"If I had power, I would stop injustices in the world": Photovoice's experiences with young people from disadvantaged urban communities

Ana Dias Garcia, Eunice Macedo & João Queirós

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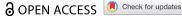Ana Dias Garcia [a], Eunice Macedo [a], and João Queirós [b]

aFaculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, University of Porto, Center for Research and Intervention in Education (CIIE), Portugal; bCentre for Research and Innovation in Education, School of Education of Polytechnic of Porto, Institute of Sociology of the University of Porto, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Based on participatory research with a group of young people of 13 to 17 years old from a socially vulnerable community of Porto (Portugal), this article proposes a reflection and debate about what conditions these young people find for citizen participation in the relationship with their communities. Faced with a fragmented urban landscape, constituted by socially marginalized communities, which often instigate asymmetrical power relations and situations of territorial stigmatization and social exclusion, young people come across constant social challenges. Through the photovoice method, the youngsters were encouraged to research the community reality that surrounds them; to carefully observe and analyze the contexts and express them visually. This article presents results produced by this research experience, and how it facilitated debates and interaction with young people, allowing us to understand better their reality and the ways they see it and act in it.

Introduction

The research which inspired this reflection aims to analyze and understand the contexts and conditions that young people of 13 to 17 years old from socially vulnerable urban communities in Porto come across to build their citizen participation. Based on the experience of the group of young people participating in this research, some key concepts will be presented to comprehend what opportunities and obstacles young people from disadvantaged urban areas perceive and deal with to participate and get involved in their communities. Through the contributions of young people implicated in this research, we also tried to understand what affects them as young citizens, identifying some aspects that they would like to change and improve in their communities.

Through the mobilization of research methods such as the photovoice, we have critically questioned and deconstructed assumptions that argue that young people are

not interested in getting involved in common causes and that they are incompetent or immature when it comes to creating proposals and participating in decision-making processes (Menezes, 2014). These statements that disqualify and disregard young people as citizens are the same as those that may contribute to excluding other social groups from the right to citizenship. Citizenship has "functioned simultaneously as a force for inclusion and exclusion" (Lister, 2002, p. 166), that is, it includes the claim of human rights and, at the same time, faces situations of the marginalization of excluded groups, while they still fight for a promised citizenship, and for the right to equality, but simultaneously, for the right to be different (Lister, 2002; Lister et al., 2007).

Young people belong to a group that faces barriers to citizen participation, which are linked to constraints and tensions experienced in their daily lives, including at school and other places in the city (Madeira, 2013). This article intents to enhance reflection on several perspectives of young people's citizenship, and about the importance of the city for the development of educational and participatory experiences.

Concerning these reflections and constructions, this article presents methodological possibilities for the development of critical and emancipatory dialogs to produce knowledge (Freire, 2014). From the photovoice method, was co-constructed a collective process of reflection and discussion on intrinsic aspects of the community from the capture and analysis of images, making it possible to understand "the social and political constructions that maintain its marginalization" (Liebenberg, 2018, p. 3). In this way, adopting participatory visual methods such as photovoice provided spaces for dialogue, introspection, interaction, and creative expression among young people. Through the photovoice experience, which we will highlight in this article, a diversity of co-constructed data emerged, revealing the participating group's desire for expression and involvement in changing their community.

Regarding the structure of this article, in a first moment, it contemplates some reflections on citizenship and the affirmation of the participation rights of young people, mentioning official documents such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Council of Europe recommendation documents such as Young People's Access to Rights (Council of Europe, 2017). And because we are referring to young citizens and citizenship, the city is taken as a space of diversity, of research and of claiming rights. This reflection emphasizes the need of building an inclusive and participatory city, where the communities that constitute it can dialogue and cooperate with each other.

Thereafter, participatory action research (PAR) is presented as a methodology that combines collaborative and participatory groundwork processes with emancipatory action, "concerned with the democratization of knowledge development as a component of social justice" (Liebenberg, 2018, p. 1). This approach, alongside photovoice, enabled data collection, encouraged the development of critical perspectives on urban communities, and stimulated research and expressive skills among the young participants. In the last section, the results and discussion from the photovoice experience are presented in more detail and some final considerations are drawn from this.

Polyphonic Citizenship: Diversity of voices, views, and ways of expression

The idea of citizenship followed the changes of society, and it has been progressively built up, incorporating a polysemic and heuristic feature, which has given it a diversity of meanings. The process of globalization has brought new challenges and demands,

namely competitiveness, the increase of social inequalities in the distribution of wealth, and regional asymmetries (Costa et al., 2015). In this scenario, the protection and strengthening of human rights has been required as well as the need to rethink the complexity of the concept of citizenship in a community, broader and cross-border perspective. For us, it is relevant to emphasize the importance of inclusive and the rights-claiming dimensions of citizenship (Lister, 2002; Lister et al., 2007), simultaneously based on the "claim for recognition and social justice" (Macedo, 2018, p. 72) and in a polyphony, which comes from recognizing the diversity of voices and the many forms of manifestation of these voices (Araújo, 2007). In this way, "citizenship is not only a statute, in terms of rights and obligations, but it also constitutes forms of identity and claim for recognition and social justice" (Macedo, 2018, p. 72), expressing "plural forms of belonging and participation" (idem) and integrating concerns related to equality, belonging, recognition and participation.

The practice of citizenship should sustain a collective construction of inclusion of different perspectives, voices, ways of expression, and claiming. The voice dimension in citizenship embodies the "different forms that voice can have and express" among young people (Macedo, 2018, p. 111). Recognizing and considering the diversity of this group and regarding their multiple pronunciations and the contexts in which they are produced (Arnot & Swartz, 2012; Bernstein, 2003; Macedo, 2018), is also a way of perceiving how young people may build their citizenship. Listening and recognizing the voice of young people in the process of expression, action, democratic and citizen practices, the voice is then positioned "as a symbol of the social struggle for recognition and as an instrument for participation and transformative action, a heterogeneous construction informed by individual experiences." (Macedo, 2018, p. 111).

The inclusion of the diversity of voices also incorporates the conception of *polyphonic citizenship*, which refuses the consideration and enunciation of just one voice, in favor of the recognition and legitimation of the expression of various voices, which constitute the heterogeneity of social reality (Araújo, 2007). In this sense, and in the context of the present research, it was relevant to avoid hierarchical approaches supported by vertical social interactions, which may strengthen the manifestation of dominant voices and legitimize asymmetrical power relations (Macedo, 2018).

This way, inspired by research experiences based on respect for diversity, may promote conditions of participation and encourage young people to get involved in community matters and to present collective and transformative proposals. For this, it is necessary to recognize the right of citizenship and the participation of young people. In this way, we will address this issue in the following section.

Affirmation of young people's participation rights

In November 1989, the United Nations, in association with the European Council, validated the Convention on the Rights of the Child as a treaty with legal value, aiming to protect the interests of children around the world, including their well-being, protection, as well as considering their right to citizen participation. This Convention assumes that children should be heard, and their viewpoints should be considered in all matters that involve them and relate to their rights (UNICEF & ONU, 2019). This challenges the traditional perception that children are incompetent and incapable of making decisions and suggestions.

Likewise, based on the Convention for the Rights of the Child and focusing on older children in the teenage years period, the recommendation documents from the Council of Europe as the Young People's Access to Rights (2017) and European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life (Council of Europe, 2015) warn of barriers to the participation of young people under the age of 18. Understanding that "the voices of young people are often among those not heard" (Cushing, 2014, p. 2), it is necessary to create opportunities and systematic policies to encourage active and effective democratic participation and civic engagement from an early age and during the youth. As from a human rights-based approach, participation is a means through which other rights can be realized, contributing to the empowerment of youngsters. In this process, it is imperative to understand and recognize that young people are a heterogeneous group – considering age, gender, identities, cultures, economic or social status, abilities, experiences –, and it is therefore fundamental to guarantee their inclusion, equality, and respect for their diversity.

The word participation does not just mean to be actively involved in some activity or experience. It also means to get involved and take part "in a collective decision-making process with a recognizable social and/or educational outcome" (Davies et al., 2005, p. 2). In the 1990s, Hart (1992) referred to participation as a "process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is how a democracy is built, and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured." (Hart, 1992, p. 5). In this way, participation is associated with the right and exercise of active citizenship (Arnstein, 1969), both being fundamental for the construction and development of participatory democracies. Nevertheless, there are hardly any opportunities for involving and including young people in decision-making debates where they can present their own agendas and ideas (Cushing, 2014).

Campbell and Erbstein (2012) refer that "youth are an often untapped but potent resource for community change" (p. 63), as long as trusting relationships between youth and their communities are encouraged. Young people can play a key role in the development of the communities to which they belong, and these community contexts are relevant places for the increase of social relationships, solidarity, and collective participation. It is necessary to see young people as individuals with rights and competencies, with their own particularities, cultures, interests, opinions, and ways of acting, which must be respected and considered, and which are essential in the construction of their trajectories and communities (Gaitán & Liebel, 2011; Macedo, 2018, 2009; Madeira, 2013; Menezes, 2014; Silva, 2010).

In communities exposed to social inequality, where populations are socially disadvantaged, civic participation can be considered as an opportunity for the reconstruction of less unequal places. Young people in socially underprivileged situations "can actively participate in the denaturalization of social inequality, since for that be provided spaces and other conditions to correct asymmetries in interactions with adults." (Madeira, 2013, p. 149). The relations of dependency between young people and adults, sustained by adult dominance and control, and paternalistic views based on cultural conservatism and parental authority, constitute an obstacle to the participation and empowerment of young people (Macedo & Araújo, 2011). For participation to be meaningful, it must be accessible to youngsters, since "there are instances where adult language and behavior can exclude children from participating at the outset, as there can be a lack of sensitivity to culturally appropriate contexts" (Kellett, 2009, p. 49).

The city as a space of learning, research, and rights claims

Lefebvre (2008) claimed the right to a city more humanized and inventive city for all citizens. The basic idea of the "right to the city," which over time, keeps assuming new meanings, goes together with the urgency for more citizenship, democracy, and social justice. Nowadays, appropriated by activists and utopians, the right to the city is also mentioned in some political speeches and even by the United Nations. Academics have rethought and reframed the meaning of the right to the city in a more wide-ranging way, considering contemporary social and educational contexts and challenges.

The challenge of reinventing the city is directly related to education, citizen participation and the involvement of populations in the communities where they live, including young people. The city can be an interdisciplinary educational territory, which may inspire gatherings, a diversity of creations, interactions, learnings, and constructions, namely the production of knowledge and participation. As we will be able to reveal in the reflection based on the progress of the present research work.

The complexity of today's globalized cities confronts us with positive and negative repercussions that have been triggering several tensions, instabilities, and social disparities in which situations of inequality and social exclusion are framed (Giddens, 2012). Urban poverty associated with marginalization and social exclusion represents a city that must be rethought, analyzed, debated, and transformed, considering the diversity and desires of their residents (Mathivet, 2010).

The city also reproduces segregation, when, for example, people with less material and financial resources are "pushed" to the borders of the city, accentuating the separation of this population and the other groups that inhabit other locations in the city (Lefebvre, 2008). Urban communities are the target of unequal appropriations, which, most of the time, instigate and affirm the power relations that constitute the social organization (Pereira & Queirós, 2014; Queirós, 2019; Young, 2002). A fragmented city, constituted by physical and symbolic barriers, dominated by privatizing dynamics is the "expression and reproduction of society as heterogeneous as it is compartmentalized (or "ghettoized"), that is, incohesive" (Borja, 2010, p. 30). In this context, the socially most vulnerable and disadvantaged populations are harmed, instigating social inequalities and the exclusion of these people from full access to their city (Queirós, 2019).

In Porto, as well as in other European cities, social inequalities reflect the image of the city. Some main problems of the populations who live in Porto's social housing are increased risks of poverty, drug trafficking and consumption, the degradation of buildings, and the stigmatization of these neighborhoods (Faria et al., 2013). Children and young people are the groups that are particularly vulnerable to these issues, while being at the same time the individuals who are not heard and considered in the moments of planning and decision-making.

Visual and participatory methodological practices *with* young people

This ongoing qualitative research project proposes the production of knowledge through participatory, action-oriented, and arts-based research. Based on a "'practical activity,' or, in other words, the action on the world (. . .), which is the basis of the physical transformation of the world and, consequently, of how we think" (Amado, 2017, p. 53), the present

research has focussed on the co-construction of a dynamic, participatory, transdisciplinary, and transformative process. This presumes permanent critical reflection and questioning of the collective about action and reality (Freire, 1997, 2001).

In order to collect data and to incorporate an aesthetic and a creative dimension in the process of co-production of knowledge, as mentioned above, for this study we applied photovoice method. The use of visual dimension approach in this research allowed a better representation and characterization of several community contexts and facilitated the participation of young people in research processes. Sandra Weber tells us that "(. . .) the environment demands to be seen" (Weber, 2008, p. 41), considering that images are part of society and are present in the different dimensions and contexts of everyday life, being, therefore, relevant resources in capturing and representing sociological aspects which otherwise, would not be accessible (Banks, 2008).

The visual methods incorporate a set of multidimensional expressive experiences that seek to understand more deeply the multiple perspectives of the participating group. Through visual participatory research experiences, it was possible to access unheard voices and visualize unseen realities and individuals, involving the participant group in research and enhancing their participation (Mitchell et al., 2017).

Photovoice, as the name indicates, is the expression of individual voices and perspectives on reality through the production of images that represent it – in this case photographs (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). Based on social documentary photography (Wang et al., 1996), the photovoice method is also inspired by the idea of Education from Dialogic Action, meaning there is a constant questioning of reality and critical awareness (Freire, 1997, 2001). At the same time, this method assumes the active participation of the group involved, including them in the research while considering the diversity of their points of view, and interpretations of reality, by the experience of taking photographs.

Photovoice combines photography, people's experiences, ethnographic practices, critical reflection, and dialogue to understand, from different perspectives, dynamics of spaces and people at the social, educational, political, cultural, historical contexts. Used in a variety of study, research, and intervention areas, notably in education, sociology, health, and community intervention in socially vulnerable settings, this method has proven significant and empowering, particularly in working with disempowered and marginalized populations (Sutton-Brown, 2014; Wang, 1999).

Further ahead in this article, we will emphasize how the practice of photovoice was carried out by the young participants, who were also research partners.

Young people as research partners

The participants and research partners in this study are twenty-one young people (11 boys and 10 girls) between the ages of 13 and 17, mostly from social housing neighborhoods in Porto. These young people are mainly Portuguese, born in the city of Porto, except for a 15-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy, both born in Brazil and recently arrived in Portugal, and a 13-year-old Asian boy from China. These youngsters were reached in the communities where they live and in their school. After the research proposal was presented, the young people were invited to participate in the study and voluntarily constituted the research group, also inviting some of their friends.

All the young people involved in this research are students in 7th, 8th, and 9th grades from Junior High School integrated in the program "Educational Territories of Priority Intervention." This Portuguese government program was implemented in the late 1990s and aims to prevent and reduce early school-leaving and absenteeism, as well as to promote the educational success of students from schools located in socially disadvantaged communities. The accessible data revealed that most of these young people live in socially vulnerable communities affected by unemployment, precarious jobs, and urban poverty. Most of the group admits to having a complicated relationship with school related to the unstimulating environment, the curriculum being far from their expectations, their problematic relationship with teachers, and school failure.

In this context, based on collaborative and democratic practices, research skills were encouraged, and the young people were challenged to take positions as researchers. Through dialogue and negotiation, research practices were proposed, and the group was requested to make suggestions for research activities. The mobilization of strategies for the inclusion of the voices of young people in the research process, placing them in the position of protagonists and active participants, is also a way of affirming and recognizing their critical participation as citizens and young researchers. It was essential to provide situations of equality, seeking to mitigate power relations by promoting empathic and horizontal relations, thus empowering the group. At the same time, it was necessary to incorporate more appropriate procedures, methods, and techniques that made possible the participation of the young group from a democratic, creative, and inclusive perspective. In this way, research design was adapted and suggested considering the expectations, interests, and talents of young people, always valuing the diversity of their languages, expressions, beliefs, opinions, ways of being, and acting.

Safe and encouraging research spaces were provided so that each young person could express themselves in an environment of collective sharing, and attentive listening. Several research resources, as video and photograph cameras, were placed at the group's disposal so that they could appropriate the tools, which would facilitate creative experiences of participation and research. Unlike conventional research, in which young people are perceived as objects of study for mere observation and interpretation, participatory research encourages the involvement and active participation of young people in research by including them in planning and decision-making moments, listening to and considering their opinions, experiences, and interpretations of reality (Mirra et al., 2016). This supports the conception that young people are competent social actors, knowledge producers, and co-creators of participatory research processes (Gaitán & Liebel, 2011; Macedo, 2018; Macedo et al., 2020), essential contributors to the inquiries.

This way, it becomes pertinent and meaningful

> to incorporate young voices into educational and social research, going beyond their instrumentalization as data providers. Therefore, we seek to hear and recognize their voices: their experiences, stories, and life expectations, as a social category and as individual beings, understanding that particular structural power relations inform them. (Macedo et al., 2020, p. 136).

The commitment with an ethical and responsible research is not only limited to compliance with aspects related to confidentiality and anonymity (Savin-Baden & Major,

2013), but also with the respect for self-determination of each person involved and "the affirmation of human dignity as the founding value of every ethical reference" (Severino, 2015, p. 780).

However, we faced some limitations, namely the time and availability of the group, who also had busy lives, due to the heavy school workload, extracurricular activities, and domestic responsibilities (particularly in the case of girls). Valuing each young person's time, we always thanked them for their availability for research, and it was relevant to express the importance of their contributions and collaboration. Even though time availability constraints were a significant barrier, the assertion by adults (some parents and teachers) that young people are incompetent and that "they do not participate; they are not interested in anything," is an obstacle to the participation of young people, who embody this discourse. The argument that young people are not responsible or do not have enough skills to participate in research activities or other relevant projects "does not aim to solve any problem, but only aims to maintain the situation of exclusion of young people." (Menezes, 2014, p. 26).

Despite these challenges, research activities materialized with success in partnership with the young people who showed themselves to be skilled, and creative actors capable of building their learning and of leading their own research, as we will present below.

The city from young people's perspectives: Experiences of photovoice

Through photovoice the group were encouraged to research and question the reality surrounding them; to carefully observe the spaces and places of their community and to express them visually; to identify their perceptions and challenges, their individual and collective experiences in the city; to create and compose images about their communities, constructing meanings, and generating debate (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Catalani et al., 2012; Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997). The use of photographs as an induction of dialogs allowed the development of a listening process and the elicitation of multiple layers of results (Darbyshire et al., 2005).

Digital cameras were made available so that the group could manipulate them, experimenting and learning from the experience of photographing. Expressing interest in learning how to work more skillfully with the cameras, each young person in the group was asking about some features of the equipment to be able to capture the images as they wanted. However, part of the group decided to use the cell phone camera, as it is more practical and easier to operate. Thus, equipped with the cameras and observing the city as a space for research and learning, the group of young people designed and defined the route through the public spaces in their neighborhoods and city.The procedures and several stages of Photovoice implementation are presented in Table 1 below.

Curious and comfortable taking photographs, the group was challenged to critically observe the spaces of their daily lives and identify positive aspects and other issues that they would like to improve. Adopting the role of citizens in action and researchers of their community, young people analyzed their reality by identifying and expressing their perspectives through photography. In total, the group went on a walking tour and explored different places in their communities and took 30 photographs, and below, in figures 1, 2 and 3, we present 7 photographs from that set.

Table 1. Steps and procedures for collecting data using the photovoice method.

Work Stage/Procedures	Sessions	Dates	Places of Action
Meeting with the research group to define the aims and plan the sessions in the field.	2	May 2019	School and Community Center
Observation, capturing/making photographs	5	from May to June 2019	Neighborhoods and their surroundings, other nearby city locations
Meeting for the presentation of the photographs, collective debate, interpretation, and analysis of the material	3	July 2019	School and Community Center
Collective reflection on the process among the research group; planning the public exhibition of the photographs	5	from September to October 2019	
Dissemination of results/display of photographs to the community and to local policymakers.	1	July 2021	City Council Gallery

Photovoice's Challenges and Limitations

Even though the photovoice materializes instigating research strategies, this method may present some challenges and limits along its application. First, there were some restrictions regarding the availability of the research group, facing a practice that requires several stages and sessions until its finalization. Then, the lack of visual and technological literacy, could compromise the performance and development of the experiments, when no training sessions in photography are foreseen. In this research experience, some technical photography tips were previously provided to the group so that they would be better able to take pictures with greater technical skills. On the other hand, the quality of the photographic equipment may contribute to unreadable and less expected results, and it is important that the whole group has equipment that produces results with similar technical characteristics.

Regarding the stage of the analysis of the selected images, it was crucial to protect the young people from photographic content that could potentially cause embarrassment within the group and in the discussion. Namely, disturbing images that evoke issues which could be sensitive and cause feelings of discomfort (Singhal et al., 2007). At the same time, ethical matters related to image rights, copyright, and privacy required specific informed consents, especially for the use of the photographs, as well as the protection of privacy of the people involved (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

Collective Findings and Discussion

After the photographs had been taken, the research group had the opportunity to discuss concerning the images collected, speaking about the perceptions and motivations behind each photo. This dialogue incorporated a listening process, which allowed us to know the learning experiences of young people in their communities, their perspectives, and desires. In this way, the group created representations of positive aspects that they value in their communities, and highlighted these:

Figure 1. Mural at the entrance of one of the neighborhoods and a wall painting on the front of a building (photographed by Kamy and Hyro respectively).

Figure 2. Green spaces and public gardens in the vicinity of their neighborhoods and school appreciated by the group (photographed by Nokas and Joka respectively).

Figure 3. Deteriorated buildings, the school gutter clogged with garbage, and damaged sports space (photographed by Hyro, Bru and Kamy respectively).

Figure 4. The group in the exhibition of their photographs and in the discussion with local policy-decision-makers (July 2021).

Street art such as murals and graffiti

> "I really like the mural painted on the neighborhood wall. Art is a form of expression and freedom; it makes the city more beautiful and art more accessible to people." (Hyro, 17 years old)

> "Street Art is a way of expressing what we feel, what we think and the things we want to change in the world." (Kamy, 16 years old)

Green spaces, such as wooded parks and huge gardens

> " We have some nice trees here, but it would be much cooler if our neighborhood had more parks for us to do outdoor activities" (Mafi, 13 years old)

> "We still have some small gardens here, but we live in a polluted world, and it is the adults' fault. We young people want green and clean spaces to live better!" (Yasmin, 13 years old)

Fun and leisure equipment's and places

> "There are cool spots we can discover in the city, especially in downtown, but there are few places where we can go to concerts and the theater for free. We should have art and culture more accessible to everyone." (Nokas, 15 years old)

The group argued that there should be fewer cars in the city, and more pedestrian access, so they could move freely and safely. They complained about the cars and how much they restricted their freedom to be out on the street playing. In this framework, the group captured aspects they disliked about their community that they would like to see changed, such as urban poverty represented photographically by each young person:

Dirty and deteriorated buildings, bumpy streets, and public equipment showing signs of vandalism and carelessness

"When we walk through our neighborhood, we see many wrong things … matters that should be fixed and aren't because the people who govern don't care about this place." (Bru, 14 years old)

"We can see broken streetlamps, damaged manhole covers, waste containers with uncollected garbage, dirty public sidewalks, some even with dead animals … and nobody cares!" (Smiley, 13 years old)

"We know that there are places where people have better conditions to live, who have more money and access to more things, and we feel a certain sense of injustice … There is so much to change to have equality!" (Kamy, 16 years old)

The disorder of the common and outside spaces in the neighborhoods, dominated by chaotic traffic and car parking

"There is a playground in my neighborhood that is quite damaged and is used for a car park! There is also some space to skateboarding and playing ball, but there are too many cars driving around and it gets dangerous … " (Çalo, 15 years old)

"We wanted to play outside, and we cannot because there are cars everywhere! It is annoying!" (Joka, 15 years old)

Insecurity of some parts of the community, namely at night, especially experienced by girls

"There are drug dealers, fighting's, and troubles with the police … Sometimes we are afraid to walk and play outside." (Mafi, 13 years old)

"Bru and I, we were harassed by an older man near the school. It is dangerous for us girls to walk at night, and our parents say that girls should not walk alone especially at night … We might be attacked, it is scary!" (Smiley, 13 years old)

The research outcomes were organized and synthesized through thematic analysis. The photographs taken by the young people were selected by the group for analysis and the most photographed elements were identified. The dialogs and reflections collectively debated regarding the photographs were heard and transcribed for the crossing of the different perspectives. In this process, key themes emerged such as urban poverty and insecurity, the importance of green areas, of the ethical and aesthetic dimension of public spaces. The group also argued that the city should be freer for creative expression and there should be more democratic access to art, especially in the most deprived communities. These emerging topics identified from the thematic analysis are synthesized in table 2 below.

During the dialogs, one of the youngsters mentioned that at school the teachers "talk about participation, but they do not let us participate," an observation that was common among the remaining boys and girls of the group. On several occasions, the group complained about the

Table 2. Emerging topics identified after thematic analysis.

Challenges of Being Young	Relationship with the Community	Experiences of Participation and Nonparticipation in the Community and School
Struggling for freedom and opportunity to be involved in a community change.	Feelings of some lack of unity and solidarity among the community, and the sense of insecurity.	Feelings of powerlessness to participate and get involve in the community in the face of obstacles imposed by most of the parents and teachers.
Fear of loss of freedom and conflicts with family and society.		
Stereotype and prejudice associated with being young from a socially vulnerable community.	Willingness on the part of young people to appropriate community public spaces, as places for meeting, socialization among peers, freedom, and expression.	*Adultocentrism* in school and community: the excessive power and control exercised by adults that limit young people's autonomy and action in community life and in the different dimensions of their lives.
Social inclusion: strengthening the feeling of belonging and identity in the relationship with the community.		
To be and not to be heard and challenging the rules: the necessity to be understood, considered, and to disobey the rules when this does not happen.	Lack of effective listening to young people by local government and planning, in debates, in developing proposals for community change, and decision-making processes on issues that affect them.	School environment is not very encouraging to the participation and involvement of young people; students are excluded from intervening in the debate and decision-making processes about issues that involve them.

school environment, which did not encourage student's participation. Indeed, most of the group said they felt disregarded and discredited in and out of school by adults in general, just because they were younger. "They are always telling me to shut up," said a young girl, when the group was discussing young people getting involved in politics and proposing changes in the communities where they live. Although some young people felt, somehow, distant from public spaces due to the feeling of insecurity, they want to use them as spaces for socializing, and expressing themselves.

"If I had power, I would stop injustices in the world," said one of the young boys from the group, revealing a wish to be able to contribute to enhance his community. The boy was supported by one of the girls, who reinforced the idea by saying "we would like to do something more, but we don't have the power to do it. Sometimes, I feel the older ones don't believe we are capable." These research data and experiences allowed us to understand the willingness of these young people to become actively involved in building and improving their communities. At the same time, through the photographic exercises and the open-mindedness of collective debates, it was possible to observe the necessity of these young people to express themselves, and to be seen, heard, and considered by society and in several moments of decision on matters that concern them.

In a later stage, the photographs taken by the young people were printed, presented to local councillors, and displayed in a public exhibition in one of the city council galleries as shown in figure 4. At the opening of the exhibition, a debate was held between the young research partners and local government councillors, with the intent of reaching out and influencing policy-decision-makers. In this way, through their photographs, the group tried to draw attention to aspects to be improved in their reality, to a positive change in the lives of the communities to which they belong.

City councillor's, a teacher from local school, a social researcher and the rest of the community were mobilized to see the exhibition of the young people's photographs and to listen to their concerns and demands for change. The young people talked about their motivations and proposed to the local government be more attentive to the needs of young and old people, to give them a safer and more dignified life in their community. The young group also suggested closer and more collaborative relations between youngsters and policymakers, and the creation of dialogue spaces where it is possible for young people to participate and propose practical solutions to the community challenges. This was a moment that it was possible to observe that the group felt safe and empowered to talk about their daily challenges and suggest more equal opportunities and justice.

A member of a local government listened and noted the speeches of each young person, stating that it was a unique and particularly important moment of listening, reflection, and debate on issues that concern younger people. Especially when it comes to young people from socially vulnerable communities, who usually do not find spaces to be heard and seen. The councillor admitted that the community borough does not have mechanisms to reach out to young people to listen to their needs and to consult them to be part of decision-making on issues that affect them. However, he reported that he would take their suggestions into consideration to improve aspects of life in the community where they live, such as outdoor play equipment's. He even said that the community playing space was already being renovated and improved.

Concluding remarks

This research emerges from seeking to understand the social and education conditions that young people from disadvantaged urban communities find to exercise their citizen participation. Based on participatory and visual methods as photovoice, this study aims to contribute to reflection and debate on the challenges of formal, non-formal and informal education for citizenship. Simultaneously, it is considered that practical learning for citizen participation should be co-constructed in the relation to the diversity of cultures, communities, and forms of expression of young people, as well as their needs, and desires for affirmation as citizens with rights.

The participatory methodological approach mobilized in this research affirmed the importance of mechanisms for youth empowerment (Morrell, 2004), which facilitate the construction of citizenship within the community. The involvement of young people as partners in the research allowed better understanding of their diversity of cultures and forms of action. Research skills were encouraged among young people, so they could explore their relationship with their city and communities. This partnership facilitated proximity to young people from vulnerable communities and open the way for further reflections on young people's access and opportunities for participation. In this way, the practice of photovoice made it possible for the group to look at their communities reflexively, allowing an interaction and open debate about their photographs, producing critical perspectives, and suggesting proposals for change.

The city could define itself as a space produced by its citizens and for that, it is necessary to recognize and consider the participation rights of those who are excluded from it, namely young people. Thus, it is required to expand participation spaces for youngsters beyond what is limited by their role as students, extending their actions and learnings outside the school (Madeira, 2013). To build an inclusive and participatory city, it is required to create spaces for collaborative learning and to know how to incorporate the contribution of young people (Garcia et al., 2019). In addition to understanding and recognizing the social diversity of these marginalized urbanites, it is crucial to

acknowledge the value and role that young people have in the social structure and community-building processes.

The European strategy that promotes the involvement of young people in democratic participation must also pay attention to the practical obstacles that young people face in their daily lives that limit their participation. We refer to the social inequalities and urban socio-spatial segregation that constitute barriers to access to important liberties and rights, such as the right to participation as an exercise of citizenship. These barriers are compounded by other obstacles based on age, social origin, gender, ethnicity, religion, and capabilities discrimination that keep young people excluded from participating while remaining subordinate to the adults' agendas (Madeira, 2013).

The participatory research experience helped us to understand how young people can appropriate several resources to claim their right to participate, to express themselves, and to contribute actively to research. In this study, we observe that the practice of visual methods with young people strengthened the construction of a social and educational portrait. Photovoice generated a dynamic learning process, in which each young person researched, reflected, and represented his or her community collectively, sharing subjectivities, which could then be translated into collective experiences. Photovoice's experience also allowed people involved – researcher and research partners – to be brought closer, mitigating asymmetric power relations, and nurturing more horizontal interactions. The visual participatory research methods enabled the co-construction of knowledge, which incorporated the opportunity of this group to create and explore different views and reflections about their community and city, and to produce critical perspectives and new meanings. This process, supported by open spaces of co-creation, plural dialogs and creative and emancipatory experiences, materialized possibilities of expression and participation.

It is by exercising the right to participate that young people learn to participate. In this way, schools are expected to be responsible for the education of citizens, but it is also in the daily challenges of communities that young citizens learn to be so. Citizenship should be promoted and practiced at school in connection with life outside school, in the different contexts of life in society, namely in the use, construction and transformation of the city. The school and the local communities that surround it are important fields for the development of educational and participatory experiences, and knowledge production. By recognizing the citizen participation of young people as a social and community project of relevance on a global scale, is strengthened a collective commitment to democracy and social justice.

Therefore, contexts may be created where rights may be claimed; in this case, the right to the participation of younger people, creating forms of expression and action that embody new educational and social intervention experiences (Madeira, 2013). Opportunities may arise for these young people to take advantage of various resources and participate equally (Gaitán & Liebel, 2011), and in dialogue with diversity (Araújo, 2007), in the creation of spaces to produce transformative actions in their community (Freire, 1997). In this context, "many possible worlds" can be built (Santos, 2005, p. 15), with creativity, inclusion, and social justice.

ORCID

Ana Dias Garcia http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4723-8561
Eunice Macedo http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1200-6621
João Queirós http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3500-5587

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