders

Sustainable children's participation relies on strong, ongoing partnerships with local stakeholders who can support, embed, and carry forward participatory practices over time. Schools, community organisations, local authorities, and families all play a vital role in creating environments where children's voices are not only welcomed but integrated into everyday decision-making structures. These stakeholders bring continuity, resources, and local knowledge that help ensure participation is not a one-off event but a regular, valued part of community life. When local actors see the value of children's contributions and take co-responsibility for facilitating their involvement, participation becomes more resilient, embedded, and capable of adapting to changing contexts. Moreover, strong local partnerships help bridge the gap between children's input and decisions taken outside of school, reinforcing the trust and the relevance of their engagement.

Good choice and agreement on scope and expectations

It is essential that the boundaries, scope and expectations of a participatory process are discussed and agreed upon from the start, together with children. Taking the children's acceptance for granted can undermine trust and limit genuine engagement. Instead, openly exploring with them the scope of participation will give them information and agency necessary for their involvement, prevent misunderstandings and build mutual respect and trust.

Open mindedness of all actors (children, adolescents and relevant adults)

In times where teachers feel constantly pressured to achieve results, it may appear counterintuitive to slow down, to challenge, to listen, to investigate together. Children have to be challenged to move beyond their opinion, and so do adult facilitators and policy makers. Adults' competences are needed to support real participation.

Flexibility of the process

This is more easily achieved in non formal contexts but should be considered also in schools and other formal environments.

Documentation, evaluation, dissemination

Consolidate and make visible the use of tools like the living wall for dissemination and communication between classes as well as for future participatory activities.

The living wall

The living wall is a **tool for collecting and reviewing perspectives** where different languages can be used to express points of view. 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.

When children take part in participatory experiences, they develop valuable skills that should not be lost once a process ends. Consolidating and making visible and usable the competences developed in previous experiences allows to make them available for students who will begin participation processes in the future. This involves adults and children who can help transfer these competences.
- Close meetings with feedback from adults and pupils
- Give the children recording devices and means other than cell phones, making the children primary actors of documentation rather than just an object of observation
- Give children a chance to explain what they did, especially to policy makers and adults that can follow up on their requests. For example, the following is a letter written by pupils from Reggio Emilia:

Letter written by pupils from **Reggio Emilia**

GOTALK

INCLUSIVE CHILDREN'S COUNCIL
LEADING TO DEMOCRATIC EXCHANGE

Dear Headmaster, Municipal Official and School Council of IC Ligabue

We are class 1B of the Dalla Chiesa school in Reggio Emilia.

We participated in the GOTALK project: the GOTALK project consists of giving our opinion on how to make the school much more comfortable for pupils. The GOTALK project gives students a voice and the opportunity to be taken seriously, as the word GOTALK suggests: go and talk, but we interpret it as: stand up and speak, WITHOUT SHAME about what you say (NO ONE SHOULD JUDGE YOU). No one judges you, your opinion always has VALUE. EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT TO SPEAK.

During the project, we reflected on how to participate in school life and thought that we would like to make it better. We came up with lots of ideas. We submitted the best ones to the rest of the school and, after a vote, we decided to focus on improving the bathrooms.

That's why we inspected the bathrooms and found this situation:
not all bathrooms are dirty, which means that some people respect the bathrooms. In some bathrooms, the tap water tastes good,
However, we also saw some unpleasant things: the doors do not close, there is a bad smell and there is vulgar graffiti on the walls and doors, the water is not clean, there is no toilet paper and the floor is slippery. There is no soap, the toilet is dirty, the walls are peeling, the armrest for disabled people is rusty and the toilet seat is missing.

After the inspection, we had a long and heated discussion and decided to make a pact between boys and girls from different classes throughout the school to take care of the bathrooms.
Our motto will be "more respect".
We in class 1B are committed to treating the bathrooms with the utmost respect.
To ensure that all bathrooms are respected by all students, we have put up signs to communicate our idea to the school and raise awareness of the issue.
We ask everyone to respect our agreement.

We feel that we cannot do it alone, so we ask you to help us in two ways:

1. First of all, we think you should help us enforce the rules because we cannot exercise authority over our classmates on our own, especially those who behave very badly. Some of us have made proposals:
   - We would like school staff to help us supervise the bathrooms so that markers, pencils, etc. are not brought in.
   - We would like the school to punish those who damage the bathrooms.
   - We would like those who cause damage to pay the school with money or, if possible, by repairing the damage themselves.

2. In addition, we would like you to come and help us fix the bathrooms because we cannot do it on our own. In particular:
   - We would like the bathroom doors to be clean and without holes.
   - We would like the walls to be clean and without vulgar writing and drawings.
   - We would like the toilets to be cleaner.
   - We would like toilet paper and soap to be available in the bathroom.

Thank you for listening to us and we hope you will support our cause.

Reggio Emilia, 15th May 2025
The boys and girls of class 1B of the Dalla Chiesa school
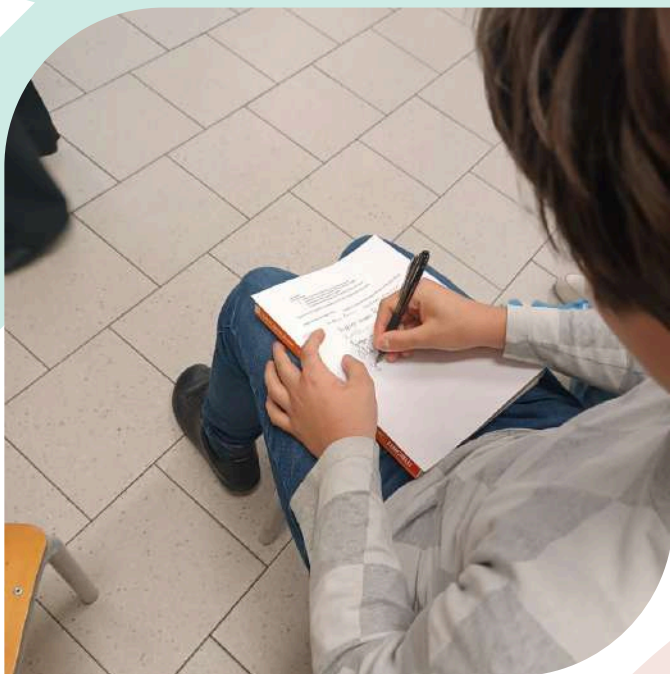
Institutionalisation

The institutionalisation of young children's participation has both positive and risky elements: if participation is not perceived as relevant and meaningful, continuing to repeat it can make it seem as an empty ritual may be seen : it becomes a mere gesture toward "formal" democracy without a real impact on important decisions. Therefore **institutionalisation processes may not lead to sustainable and motivated participation if they are not including the availability to open the decision making process to YC** and to revise established decision making routines.

To illustrate this dynamics, the insights from GOTALK led to the emergence of the concept of **'Schoolification of Participation'** to refer 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 standard process through which pupils were supposed to participate: participation was "done" in the pupil council and only following a certain formal procedure, agenda items could be added to the pupil council's agenda. This strict delimitation of children's participation shows how the risk of making it appear as an empty ritual, not open to children's emerging interests.

In some cases **participation can also be manipulated and instrumentalised** to get apparent children's consensus to decisions that are in fact desired by adults or to collect children's opposition to likely decisions that are not desired by those who organise the participatory process. This dangerous dynamic may occur when the relevant adults are not fully embracing the principles of children's participation in decision making.

Any serious Young Citizens' participation exercise should have a **monitoring and evaluation component, in which YC are involved since the very beginning**. What may not appear as a problem to adults may reveal to be a serious concern for children and adolescents, and compromise the whole meaning of participation and its results. It is important that children participate not only in expressing their views on the process and results, but also in co-defining what will be the success criteria of the exercise.

Example 1: Perspective is needed

It is important to work with a broad perspective. Each project must be well placed in the context in which it is proposed and, precisely because it aims to activate and sustain participation, it must have a possible future, even beyond the project itself.

Who will participate in the project? If you choose to work with an entire class, it is useful to choose a class that is just starting out: as they continue their schooling, they will have the opportunity to experiment with other methods and tools or, in any case, to ask adults for further opportunities to participate. If you work with a subgroup, it is essential that it communicates with others: pedagogical documentation (a cycle of observation, documentation and interpretation used first and foremost as a practice to reflect on children's learning) and dedicated notice boards allow you to broaden your perspective and give a future to what has emerged within a small group.

Example 2: What can I transfer?

If the project is proposed with the participation of an external operator, the educators and teachers involved have a dual responsibility: to dialogue with their colleague, for greater effectiveness in the present, and to "steal the trade" from their colleague, with a view to the future.

An observation grid can help to focus on what happens during the meetings. For each proposed activity, it is possible to ask how inclusive it was and how it allowed for participation (for the whole group and for vulnerable individuals). For each proposed tool/method, it is possible to ask whether it can be transferred to one's own teaching activity and discipline, either directly or with modifications. An example of a grid is the one used in some GOTALK meetings in Italy, which is available here.

Examples
and points of attention

Example 3: Responsibility lies with the young people

Once the group has a clear idea of its project, it can decide independently and respectfully how to carry it out and what tasks to assign to each member. Choosing who should do what is not the task of adults, who can at most advise or make suggestions.

When choosing who will be the spokesperson for the group, it is possible to initially ask who would like to apply for that role and then add those who, although they did not apply, are considered capable of performing that task. After hearing the reasons behind the nominations, through simulations, role-playing and theatrical improvisations, you can try to put yourself in the spokesperson's shoes, working with the whole group to develop the outline of the content to be expressed, as well as the most effective communication style. Everyone takes part in the simulation: in this way, it is possible to re-discuss the various nominations and, in the light of the facts, understand who are the most suitable people to fill that role.

Examples
and points of attention

Example 4: No abstraction, first of all observe

Young people must be able to think big and not be disappointed in their expectations. It is essential not to mislead them, but to accompany the group towards a realistic plan, keeping their dreams open and anchoring them to reality. Young people have the right to be informed respectfully about what is possible and what is not. What resources do young people have? What resources can be added? What is the context in which they dream?

When planning an action in the local area or at school, it is important not to assume that you know everything: moving around the space, capturing certain details with a camera or with drawings and notes, allows you to find confirmation of your own points of view and reasoning, but also to pick up on new nuances, to see something you did not imagine you would find, to be surprised by an obscene graffiti or a corner of beauty. Capturing these elements and sharing them with the group allows you to make informed decisions and plans, setting ambitious but realistic goals.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN...

1) Among teachers, reflect on the mechanisms currently in place for children participation: where and how can they speak? Who should they speak to? Are their messages taken seriously only under certain conditions? Teachers can then discuss this with pupils to see how they align on this.

2) Draft a list of local stakeholders whom you would consider important to involve in the participation exercise that you planned in the activity of Section 3. How would you convince each of them to participate? What would be their possible role before, during and after the pilot activity? Please fill a table with the answers and discuss it with your colleagues who should also be involved. Correct as necessary and then use it to approach each stakeholder.

3) Ask yourself how each stakeholder identified might contribute to consolidate the pilot participation exercise and make it become a normal practice in your organisation. Compare your views with those of your colleagues and draft a "Sustainability engagement" to be discussed with stakeholders.

STAKEHOLDERS:	HOW WOULD YOU CONVINCE THEM?	WHAT MIGHT THEY DO?			COLLEAGUES' COMMENTS
		BEFORE	DURING THE PARTICIPATION CYCLE	AFTER	
Stakeholder 1					
Stakeholder 2					
Stakeholder 3					
Stakeholder 4					

What are the most important conditions, in your context, to make the experience sustainable? What are the barriers to sustainability?
How can you get help? May children/adolescents help? How?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN...

use this space for your reflections
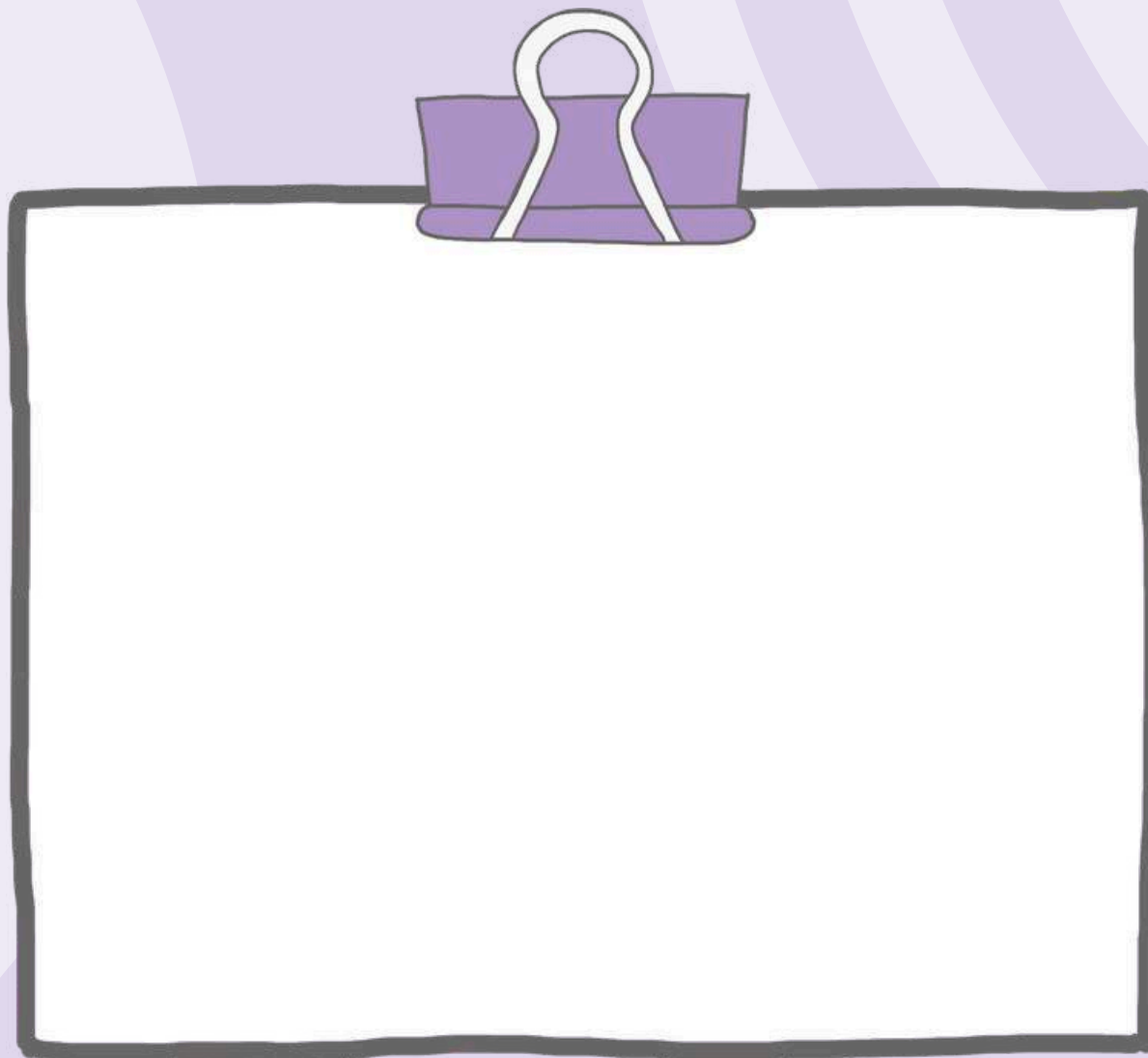
5. Impact on decision making to make participation credible

If we want children to engage consistently in participatory practices, they should see that the **participation can result in decision-making**. All too often, participatory practices are limited to a didactic exercise, focusing for instance on argumentation or deliberation. While these exercises have their worth, they do not constitute participation.

For participation to become a strong practice, it should result in shared or joint decision-making. If little importance is given to recommendations, young citizens will easily lose interest for a participatory exercise that does not produce results. Furthermore, ensuring the sustainability of the processes and results of participation allows to make them visible to every stakeholder, including those not directly involved, further fostering participation

The credibility challenge of participation

- **Checking the climate in the school**

The **credibility of institutional participation** is fundamental and built through tangible impact. In order to consolidate a participatory school environment, adults should assess the school environment and the issues that the children bring up in different ways.

- Check the walls of the school / the bathroom doors? What do they tell school teams about pupils' perspectives?
- These are often unwanted ways of participation, but can be used as an inspiration for wanted participation, for instance by capturing those voices on a living wall / digital living wall.
- The living wall should be used to communicate what's happening in the pupil council, but also to broaden the scope / to include more pupils in the discussion. That way, it becomes a living thing, like a heart with a beat, pulsating movement in and out of a pupil council: 'the participation heart of the school'
- Also important is the room of the pupil council, not having all pupils look at the teacher, but rather looking at each other and facilitating movement within the room or even going out.
- Hang statements on the walls for pupils to react to.
- Schools should also consider the translation of power dynamics in the positions in a classroom (sitting down or standing up, being in the front or not, educators sitting in between the pupils while working together, ...).

The credibility challenge of participation

- **Ensuring credibility through decision making**

When children see that their ideas lead to real changes in school policies, practices or behaviours, the **process gains legitimacy** in their eyes and in the eyes of adults.

Impactful participation builds trust, demonstrating that children's voices are not just heard but acted upon. Conversely, if participation results in little or no visible outcome, its credibility quickly erodes, regardless of how inclusive or well-facilitated the process may be. Children are quick to recognise when their involvement is merely symbolic, and repeated experiences of empty consultation can lead to disillusionment and withdrawal.

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. Credibility is also naturally linked with the issues of **inclusiveness and sustainability**: impact is better achieved with diverse and inclusive participatory processes and, in turn, credibility gained from impactful participation will fuel future participatory processes.
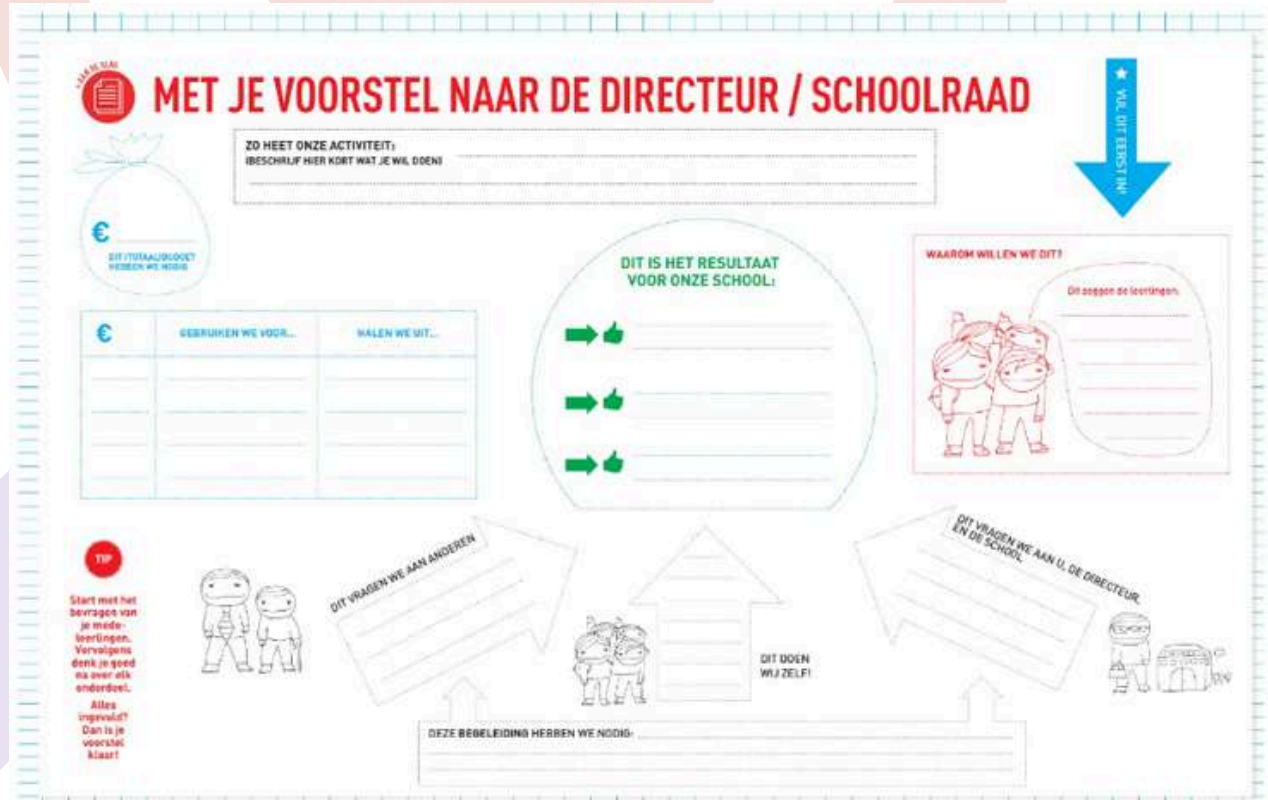
Putting expectations at the right level and preparing all actors to remain within the scope, while fostering open-mindedness and innovation in methods

Setting the expectations at the right level is important in any participatory exercise: participation does not mean automatic deliberation, and those who accept to participate should be well aware of the existing rules and limits of their exercise. However, the contribution of children is also valuable in setting these expectations, letting them express themselves on how the participatory process should unroll and what limits should be set to their expectations. At the same time, those adults who make participation possible should be prepared to open some space to implement recommendations and, when these are not realistic, to take the time to give exhaustive explanations to motivate a refusal. Adults should also, in a starting phase of the participation exercise, be clear about the mandate of the group with regards to the impact on decision making.

All this requires children to be informed about how to participate: for instance, how to formulate their demands, who to formulate them to and what decision-making mechanisms their demands will go through.

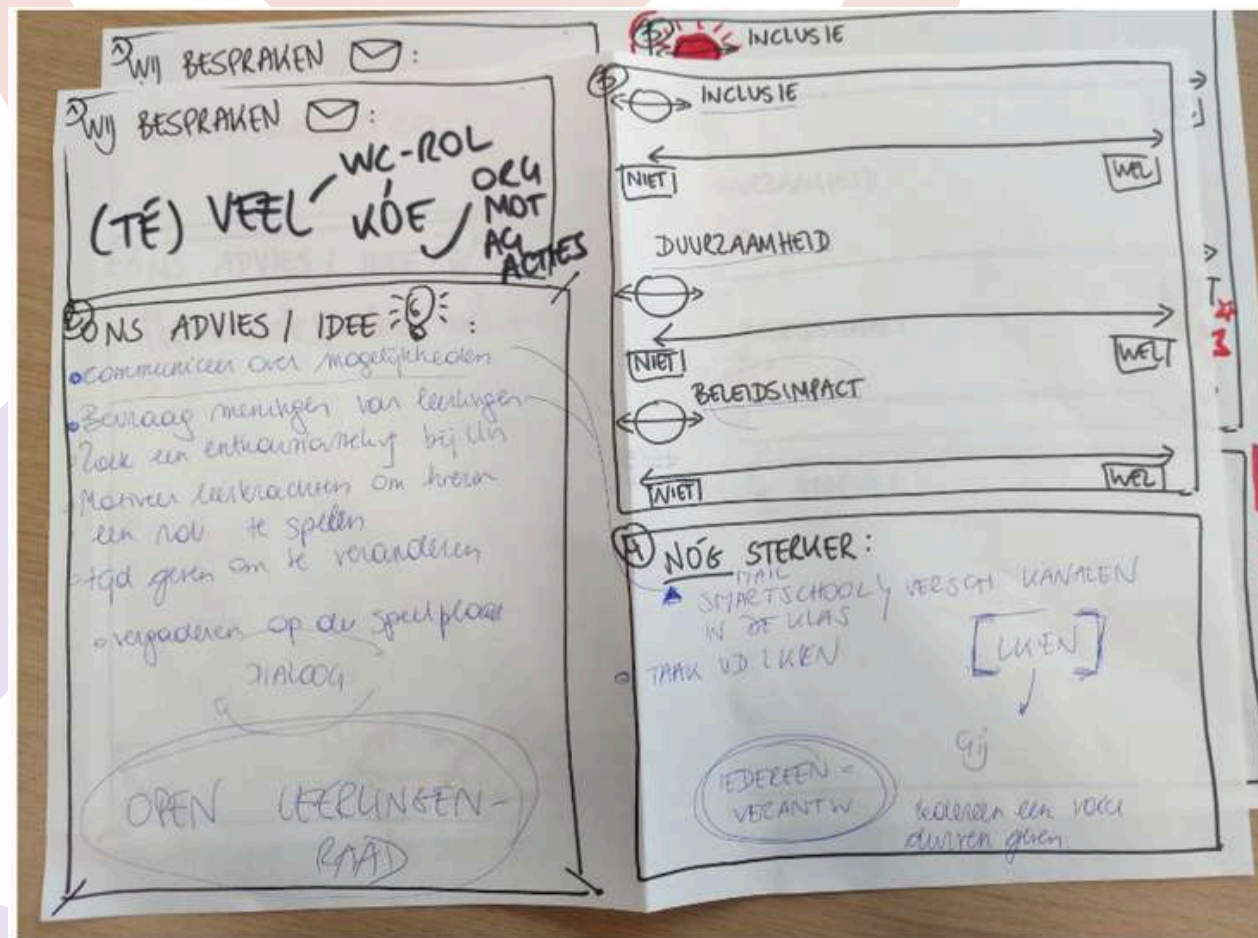# How to involve decision makers and define the rules of the game

This image is a tool designed by an organization called 'Student Union Flanders'. The tool helps pupils to prepare a proposal for the school's policy makers and targets questions of needed resources, requests for school workers, arguments why the proposal is good for the school and why pupils want it.

Impact on decisions is not an easy criterion to judge participation: many other benefits of participation at a young age can be identified: preparing young citizens to listen to other people's opinion, to express themselves, to transform conflicts in peaceful ways, to collaborate in taking "principled" decisions is fundamental for children's agency and, more specifically in terms of curricula objectives, for citizenship education. However, it has to be stressed that the willingness of adult decision makers is a crucial cornerstone of participation. Adults can rethink decision making processes and clearly explain to children the complexity of some decisions, rather than discouraging children from believing in the possibility to produce change.

How to involve decision makers and define the rules of the game

This form was used during the second lab on pupils' participation in Antwerp. In the exercise the group received a case from one of the piloting settings with some reflective questions. In a first phase, the group formulates a proposal for the piloting setting and they then measure it against the three GOTALK pillars (right side of the paper). Based on the analysis of their idea in terms of inclusion, sustainability and policy impact they try to improve their proposal.

Examples
and points of attention

Example 1: Communicate even the unthinkable

The paradox of participation is that even not participating can be a form of participation. Adults should not assume that participation is a goal and a value for all members of the group they are dealing with.

Participating means, first and foremost, communicating one's point of view. Does everyone have the same idea of participation? By working on creating a video message in which everyone shares thoughts, you can convey different points of view, even conflicting ones. This leaves a mark because everyone can see themselves represented and can seize the opportunity to listen to and be challenged by ideas different from their own. Using different languages in the same video makes it more inclusive and also more effective.

Example 2: Be consistent and take them seriously

Adults' ideas should not carry more weight than those of young people. Young people should be taken seriously and adults must be consistent, otherwise projects and processes lose credibility and their effectiveness is reduced, causing young people's motivation and trust in adults to decline.

When the group raises an uncomfortable question ("why are not all religious symbols displayed in the school, but only the crucifix?"), when young people ask to change rules and regulations ('we would like to be able to move around the school's common areas during break time, but the rules do not allow it'), when they simply express a wish ('we would like to conclude the project by eating a nice ice cream together'), it is essential to always take their requests seriously. If a yes is not possible, before proceeding further, it is necessary to suspend any activity and take all the time needed to consider the request, analysing the limits, costs and constraints with the children and trying to find answers and solutions together. And when, as in the case of ice cream, a yes is possible, it is extremely important not to disappoint expectations.

Examples
and points of attention

Example 3: Having the courage to talk to adults

Young people need to feel that adults consider them as real interlocutors and take their ideas and requests seriously. Dealing with the adult world can be difficult and cause fear and embarrassment, but when substantial listening and authentic dialogue are established, participatory processes become more effective and take on a deeper meaning.

When the group reaches a decision that involves using the school premises in a different way than usual, it is necessary to respect hierarchies and regulations and request a meeting with the Headteacher. In this case, it is important that the students themselves, and not the adults who support them, attend this meeting. The class will prepare, together with their representatives, an initial discussion to explore the possibility of action: through counterfactual thinking activities, they will explore possible perspectives and hypothesise questions and answers. After receiving the initial responses, the class can proceed with its planning, committing to sharing it again with the headteacher and the school, this time in a plenary session, so that everyone has the opportunity to experience the meeting and dialogue with the institution. This process requires great attention to the emotional aspect: even when the headteacher is a welcoming person who is good at listening, meeting an adult figure who holds an authoritative role can be experienced with concern or trepidation, especially if it is the first experience of this kind.

Example 4: A pact with peers

The participation of young people can leave a lasting impression when they manage to reach out to their peers and convey their goals, motivations and enthusiasm to them in a horizontal manner.

Respect more respect. This slogan brings to life the idea of a pact of shared responsibility and strongly emphasises how important it is for everyone to contribute to caring for the common good. Rules, rewards, punishments and coercion by adults are not enough; instead, young people need to get involved themselves and call on their peers to do the same. If the school bathrooms are dirty, worn out and vandalised, the first step is to carry out a careful inspection to understand what works and what does not. Even small signs of care can be a starting point to build on. Pictures and signs can be useful in encouraging everyone to respect the space. Once you have taken personal responsibility in this regard, it becomes easier, but also more consistent and legitimate, to knock on the door of adults and ask them to do their part too.

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN...

Make a list of decision making issues that have already been tackled through children participation in your context, then make a list of issues and decision types that you would consider appropriate for children's involvement.

Show the list to your colleagues and collect their feedback, then propose the revised list to the children whom you can directly access and get their feedback.

What are the differences between the adults' and the children's views? Do you identify prejudice or wrong expectations? At the end of this reflection please propose a priority list that, in your view, best corresponds to the possibility of a real impact on decision making.
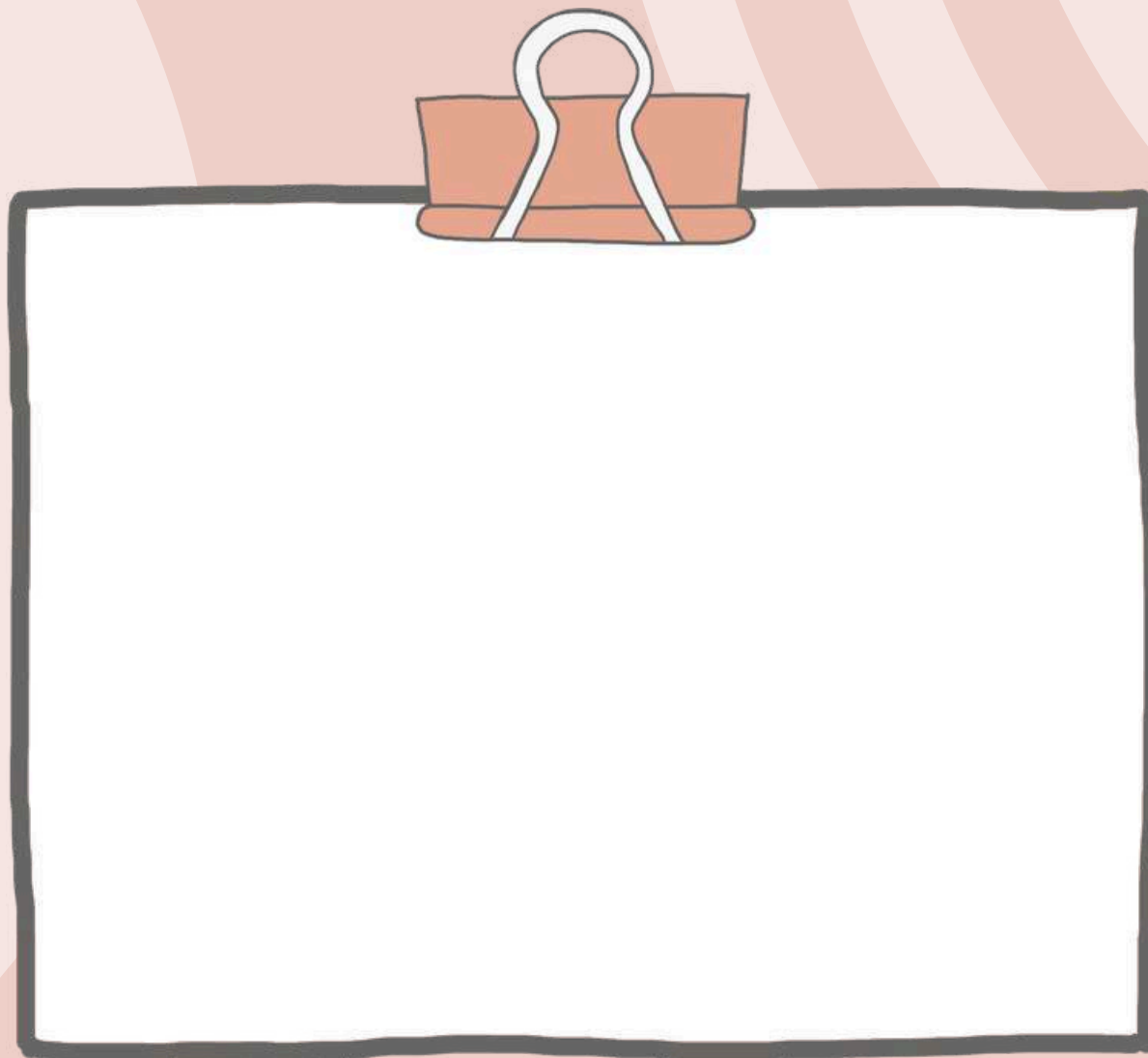
Some useful reflection questions emerged from pilot activities: How easy is it for schools to be transparent towards children about the complexity of decision making?
Do the teachers themselves have enough resources to take on the investigation of a complex topic? Do they dare to embark on investigating a research question with the pupils?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN...
use this space for your reflections

6. Conclusions and recommendations for mainstreaming

This final section of the Guidelines directly addresses the purpose of **mainstreaming the approaches, the tools and the lessons learnt** through the GOTALK project run in Antwerp and Reggio Emilia, with the aim of being useful to all those who are interested in young citizens' participation in decision making.

In the previous sections the general and specific challenges to make participation of children successful from all perspectives were explored and some suggestions were presented on how to reflect/act; here we will address the issue of how to spread our methodological reflections and lessons learnt among educators, researchers and policy makers, in order to multiply the project impact.

Innovative educators and school staff

The first and most important purpose of these guidelines is to address educators, teachers, school principals and other people who are directly engaged with children and want to make participation work. We strongly believe that a **bottom-up approach** allows us to spread innovation more effectively (if not more quickly) than a directive approach. These Guidelines were conceived as an instrument for mainstreaming the project experiences, tools and conclusions, primarily towards educators.

As already written above, GOTALK proved that no "one-size-fits-all" model exists, and that substantial adaptations were necessary when the cross-experimentation exercise was implemented between Antwerp and Reggio Emilia. The following suggestions are conceived to facilitate a critical adoption process of some of the approaches and instruments that were used in the pilot activities.

- **Common principles and different contexts: how to understand how participation will work in your context**

Being inspired by good practice is fine, but very often the contextual conditions differ very substantially and very seldom an experience can be totally reproduced in a different context. That is why a careful analysis is required and specific good practice elements have to be identified: some, of a more technical and methodological nature, may frequently be transported in other contexts, while some others, of a more relational, cultural and political nature affecting people's interaction, will probably require a more substantial adaptation (de-contextualisation followed by re-contextualisation). The granularity of good practice elements (GPE) allows a more promising adaptation than the attempt to reproduce the whole good practice.
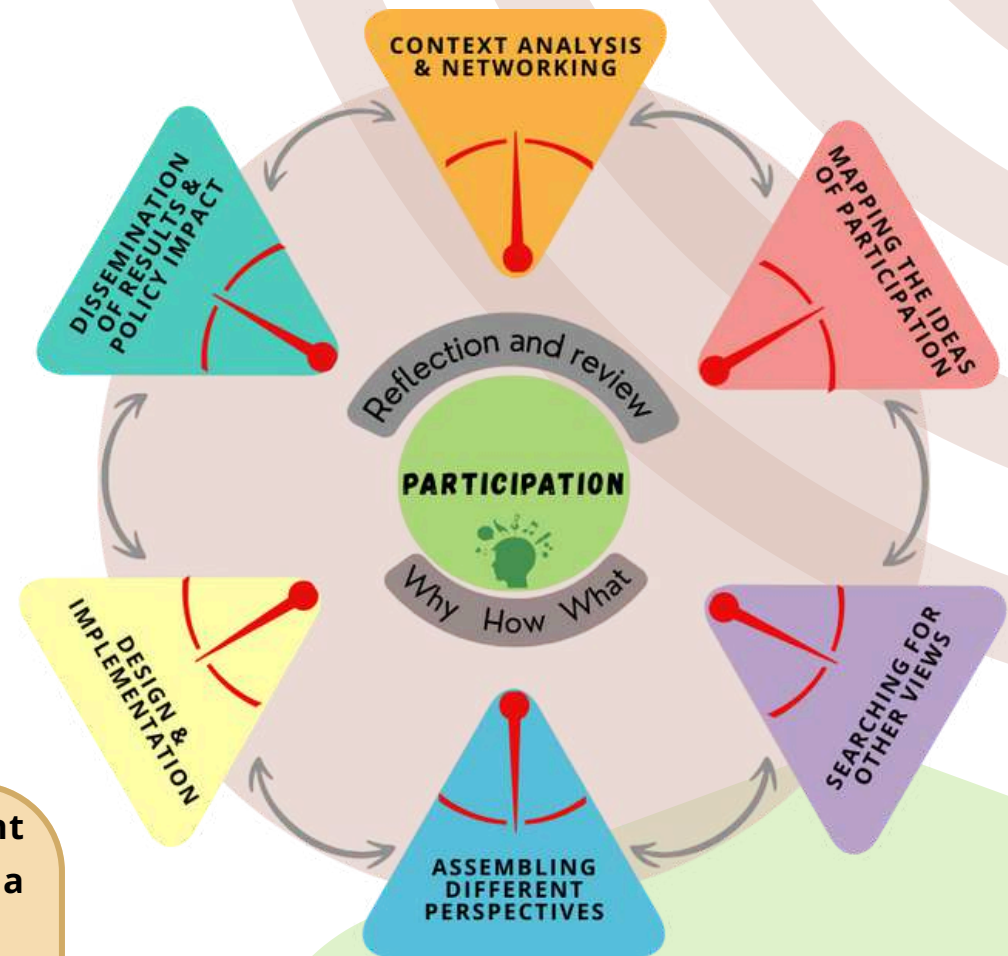
Innovative educators and school staff

- **Sharing good practice through school networks and civil society**

The importance of working in a community of practice cannot be overestimated: many people and organisations are working on children's participation and have experiential knowledge to share: the GOTALK project itself gathers a small community in two regions of Europe, but its relations with other school networks and civil society organisations are growing. Guaranteeing that the outputs and the lessons learned in the project are continuously shared with other school and educational communities is a priority for the GOTALK consortium.

- **Networking for methodological advancement and flexible implementation: GOTALK as a catalyst of research and innovation**

Some of the GOTALK reports are valuable research results and can feed the research community. To this purpose a synthesis of the reflections conducted at the end of the project is presented in a graphical form beside. A detailed explanation of each component of the graph is included in an annex to these guidelines.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS & NETWORKING

MAPPING THE IDEAS OF PARTICIPATION

DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS & POLICY IMPACT

Reflection and review

PARTICIPATION

Why How What

SEARCHING FOR OTHER VIEWS

DESIGN & IMPLEMENTATION

ASSEMBLING DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Research Community:
How to reach them and to promote new collaborative research

The GOTALK project started with some research questions and produced significant reflections related to the three challenges addressed. Most of the scientific results of the Project are obviously contained in the main reports on experimentations conducted in the two local contexts. **How can the research community be made aware of the project results and contribute to the scientific debate on children's participation in decision making?**

The final event conducted at the end of June 2025 was mainly directed to grassroot educators and European Education Networks involved in policy making, but a specific dissemination action directed to the research community might bring further light on the project open questions or, at least, enlarge the number of contributors, also making other studies available and preparing new collaborations. Furthermore, the International Stakeholders' Committee was partially composed of researchers who contributed to the project development through comments and suggestions, but also through linking GOTALK with their research and research/action communities.

One of the main conclusions of the project certainly deserves further efforts of knowledge gathering, since it revealed itself as one of the most important success factors (if not the most important) of children participation in decision making: adults' attitudes and availability to change decision making processes are key for the success of young citizens participation, awareness and direct involvement of virtuous process of listening, discussion, proposal formulation, collaborative search of new solutions with no (as little as possible) power relation feeling is key to make adults suitable to facilitate participatory decision making. Exploring adults' attitudes and behaviours towards children' participation is a research task that requires further investigation.

Research Community:
How to reach them and to promote new collaborative research

As previous research shows[10], there is a need for more knowledge about children's rights among adults. An interesting research question in this area could focus on the role of school leaders and policy makers in supporting their school teams in this regard. The GOTALK project shows that a culture of participation must be supported by the entire school organization, so supporting teachers from the school management is a good first step in this regard. In that support for teachers, not only tools for participative practices should be offered, but these should always be linked with a culture of participation that underlines the agency of children and the value of children's participation.

The right to participation is, in essence, a social and political right that assumes children are worthy and capable human beings. It also assumes that power relations are interwoven through human interactions. Throughout the GoTalk project, we regularly stated that real policy impact requires the willingness of adult gatekeepers, policymakers, and institutions to act upon the participation of children. This evokes the question of whether children should also be involved in the design of policies and research. After all, the decision of which question gets asked and which does not is imbued with power.

However, as was observed during this project, participatory work is often slow, and the processes of applying for research funds are frequently hurried and time-pressured. We aim to make a case for a more profound involvement of young people in all stages of research, particularly in the design of research project. Knowing the dangers of time pressures and their constraints on participation, this will not be easy.

[10]Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. British Educational Research Journal, 33(6), 927-942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Research Community:
How to reach them and to promote new collaborative research

Another research question that might be interesting to look at is one about the sustainability and feasibility of change trajectories in schools and other educational settings. These mainstreaming guidelines are built upon the idea that educational settings can change themselves and go through a profound changing process without the support of an external facilitator. During the GOTALK project, the team struggled with that idea. Research into change processes is not new[11] and they has been investigated in the contexts of schools as well[12], but more research is needed to enforce sustainability of change in participatory practices in schools. It might be very interesting to find out which conditions need to be fulfilled to realise sustainable and profound change in participation practices and beliefs in educational settings.

It is important to continue and extend research into the concrete implementations and meanings that the right to participation takes on from the perspective of the actors, otherwise it remains vague and empty. Age-appropriate approaches should be adopted throughout the process.

[11]Kirby, Perpetua; Lanyon, Claire; Cronin, Kathleen & Sinclair, Ruth (2003) Building a Culture of Participation: Involving children and young people in policy, service planning, delivery and evaluation.
[12]Brown, C., White, R., & Kelly, A. (2023). Teachers as educational change agents: What do we currently know? Findings from a systematic review. Emerald Open Research, 1(3).

Policy Makers:
How to reach them and to make them reflect
on what is missing in young citizens' participation

Participation at a young age has many benefits for the development of citizenship competencies: learning to listen to other people, learning to understand and advocate for other people's opinions, expressing oneself, transforming conflicts in peaceful ways, collaborating in taking principled decisions. Each of these benefits can be evoked through participation processes.

In general and rhetoric terms, many policy documents (notably the Child Strategy 2021, on which the CERV call for proposal was based) and public speaking insist on participation as the key of democratic citizenship education and propose to give it a broader role at all ages, but particularly within initial education. However, most recent policy guidelines on citizenship education cover many new subject areas (global citizenship and sustainability, digital citizenship and contrast to disinformation, intercultural education, respect of diversity, etc.) without insisting on the participatory processes that are not only allowing the expression of a right, but also allowing the development of a democratic culture for young people.

Very often the constraints are hidden in the institutional and hierarchic structure and decision-making procedures of the school system, which also partially explains the limited support of many teachers and school heads to "real" and relevant children's participation.

Policy Makers:
How to reach them and to make them reflect
on what is missing in young citizens' participation

A policy effort is required to implement the principle declarations that are currently very popular, at least at the EU level (we cannot hide that some national authorities are more favorable than others to participation in general, not to mention children's participation that may destabilise status quo power relations). One obvious path is institutionalising the participation of young citizens (YC) in the school decision-making bodies or through other more inclusive and innovative models. Institutionalisation of YC participation has many benefits, among which the certainty that participation will continue year after year, that it will not disappear according to the policy trends and, irrespective of the contingent views of decision makers of any level, it will have a basis of resources and places where to happen and some established rules.

However, if participation does not meet the YC expectations in terms of institutional attention and real impact, it may start to be seen as a boring exercise, a sort of "parking" in which young citizens are allowed to say what they want without disturbing the routine of institutional decision making. In order to avoid this, policy makers who believe in participation are encouraged to establish appropriate participatory mechanisms to set the agenda, to allow freedom of expression and to follow-up recommendations by the actual decision makers. This may avoid the decay of YC interest and of the overall credibility of institutionalised participation opportunities.

In order to provoke a substantial step forward in the policy awareness of what GOTALK discovered, **dedicated events may be organised**, maybe in concomitance with the publication of EU, UNESCO or OECD relevant policy documents, to stress the main conclusions and recommendations emerging from the GOTALK experience and reflections.
The point to be made clear is that young citizens' participation is not a gift or a favour, it is a right. Children's voices are key to policy feedback loops and help to disrupt traditional and generational power dynamics. Working with adults, reviewing invisible routines in the decision making process, remains a priority for practice, research and policy making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Annex:
The conclusions graph explained
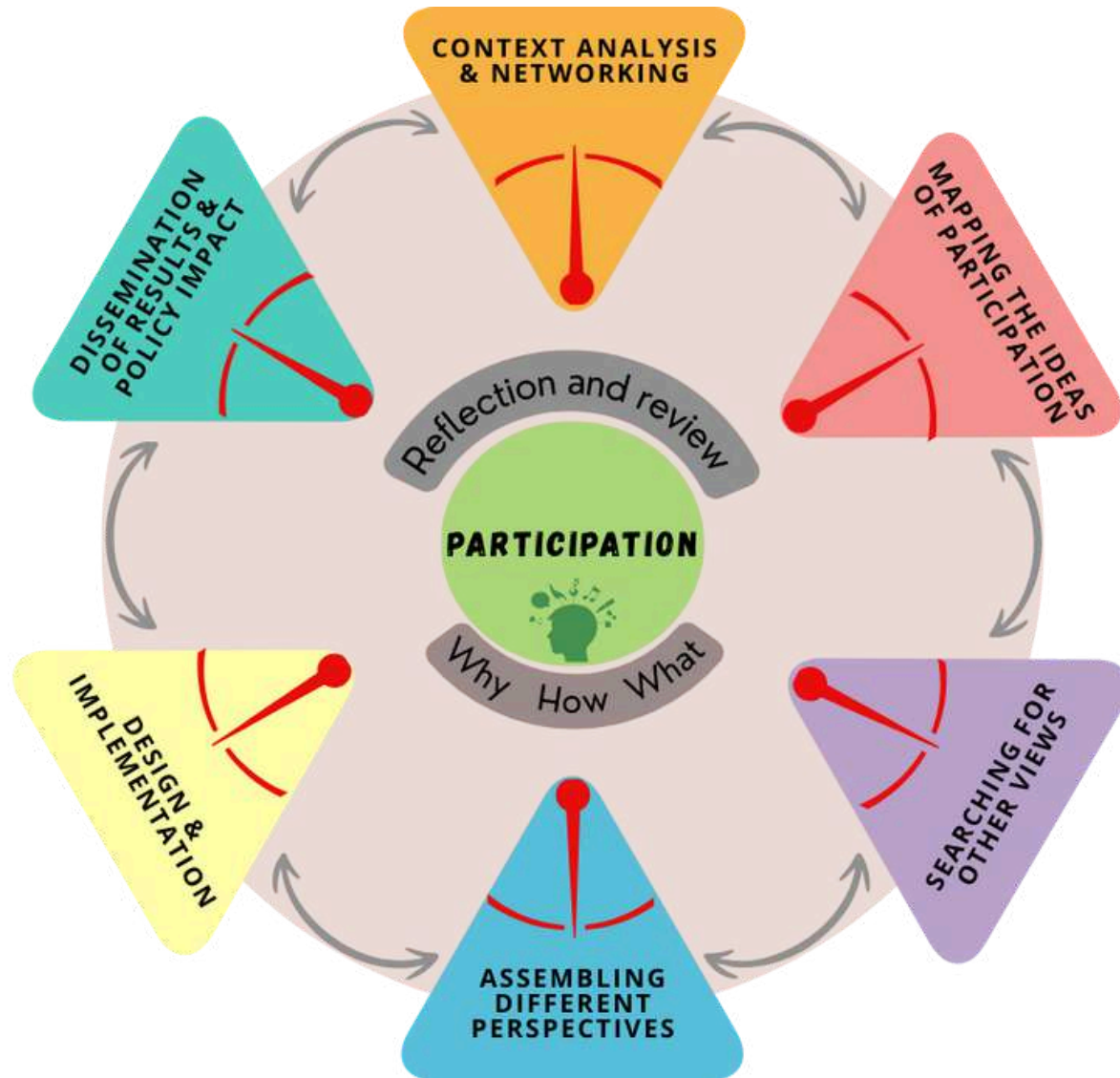
PARTICIPATION IS THE FOCUS, THE CENTRAL CORE OF YOUR ACTION:
- It is your objective
- It is both the premise and the tool from which to begin
- It is the process itself, which becomes concrete and active through its development

PARTICIPATION

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?**
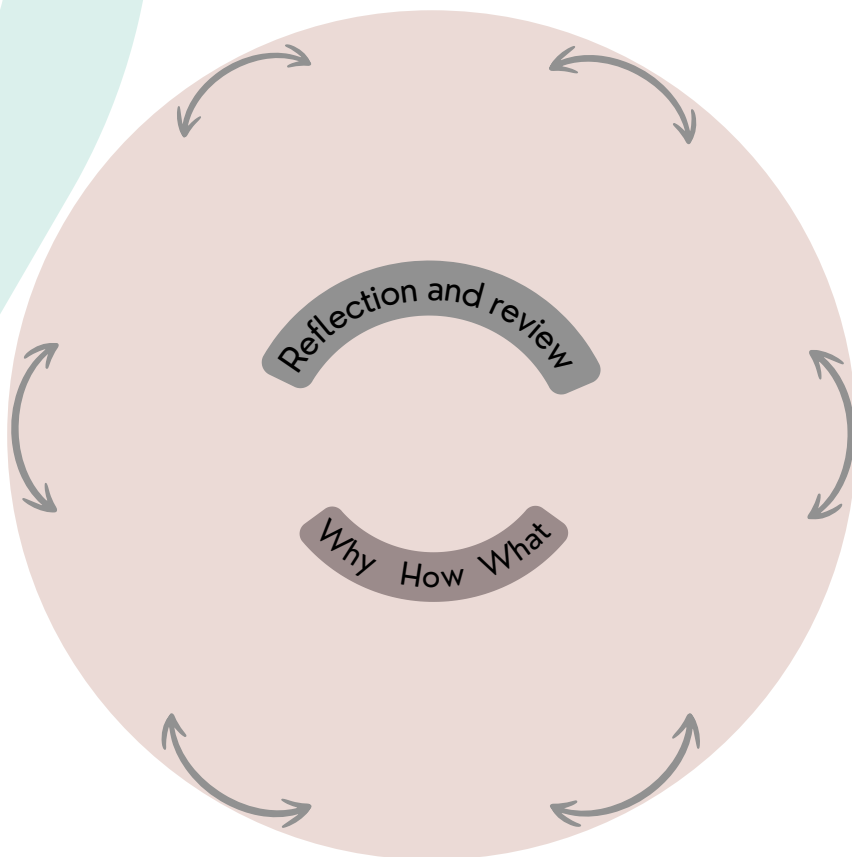
PARTICIPATION IS A CONTINUOUSLY MOVING PROCESS

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?