Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wpic20

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Available online: 07 Jan 2010

To cite this article: Lorenza Dallago, Francesca Cristini, Douglas D. Perkins, Maury Nation & Massimo Santinello (2009): The Adolescents, Life Context, and School Project: Youth Voice and Civic Participation, Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, 38:1, 41-54

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10852350903393434

Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, 38:41–54, 2010

ISSN: 1085-2352 print/1540-7330 online
DOI: 10.1080/10852350903393434

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The Adolescents, Life Context, & School project was developed in a suburban, residential area of Padova, Italy, and involved three classes of 12-year-old children. Across three months, children observed, documented, and talked about their own life contexts in order to voice problems to decision makers. Both teachers and council members played key roles in supporting the project and the children's work. Limited quantitative results showed an increase in reported neighborhood civic responsibility compared to a control group of students. Qualitative evaluation results demonstrated strong interest. The involvement by teachers, local government, and students in the project led to real actions and improvements in the neighborhood and school and to the creation of an official youth affairs council. The program provides a model for service-learning and organized student civic engagement.

KEYWORDS community engagement, early adolescence, empowerment, mixed methods

We thank all the pupils, school teachers, school administrators, and each member of the local community council for contributing to this project. This research was funded by the Italian Ministry of Research and Universities.

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In fields such as education or community and developmental psychology, both children and society are thought to benefit from young people voicing their opinions and actively participating in social problem solving (Chawla, 2002; Youniss, Bales, Christmas-Best, Diversi, McLaughlin, & Silbereisen, 2002). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely ratified international agreement, identifies participation as one of the guiding principles of the Convention. Article 12 outlines the rights that children have in relation to participating in decision-making processes.

Research suggests that the benefits of consulting the views of young people and enabling them to participate in decision making go way beyond just addressing their concerns. Some theories suggest that participation promotes healthy behavioral and psychological development. Prout (2000), for example, views youth participation as a form of social investment that concentrates on improving children's present and future well-being and civic participation. At the individual level, research showed that opportunities to speak out about one's own opinions and to influence decision makers is strongly connected to individual well-being and empowerment (Cantor & Sanderson, 2003). Children who have the opportunity to participate gain new social skills, leadership and management abilities, cohesion, higher levels of motivation and initiative, both in and outside the school context, and, especially, bonding with the context where participation takes place, sense of social responsibility, and self-efficacy (Greenwald, Pearson, Beery, & Cheadle, 2006; Prout, 2000; Yates & Youniss, 1999). These skills may, in turn, allow participation to serve as a "protective factor" against various risky behaviors (Greenwald et al., 2006; Vieno, Nation, Perkins, & Santinello, 2007). Furthermore, participation contributes to a common good by promoting citizenship. Cooperation with others and exploring one's own life contexts are part and parcel of civic participation and facilitate tolerance, civic and other competencies, and common values—all relevant characteristics for active citizenship in the future (Checkoway, Allison, & Montoya, 2005; Hart, 1992).

Despite social and psychological benefits of youth participation and Italy's ratification of the UN Convention, the opinions of young people in Italy are rarely heard and children rarely show much interest in social issues until they go to university (Maurizio, 2001). Among the possible reasons for the lack of involvement is that there are few initiatives that allow children to participate in social change and most initiatives are adult driven (Ameglio & Caffarena, 2005; Tonucci & Risotto, 2001). Hart's ladder (1992) proposed different levels of participation: from manipulation to decoration to tokenism to young people consulted and informed to young person–initiated and shared decisions. The author suggested that most forms of adult-driven initiatives to include children and youth amount to little more than manipulation in which youth have no real power or control. Hodgson (1995) identified five conditions for empowering children and young people, namely: access to

those in power; access to the relevant information; choices between different options; support from a trusted independent person; and means of appeal or complaint if things go wrong. Initiatives that encompass these conditions might promote more involvement among children and youth. There are multiple ways in which such involvement might occur, for instance, allowing youth to offer their views on community issues. We think this is relevant because it allows children to understand their own contexts and the salience of their involvement in working to improve the context. Children's ideas can grow from everyday life situations and knowledge. Experiences of the nearby environment help the child get an understanding of social life, of role behavior, and of the social dynamics of society as well as give them a sense of identity (Gorlitz, Harloff, Mey, & Valsiner, 1998).

Participation of young people is a topic of increasing interest in Italy (Francescato & Tomai, 2003; Mannarini, 2004). Developing new methods and conditions to promote it, and programs and settings to provide outlets for it, has become a priority (Martini & Torti, 2003; Vieno et al., 2007). Although there is a global consensus on the need for youth participation, evaluation of interventions to promote youth civic participation has been limited. Furthermore, in most cases these interventions are adult-driven, with adults playing the crucial role in youths' participation by determining the conditions to be addressed, and facilitating processes through which youth participate. As Shucksmith and Hendry (1998) commented on this type of youth participation activity, "Little of the pressure to participate is coming from young people themselves" (p. 6). Therefore these interventions do little to address the need of increasing and promoting participation among youth.

A second approach to youth civic participation has been interventions focused on promoting social change and political action. These interventions are more likely to be initiated by youth, but are much less common. Furthermore, other than anecdotal descriptions, there have been relatively few systematic evaluations of the processes and outcomes of these interventions. Among the notable exceptions, Morsillo and Prilleltensky (2007) examined the impact of a community change intervention with a group of 10th-grade Australian students. To our knowledge, there have been no evaluations of this type of intervention among Italian youth.

The current study describes and examines the outcomes of the *Adolescents, Life Context & School* (AC&S) project. Using youths' everyday experiences, this project offered opportunities to youth to participate in shared understanding of their life contexts and in decision making that affects their lives. The goal was to increase individual empowerment in terms of promoting students' active role in the school and community through civic *participation*, increasing their knowledge and understanding of the life of their local community, its problems and the root causes of those problems (*critical awareness*), and developing, through relevant experiences,

participants' personal growth, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (*control*; Zimmerman, 2000). To reach this goal the AC&S Project: provided opportunities to listen to different opinions and weigh options and consequences; linked school lessons to real life experiences; developed experiences geared to have a meaningful and relevant impact on participants' personal growth (e.g., organizing a final community event); connected youth to local decision makers; and allowed young people to share their ideas with them and build common projects.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVENTION

In December, 2004, we conducted a study (the AC&S survey) in five middle schools on early-adolescent well-being, risk behaviors, and context perceptions (neighborhood, school, peer group, and family). In four out of five schools we gave the teachers and the principal a common final report, but in one school we decided to do something more: to work with the students involved in the survey to help them understand, and comment on, the results and to sharpen their critical understanding of their community contexts.

What convinced us to conduct this project were both the limited impact our prior research had on students' lives and our desire to collaborate with young people to help them express their opinions on the data and on their life contexts. We wanted to help them develop their opinions on things of importance to them and express their ideas about the neighborhood in which they live.

The neighborhood selected for the AC&S Project is a middle-class residential area, somewhat isolated from the city center. We chose the neighborhood because children there have good freedom of movement (it is an area relatively safe from crime and heavy traffic) yet rarely travel to the city center. The scientific coordinators of the project built a partnership with the local council to create a connection between children and decision makers and ensure that viewpoints of young people were included in the analysis of local development policies.

We asked students if they wanted to build this process with us, and we proposed to develop dissemination materials about their ideas and proposals to improve their life context. As coordinators of the project we tried to be facilitators of new knowledge, giving students hints and tools, but we were mostly instruments in the hands of the students to help them develop their ideas. Therefore, students had a say in each activity we proposed and had the power to propose, develop, and implement their own new activities.

The first tool we gave to the students was a short review of the main results of the AC&S survey conducted in their school: the information was context-specific (family, peer, school, neighborhood). We gave them a short descriptive report of the main results of the study. They had small group discussions to better understand the data, plan further actions, better

understand the chosen life context, and find a way to report their comments. Adults were only facilitators of the discussion. The students were actively involved and were the only ones to decide what to do and how to present their ideas. The second tool we gave them (based on Photovoice methods; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005) was a camera, so they could also take pictures during their life context analysis. The third tool we gave them was a set of discussion points, including items such as: What do you like in your neighborhood (or family, school, peer group)? What do you dislike? What is there to change? What would you propose to improve your neighborhood (or family, school, peer group)? Each discussion developed in each class or group was summarized on a chart that was hung in the corridor, so other students could see the result of the class/group's discussion. The fourth and final tool we gave them was our team and computers when they started ordering their ideas and building the dissemination materials they had chosen: a class worked on a magazine for parents and teachers, another on a comic strip for other students, and a third one on some posters for the entire community.

Each of the dissemination materials made was derived from our data, developed the new information gained from students, and finally focused on students' opinions and proposals. Each small working group had to organize their work autonomously. Teachers were involved and were asked to integrate students work into school work. The coordinators of the project met the students once a week, for nine weeks during school hours and during some optional afternoons, to monitor their work and to propose new topics for discussion. The coordinators also gave advice to teachers and trained them on specific techniques (brainstorming, problem-solving), that could be useful in continuing discussions in class.

The local council gave the students the opportunity to use a public room to make a final "show" of their ideas, and invited the students to participate to a council assembly and to present their ideas. The students proposed to build new posters with the materials they collected (photos, comments) and a video on some main topics (meeting points, green areas and school) they want to develop during the council assembly. The project took place from March to June 2005. The final presentation was publicly displayed for a week in the district's municipal hall and then in the school's main entrance hall for two weeks.

PROCEDURE, PARTICIPANTS, AND PSYCHOMETRIC SCALES

To evaluate the project we used both a process and an impact evaluation (quasi-experimental design—pre-, post-, post- with nonrandomly assigned control group). The control group came from a nearby neighborhood, but from the same school (same principal, and in some cases, the same teachers).

The process evaluation was done using multiple methods: observations during our meetings concerning group climate and youth involvement, a researchers' debriefing after each meeting, asking teachers each week about the work done, and asking children in their final questionnaire to give us their impression about how work was carried out. The first two tools helped us to make in-progress changes to answer specific needs or problems developed during each meeting with each class. For the impact evaluation we used a self-report questionnaire with closed-ended questions, both for the intervention group and for a control group. The intervention group also had to answer some open-ended questions about what they had learned and how they evaluated the intervention they were involved in.

The intervention and control groups were composed of six classes from the local middle school. The target questionnaire was completed by a total of 132 students (49.2% experimental group students, 50.8% control group students) representing 46.6% boys ($n = 62$) and 53.4% girls ($n = 70$). We chose second-year (12-year-old) students based on the AC&S survey results and teachers' accounts, in which that cohort seemed less committed to school and more "at risk" than other years: for example they showed higher risk behaviors than younger and older students. Teachers told us that this age group was less involved in other school activities, less well-adjusted to school than were first-years, and that they were less stressed by school work than third-year students, who had to face final exams. Our choice of 12-year-old children was also due to the fact that children this age generally are quite actively engaged in their nearby physical environment, taking a considerable interest in it, being able and allowed to move around rather freely on their own, and spending much time outdoors (Arthur, Hawkins, Pollard, Catalano, & Baglioni, 2002; Maurizio, 2001; Vieno et al., 2007).

A questionnaire was administered before the intervention, after the work with the classes, and after the assembly with the local council (two months after the end of the activity). The questionnaire for the evaluation was created to measure the following factors: process factors (perception of working in a group, work group efficacy, trust in relationships with adults) and outcome factors (self-efficacy, empowerment, civic responsibility toward the neighborhood, neighborhood attachment). For this study we focused on factors considered to be effects of participation (Cantor & Sanderson, 2003; Greenwald et al., 2006; Prout, 2000; Yates & Youniss, 1999).

Self-efficacy was measured using the Global Self Efficacy scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) composed by 10 items, such as "I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough." Responses were rated on a 4-point-scale from 1 = "True" to 4 = "False." Alpha reliability for the scale was 0.73 at the first and second waves, 0.75 at the third wave.

Empowerment was measured by an eight-item scale (Ammon, Chi, & Furco, 1999), such as: "I can make a positive difference in my life." Responses were rated on a four-point scale (1 = Disagree strongly, 2 = Disagree,

3 = Agree, 4 = Agree strongly). Alpha reliability for the 8-item scale was 0.56 at the first and second wave, 0.55 at the third wave.

Civic responsibility toward the neighborhood included five items (Ammon, Chi, & Furco, 1999). This scale included items such as "Being involved in a program to improve my community is important for me." Responses were rated on a four-point scale (1 = Disagree a lot, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, 4 = Agree a lot). Alpha reliability for the 5-item scale was 0.79 at the first wave, 0.84 at the second wave, 0.81 at the third wave.

Neighborhood attachment was measured by a three-item Neighborhood Attachment Scale (Arthur et al., 2002). An example of these items is "If I had to move, I would miss the neighborhood." Responses were on a four-point scale from 1 = "Disagree strongly" to 4 = "Agree strongly." Alpha reliability was 0.78 at the first wave, 0.79 at the second wave, 0.85 at the third wave.

RESULTS

The outcome evaluation showed a statistically significant result relating to only one factor: civic responsibility toward the neighborhood (see Figure 1). The analysis used was a general linear model for repeated measures using the outcome as dependent variable and the group (experimental vs. control) as the between-subjects factor. The initial analysis, run with all three waves, did not show any significant effects. The next analysis was run using only the pretest and the post-posttest, which showed a statistically significant effect of the interaction between time (pretest vs. the post-posttest) and group variable ($F = 4.85$; $p < .05$). Students in the

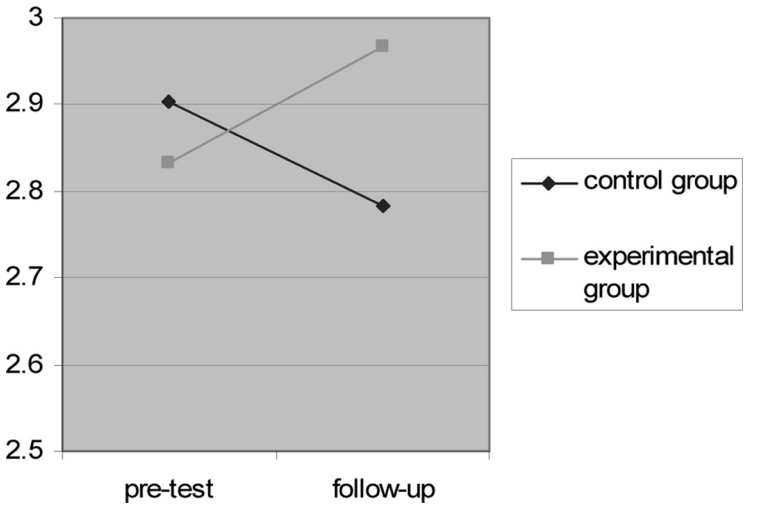

FIGURE 1 Civic responsibility about the neighborhood means of experimental and control group.

experimental group showed an increase in civic responsibility toward the neighborhood at the post-posttest, whereas the control group students reported less civic responsibility toward the neighborhood at the post-posttest than at the pretest.

Qualitative Process and Outcome Evaluation

Qualitative results

During the entire project most students were highly committed and engaged in the activities. They worked hard during the time they spent with us and during school hours and after-school hours to finish their dissemination materials. During the posttest they had to answer some open questions about the project, saying what they liked, what they learned, and what they think should be changed. Most of the comments were positive. Students pointed out that: (1) they gained new knowledge about their life contexts: "It was interesting to understand which problems are more relevant and which concern youths more. Understanding our contexts was important to propose useful changes"; "I've learned a lot about opportunities and weaknesses of my neighborhood. It's strange—I've always lived here but I didn't know most of these things"; (2) they learned how to improve their life, and how they have the possibilities and capacities to propose useful and real changes: "I've learned many things such as that different people can have different points of view or feelings toward an issue, and how to propose changes"; "I've learned how we can all improve our life, if we work together"; (3) they understood that it is relevant to participate for community benefit: "I'm really happy I was useful to give older people ideas on how to improve our neighborhood."

These comments reflect the three dimensions (critical awareness, control, and participation) that were the focus of our work. Apart from that, students were also happy because they had the opportunity to work in small groups with no interference from adults, to share ideas with others, to feel that other people respected and valued their opinion and ideas, and to display their work to many people.

Unexpected results

The most interesting results of this intervention were the least expected. First, there was a high interest in the intervention from media, showing the novelty of such an experience at the national and local level. The intervention was also presented by school teachers in various school-related events, as a "good practice" to follow.

Another unexpected, but hoped-for, result was that some of the requests made by students were followed by real action: the green spaces in the neighborhood were cleaned, the walls in the school were painted,

and the school play-field reconstructed and repaired. Real action followed student requests. Furthermore, students used some of the reflections about life contexts in other school activities, for example in the final school show: they played some "real life situations" in different contexts (family, peer group, school) expressing some of the messages we developed during the intervention. The drama teacher said that they were very lively in proposing plots and ideas, and that they asked her to change the play she planned to do to fit their needs.

Last but not least, the most important outcome was that we helped the development of a more empowering community: the local council, observing the results of the project, decided to start a new initiative, giving a more structured framework to youth participation. They decided to create a youth council, involving other local schools, to permanently include students' point of view. Our aim to hear youths' voices was reached, and it appears that it will be maintained for a long time.

DISCUSSION

The evaluation of this program showed, on the one hand, noteworthy effects about how the children participated and were involved in the activities, about what they were able to recognize as needs of their community (school and neighborhood). We offered them tools to help them ask for what they thought was important for their local community. The partnership with the local council played a positive role in the project and helped youth to obtain what they asked for. The creation of a structured means to increase children's participation at the local level (permanent youth council), was the true realization of our aim.

As the lack of confidence and apathy toward political processes increase, a new generation of citizens must be educated about how to build a strong democracy. But, active citizenship may not happen overnight when a person reaches voting age: it must be learned "by doing." We hope that participation first in our intervention and then in the youth council will be good starting points to increase the interest of youth in civic life and improve their knowledge and trust in democratic decision making. Comments of children involved in the present project were positive enough to let us think we helped them truly participate and that our efforts were not made in vain.

On the other hand, the quantitative outcome evaluation showed statistically significant effects only for one outcome. These results lead us to a reflection about some characteristics of the program. Before all, we are aware about the low dosage or program intensity of this intervention, because we developed only 10 meetings with the students. Previous research showed that a sufficient dosage is an important criterion for program effectiveness (Nation et al., 2003), so this may be a reason for the small effects found in

the quantitative outcome evaluation. Also the duration of the total program was quite short (about 3 months) and this can explain why we see significant results in the comparison between pretest and post-posttest, but not by the comparison between pretest and posttest. Furthermore, this represents just a preliminary qualitative analysis: more in-depth analysis may reveal other patterns underlying youths' opinions. Nevertheless, the obtained qualitative results are remarkable and we hope to re-develop and re-evaluate the program on a larger sample, with a higher dosage and involving the teachers as an active part of the staff. We genuinely believe that youth are "assets," that they can become "active agents of social change" or "powerful decision-makers." We also believe in the importance of giving them tools to express their point of view in the most useful ways.

Working with 12-year-old school children has indeed been rewarding in many ways, but we do think it important also to focus on younger and older children and their different relationships to the physical environment. One age group cannot be said to represent all children. Therefore we now would like to follow up on our original intervention idea to involve multiple age groups.

Limitations and Challenges

There were several challenges that limited the intervention process and the conclusions that may be drawn from the present study. First, the timeframe of the intervention was just a few hours per week over a total of only three months. We acknowledge that it is difficult for a brief intervention to accomplish behavioral change, and it may be even less likely to produce systematic community change. We addressed this by making the intervention as intensive as possible, including three specific techniques: (a) the number of psychologists who worked in the project: every time we met a class at least four trained researchers were present to more easily and effectively follow, support, and capture all the activities of the small group work; (b) the involvement of teachers who gave class time to the students to finish their work; (c) eliciting a strong commitment from the students who met outside of school time to work on the project.

A second major challenge was the evaluation. It was limited by four significant concerns: (a) the control group was similar, but we were not able to control for other activities done at the same time in the control group; (b) the scales we used were weak and not very useful to track change; (c) the sample size was small: this, in combination with the brief intervention, makes it likely that the analysis would have limited power to detect the overall effects of the interventions; (d) the posttest was done, out of necessity, before the final meeting with the local council. Finally, the innovative nature of the intervention made it necessary to focus the majority of the available resources on implementation of the intervention rather than on evaluation.

Lessons Learned

Despite these limitations, we believe the evaluation provides some valuable insights into important factors affecting youths' civic involvement. Among the most important insight is that building a partnership with the local council is an important key to a successful and effective process. This is something Italian practitioners tended to avoid in the past: usually when someone proposes an intervention in schools, collaboration with other agencies and associations is nominal or non-existent. We think that it is not only useful but necessary, especially to give visibility and continuity to the project. From our experience we think that this collaboration can be easily achieved if (a) the planners have a good knowledge of the context they will work in (which institutions are present; who could be interested in the project); (b) the institutions are contacted at the beginning of the intervention, when their contributions and ideas can be included in the development of the activities; (c) researchers ask institutions to provide resources that are for them inexpensive (e.g., rooms) but relevant for the project; (d) visibility for the products of the interventions and the collaboration is possible (media coverage, community events, publications).

Second, collaborating with teachers is time-consuming but another key-factor in the project. Having teacher commitment and understanding was hard, but once we gained it, everything was easier. Integrating some of the activities of the project in curricular activities, giving hints to the teachers on how and which tasks to propose during school-time was useful. It underlined for students the importance of the project as a school activity. Furthermore, teachers' new abilities, which were gained with the project, are a new resource for the school. This resource will last despite our departure from the school.

Third, having multiple classes at one time to work with was critical for helping us reflect on the activities proposed, and in forcing flexibility in community practitioners' work. Every activity was faced in a different way in each of the classes we worked with and this was a great source of information for us. It was like having three pilot studies going on at the same time. As well, confronting ideas and perceptions among students in different classes made the whole project more creative and challenging.

A final lesson learned is the importance of trusting students' abilities. Every practitioner that was involved in the field agreed that respect and non-judgment were the essence of our conduct with the children. This was not always easy because students were challenging, provocative, and sometimes seemed not very interested. Respecting their ideas, reinforcing motivated students, using a caring but not paternalistic way of communicating, and showing real interest and respect for their ideas were ultimately necessary ingredients to gain students' trust and commitment. Debriefing after each session helped us regain motivation and immediately identify and correct errors.

Future research must address definitional issues of *what* constitutes youth civic participation and voice. *How* do they relate, not only to individual rights and responsibilities, but to the development of connectedness (sense of community) and a commitment to selfless service to others and to the common good? *Why* do youth choose to participate (or not) in civic activism—what motivates them and how can that knowledge be used to improve youth civic engagement opportunities? *When*—at what ages or cognitive, emotional, or moral developmental stages—are the optimal windows for achieving the greatest, most lifelong impacts on building civic mindedness and behavioral habits? *Where* are the opportunities, not only for youth civic engagement (through schools, clubs, religious organizations, advocacy groups, etc.), but what are the potential roles for the public and private sectors, media, and youth culture? And how does youth participation vary geographically both within and across countries and regions? Finally, *who* is participating in what forms of activism (or not participating at all) and how do participation and its influences and impacts vary across diverse populations of youth? These are universal questions for all nations and the global society to urgently address.

In sum, the present study highlighted the great potential for involving youth in social action. Participation is a high priority in Italy: Italian Law 285/1997 aims to achieve empowerment and participation among youth to increase their well-being. Unfortunately, despite the need for meaningful opportunities for youth participation, only 14% of the projects funded by the law explicitly promote positive action for children's rights, and most of them are information or public awareness campaigns. We believe this is why the present intervention received so much interest.

AC&S project was different from adult-driven youth participation processes: it tried to follow both Hart's and Hodgson's advice in developing youth participation and empowerment. Although the project was initiated by adults, and not by youth as recommended by Hart's theory of youth participation, decision making was shared with the young people: they had the possibility to choose what to do and how to do it. Adults had only a supportive role. We tried to enable them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults, but to identify their own opinions and considerations. Students were well informed about the project, their role, and the roles of adults. Furthermore they had: (1) real access to those in power: they met the local council and had the opportunity to show them their ideas; (2) access to the relevant information: first from AC&S survey results, then from other sources of information they found during their work (other archival data, observations, interviews); (3) choices between different options: in each step of the program they had different options from which to choose; (4) support from a trusted independent person: the presence of researchers in the school was embraced by the students and we all developed trust and faith in each other; (5) means of appeal or complaint

if things go wrong: this was addressed by the development of the youth council.

We can say that the AC&S project was different from projects driven by adults: rather than pressuring students to participate, we invited them to build the process and they responded to that challenge and opportunity. Children can have important roles to play in our understanding of problems and developing solutions. Consequently, we believe that the definition of citizenship includes the active participation in promoting the common good of all citizens, including children and youth. There is an urgent need to develop effective ways to engage youth in this process. The present study provided an exemplar of one way community psychologists in Italy approached this need using multi-method action-research.

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