

# Inclusion through participation: approaches, strategies and methods

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## **Abstract**

Making space for the inclusion of individuals is the foundation of any participatory process. What is required is a willingness to give up some power of control over situations, understood in political, scientific or technical terms, and a recognition of the “access rights” of all stakeholders to decision-making. Accordingly, in participation processes, inclusion and exclusion assume special importance. In a debate that is essentially structured around possibilities, but also the critical issues that are closely related to participation experiences, analysis reflects on the merits of initiatives put in place to identify impact and evaluate outcomes. Seeking a correlation between inclusion and participation means trying to analyse the processes whereby participation possibilities are closely linked to the key questions of inclusion: What are the reasons and the opportunities for participation? Who are the subjects involved? Which relationships can be established? How and what should be assessed for similar patterns? In our paper, we will deepen this issue in a theoretical way and with an analysis of a project of participatory planning which highlight several categories of inclusive participation, the ways of promotion of educational alliances and some model risks identified in a specific context.

**Keywords:** Active Citizenship, Participatory Planning, Coeducation, Community Development

## **1. Participate and include - why?**

The consensus around a participative style in the management of individual contributions has almost become a requirement or a new standard in the governance of public actions and has led some to highlight the possible risk of a «rhetoric of participation» (Blondiaux, 2001).

It is not over-naive or simplistic to claim that we must ask ourselves how participatory processes can be promoted with marginalized people experiencing discomfort and deviance or those whose social ties are fragile. It is also difficult to define the space for dialogue with people who are not interested in

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expressing their own point of view in front of others or who reject communication perceived as an active and passive instrument of power.

Some fundamental questions immediately arise: what skills are required to participate? How can the conditions for participation, expression and finding a voice and a role in participatory spaces be deepened?

Obviously, the characteristics assumed today by participatory procedures and their implementation methods cannot be structured as in the 1960s and 1970s, but what seems undisputed today is the assertion of a «deliberative imperative» (Blondiaux, Sintomer, 2002).

Increasingly complex and often-ambiguous phenomena require negotiation of meaning, while concern to ensure that actions are effective has intensified the focus on greater involvement of the targets of intervention and action.

In pedagogical terms, thinking about participation means adopting a specific forward-looking perspective that questions active engagement in reality. The dynamic involvement of people draws out the educational challenge and is measured in transformative action.

However, the invitation to adopt participatory processes in education can be subject to criticism if the principle is stated too generally, with no specification from the perspective of applicability, to individuals and groups, or indication of room for manoeuvre. In fact, we might ask what spaces for compromise, for the formation of alliances or for comparison are really needed for people to be genuinely able to participate.

Hence, the need to recognize that the aims of each person involved may be subject to significant variation. Several issues may be in play: concern for legitimacy in a process; an attempt to form a reflexive attitude to one's own practices; experimentation with a strategy for choice validation before a hostile or hesitant audience or hierarchy; the desire for recognition.

In short, the construction of alliances between different individuals requires: agreements that enable needs, expectations and mutual interest to be defined; identification of the types of skills and knowledge that can be intertwined and activated at different stages of the participation process; definition of how the different individuals can take ownership, share, discuss and disseminate the results and change their own practices.

This type of analysis puts the emphasis on fundamental aspects of participation, i.e. on the measurement and configuration of powers and abilities. The approach based on joining up powers, abilities and participation offers us a promising route for exploration of the links between the most specific dimensions of individual behaviour, the real abilities and expectations of people involved in participation and for establishing them within a broader institutional and organizational framework. This makes it possible to describe the real dynamics of participation by identifying discrepancies between

expectations of intervention and what they are able or unable to do – i.e. .to illustrate how these dynamics can change power relations, if they can be changed.

This seems an interesting line of research as instead of asking whether or not participation transforms or democratizes public action, it seeks to discover how public action is transformed by participation.

## 2. Relations between subjects

If, for the purpose of redistribution of powers and repositioning, participation assumes a willingness to engage on the one hand and to give ground on the other, what risks being left to one side is the type of relationships that subjects can objectively form, that they subjectively hope for or, even, that they are allowed to maintain institutionally.

Due to the characteristics and conditions of the context of participatory processes, the levels of impact to be considered are different. In particular, participation intercepts issues relating to the representation of social groups: which individuals are involved (inclusion) and, conversely, which individuals are excluded (exclusion)? Moreover, attention is also paid to consideration of aspects concerning the legitimacy of decisions: how can the information that is useful for participatory processes be accessed and how do these have an impact on actions?

The levels of information, training and awareness of people are therefore central matters for discussion. In fact, it is necessary to check the extent to which these matters are present and distributed. Reflection is needed on the issue of the promotion of the capacities that make the principle of equal rights more realistic and practical.

The challenge, then, is no longer merely to provide time for consultation, but to develop new modalities in relation to information sharing, the range of actors involved, their representativeness, the different stages of the decision-making process and the various operational support tools.

The development of individuals cannot ignore the formation of a “suitable” set of expectations, ambitions, desires, values and ideals. Working towards such a change means addressing the distribution of the capacity available to people, because if it were asymmetrical, the possibility of evaluating the alternatives of choice and the scope of the issues at stake would be different.

The issue takes on a clear educational connotation because promoting development means promoting the formation of critical awareness in people, encouraging a complex subjectivity able to define personal goals and individual values.

Preparing comparative situations that favour a “generative” conversation between interlocutors transforms the roles of the individuals involved and modifies orientation with regard to what is deemed interesting and useful to know, but which does not leave the hierarchical structure of the processes unchanged.

Ivan Illich warned, with that professional power, in his opinion, «is a specialized form of the “privilege to prescribe”» (Illich, 2008).

The following description of participation levels is useful in this context (Serbati, Milani, 2013):

- at the first level, named *Being Told*, the individuals involved are informed, but decisions are taken unilaterally by professionals; the condition of the subject is passive;
- at the second level, *Being Consulted*, the opinions of those questioned are considered, but decisions are made by the professionals;
- at the third level, *Being a partner*, agreements are made with individuals by dialogue and negotiation;
- at the fourth level, *Being in control*, people's ability to make decisions for their own lives are fully respected.

Participation has an emancipatory and subversive role: «it is radical because it bridges the gap between those who govern and those who are governed, between those who decide and those whom the decisions affect; it presupposes delegation of powers and sovereignty and therefore casts serious doubt on established aspects of power» (Tarozzi, 2008, p. 129).

At the same time, attention and analysis should be focused on the potential for transformation and empowerment with regard to the nature of the relationships and social links established between individuals and which relates to the ability and possibility of finding solutions to the problems that affect them. Participation relies on the involvement of individuals in real-life situations, which engages them in assessment of the sense of the ideal principle. This is a specific application of the idea of A. Giddens «no rights without responsibilities» (1998, p. 66).

### 3. How and what to evaluate?

Clearly, participation and inclusion do not immediately present their results. Action taken in the short term may be governed by the principle of efficiency, which is replaced in the long term by the principle of pluralism. This means a process that is not improvised but is the result of preparation, documentation and study of the matter under review. Its degree of efficacy is therefore measured in the capacity of individuals to reflect on problems, to defend their

own ideas, propose innovative solutions and acquire better knowledge of the practical implications of the problems being discussed.

In participation studies during the last few years, a wide and diverse literature has been produced on both objects and approaches. Contributions have proliferated over time to such an extent that the theoretical apparatus around the concepts, themes and research issues may seem hesitant and somewhat confused.

Those analysing participation reflect on the development of ideas, tools and practices, which often embody a certain lack of definition, confusion and approximation that makes it difficult to describe participatory processes.

The stress on the emergence of "bottom-up" demands, on the combination of several approaches to favour the involvement of people, show that the different forms of participation cannot be reduced to a few hasty interviews or to close-up observation of some sequences. In-depth discussion of the proposals and methodologies requires intelligent attention to allow participation processes to be closely connected to the fundamental questions of the human and social sciences.

In particular, with regard to the indeterminacy of the evaluation criteria to be adopted, the following questions are specified: How can good participation be defined? When does a participation process qualify as successfully completed? Can good participation be defined using the criterion of wide numerical involvement of individuals? Can extended participation provide guarantees for taking the best decisions? Does this condition itself enable all opinions and all categories of the population to be represented? Is this a participatory process that has provided space for the expression of conflict or does it, conversely, deactivate critical sense and encourage consent and adherence to a pre-established hypothesis?

A possible outcome of extension of adherence and involvement is to judge the success of a participatory process by the number of people involved. On closer inspection, the numerical indicator of participation should not be crucial but should be replaced by a qualitative indicator that seeks to answer the following questions: "Who represents whom and what?", "Who does/tries to do what for/with whom?", "What needs are met?", "Are the legitimate interests of the various community sectors represented in the process?", "What competences and responsibilities are required?" (Quaderni della partecipazione Regione Emilia Romagna, p. 29).

There are several doubts regarding decision-making models that are unable to support processes with shared objectives and realistic and measurable results. In and of itself, if participation is not organized in terms of time and mode, there is a danger of undermining ability to make urgent and strategic choices.

Certainly, one useful tool for our analysis is Sherry Arnstein's scale. Developed in 1969, this "ladder of participation" of citizens in projects that affect them is still used today by sociologists to analyse the ways in which the public authorities inform, i.e. involve citizens in public decision-making. From the lowest 'rung' of the ladder, where participation is actually only apparent or manipulated, the diagram illustrates the sequence of the various levels of participation intensity, from simple "top-down" information transmission to full decision-making power in the hands of the participants on the top rung.

The model links eight stages in three levels:

*Level I – Non-participation:* refers to processes that assign an entirely passive role to people, with the aim of achieving consensus over pre-determined choices and plans.

*Manipulation and Therapy* (stages 1 and 2) describe a level of non-participation. The first two rungs assume a passive audience supplied with biased and incomplete information. The aim is to look after or instruct participants. The identified solution is put forward as the most suitable and the participation work seeks to garner public support through public relations. This is a distortion of participation.

*Level II – Cooperation and symbolic changes:* designates processes oriented towards improvement of projects and choices to be made, but which do not assign real power to people, because the decision-making stage remains the sole responsibility of those who govern these processes.

*Information* (stage 3): the public is informed about what will happen or what is happening and what has already happened; it is an important first step towards legitimacy. Too often, however, the emphasis is on a one-way flow of information involving the transmission of ideas and instructions with no feedback channel.

*Consultation* (stage 4): people enjoy the right to speak, expressed through various forms of investigation in relation to their needs, but do not have the power make their opinion count; this case also initiates a legitimate movement through the expression of people's own arguments and opinions about the identified issues. However, the limit of the consultation is that this «is not an obligation for taking certain decisions» (Mortari, 2008, p. 153).

According to the author, this is still a facade.

*Pacification* (stage 5): at this level, people start to have a certain degree of influence. It is a first concrete step towards the construction of relationships of effective interaction between those holding different levels of decision-making power. It provides for the inclusion of «a small number of representatives of a minority or of marginalized social groups within a committee or bodies working to solve particular social problems» (op cit., p. 153).

*Level III – Effective citizen power* denotes the direct involvement of people in decision-making.

*Partnership* (stage 6): the public starts to negotiate with decision-makers, from an agreement on roles, on responsiveness and levels of control for the processing and management of specific intervention programmes. On this rung of the ladder, power is redistributed through negotiation between citizens and power holders. The partnership is based on the existence of a «clear and binding agreement between public and private actors who undertake to carry out actions for the achievement of common objectives» (op cit., 153).

*Delegation of powers* (stage 7): this is partial but real delegation of powers. At this level, the ladder was reduced to the point where citizens play a significant role and accept responsibility for the actions to be carried out. Through delegation, institutions transfer a share of their decision-making power.

*Control by citizens* (stage 8): full delegation in decision-making and actions. «In the delegation of power citizens represent the majority in ad hoc committees appointed to respond to particular types of problems, and institutions shall give specific assurances that the decisions taken in these organizations will be taken into due consideration» (op cit., 154).

### 3.1 What can be expected from a participatory process?

The outcomes of the involvement of people are often uncertain, theoretical and vague, while the expected result would be an experience of *empowerment*, where the skills available at the end of the process are different from those available at the start.

It is important that subjects involved discern immediate benefits in proportion to their level of commitment. However, it must be said that the expected results of this process also affect the professionals involved in participatory processes. The transformation process affects all project stakeholders.

In light of the above, there are at least two directions in which the gain derived from the use of participatory processes must be identified.

Participatory devices are not an answer to the problem, but contribute to construction of the problem and of the processing of representations.

What clearly stands out is that participatory design changes relationships, which become complex and, sometimes, in order to establish a position, clash.

### 3.1.1 Active citizenship as a form of inclusion

Participatory planning is a dialogue-based methodology of social work that provides for the creation of networks in which various subjects (formal and informal individuals and groups) can define and develop lines of reflection and intervention for a response to the needs of the community, starting from the involvement of its members (Amirian 2012; Avril, Neem, 2014).

This model, connected with the promotion of inclusion, feeds active citizenship route maps and processes; a concept in progress (Gaventa, Tandom, 2010) which embodies the categories of commitment, reciprocity, solidarity and participation. These are all guidelines that call on the population to play an active part in their own life contexts so that they can become agents of change.

As mentioned above, the general principles and guidelines are not sufficient to promote participation, because the multiplicity and heterogeneity of situations require specifically targeted implementation procedures. The practice of citizenship becomes inclusive when, through participatory planning, there is an opportunity «to learn and practice autonomy, responsibility, co-operation and creativity [allowing] the development of a sense of self-esteem and the ability to compare oneself and accept ambiguity and contrasts. This implies a more holistic conception of citizenship»<sup>2</sup> as a means of mediation, comparison and cooperation, so that all participants have space for action and expression (with no exclusions).

It is essential, therefore, to design community interventions that enhance resources in contexts, by nurturing dialogue between the various training/education agencies, institutions, civil society, the third sector and associations. It means building representation channels also for people who are often marginalized because of weakness or unease and who, if not supported, are likely to remain invisibly excluded.

The move from a *top-down* approach (specialist interventions and subject-users) to a *bottom-up* approach (co-designed interventions and citizens-social actors) is not immediate and requires supportive measures to facilitate access to participation. The focus of meaning is participation that becomes policies stimulating dialogue between parties, building new approaches for community sustainability and change in the quality of democracy (Moro, 2013).

Implementing processes of negotiation and consultation of decision-making dynamics, creating real social participation, requires freedom of expression to be guaranteed for citizens in a continuous flow between reflection and action. Shared goals are often the outcome of a long process of reflexive activation of the parties and, at the same time, represent *the premise and promise of the*

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.edrim.enaip.fvg.it/htm/04/04\\_cap2\\_021.htm](http://www.edrim.enaip.fvg.it/htm/04/04_cap2_021.htm), last consultation: 15/05/2016.

*agreement of common routes* and the means of their construction and evaluation (Sen, 1997). Against the resignation of disengagement and frustrated delegation, the logic of cooperative governance emerges (Fazzi, 2003) and points to inclusion through shared responsibility.

The difficulty of triggering this methodology lies mainly in intercepting people (often experiencing self-exclusion or demarcated in pockets of *outsiders*), interests (using powerful detection tools) and needs (identifying community priorities) (Deluigi, 2016). Without doubt, the first step is to *raise awareness of citizenship and to take part in a context in which the individual has co-responsibility*.

We must therefore build devices that make participation visible and accessible to all, starting from the idea that «active citizenship is the glue that keeps society together. Democracy does not function properly without it, because effective democracy is more than just placing a mark on a voting slip [...]. By definition, participative democracy requires people to get involved, by playing an active role in their workplace, perhaps, or by taking part in a political organization or supporting a good cause. The area of activity does not matter. It is the commitment to the welfare of society that counts» (EESC, 2012). The logic of commitment is essential to understand the areas to be used to refine educational interventions by interweaving active citizenship, civil society and the third sector (Kenny et al., 2015) as effective promoters of active, relational, co-responsible and inclusive welfare (Cottam, 2011).

This means initiating networks of reflection not only from the formal but significantly substantial point of view to ensure that participation is «the fruit of a process, of a shared and agreed work, from its origins to the re-reading and evaluation of the work» (Barbini, D'Angelo, 2011, p. 9).

The value of links and social commitment determines ways of participation and citizenship and re-generates forms of democracy oriented towards the reconstruction of the social fabric, acceptance and proximity. This transformative action takes place only in shared experiences in space and time for dialogue and cooperation, in which personal projects become social agents of change.

Active citizenship and participatory planning can become gateways for inclusion and routes to the promotion of *empowering* and *empowered* open local realities for improvements in quality of life (Giacconi, 2015). In this sense, researchers, social workers, regions and families can cooperate to develop support networks for individuals, exploiting synergies of knowledge and skills. This perspective enables the co-creation of ideas and interventions focused on well-being where stimulus and reciprocal listening processes enable us to understand resources and to address, together, the needs of citizens who live in the city every day (Brandani, Tomisich, 2005).

It is now clear that participatory planning is challenging, requires medium-long term periods and is part of *an alternation between reflection and action*, through which participation is strengthened in its logic and strategies. The transformative dimension of this approach is not only seen in the outcome of the activities undertaken, but also in the modes of citizen inclusion in discussion and decision-making. Accordingly, there is no waiver or delegation of responsibility for anyone: cooperative citizenship forms can redefine *local welfare objectives by identifying critical matters and the potential of situated resources and creating relationship and alliance networks between the different frames of reference and organization of the social dimension*. In this way we will be able to generate inclusive places that creatively address the crisis of our times (Devastato, 2012) and promote the right and duty to build shared well-being, even in divergent forms (Avril, Neem, 2014).

As pedagogues and educators, the challenge we must take up is the following: «How can participatory reflection circuits be triggered with citizens and not only among professionals? This change must be considered to be the *evolution of a model that enables, recognizes and includes*, by tracing existing residual and active spaces, by “hooking” forms that are organized autonomously by citizens or that are disorganized and spontaneous, but still function, to create networks and alliances, and to consolidate proximity between the parties - individuals, entities and organizations» (Deluigi, 2016).

### 3.1.2 Planning together: alliance between educational agencies

Participatory projects can stimulate community movements on different levels, by interconnecting awareness and responsibility of heterogeneous individuals. The creativity of sharing can inspire multi-faceted visions, provided that there are sustainable plans and effective decision-making powers. The trajectories of empowerment and the centrality of social ties, including cooperation and participation (Cadei, 2010; Ripamonti, 2006) require care and assume a role that will be deepened through analysis of a project carried out in Italy.

“Maps for Integration” is a project designed according to the guidelines of the “Reseau International de Cités de l'éducation” (RICE): «creating, organizing and implementing, within a framework of co-education, activities for the cognitive, affective, social and cultural development of children, the educational enrichment of parents, the support of education providers in the field of School-Family-Community relations, together with the collaboration of all those who are eager to contribute to the emancipation of the City» (Pourtois & al., 2011).

The initiative took place in the city of Macerata during academic year 2011-2012 with the involvement of the University (Faculty of Education Sciences, now the Department of Education, Cultural Heritage and Tourism), a primary school (“Salvo D’Acquisto”, Circolo Panfilo, now Mestica Comprehensive School), families and the local authority. “Maps for Integration” was configured as an action-research project, for the promotion of the development of skills related to participation, citizenship and inclusion.

The concrete nature of these categories led us to seek out ways to activate cooperative dynamics in synergy with the locality, understood as a place where individual identity can be constructed: the place, in fact, is not only the physical space, but also a “landscape” of symbols, narratives, time limits, experiences, memories and recall. We therefore imagined the promotion of a mutual perspective, a multi-voiced narration able to represent a shared space. The city is a grid of representations that cuts across cultures and generations, stimulating dialogue and exchanges and it is important to explore public and private spaces as places of experience, including different ways of perceiving and describing them. In this project, the city of Macerata was seen as a citizenship, experimentation and social sustainability space and as an environment to be understood and explored so that individuals can establish themselves inside it, not only as “passing wanderers” but as inhabitants.

The project was carried out in four year-IV primary classes and involved 86 children and their families, reference classroom teachers, a teacher with a “bridging” role between school and university, the head of the school, a local councillor and two researchers from the University of Macerata. The different skills and areas of professionalism enabled the development of a network of reflections and planning open to the prospect of building a city of education. The consolidation of social, educational and training alliances between the social actors involved highlighted the importance of producing practical knowledge for the daily life of participants (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) who, in turn, become promoters and carriers of *new collective knowledge in and of reality*. The different logics of the participants are interconnected in order to generate sensory experiences for and with the children; to consolidate the planning networks between school and university; to combine the joint agreement and university as a concrete issue; to promote educational alliance trajectories with families.

The “Maps for Integration” project enabled the children to experience the urban space as an opportunity for participation through direct experiences, dialogue with peers and reference adults, the use of different languages, the acquisition of citizenship skills and the ability to put forward changes to improve the environment. The central role of participation of children has been recognized and demonstrates how their form of communication and experience

of the city can become a creative citizenship space, encouraging the growth of social forces oriented towards changing the urban fabric (Tonucci, 2005).

Seeing the city through the eyes of a child required adults to question the centrality of their own beliefs and certainties and to adopt an inclusive perspective attentive to the key role of childhood. There were many perspectives on the city, which highlighted references, senses and meanings that were not self-evident, but called on the curiosity and learning capacity of children and built new active citizenship voices. The displacement of adults underlined the skills of children and the opportunity to undertake action research together, promoting «the involvement of children as active agents of change processes who are able to redefine the social, institutional and cultural models of the city and stimulate local government in urban planning. In particular, participatory planning activities are an example of “bottom up” democracy for citizenship that focus the attention of government on collective demands illustrating the opinions and needs of citizens [...]. Participatory planning, however, is also assigned a second meaning: education for active citizenship, which provides children with the tools to understand their rights and develop cognitive, cultural, manual and relational abilities» (UNICEF, 2005, p. 40). As we have seen, participatory practices require subjects to be social actors rather than users of top-down interventions. Hence, in the "Maps for integration" project, children's voices played a central role in planning the intervention route maps and methodologies deployed.

Promoting this way of working required a process of reflection and circular review, implemented jointly by researchers and teachers, to redefine ongoing strategies, by focusing mostly on processes of discovery and citizenship in progress. In particular, the direct participation of children opened up an activation channel for whole families, with continuous feedback with the school, which was also conveyed to the local authority.

We believe that one of the most significant processes during the project was one where the role of support and discovery of city spaces was reversed: it was children who developed city exploration strategies through the itineraries that they had experienced and shared with their peers, offering alternative spaces for continuous and cooperative learning. This makes it possible to lay the foundations for concrete experiences of Learning Ecologies and Life Wide Learning (Jackson, Cooper, 2013) – both essential building blocks of knowledge that is relational and situated, interdependent and community-based, global and open to heterogeneous complexity.

#### **4. “Maps for integration” – participatory discovery of a territory**

During the “Maps for Integration” project, we have realized various and diversified activities to achieve common goals and encourage children with different languages, plural learning styles and modes of expression and interaction. The two main work channels are coordinated with the reference teachers and with the classes involved in the project. First, we held regular meetings with the teachers for joint discussion and design of the interventions; second, planning fed into action, through proposals put to children, including some experiences to be shared with their parents.

The co-design required the commitment of all parties to dialogue along general guidelines and objectives to define actions collaboratively. The flexibility of the approach raised certain difficulties and uncertainties that required changes along the way, so that the subjects could be activated by the different proposal offered.

The project was “set” in the educational context of learning and, specifically, some concepts were consolidated, to highlight links with the experiential dimension, particularly through a more in-depth understanding of the city itself.

Various levels of reflection and observation were developed, to restore a comprehensive image of the educational and training processes implemented; in this regard, the joint work between researchers and teachers focused on the dynamics deployed to achieve the expected outcomes and on the strengths and critical issues. Below we describe the itinerary devised and the forms of participation and activation of those involved.

The first activity proposed, to assess needs, was a questionnaire for children enabling them to clarify their knowledge of the city and their ability and opportunity to move around the urban environment. The questionnaire was devised in partnership with teachers who knew the territory and were familiar with the children’s habits. This made it possible to put questions for reflection at the level of subjects who were to be treated as co-agents of the cognitive process (Sharmahd, 2012). The findings were appraised, analysed and shared with the teachers as a guide to the activities and to boost the project’s aims. The questionnaire attracted curiosity and stimulated expectations of the pupils of primary school who expressed a desire to understand what the questions were for and what activities would be involved; the teachers did not reveal the whole process, as they wanted to stimulate the curiosity of the children.

The second activity performed with the classes sought to create a communication space for the children and among the children using a blog. The web page is organized in several sections. To familiarize the children in

using the tool, a mascot was designed as the project guide: Vagamondo, a traveller who is very keen to know the children and their situation. The classes chose the name through an online vote and he then began to interact with them. The launch of the blog <<http://mappeperintegrare.blogspot.it/>> and the mascot enabled us to suggest activities and gather the materials produced. The blog gave the children a forum to express themselves and documented the route followed.

Dialogue with the mascot led the classes in exploration of the city and in participation through stimuli, comments, curiosity, references to ongoing activities. The children are often assigned to small groups in the classroom with the teacher and the use of the interactive whiteboard created a generative learning environment promoting plural and multicultural understanding and developing skills and continuous learning (Gemma, Pagano, 2011).

The third project action was designated “the little reporter”. The children explored Macerata with their families and took photos in their favourite places; the aim was to look at the city “through the eyes of a child”. Once the material was collated, it was made public on the blog in photo galleries to promote interaction between the children and Vagamondo, highlighting the reasons behind the choices of the photographed places, the meaning of the spaces represented some curiosities in the history of Macerata and forms of living and inhabiting the actual city space. The children were very enthusiastic and the participation and co-operation space found different forms of expression from the perspective of the sustainable city at the level of the boys and girls and guidelines for participation and democracy for minors (Lansdown, 2001; Raymond, 1998).

The fourth project stage involved a comparison of historical black and white photographs of the city and the new photos taken by the children, to identify the differences. Comparing the historical and the current material stimulated discussion on change in the spaces and their use. The examination of the past and present of the city made it possible to reconstruct some significant features of memory and evolution and, simultaneously, to reflect on the use of the spaces of today.

Subsequently, thanks to “La Meridiana”, one of the Macerata’s cultural association, all the children went on an excursion in the city (field trip) to discover its spaces, to learn to navigate, to move around on foot and to recognize the main buildings and the history of Macerata. The trip enabled the children to become familiar with the city, to revisit known places that they had photographed and the presence of the guide, the teachers and the researcher was a further stimulus and linkage. The children showed their knowledge of many aspects of the city, thanks to work undertaken previously in the classroom and, at the same time, they had the opportunity to learn new things.

On the urban walk, the children were immediately “in the field”, immersed in the squares, alleys and buildings of their city, walking through the streets, observing previously unknown details and relating their experiences of the places on the itinerary followed. It is important to emphasize the coherence between the theme of space and knowledge of the city and the visit to the historic town centre where the «relationship is open, because we know that it is people who build their own experience, even when they come into contact with historical and artistic environments and places, urban spaces, but some environments offer obvious connections with specific themes. These connections, if properly addressed, can promote mature experiential learning in the situation» (Reggio, 2010, p. 99).

The fifth action involved the children producing projects about their favourite places, based on their photos, the places visited during the trip and those most commented in the blog. The children worked together creatively to design some changes for a possible Macerata of the future. This step was important in strengthening dialogue with the local authority and in highlighting the desire for participation and the potential value of the active citizenship of children. Increasingly, also in a context of inter-cultural and inter-generational dialogue, we are called to seek out and experience «strategies to enable innovative perspectives of coexistence and guidance for active citizenship in a space and time that can engage in dialogue with the needs and resources of the present, poised between a past or, better, a number of disjointed pasts and desirable future perspectives in dialogue with one another» (Deluigi, 2012, p. 30).

The final activity was a closing meeting for presentation of the project in a fun event that was open to all, with the involvement of those who participated in “Maps for Integration”. The project was shared with families and the local authority in a fun event in a public place, open to the city. The aim was to provide an opportunity for feedback and participation, to generate further discussion on the liveability of the area, by paying attention to the voices of children and the route travelled. Therefore, after the presentation of the project to the citizens, the children presented their own projects for Macerata. The families also took part in a game on the city with tests on the stages and key topics addressed throughout the project. Exploring the city through play enabled the children to bring out their knowledge and skills and to share them with their parents. The meeting between the stakeholders (university, school, family, local authority) strengthened dialogue and stimulated ideas for new projects. Certainly, cooperation and participation between adults and children was a focal point of this activity, which presented them with the keys of the city as citizens who know the urban reality in which they live and who are able

to contribute, in terms of design perspectives, for a more welcoming and more liveable environment.

## 5. Inclusive trajectories: participating to regenerate the community fabric

The “Maps for Integration” project aimed to mobilize and question the local reality, creating a greater knowledge and awareness in children of the space of their city. The results can be described on different levels:

- The first step relates to activation of dialogue between institutions for sharing the educational aims of the project to be proposed in the area, in close connection with the RICE objectives, in relation to the concept of the educating city (Pourtois & al., 2011). Some dialogue channels were already open, thanks to past shared activities while others were launched through this project. The initial protagonists were the university, the school and the local authority. This made it possible to stimulate cooperation and to define an agreement, also embodied in a formal protocol supporting the development of the project.
- The human resources available defined the strategies to be followed; the strategies were redefined over time and required the participation of the environment with different roles and responsibilities. This system was not implemented immediately, as it did not provide phases that had been strictly prescribed upstream, but sought to observe processes as they unfolded, to assess them and nurture team dialogue and a continuous theory-practice relationship (Milani, 2013).
- The focus was initially on the participation of children so that they could experience the path of discovery of their own city, highlighting their ideas for a friendly city (Gleeson, Sipe, 2006). Engagement with peers and reference adults produced thoughts on city liveability, including the design of some changes for improvement in the citizenship fabric. As we have seen, knowledge of the area is closely related to citizenship rights, with the recognition of a lively presence such as that of children, in the search for sustainability and learning, that becomes an active experience due to the plurality of languages used and places visited. At this level, the issues which our work prioritized were as follows: *activation of reflection and sharing processes; attention to the process and the outcome; activation of different learning channels and of interdisciplinarity.*
- The bottom-up approach was developed especially among researchers and teachers. Similarly, the children expanded their critical eye and knowledge, by taking account of the elements of ~~knowledge~~ learning and experience

that emerged during their journey. The central focus was on the role of children, attention to the development of their abilities, based on their existing skills that could be deployed through the educational agencies on their side: the school and the family. Through children, interest can be generated in relation to the construction of family well-being and a local *milieu* that is welcoming, inclusive and supportive. The *milieu* is defined as «the sum of the environmental conditions of a particular local system. However, this does not relate exclusively to the conditions of the natural environment, but to all those social, cultural, political and economic characteristics that have settled in a certain place over time and that can be understood as specific properties of the place itself» (Emanuel, Governa, 1997, p. 299). This definition brings our attention back to means of enhancing development and, in particular, the cooperative dynamics that are, and that can be, activated in the context.

The theoretical framework illustrated and the experience of the “Maps for Integration” project show that joint design and cooperation require a willingness by all agencies and stakeholders to take part by sharing the burden and the effort, as well as the achievement of agreed targets, towards social change.

It is not only institutional or formal parties that are invited to participate – individuals and families can also make a contribution, because the objective of the citizenship network is to establish links and meaningful relationships within the social fabric so that, over time, they become self-sustaining and develop independently. All this can be strengthened through the maintenance and consolidation of the dialogue initiated between universities, local governments, schools and families, to develop certain basic concepts of shared living such as feedback, activation and participation. Accordingly, this means cultivating inclusive approaches that also give rise to an inexhaustible design dialogue and innovative field action research.

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