Participation as a mechanism to favour psychological empowerment and positive interaction: The "Ágora Infantil" participatory democracy programme

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Abstract

This investigation aims to show the relationship between participation and psychological empowerment and be- tween participation and interaction under an institutional political participation programme. This initiative known as Ágora Infantil (AI) is characterised by an obligatory draw- based deliberative participation methodology with super- ordinate goals based on group dynamics, with games playing a central role. The evaluation was carried out using a quasi-experimental design, with quantitative measure- ments of the experimental and control groups, along with systematic observation of the target group. The results support the hypotheses proposed: Participation in the AI programme led to an increase in psychological empower- ment and positive interactions between the participants. These results offer information as to what design should be used for these types of political initiatives to favour inclusion and empowerment of children, while at the same time improving classroom relationships.

KEYWORDS

Children, participation, participatory democracy, positive interaction, psychological empowerment

1   INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have considered the relationship between participation and empowerment and between participation and interaction (Israel, Checkoway, Schulz, & Zimmerman, 1994; Lyons, Smuts, & Stephens, 2001; Marta-Lazo, Valero-Errazu, & Gabelas-Barroso, 2018; Morgan, 2016; Putnam, 1993; Ramos-Vidal, Castro, & Palacio, 2016; B. J. Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992; Zoë & Mark, 2009) but very few have analysed these relationships in the context of institutional political participation. That is precisely the object of this study. More specifically, it aims to study the effects on these variables of involvement in a political participation programme carried out in classrooms known as "Ágora Infantil" (AI). AI is an experimental initiative with a methodology that aims to secure inclusion of all profiles of children in public decision-making processes.

It is one example of the very different experiences that have arisen in response to political disaffection (Cain, Dalton and Scarrow, 2003; Lerner, 2014; Norris, 2002; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). A common feature of these experiences is the recurrence to participation as a mechanism for involvement by citizens in public decision-making processes.

Upon a brief overview of the initiatives of this type carried out with children, two, in particular, stand out all over the world: the Youth and Children's Councils and Children's Parliaments (for more information on these experiences and their manner of functioning see George & Lee, 2013; Mármol & Serrano, 2014). These are representative mechanisms that allow governments to listen to the needs of the younger population. Their func-tioning is similar to the representative structures of adults: the children decide by vote on a subgroup of children that will represent them in public spaces. In a large number of cases, this body is strictly advisory. In other words, the executive team (consisting of adults) makes decisions after hearing the children's recommendations, either incorporating or not incorporating their contributions. However, there are also cases in which the children's recommendations are binding.

Another significant group of experiences is based around participation by invitation. This means that the children are invited to attend a meeting to resolve certain public issues. The children participate voluntarily and with the level of involvement, they wish, without any election mechanisms, or criteria of representativeness. In some cases, these bodies have advisory functions in relation to local policy. One example is the "Investing in Children" programme promoted in the UK by a multiagency partnership (Cairns & Brannen, 2005). This initiative focuses on creating groups of young people (reference groups) to study a specific need in greater depth. Once the youths are fully versed in the topic (e.g., public transport) they have a greater capacity to influence political decision -making processes. This allows them to engage in debate with political representatives (adults) on more equal terms. Another experience with major international impact consists of participatory budget processes involving children and youths. In these cases, the participants decide or propose (depending on whether the process is binding or advisory) how to invest part of their town's budget. Their manner of functioning varies considerably, although a number of these experiences are based on participation by invitation (for more information and analysis of these experiences, see Allegretti, Luz da Silva, & Freitas, 2012; Berreta, Turra, Ferrero, & Lasaga, 2005; Bloj, 2016; Observatorio Internacional de Democracia Participativa, 2010).

All these political initiatives search for ways to guarantee children's right to express their views in all matters that affect them. The resulting data points to positive results in both symbolic and educational terms increased knowledge of the functioning of public institutions, development of critical thought, greater influence in decision-making processes, and incorporation of children in public debate (Cairns & Brannen, 2005; Dekleva & Zorga, 2004; García-Leiva & Falck, 2018; Thomas, 2007).

However, these initiatives share a common limitation: The exclusion of children less capable of assimilating adult communication codes. Whether by way of representation or invitation, there is a process of selection or self-selection of the children participating (Tisdall, Kay, & Davis, 2004). Although unintentional, this thereby reproduces the symbolic capital of dominant groups (Young, 2000), ignoring groups traditionally excluded from public life such as children and women (Martínez-Palacios & Nicolas-Bach, 2016). As a result, particularly in the case of

representative experiences, children are required to behave like small adults and behaviour is imposed which is atypical of children, leading them to even end up proposing the messages expected by adult society (Hart, Pavlovic, & Zeidner, 2001).

To overcome these problems, the AI programme has opted to select various groups of children between the ages of 10 in 12 which are then randomly distributed in classrooms. As a result, each of the groups (the classes) include children of all the different profiles. This group of children must participate fully in the programme without any election of representatives; all the children are participants under the AI programme. The aim behind this is to psychologically empower the children regardless of their motivation and ability to participate in public life. Furthermore, the methodology consisting of games, cooperation, interdependence and superordinate goals as further explained below is designed to improve the interactions between the students in the classroom.

2 PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

2.1 Participation and empowerment

The first published definition of empowerment was formulated by Rappaport (1981), who defined it as the mechanism by which people, organisations and communities gain mastery over their lives, or handling of affairs and topics of interest to them, for which it is necessary to create conditions that facilitate that mastery. There is considerable debate regarding the relationship between participation and empowerment. One of the theses proposed is the so-called selection thesis, which maintains that higher levels of empowerment lead to a higher level of participation. This proposal is based on the idea that individuals avoid situations or environments with demands that exceed their capabilities (Bandura, 1989) and accordingly only subjects with a high level of empowerment get involved in participatory situations. On the contrary, according to the socialisation thesis, participation increases empowerment levels (Christens, Peterson, & Speer, 2011). In other words, the more participatory experiences a person has, the more empowerment they will have. Finally, various investigations have identified a bidirectional relationship in which participation increases empowerment, and at the same time empowerment generates greater participation (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Different studies have determined that this relationship is time-sensitive, that is, the longer the period of participation the higher the level of empowerment, which supports the importance of the socialisation process. In the investigation by Itzhaky and York (2000), subjects with more participatory experiences had significantly higher results in the empowerment measurements. Eleni and Charalambous (2017) also highlighted how children with constant exposure to participation and decision-making through games increased their empowerment, as well as establishing relationships with their equals and with adults in which everybody's opinion is important and respected. The current investigation focuses on this socialisation thesis, seeking to analyse how children increase their levels of psychological empowerment after participating in the AI programme.

2.2 Psychological empowerment

Empowerment is a complex theoretical construction that has been explained and studied from various viewpoints, with Zimmerman (1995), (2000) offering one of the most widely supported approaches and the one which will be adopted as a reference in this study. Zimmerman (2000) adopts a multilevel structure which requires comprehensive study to understand why certain organisational, political or economic aspects have a specific influence on the acquisition or on the contrary inhibition of the processes that generate empowerment (Zimmerman 1990).

From a psychosocial perspective it is important to analyse whether potentially empowering environments such as the AI programme have an influence on psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment has been defined as *a connection between a sense of personal competence, a desire for, and a willingness to take action in the public domain, having a negative correlation with alignment and a positive correlation with leadership* (Banda & Morales, 2015, p. 6). Taking this theoretical concept which operationalises psychological empowerment as our basis, a measurement tool is then required that is adapted to the context and the target population. Zimmerman (1995) proposed a "nomological network" of psychological empowerment to establish the indicators of its three components: intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural. According to this nomological network, the intrapersonal component refers to beliefs about our ability to exert influence over matters that affect us and perceived control and sociopolitical effectiveness (Peterson et al., 2006). The interactional component refers to the understanding people have about their sociopolitical context and its critical evaluation, decision-making and problem-solving skills, along with the democratic culture. According to Ricart, Bonetti, Artagaveytia, and col. (2006), democratic culture involves knowing how to listen and respect different viewpoints and develop collective positions based on individual differences. The behavioural component of PE refers to participation with the aim of influencing one's sociopolitical context. To measure PE, this investigation has developed an instrument applying this nomological network. It also takes into consideration the target population, the territory, the cultural characteristics and the historic moment in which the measurement is performed (Hombrados-Mendieta & Gómez-Jacinto, 2001), without forgetting the nature of the AI programme itself.

2.3 Participation and interaction

Leggett and Ford (2016) demonstrated how children involved in groups and interacting with their communities, learn to participate actively and establish rules of commitment that are necessary in their relationships with others, thereby generating links and cohesiveness for their own benefit and the group's benefit. Furthermore, children learn to offer ideas and acquire experiences via their interaction between equals in their own social spaces (Elsley, 2004) which is beneficial for them, for families, for communities and for the democracies in which they live (Lansdown, Jimerson, & Shahroozi, 2014).

In the same way, the Jigsaw technique has also generated positive results in relation to classroom participation and interaction. This consists of a collaborative learning technique focusing on group and interpersonal interdependence to achieve a goal which has been implemented in classrooms (Aronson, 2002). Under this model, students are assigned to mixed groups with which the student is closely linked so that each one of them can achieve the objectives proposed if and only if the others also achieve their objectives. This interdependence thereby fosters positive interactions between students, converting it into a strategy to facilitate mixed group work. This technique can foster classroom participation and social interaction from the early stages of life. According to this technique, the most effective outcomes are achieved by including teams which represent the diversity existing in the classroom, with systems to achieve one or various goals that allow distribution of success among all the members and equality of roles for all members. This effectiveness may be explained on the basis that they provide the opportunity to share and achieve a similar position with different members of the classroom in pursuit of strongly desired goals, favouring interchange of roles, and distribution of responsibilities.

Within this context, other collaborative experiences have found an improvement in the classroom environment, more positive interpersonal relationships within the group (Ballantine & Larres, 2007) and greater group cohesiveness. Under a balanced power distribution, everyone has the opportunity to reflect on their skills and knowledge. At the same time, the exercise of power is seen as a reflexive learning process, where the participants assume responsibility for their decisions and actions (Loizou & Charalambous, 2017).

The AI programme was developed taking these strategies into consideration. The children under the AI programme have to work in mixed small groups, the members of which are rotated to ensure that children assume

different roles and responsibilities. These small groups also work interdependently in pursuit of a superordinate goal: the political proposal of the class.

Based on these theoretical premises, this study analyses the effects of institutional political participation on psychological empowerment and intragroup interaction of children participating in the AI participatory democracy programme. The general hypothesis is that a participatory democracy programme structured in sessions based on group dynamics applied in classrooms with children aged between 10 and 12 allows an increase in psychological empowerment and enhances positive interactions. The specific hypotheses are

1. Psychological empowerment

    Hypothesis 1.1: *Following the AI programme, children participating in the sessions will have higher psychological empowerment levels*.

    Hypothesis 1.2: *The control group that has not participated in the programme will not show significant changes in psychological empowerment levels*.

2. Group interaction

    Hypothesis 2.1: *The experimental group will have more positive interactions upon completion of the intervention*.

    Hypothesis 2.2: *The experimental group will have less negative interactions upon completion of the intervention*.

3 METHOD

3.1 The Ágora Infantil programme

AI is an experimental political initiative at a local level in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia in southern Spain, which allows children's participation in public budget decisions as well as the design and execution of specific local policies. The participants are boys and girls aged between 10 and 12 who are in their last year of primary education. The main participants are (a) schools, which provide the spaces to develop the programme, (b) local councils, which promote the policy, choose the themes for the design of proposals and offer the resources necessary in accordance with the budget established, and (c) the students, who are the actors responsible for making the decisions and designing the proposals.

The programme involves a deliberative process whereby the participants collectively develop proposals during work sessions. From the start of the intervention, decisions are made and agreements are reached using games. In addition, the daily work is carried out collectively and when the class is divided into subgroups, these subgroups are interdependent.

AI is normally carried out in the classroom (approximately 25 students per class), with the exception of two sessions carried out in the town hall. The participants are the children of the classes selected and the persons responsible for the children are the team carrying out the intervention. These consist of a group of experts linked with the NGO responsible for designing and implementing the programme (Coglobal). They are all young women trained in the field of social and community intervention and deliberative political participation mechanisms.

The intervention is divided into seven sessions between 90 and 300 min. The design was proposed by Coglobal in accordance with the objectives of the programme and its execution cost. The duration of the sessions and their frequency, normally every 15 days, is negotiated with the schools, adapting it to the school syllabus. Sessions taking place in the town hall are also planned with the local council.

The sessions are divided into (a) presentation of the programme to students by the AI team, subsequent development of the guidelines for participation in the group and agreement regarding its functioning, agreed jointly by all parties; (b) establishment of small mixed work groups to prepare questions regarding political management of their town. Questions are also prepared regarding financial and resource restrictions for potential proposals, thereby giving them a better idea of the concept of technical viability. All this is done with

the idea of simulating a press conference in the following session, with the students being the journalists interviewing the government, learning about the proposals and resolving their queries; (c) the children go to the town hall to perform a role-play of the press conference, allowing them to learn more about the proposed actions and general queries relating to local government; (d) based on the work in the previous sessions, the students develop interdependent proposals aimed at planning and execution of activities based around a theme agreed with the local council, eventually developing a final proposal between all parties in the manner of a puzzle. In the participating schools, the proposals focused on: creation of a municipal social club for children, leisure-sports activities in summer, design of children's playgrounds and leisure activities; (e) during this session, a representative of the local council meets the students to present the viability of each of the proposals depending on the economic budget and the human and technological resources necessary for their execution; (f) the students deliberate and choose from among the viable proposals the ones that will be presented at the meeting of the local council; (g) finally, the proposals are presented at the meeting of the local council approving the proposals chosen and subsequently starting them up. The main methodological features of AI are as follows: deliberation, clear and previously-agreed rules, matters for debate agreed with the local government (accordingly, adapted to the needs of each territory), and binding decision-making.

3.2   Evaluation

The evaluation was carried out using a quasi-experimental design, with the dependent variables being psychological empowerment and interaction; the independent variable is participation in the AI programme. For each school, an experimental group was selected as well as another control group, both with similar characteristics in terms of gender, age, school year, school and locality. This design includes quantitative measures (pre and postintervention) in both the experimental and control groups. Qualitative measures are also adopted, solely in the case of the experimental group, via the recording of systematic observations. Before the systematic observation, it is necessary to construct a sociogram to identify the profiles. A sample of six students was selected: two with leader profiles, two with isolation/exclusion profiles and two with an average profile, aiming to choose the same number of boys as girls.

3.3   Participants

The programme involved participation by 273 boys and girls in total from six schools in two Andalusian provinces, Malaga and Córdoba, in their 5th and 6th years of primary school.

The experimental group was made up of 143 students, 45.6% of whom were from the province of Malaga. The remaining 54.4% were from schools in the municipality of Puente Genil (Córdoba). The age of the participants ranged between 10 and 12 years (M = 10.39; SD = 0.62). 53.6% of the participants were boys and 46.4% were girls.

The control group was made up of 130 students, 55% of whom were from the province of Malaga and 44.6% from the municipality of Puente Genil (Córdoba). The age of the participants ranged between 10 and 12 years (M = 10.18 and SD = 0.78). 57.69% were boys and 42.30% were girls.

3.4   Instruments

Some of the instruments used were developed by the authors and others were previously used by other authors. In the case of PE, in accordance with the nomological network outlined in the introduction, a questionnaire has been constructed. This is complemented in the case of the interactional component of empowerment with systematic observation. For the interaction variable, the approach adopted relies solely on

systematic observation, based partly on the categorisation system in the study and partly on another investigation as indicated below.

To facilitate its reading grouping is performed by variables, with some being measured using more than one instrument.

3.4.1 Psychological empowerment

Intrapersonal empowerment
This component is evaluated strictly via a questionnaire using three independent items developed by the authors: (a) Your opinion counts in your town; (b) boys and girls can influence the decisions made by the mayor and the councillors; and (c) boys and girls can change things they don't like about their town. The format for replies to these items was a Likert scale, where one 1 = strongly disagree and 8 = strongly agree.

Behavioural empowerment
This refers to the intention of future behaviour and is measured using a single item taken from the youth participation survey prepared by the Canadian Mental Health Association (2003): If your local council asked children to participate in the decisions regarding activities for children and youths in your town, would you participate? The answers were dichotomous (Yes or No).

Interactional empowerment
The part measured using the questionnaire refers to institutional political knowledge, consisting of independent questions drafted by the authors with categorical answers which are subsequently categorised as correct and incorrect:

(a) Management of funds by the local council. The possible answers are
   – The funds that the local council has are for all the residents of the town (Correct).
   – The funds that the local council has are for the politicians of my town (Incorrect).
   – The funds that the local council has are for the President of the Andalusian Autonomous Government (Incorrect).
(b) What is the town hall; the participant must choose one of the following options:
   – The town hall is the place where the mayor of my town lives (Incorrect)
   – The town hall is the place where the councillors of my town meet and work (Correct)
   – The town hall is the place where the President of the Andalusian Autonomous Government works (Incorrect).
(c) What is the name of the Mayor of your town? Write the name and surname (it is considered correct when they write the name and surname correctly, or at least one of the two is correct. It is considered incorrect if it is left blank, or if the name or surname is written incorrectly).

Systematic observation: This is an observation grid with mutually exclusive coding categories designed for the study. Democratic culture. This consists of all behaviour related with knowing how to listen to the opinions of others and decision-making. The codes are respect for the interventions of others (RD), he/she is respected by others in his/her interventions (ER), enhancing decision-making (FTS). The last code is inhibiting decision-making (DTD), which is when the student observed does not facilitate decision-making by the group.

Deliberation: this refers to all the mechanisms used in the debate to defend the proposals and convince others, the indicators of which are arguments (AR), use of social justice criteria (JS), preference-based communication (CPR), and mediation (MD). Table 1 explains each of the codes and their respective indicators.

TABLE 1 Categories of analysis of systematic observation for interactional empowerment and interaction

Category	Subcategory	Indicators
Interactional empowerment	Democratic culture: This consists of all behaviour related with knowing how to listen to the opinions of others and decision-making.	- Respect for the interventions of others (RD), which refers to when the student observed listens to the interventions of others and does not make negative comments about their proposals. - He/she is respected by others in his/her interventions (ER): when the target student intervenes others listen and no negative comments are received regarding his/her proposals. - Enhancing decision-making (FTS): this refers to proposals aimed at enhancing agreement and decision-making by the target student. - Inhibiting decision-making (DTD), which is when the student observed does not facilitate decision-making by the group.
	Deliberation: This refers to all the mechanisms used in the debate to defend the proposals and convince others.	- Arguments (AR), when the target student uses arguments to explain his/her positions or those of others. - Use of social justice criteria (JS): the student observed defends groups with specific needs, and may also defend the social majority as an argument in favour of the common good. - Preference-based communication (CPR): when the defence of the views of the target student is based exclusively on criteria of own preferences, tastes and interests. - Mediation (MD): interventions which facilitate dialogue and ease tension between opposing views.
Interaction	Positive interaction: This includes all behaviour that contributes towards adequate relations with classmates or the teacher at the student's own initiative or as a response to interaction.	- Interacts with classmates (IC), which refers to when the student initiates or maintains a direct interaction with a classmate. - Interaction by classmates with the target student. (ICO): this is when classmates initiate or maintain a direct interaction with the target student.

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Category	Subcategory	Indicators
	Negative interaction: This includes inappropriate behaviour by the student towards his/her counterparts and by classmates towards him/her.	- Student participation (PA): this is established when the student seeks interaction with the facilitator to contribute something to the task. - Responds to the facilitator (RD): the student seeks direct personal interaction from the facilitator with that student. - Aggression towards another (AT), which occurs when the student being observed physically or verbally abuses one or various of his/her classmates. - Aggression by a classmate towards the target student (ACO): a classmate or various classmates physically or verbally abuse the target student. - Inappropriate behaviour by the target student (CI): this refers to abnormal behaviour not related with the activity or which may lead to a disruption of the dynamics.

3.4.2 Interaction

Interaction was studied via systematic observation, relying on a system of categories previously designed and validated by Pedrosa, Borges, Herranz, Lorenzo Alegría, and García-Cueto (2013). The categories of analysed were positive interaction and negative interaction (Table 1).

3.5 Procedure

Approximately a week before beginning the intervention, the profiles were compiled for observation via the sociogram in the target group. To do so, the research team sent the instrument to schools and the teachers gathered the data and subsequently sent it to the research team.

On Day 1 of the intervention, before explaining the programme the prequestionnaire was issued to the experimental group and the control group, which was completed individually and voluntarily.

Throughout the intervention, the systematic observation was carried out via two observers with previous training. The analysis unit was the person and frequency was the measurement unit. A sample of six students was selected: two with leader profiles, two with isolation/exclusion profiles and two with an average profile, aiming to choose the same number of boys as girls.

The observers are two postgraduate students with experience in social and community intervention from the University of Malaga, who are previously trained and familiar with the recording system and the AI programme. There were always two observers in each session. The interobserver reliability calculated applying kappa Cohen's coefficient, exceeding 90%, meaning that the reliability of the information gathered is high.

Sessions 3 and 7, during which the students visited the town hall, were not recorded. Accordingly, during the five remaining sessions, observations were made of interactions and dialogue, needs analysis, construction of proposals, and decision-making. Subsequently, the analysis was performed and the results of the first and last session observed were compared.

Finally, on the last day of the intervention, the after questionnaire was issued to both the target group and the control group.

4   RESULTS

The results obtained are set out in accordance with the order of the hypotheses proposed. For the Likert variables, an analysis of variance repeated measures analysis has been used, while a McNemar and χ^2 analysis has been used for the categorical variables. In the case of systematic observation, a Friedman test has been applied.

4.1   Empowerment

4.1.1   Intrapersonal empowerment

The results reflect the significant effects of participation under the AI programme: Your opinion counts $F(1, 228) = 23.689$; $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .095$; you can influence politics $F(1, 237) = 5.596$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .023$ and you can change things in your town $F(1, 235) = 15.604$; $p < .01$; $\eta^2 = .063$.

Figure 1 shows the changes in the averages of both the experimental group and the control group. Before the intervention, the measurements of the two groups were similar for the items: your opinion counts and you can influence politics, and somewhat higher for the control group in the case of: You can change things in your town.

Your opinion counts

	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental group	3,524 (SD= 2,223)	4,434 (SD= 2,429)
Control group	3,764 (SD= 2,505)	2,896 (SD= 1,886)

You can influence politics

	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental group	3,024 (SD= 2,228)	3,709 (SD= 2,448)
Control group	3,123 (SD= 2,532)	2,911 (SD= 2,254)

You can change things in your town

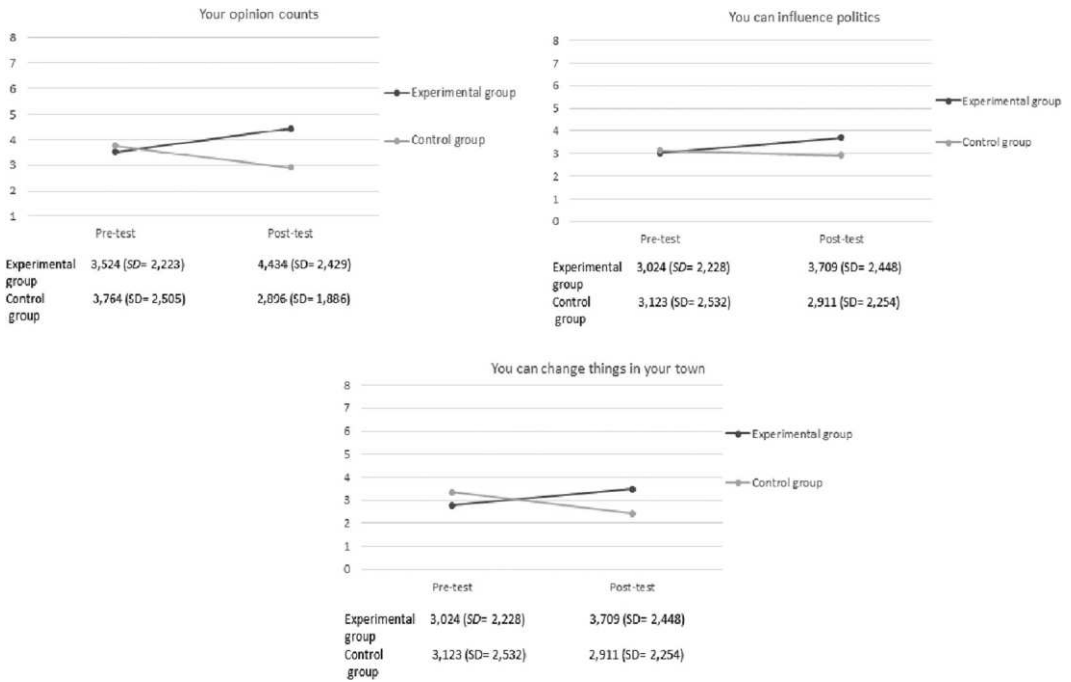|	Pre-test	Post-test
Experimental group	3,024 (SD= 2,228)	3,709 (SD= 2,448)
Control group	3,123 (SD= 2,532)	2,911 (SD= 2,254)

FIGURE 1   Averages and typical deviations of the effect of interaction time*group in the intrapersonal empowerment variable (scale from 1 to 8)

However in the posttest results, as was expected, the averages of the target group were higher than at the beginning and higher than the control group for all the items of intrapersonal empowerment.

4.1.2   Interactional and behavioural empowerment

Upon performing the McNemar test of behavioural interactional empowerment for participants of the control group, no significant differences were found in the results obtained in the two moments of the pre and post-measurements behavioural empowerment: $p = .472$. Interactional empowerment: management of funds $p = .081$ and meeting place $p = .177$; the name of the mayor $p = .110$. On the contrary, in the target group, there were significant differences both pretest and posttest always pointing in the expected direction as can be seen in Figure 2: in the posttest the averages were higher, indicating a positive change in the students following the intervention.
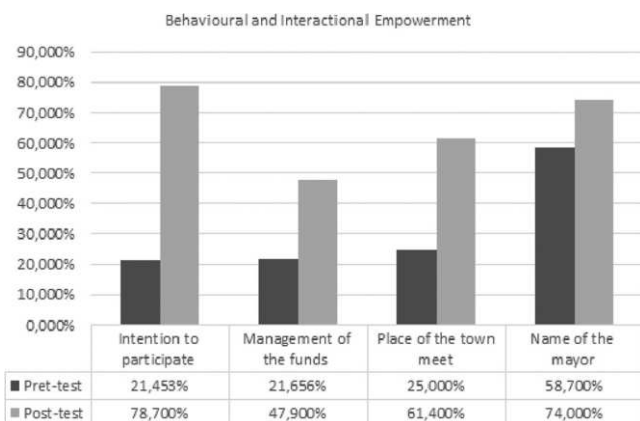
Behavioural and Interactional Empowerment

	Intention to participate	Management of the funds	Place of the town meet	Name of the mayor
Pret-test	21,453%	21,656%	25,000%	58,700%
Post-test	78,700%	47,900%	61,400%	74,000%

FIGURE 2   Descriptive statistics for experimental group pre- post test ($p < .01$)

Systematic observation in the components of interactional empowerment: Democratic culture and deliberation
As can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 3, with regard to the democratic culture there were statistically significant differences for all the items: with regard to the intervention of others (RD), being respected by others in his/her interventions (ER), enhancing decision-making (FTD) and inhibiting decision-making (DTD). In the case of the indicators RD, ER, and FTD, generally speaking, the averages increased during the course of the programme, while in the case of the DTD indicator they decreased. We can conclude from this that as the intervention advances, the conduct of improving democratic culture is enhanced (Figure 3).

As regards the deliberation processes, there were significant changes in the case of the following indicators: arguments (AR), social justice (JS), and mediation (MD). The averages gradually increased from one session to the next, except in the case of preference-based communication (CPR), which was not statistically significant and had very low and similar averages in the two sessions. This result suggests that during the course of the AI programme the defence of views based exclusively on criteria of personal preference, although stable, was very rare (Table 2).

TABLE 2 Friedman Test for comparison between session 1 and session 5 in the components of democratic culture and deliberation

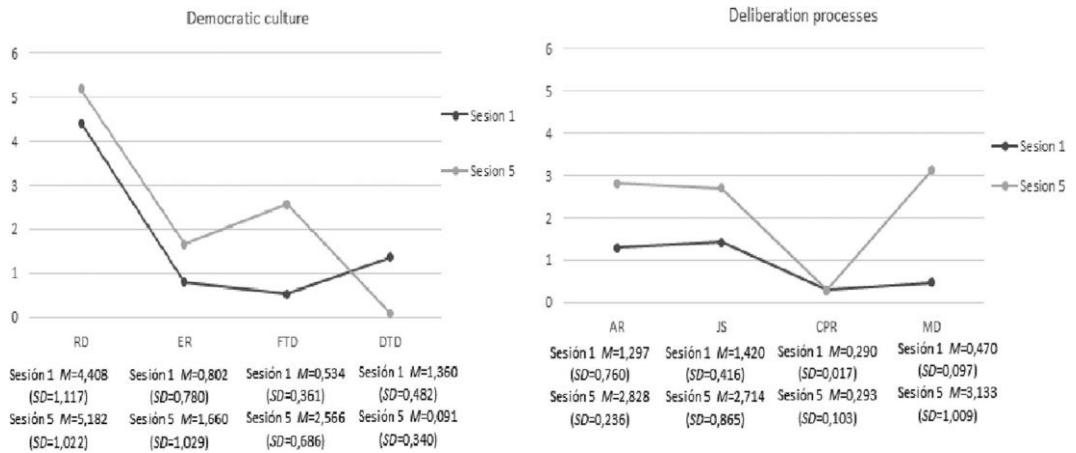|	Items	Statistic	Kendall's W
Democratic culture	RD	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 28.993; p < .01$	.006
	ER	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 11.109; p < .01$	.002
	FTD	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 16.915; p < .01$	.010
	DTD	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 9.109; p < .01$	.009
Deliberation	AR	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 28.012; p < .01$	.013
	JS	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 97.588; p < .05$	.091
	CPR	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 4.667; p = .117$	.340
	MD	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 79.157; p < .01$	.010

FIGURE 3 Descriptive statistics for comparison between session 1 and session 5 in democratic culture and deliberation

4.2 │ Interaction

As can be seen in Table 3 and Figure 4, the changes point in the expected direction and the trend is towards an increase in the averages from one session to the next, showing a greater positive interaction by the participants as the intervention progresses. In terms of the negative interaction during the course of the sessions there is a decrease in the averages, indicating that the aggression towards other classmates and inappropriate behaviour of the students observed decreased. On the contrary, the indicator aggression by a classmate towards the target student (ACO) did not have any statistically significant differences during the course of the intervention. According to the results, the averages were very low and there was very little variation, suggesting that there were very few

TABLE 3 Friedman Test for comparison between session 1 and session 5 in positive interaction and negative interaction

	Items	Statistical	Kendall's W
Positive interaction	IC	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 63.47; p < .01$	.301
	ICO	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 82.50; p < .01$	.290
	PA	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 53.23; p < .01$	.294
	RD	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 107.52; p < .01$	.075
Negative interaction	AT	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 8.247; p < .05$	.047
	CI	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 6.709; p < .01$	.110
	ACO	$x^2(4, N = 45) = 0.619; p = .155$	.288

aggressions against the target students observed during the course of the intervention and they did not increase or decrease (Figure 4).
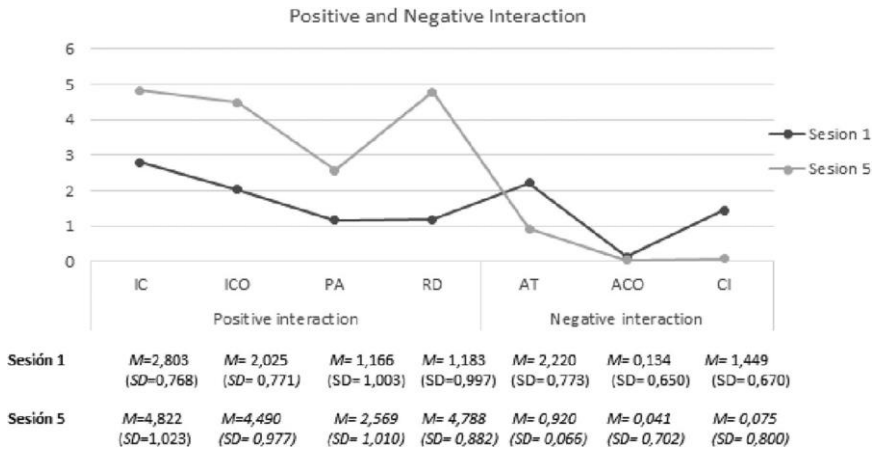

Positive and Negative Interaction

	IC	ICO	PA	RD	AT	ACO	CI
	Positive interaction				Negative interaction		
Sesión 1	M=2,803 (SD=0,768)	M= 2,025 (SD= 0,771)	M= 1,166 (SD= 1,003)	M= 1,183 (SD=0,997)	M= 2,220 (SD=0,773)	M= 0,134 (SD=0,650)	M= 1,449 (SD=0,670)
Sesión 5	M=4,822 (SD=1,023)	M=4,490 (SD= 0,977)	M= 2,569 (SD= 1,010)	M= 4,788 (SD= 0,882)	M= 0,920 (SD=0,066)	M= 0,041 (SD= 0,702)	M= 0,075 (SD= 0,800)

FIGURE 4   Comparison between session 1 session 5 for positive and negative interaction

5   DISCUSSION

The results support the hypotheses proposed: participation under the AI programme improves the psycholo- gical empowerment of children and favours positive interactions while at the same time reducing negative interactions. These results support the socialisation thesis proposed by Christens et al. (2011) regarding PE. They are also in line with the results of studies where the proposals are developed by equal participants via superordinate goals and cooperative learning (Aronson, 2002; Elsley, 2004; Ballantine and Larres, 2007). The results demonstrate that children participating in the AI programme increased their perception of capacity to influence local policies, improved their knowledge regarding the local council and increased their intention of participating. Similarly, they fostered their democratic culture as they learned to respect others during debates and take collective decisions. They advanced in terms of their deliberative capacity and enhanced their argumentation skills when propounding their views. They analysed the proposals based on criteria of social justice which go beyond their personal interests and implemented mediation strategies to resolve opposing positions. These results support the dynamic view of PE, not as a feature but rather a dimension which is generated and grows depending on the empowering processes experienced (Zimmerman, 1990; 2000). This series of learning experiences undoubtedly fosters children's capacity to participate in public decision-making processes.

According to the data, AI may be proposed as a suitable tool for the implementation of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), considered as the embodiment of all children's civil and political rights (Marshall, Byrne, & Lundy, 2015). Article 12 provides that States Parties shall assure children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, with the views of the child being given due weight. As indicated in the introduction above, other political initiatives (Youth and Children's Councils, Children's Parliaments, Participatory Budgets, and Investing in Children) have also attempted to apply this provision, with some of them seeking in parallel to combat political disaffection. As has been indicated, these methodologies show very positive data regarding various aspects such as knowledge of institutional functioning and incorporation of children in public debate. However, their capacity for inclusion has been limited. Their strategies of participation by invitation or participation via representation processes exclude the majority of children. This limitation is one of the central aspects that AI seeks to resolve. Accordingly, it proposes a strategy which allows empowerment even of children who do not tend to participate at all. These children, whether due to their sociodemographic profile, skills and abilities, life experiences or all of the above, are not always incorporated in participatory dynamics. In light of this obstacle, AI proposes obligatory participation in groups chosen at random, achieving significant results. At this stage, it is important to highlight that together with the global qualitative changes of all the members of the group (regardless of their characteristics) changes were observed in the interactional empowerment of isolated children and children with average popularity indices.

Another of the aspects of the design that should be addressed is the effort to minimise power dynamics between adults and children (Horgan, 2017; Percy-Smith, 2005). The first measure taken to this end is the selection of a team to perform the intervention and the investigation specialising in the area and not associated with the school. The aim is to avoid the weight of authority of the school itself detected by other researchers in participatory budget experiences (Allegretti et al. 2012). Together with the qualifications and specialisation of the team, the profile of the parties interacting with the children is controlled. All of them are young women with expertise in group dynamics with children. Third, the methodology is based on dynamic games with a familiar language for children, where they always have a numerical majority compared to the number of adults in the room. The intention is to construct the political proposals applying their own communication styles, creating the entire participation process based on their symbolic capital and not that of the adult world (Young, 2000). This element represents a clear difference compared to representative experiences (Youth and Children's Councils and Children's Parlia- ments) and invitation-based experiences (Investing in Children), which emulate adult codes and behaviour. AI seeks to provide a space for the voice of the children themselves, from their viewpoint and based on their own experiences.

Another dimension that undoubtedly defines AI is its binding character. There is extensive literature indicating their participation is not necessarily a means of influence, nor a question of being included (Percy-Smith, 2006) and that an invitation to have an opinion is not the same as deciding. Many criticisms have been raised of processes in which children are present but the decisions are taken in another place where they do not have access (Matthews, 2003). In the case of AI this is deemed to be a necessary feature, thereby ensuring children's decision-making power while at the same time making them responsible for their actions and their power to influence (Apud, 2003; Cussiánovich, 2009). Studies now considered to be seminal have related this capacity to make decisions with the capacity of empowerment (Maton & Salem, 1995; McMillan and Chavis, 1986). In the case of representative and invitation-based experiences, it is possible to find examples of both binding and advisory initiatives.

Related with all of the above and in particular, the link is the need for information and clear and transparent rules (García-Leiva, Falck, 2018). An ability to make decisions no matter how binding they are without sufficient information does not enhance democratic quality. Accordingly, the AI team began the intervention (session 1) by developing the general framework of the programme, while at the same time agreeing on the manner of functioning with the children. The information for the decision-making process is acquired by the participants during the course of the sessions through the questions posed to the local government team (session 2) and the interaction between the two groups. Similarly, the team organising the intervention informs and reminds the participants of the rules during the course of the entire process. This aspect has been identified as a weakness present in practically all processes involving children, whether due to the complexity of the rules and the formal vocabulary used to explain them or their extreme simplification (García-Leiva & Falck, 2018).

The last of the characteristics to be highlighted relating to AI is the work in small groups to achieve a superordinate goal. This strategy has been widely used in relation to cooperative learning and intervention in classrooms to reduce prejudices and negative interaction between groups of different ethnic origin, nationality or academic characteristics (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Sherif, 1966; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). However, its application in institutional political participation initiatives is uncommon, with participatory budgets most frequently relying on this type of strategy. The positive results of AI could set up a virtuous circle of participation, given that a participatory environment which contributes to an increase in positive interactions fosters favourable social relationships over time (Carron & Brawley, 2000).

As a general conclusion, we suggest that the combination used in the AI design (obligatory draw-based participation, a battery of techniques to control power dynamics, linking and small groups working interdependently to achieve a goal) is the project's strength and the reason behind the results found. As regards the investigation, an aspect to be highlighted is the construction of an instrument to measure PE, given that a single universal and comprehensive measurement of empowerment cannot be developed (Zimmerman, 1995). Similarly, the design and methodological combination proposed may be a useful reference in a panorama of frequent participatory democracy innovations (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017) which require rigorous evaluations to estimate their effects.

While the results obtained are backed up by the type of design used, which enhances the internal and external validity of the results as we have indicated, certain aspects have been identified which could be improved. First, the study needs to be replicated in other schools with similar characteristics to estimate the scope of the generalisation of the results. Secondly, although the interobserver reliability measured using the kappa index is high, it would be interesting to carry out systematic observation of the control group as well and using a double-blind design. Finally, it would also be interesting to continue working on the instrument and achieve its validation. All of the above measures should take into account the specific nature of empowerment measurements and their dependence upon the population, territory and cultural characteristics (Hombrados-Mendieta & Gómez-Jacinto, 2001).

In future investigations it will be necessary to measure the continuity over time of the empowering effects and positive interactions, meaning that longitudinal analysis will be necessary. A second element that needs to be considered in future interventions is the need to scale the experience. AI is an experimental programme that has allowed testing of the methodology, however, its large-scale implementation requires adaptations. Promoting political participation in the educational ambit (Lansdown et al. 2014) offers the potential for inclusion, imposition as an obligatory measure and generalisation. However, it is necessary to work on the mechanisms that regulate the power of the institution itself over children. To do so, AI proposes a specialised external team. This ensures a high degree of technical quality, although it excludes stakeholders in the educational community and diffuses the participation by children. Overcoming this limitation requires future methodological innovations that will need to be put into practice and evaluated.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight the importance of continuing to work on these types of policies that allow recognition of children's rights and the central role of children in society (Estrada, Madrid, & Gil, 2000; Gallego-Henao, 2015). Seemingly, the construction of a permanent democracy (Fuster-Morell and Subirats, 2012) cannot begin upon reaching adulthood. Democratic skills and knowledge do not arise spontaneously and the socialisation to develop its skills, values, actions, and reflections must necessarily begin at an early age.

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