# Longitudinal Study of the Psychosocial Effects of Political Participation by Children: the 'Ágora Infantil' Programme

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## Abstract

The objective of this paper is to evaluate the effect of participation-based democratic innovations on psychological empowerment and group identification of children. To do so, it analyses the impact on the participants of a participatory democracy programme for groups of schoolchildren, 'Ágora Infantil' (AI). Evaluation is performed via a longitudinal study carried out over two years, with pre and post quantitative measurements of the target and control group. The sample consisted of 182 boys and girls. The data were gathered via a questionnaire made up of items prepared by a group of experts for the current study based on Zimmerman's empowerment theory (*American Journal of Community Psychology, 23*(5), 581–599, 1995, 2000). Items were also taken from other authors, for example affective links, which were used as an indicator to measure group identification (Gaviria et al. *International Journal of Social Psychology, 30*(3), 531–562, 2015). The results show that institutional political participation generates positive changes in the participants. More specifically, the children improved in the two components of psychological empowerment (intrapersonal and interactional), with an intensification of relationship links with the group (the class). These findings demonstrate the political and psychosocial importance of these participatory innovations being introduced and their medium-term effects.

**Keywords** Empowerment · Group identification · Political participation by children

Democratic innovations have captured the attention of social scientists in recent decades, yet the different studies carried out have not addressed the psychological effects on the participants in these studies. This paper aims to contribute information

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in this regard via a longitudinal study of schoolchildren participating in the participatory democracy programme *Ágora Infantil* (AI). AI is a programme developed within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC provides that children are entitled to express their views and to have mechanisms which allow them to communicate their needs as citizens (MacNaughton, 2003). This international agreement has led to the proliferation of different democratic innovations such as children's councils, forums, participatory budgets and mini-publics. These initiatives seek to incorporate citizens in public decision-making (Smith, 2009) and have been widely studied from the viewpoint of their contribution to the democratic system (Beauvais & Warren, 2019). However, the empirical literature does not consider the psychological effects on children of their participation in democratic innovations. Accordingly, this study has developed a measurement instrument applying the theoretical constructs of citizen participation which have generated the most positive outcomes: psychological empowerment (PE) and group identification. Like all mini-publics, AI involves random features and deliberation mechanisms. Another distinctive feature is its binding character. Specific procedures have also been developed to overcome some of the limitations identified in participatory processes with children, such as child–adult power relationships and the lack of representativeness of the participants (Horgan, 2017). It is expected that a participation initiative promoted institutionally and with the characteristics outlined above will have a favourable effect on the psychosocial variables indicated.

## 1  Ágora Infantil (AI): Justification of use of a Participatory Democracy Programme for Children in a School Setting

AI is a deliberative space that allows children to decide how to make public policies through debate, collective reflection and binding decision-making. As a result, children's opinions are incorporated in the decisions of local councils, enhancing their influence and converting them into political actors. The need to initiate these types of experiences at an early age is supported by the literature, which identifies a relationship between brain development and social interaction and highlights that thought processes enabling cognitive flexibility, decision-making, problem-solving and reasoning are established during primary education (Portellano et al., 2009). These skills are perfected through the learning processes generated and their application in the specific context (Lamm et al., 2006). Psychosocial literature also recognises the importance of addressing the group dynamics that can arise in the political sphere as early as possible. The in-group – out-group division that takes place when a person is identified with a social category (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can involve a series of consequences, including a dehumanisation effect. Experimental studies show that from the age of six onwards children are capable of dehumanising members of the out-group, a trend which is maintained over the years (McLoughlin et al., 2017). Similarly, other studies have demonstrated how as from the age of 5 to 10 dehumanisation of the out-group gradually increases (Dore et al., 2014) and this process is related with prejudice (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Rudman & Mescher,

2012; Viki et al., 2013) and neglect (Čehajić et al, 2009; Cuddy et al., 2007). Categorical identification arises in the.

The Socialisation Thesis asserts that PE is developed when individuals participate in empowered community environments (Christens et al., 2011): the more participation, the more PE. In the case of children, various studies have shown that the processes facilitating PE are characterised by a collective conception of power, participatory and collective decision-making and existence of shared activities and goals (Jennings et al., 2006). Given that these characteristics are present in AI, the programme is expected to be an empowering process. A specific measurement instrument is needed to evaluate AI's capacity to generate empowerment of its participants. The nomological approach to PE by Zimmerman (1995, 2000) has therefore been applied to establish the indicators of the components of PE. Two of these components are intrapersonal empowerment and interactional empowerment. The first one, the intrapersonal component, refers to an individual's perception of personal control and capacity to influence their reality. The interactional component refers to an individual's critical awareness and understanding of their sociopolitical environment. These concepts are used to propose a series of items adapted to the target population and the intervention carried out with the aim of determining the changes that participation can bring about in PE.

## 1.1 Group Identification and Participation

Experiences that can foster participation among groups of children include getting to know partners, sharing common experiences, establishment of affective links with group members and acts of solidarity towards others that are identified as group members (Sherif & Sherif, 1975). These groups will be capable of visualising shared needs and establishing common goals (Cillero, 2004). Group identification by children aged 6 to 12 years has also been analysed in relation to identity merger. The results show that children can feel an intense connection with their group mainly due to the relationship links which act like a strong force connecting them with the group, even though it does not lead to merger (Gaviria et al., 2015). It is to be expected that this activation of common links in the group will be fostered by participation in game-based tasks with common and interdependent goals such as those proposed by AI in the classroom. In fact, prior studies.

show that participation in the design of educational environments has the potential to empower children and help them to feel part of the group through the exercise of citizen participation, while at the same time promoting their personal and community development (Can & İnalhan, 2017).

## 1.2 The Current Study

The current study of child participation aims to evaluate whether children foster their psychological empowerment and promote group identification through activation of common links following their participation in the AI programme. To do so, a longitudinal study was carried out with a quasi-experimental design with recording

of measurements pre and post intervention for the target group and a control group. The general hypothesis is that participation in the AI programme increases psychological empowerment and group identification.

### 1.2.1 The Specific Hypotheses are

1. Psychological empowerment

   Hypothesis 1.1: Following the AI programme, the children participating in the sessions (target group) will have higher levels of psychological empowerment upon completion of the second year of the intervention in comparison with the pre-test of the first year. Similarly, the levels of empowerment will be higher at the end of the second intervention compared to the first intervention.
   Hypothesis 1.2: In the case of the control group, there will be no significant changes in their levels of psychological empowerment when comparing between the two post-intervention measurements and with the pre-test measurement of the first year.

2. Group identification

   Hypothesis 2.1: The children of the target group will perceive more common links with their group upon completing the second year of the intervention in comparison with the pre-test of the first year. Similarly, the levels of group identification will be higher at the end of the second intervention compared to the first intervention.
   Hypothesis 2.2: In the case of the control group, there will be no significant changes in their perception of group identification when comparing between the two post-intervention measurements and with the pre-test measurement of the first year.

## 2 Method

AI is a political initiative at a local level in the Autonomous Community of Andalusia in southern Spain. The main participants are: a) 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; b) the students, who are the main actors responsible for making the decisions and designing the proposals; c) Coglobal, the social entity responsible for execution of the programme; and d) schools, which provide the spaces to develop the programme. The main methodological features of AI include: a) superordinate goals, b) deliberation, c) clear and previously agreed rules, d) matters for debate agreed with the

local government (accordingly, adapted to the needs of each territory), e) binding decision-making and f) an intervention team specialising in work with children and dynamics based on collaborative games. It should also be highlighted that the work group is the whole class and the intervention takes place during class time. This involves high potential for political inclusion, given that classroom composition in Spain is based on random criteria.

The programme sessions were held once every two weeks with each class, approximately during a four-month period. Each session had a duration of 90 min with the exception of sessions 3 and 7, which took all morning. The sessions were divided in the following manner:

1) Presentation. Presentation of the programme to students by the organisers and subsequent development of the guidelines for group participation and agreement regarding its functioning, agreed jointly by all parties. They were also asked to begin gathering information on the topic to be considered during the course of the programme.
2) Adjustment of expectations. During this session, small mixed work groups were created to prepare questions regarding political management of their town. The questions were related to the topics the children would be working with, along with the functioning of local government.
3) Getting to know the local government. The children visit the local councils and hold interviews with public representatives, investigating regarding the actions they wish to carry out and general matters relating to local government.
4) We suggest. In accordance with the work carried out in previous sessions, the children prepare interdependent proposals which are then brought together to develop the final proposal in the manner of a puzzle. The proposals are related to planning and execution of activities based around a theme agreed with the local council. In the participating schools, the proposals focused on creation of a municipal social club for children and leisure-sports activities.
5) From imagination to action. in this session the preparation of the proposals continues following on from the activity initiated in the fourth session. Feedback is also received from the local council on the technical and economic viability of the proposals.
6) What, who, how and when. through deliberation and voting, the students select from among the viable proposals the options that will make up the final programme of the activity.
7) Meeting in the town hall. The programmes of all the proposals are presented during a meeting of the local council (before the mayor and councillors) for their approval and subsequent execution.

The study has a quasi-experimental design and was carried out over two years. The AI programme was carried out twice, once per year. The data were gathered at three stages, before and after the first AI: 2016 (pre 1 and post 1) and after the second AI 2017 (post 2), with the same participants in both years.

## 2.1 Sample

The participants consisted of a total of 182 boys and girls from two primary schools, one from the province of Malaga and another from the province of Cádiz (Andalusia, Spain). The average age was 10.49 years (SD = 1.02). The target group consisted of 128 participants with an average age of 10.87 (SD = 0.89), with 52.30% boys and 47.70% girls. The control group was made up of 54 children with an average age of 9.59 years (SD = 0.71); 55.6% were boys and 44.4% were girls. The difference in size between the target group and the control group was due to ethical reasons. The local councils and schools were concerned about the fact that certain classes would benefit from the AI programme while others would not due to the need to have control groups. Accordingly, in both schools all the classes of the 5th and 6th years of primary education participated in the programme, with the exception of four classrooms (two in each school) which were the control groups. The assignment of the classes to control or target groups was random. The target group and the control group shared similar characteristics, with homogeneity of their variances for the different measurements used, so they are considered equivalent groups. The results are described in the following sections.

## 2.2 Instruments

The instruments used to measure the different variables under the study are set out below.

### 2.2.1 Psychological Empowerment

As indicated, according to the nomological approach to psychological empowerment proposed by Zimmerman (1995, 2000), an interdisciplinary group of seven empowerment experts developed a series of items to confirm the change in PE following participation in the AI programme. The items prepared for each of the components of PE are:

1) Intrapersonal empowerment. A short scale made up of three items was used to measure perception of their capacity to influence their reality: "Your opinion counts in your town"; "children can influence the decisions made by the mayor and the councillors"; and "children can change things they don't like about their town." The format for replies to these items was a scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 8 = strongly agree. The factorial analysis shows that a single factor explains 63.64% of the variance and the reliability index is 0.7. Levene's test indicates that the samples are homogenous before the AI for the three items taken separately [$F_{(1,180)} = 0.047$, *n.s.;* $F_{(1,180)} = 0.228$, *n.s.;* $F_{(1,180)} = 1.192$, *n.s.*], and also for the complete scale [$F_{(1,180)} = 1.485$, *n.s.*].

   Given that the participants are children, the instrument is presented as a staircase with 8 steps and the children must draw a small figure on the step where they perceive themselves as being.

2) Interactional Empowerment. As previously indicated, this refers to institutional political knowledge and is evaluated using three questions with categorical answers (for the exact formulation of the questions see Albornoz-Manyoma et al., 2020) which are subsequently dichotomised into correct and incorrect responses. The aim is to establish the increase in knowledge among children regarding: a) management of funds by the local council, b) the nature of the local council, and c) the name of the local mayor. A single score is calculated referring to the number of total correct answers, meaning that the minimum score would be 0 (no correct answers) and the maximum 3 (3 correct answers). Levene's test was applied, the results of which indicated that both samples were homogeneous before the AI programme [$F(1,180) = 1.84$, *n.s.*].

### 2.2.2 Group Identification

The pictorial measurement of identity merger proposed by Swann et al. (2009) has been taken and adapted to allow measurement of the link with the class group through development of common links. All the above is carried out in accordance with the age profile of the participants in the study. The pictorial representation consists of a small circle representing the person that has to respond and a larger circle which represents the class, the group for which the link with the student is measured. The question has four possible answers in the nature of a scale, each of which shows illustrations with different degrees of overlap between the small circle and the large circle. The absence of any overlap between the two circles (value l) implies an absence of identification by the student with the group. On the contrary, total overlap of the two circles (value 4) represents total identification with the class. Levene's test was applied, the results of which indicated that both groups (control and target) were homogeneous for this variable before the intervention [Levene $F(1,180) = 0.298$, *n.s.*].

### 2.3 Procedure

The social agency Coglobal responsible for executing the programme and the universities participating in the study entered into a collaboration agreement under which the university research team carries out external evaluation of the processes implemented by Coglobal. Accordingly, Coglobal was responsible for contacting the local councils to explain the programme, who in turn decided whether to implement the programme and how many schools in the locality would be involved. The schools then spoke with the teachers of the classes for which the programme was to be implemented. Subsequently, an informative meeting was held during which the research team explained the AI procedure to the participating schools.

When the programme commenced on day 1, prior to explaining the programme the pre-questionnaire was issued to the target group and the control group, which was completed individually, anonymously and voluntarily. Before the students answered, the researchers read all the questions out and clarified any doubts. On the last day of the intervention, the post-questionnaire was issued to both the target

group and the control group. The procedure was similar for both editions of AI, with three measurements as indicated previously: 2016 (pre 1 and post 1) and 2017 (post 2).

This study was carried out in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration and the protocol described was approved by the corresponding Ethics Committee with the identification code CEUMA: 71–2020-H.

## 2.4 Statistical Analysis

Firstly, analysis was performed of the reliability and validity of the intrapersonal empowerment scale, along with the homogeneity of the variance of both groups according to Levene's test. After obtaining the information for the metric variables (intrapersonal empowerment and identification) a two-factor ANOVA test was performed with measurements repeated in one factor, with time being the intrasubject factor and the group being the intergroup factor. For the categorical variable (interactional empowerment) a total score was obtained according to the number of correct and incorrect answers, as indicated in the instruments section. Following completion of this recoding, a repeated measurement ANOVA test was performed. Subsequently, the Bonferroni correction was applied to identify changes in the comparisons of the different moments of the intervention. The data gathered were processed using the SPSS 28.0 statistics package.

## 3 Results

The results are set out below ordered by variables and according to the hypotheses proposed.

### 3.1 Psychological Empowerment

#### 3.1.1 Intrapersonal Empowerment

The results reflect the significant effect of participation under the AI programme $F(1, 182) = 52.765$, $p < 0.001$, $n^2 = 0.371$, as can be seen in Table 1. Similarly, Fig. 1

**Table 1** Statistics of the different moments for the Intrapersonal Empowerment components in the two groups (target and control)

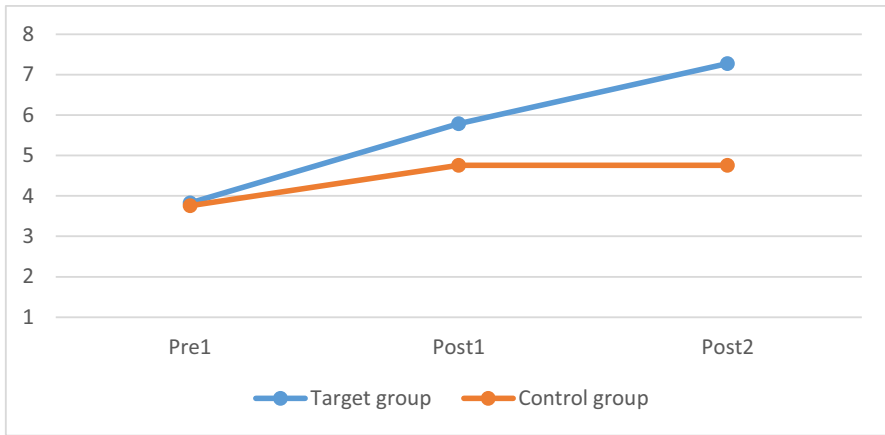| Intervention moments | Group | M | SD | F | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre1 | Target | 3.83 | 1.34 | 0.11 | 0.74 |
| | Control | 3.76 | 1.31 | | |
| Post1 | Target | 5.79 | 1.04 | 28.86 | 0.00 |
| | Control | 4.76 | 1.45 | | |
| Post 2 | Target | 7.27 | 0.95 | 133.84 | 0.00 |
| | Control | 4.76 | 1.96 | | |

Traza de Pillai =.371

**Fig. 1** Measurements of the different intervention moments for intrapersonal empowerment in the target group and the control group

shows the changes in the averages of both the target group and the control group. It can be seen that in the case of the target group, the measurements go up following the intervention. These results suggest that the child participants under the AI programme perceive that they have more influence over their sociopolitical environment following participation in AI. On the contrary, the measurements for the control group remain stable. The post-hoc Bonferroni test shows that these differences in the comparisons by pairs (pre1-post2 and post1-post2) are significant ($p < 0.001$).

### 3.1.2 Interactional Empowerment

As can be seen in Table 2, there are significant differences between the two groups in the post1 and post2 moments $F(1,182) = 93.601$, $p < 0.001$, $n^2 = 0.511$. According to Fig. 2, these changes in the target group are in the expected direction given that there is an increase in interactional empowerment, which reflects the greater understanding and knowledge of the sociopolitical environment on the part of the children participating following the AI programme. The post-hoc Bonferroni test shows that

| **Table 2** Statistics of the different moments for the Interactional Empowerment components in the two groups (target and control) | Intervention moments | Group | M | SD | *F* | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Pre1 | Target | 1.47 | 0.90 | 0.37 | 5.39 |
| | | Control | 1.38 | 0.81 | | |
| | Post1 | Target | 2.60 | 0.59 | 16.53 | 0.00 |
| | | Control | 2.16 | 0.79 | | |
| | Post2 | Target | 2.87 | 0.35 | 72.09 | 0.00 |
| | | Control | 2.11 | 0.86 | | |

Traza de Pillai = .511

**Table 3** Statistics of the different moments for the identification with the class group in the two groups (target and control)

| Intervention moments | Group | M | SD | *F* | Sig |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre1 | Target | 2.71 | 0.88 | 62.96 | 0.00 |
| | Control | 3.17 | 0.94 | | |
| Post1 | Target | 3.15 | 1.21 | 0.77 | 3.78 |
| | Control | 3.12 | 1.46 | | |
| Post2 | Target | 3.86 | 1.02 | 93.85 | 0.00 |
| | Control | 2.97 | 1.33 | | |

Traza de Pillai =.368
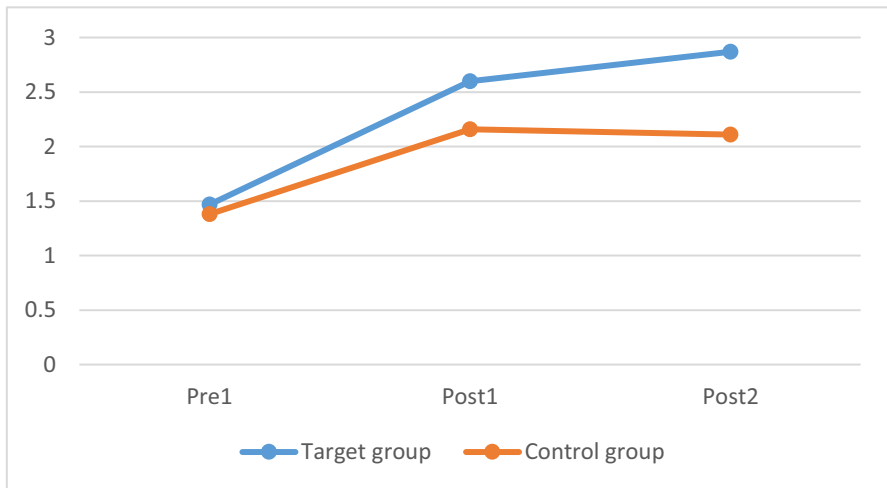


**Fig. 2** Measurements of the different intervention moments for interactional empowerment in the target and control group

these differences in the comparisons by pairs (pre1-post2 and post1-post2) are significant ($p < 0.001$) Table 3.

### 3.1.3 Identification with the Class Group

The findings for this variable show differences between the target and control groups following implementation of the programme: $F(1,182) = 1.340$, $p < 0.01$, $n^2 = 0.021$. The target group underwent significant changes (see Fig. 3) which reflect an increase in affective links with the group following participation in AI. These results support hypothesis 2.1, given that the greater the participation in the programme, the greater the perception of union with the group. The post-hoc Bonferroni test shows that these differences in the comparisons by pairs (pre1-post2 and post1-post2) are significant ($p < 0.001$). Meanwhile, there were no significant changes in the control group as can be seen in Fig. 3.
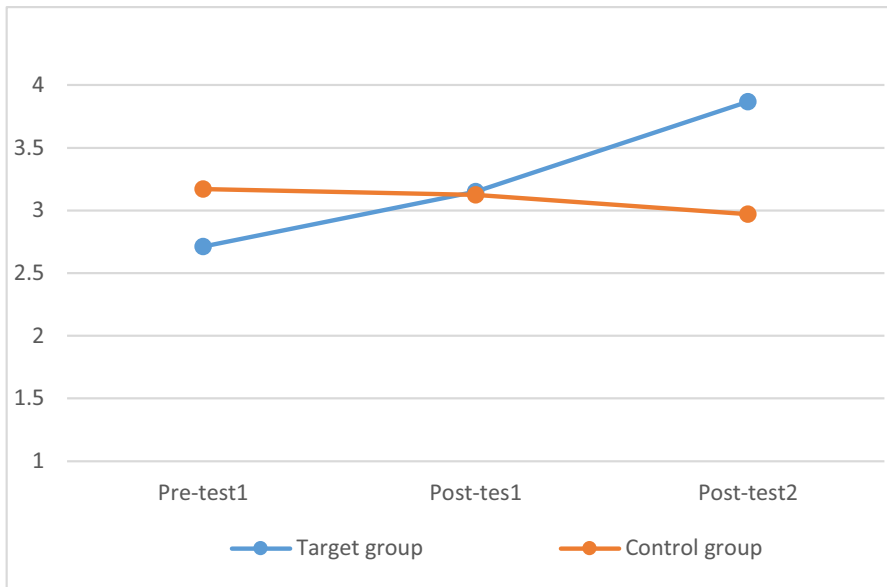
**Fig. 3** Comparison of the measurements of group identification for the target group and the control group in the different moments of the intervention

## 4 Discussion and Conclusions

Political participation by children in democratic innovations and their psychosocial effects have received little attention in previous research. This longitudinal study of the AI programme makes a contribution in this sense. The results show an increase in psychological empowerment and group identification, effects which are intensified the longer the children participate in the programme.

In accordance with the first of the hypotheses proposed, the psychological empowerment of children increases following participation in AI, with a greater increase following the second year of the programme. The data indicate improvements for two components of psychological empowerment proposed by Zimmerman (1995, 2000): intrapersonal and interactional. The children see themselves as agents for change with the capacity to influence their immediate context the more they participate in institutional policies. It has also been confirmed that following the second year of participation in AI, the children have greater knowledge of institutional politics given that the programme facilitates communication and brings children into closer contact with local councils and their teams (and especially with the mayor). This series of results confirms the relationship between participation and empowerment proposed by the Socialisation Thesis (Christens et al., 2011): the greater the participation, the greater the empowerment, with participation being the independent variable.

The data also clearly support the second hypothesis: forming part of AI increases links with the class group, favouring identification with the group. Participation in a

deliberative programme with interdependent goals of a binding nature fosters a feeling of strong connection with the group among children, which can act as a major force to connect them (Gaviria et al., 2015). These findings are in line with the studies by Dusi et al. (2014) and Kyhälä et al. (2012), which highlighted the increased closeness between children in a group depending on their participation in the group. Similarly, as in the case of the psychological empowerment variable, the greater the participation in AI, the more the participants identified with the group. This potential for increased group identification through political participation opens up a nexus with classical psychosocial theory regarding the relationship between identity and social support, group effectiveness and well-being, among other factors (Haslam & Reicher, 2006).

One of the implications of the results of this study is the identification of institutional political participation as an independent variable capable of generating psychological empowerment and group identification, beyond mere activation of these variables in individuals who already have high scores in these areas (Flavin & Keane, 2011; Pirralha, 2017). Another relevant aspect is the cumulative effect over the course of time; the longer the participation the more pronounced the psychosocial effects. These two results are especially useful for the design of democratic innovations to improve the representative system and also constitute strong support for initiatives of this kind.

Another interesting aspect of this research is the possible effect of these types of programmes on the day-to-day activities of schools. These types of initiatives may favour more effective learning due to the higher levels of psychological empowerment. As a consequence, they may foster autonomous and cooperative work and promote self-confidence. In addition, the higher levels of group identification could increase intragroup collaboration and reduce negative stereotypes in the classroom, as is shown by classical studies of Group Psychology (Sherif & Sherif, 1975).

In conclusion, this study demonstrates how an innovation in the democratic system characterised by a) deliberation, b) binding decision-making, c) superordinate goals, d) previously defined topics and e) promoted by a team specialising in work with children through games can contribute to improve the functioning of democracy itself, and also to improve the capacities citizens have to promote democracy. AI's approach converts this programme into an empowering process that introduces the younger members of society to democratic rituals in a concrete, everyday context: schools. This is a way for political participation to regain its essential purpose of searching for agreement between different parties, as well as reducing political polarisation and its consequent dehumanisation of the out-group (Miller, 2020). These types of innovations could also increase satisfaction with the democratic system, an aspect that also influences citizen well-being (Chang, 2018). These are all aspects that could be addressed in future research.

Finally, certain limitations of the current study should be identified. The first of these is the small size of the sample, along with the difference in size between the control and target groups. As indicated, excluding a large number of schools from the programme in order to balance the size of the sample is ethically questionable. However, future studies could opt for nested designs and larger samples in order to overcome this limitation. These types of improvements will be dependent upon

the political will of local councils and the capacity to continue financing the programme over various years. Another limiting factor consists of the measurement instruments used. The novelty of the AI programme and the fact that it involves children prevented prior validation of the instruments. However, their good statistical performance indicates that they may be used for other studies. Finally, a multi-level analysis could be carried out to identify the effect of contextual variables such as the school, the class and the locality. It would also be interesting to identify whether there are any differences based on the gender of the participants. As regards the AI programme, it is necessary to think of designs that allow participation of more subjects, given that it would be difficult to translate the current design to a regional or countrywide scale. All these limitations could be addressed in subsequent studies and future reformulations of the AI programme.

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