

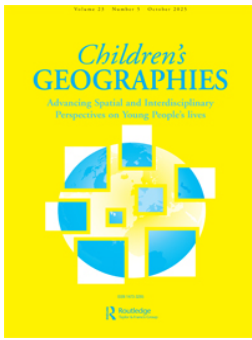
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Occupying the invited spaces of European decision-making: deepening conceptions of children's democratic participation by learning from Roma-led participatory projects with children

Cath Larkins, Ábel Bereményi, Sara López-Ruiz & Enerida Isuf

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Occupying the invited spaces of European decision-making: deepening conceptions of children's democratic participation by learning from Roma-led participatory projects with children

Cath Larkins^a, Ábel Bereményi^b, Sara López-Ruiz^c and Enerida Isuf^d

^aSchool of Health, Social Work and Sport, University of Lancashire, Preston, UK; ^bFaculty of Education, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; ^cFaculty of Education, Psychology and Social Work, University of Lleida, Lleida, Spain;

^dThe Centre for Children and Young People's Participation, University of Lancashire, Preston, UK

ABSTRACT

There are growing commitments to involving children in policymaking in Europe and beyond, but these processes remain exclusionary. Thinking spatially and epistemologically can help challenge some of this exclusion and promote a stronger orientation towards justice. We draw on two case studies of Roma-led participatory processes in Europe that were part of an international programme in five countries, which sought to understand how to connect the concerns of children living in marginalised contexts with policymaking related to the EU Child Guarantee. Data collected through ethnography, participatory observations, voice notes, participatory evaluation and interviews with children, workers and leaders were analysed through a conceptually informed approach. This analysis shows that diversity in children's participation policymaking can be strengthened by: providing opportunities in children's everyday spaces; creating bridging relationships between diverse places and identities to connect marginalised concerns to centres of power; creating multiple microphones through which to hear children's concerns and to understand their contexts; intergenerational dialogues that progress towards meaning making through engagement with children and adult activists; reflection on the absences of reciprocity and engagement in action for change in social provision and social norms over the long term. These practices have relevance internationally for strengthening marginalised children's democratic participation.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, there have been increasing calls for provision of more diverse forms of citizen participation, deepening democracy beyond regular elections and the most traditional forms of representation (Hickey and Mohan 2004). As in other parts of the world, in Europe policy documents and reports from state-level and European institutions express commitments to underrepresented social and cultural/ethnic groups, such as the Roma¹ (European Commission 2012; European Parliament 2006). Building on the rights enshrined in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Council of Europe, European Union (EU) (2000; 2021a; 2023) and national (Janta et al. 2021) policy commitments and programmes seek to promote children's democratic participation. Despite these

CONTACT Cath Larkins  CLarkins@lancashire.ac.uk;

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commitments, many children are not involved in formal participation. For example, young Roma are currently among the least included in children's participation mechanisms in EU (Janta et al. 2021). Radical reform of institutional structures would be needed to offer young person-friendly political opportunities (Skelton 2007) and this requires engagement with children's lifeworlds and mundane forms of political participation, as well as European policy (Firinci Orman 2021).

To propose steps towards less exclusionary forms of children's democratic participation, this paper critically reviews existing literature then uses this conceptual framework to analyse the Reach Initiative, a unique experiment in connecting children's lifeworlds and policymaking in five European countries. We seek to understand some of the enduring barriers (Cuevas-Parra 2023) and to attend to children's perspectives and concerns articulated through everyday embodied encounters rather than neat parcels of voice (Horton, Kraftl, and Tucker 2008). Our focus is on two of the most grassroots civil society organisations (CSOs) within the Reach initiative, which had no previous national or international profiles and networks. Here a dense, interconnected system of associations and a budget which children could help direct, were brought together to enable us to learn together about how the concerns of children in marginalised contexts might occupy some space in the arenas of local and European decision-making. Based on guidance from community groups, the *European Child Guarantee* (European Commission 2021b) was our policy framing, as it connects to broad areas of children's everyday lives – poverty, social exclusion, care, education, activities, healthcare, food, and housing.

The insights that emerge from our analysis – related to building bridge between diverse places and spaces; deep listening to voice, embodied action and contexts; and critical reflection on materialities and resource distributions over time. We suggest that these insights can contribute to a more holistic understanding of more deeper approaches to children's democratic participation, in and beyond Europe, enabling the concerns of children in marginalised context to occupy invited spaces through hybridising the everyday.

2. Existing conceptions of children's democratic participation

2.1 Spaces and places

Lundy's (2007) understanding of children's participation as space, voice, audience and influence is becoming dominant at a European level (Cuevas-Parra 2023). In analysis of children's democratic participation, there has been a tendency to conceive of the first element of this – space – as formal participatory mechanisms such as an advisory board or youth council (Firinci Orman 2021; Gaudet, Jean, and Forest 2025; Janta et al. 2021). But children's democratic participation occurs across diverse spaces (Cuevas-Parra 2023; Johnson 2011; Löw-Beer and Luh 2024), including these 'invited spaces' provided by public authorities or intermediaries and 'popular spaces', where people gather at their own initiative (Cornwall 2004, 2). This attention to the everyday is important because it is here that the banal events that fundamentally matter occur (Horton and Kraftl 2006), and that children describe experiencing their most meaningful feelings of participation (Horgan et al. 2017). However, access to invited spaces can also matter, as it may offer the potential for reconfiguring relations, extending alternative forms of democracy, empowering some children and developing skills (Lundy 2018; Kiili and Larkins 2018; Gaudet, Jean, and Forest 2025).

Understanding spatial relationships in children's democratic participation requires rethinking scale, destabilising the binaries of local/global and agency/structure (Skelton 2013 drawing on Ansell), to focus attention on the political nature of diverse spaces and places, including everyday sociocultural settings (Horton and Kraftl 2006) and institutional landscapes (Cornwall 2004; Gal 2017; Johnson 2011). It also requires understanding space and place as relational contexts (affected by personal and cultural relationships, regional, national and international influences, structural dynamics, and power relations) (Löw-Beer and Luh 2024 drawing on Massey 2004, 2009). Thinking about space relationally reveals, for example, how structural conditions affect which children of

multiple intersecting identities can enter which spaces (Cuevas-Parra 2023). So, in analysing the case studies in this article, we sought to understand how multiple relational places and spaces support democratic participation for children and adults experiencing intersecting oppressions.

2.2 Dialogue

Voice-based constructions of children's democratic participation dominate the Global North and South (Imoh and Okyere 2020). Challenging this, and strengthening accountability and transparency, might start from thinking about voice and influence as a process of *dialogue* (Lundy 2018, 349). Dialogue involves hearing and also changing one's understanding (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010). It requires that duty-bearers and decision-makers demonstrate how they given weight to children's views and provided full feedback (Lundy 2018). Dialogue is also a useful counter concept to the dominant focus on voice, because it draws attention to the complex interwoven and inter-dependent relationships and social positions through which views are expressed, heard and considered (Wyness 2013). Dialogue can be internal to a group, rather than with an external audience, for example, intra-generational dialogue to plan and enact youth-led projects (Duramy and Gal 2020) and intergenerational creative dialogues generating collective understandings (Kocsis 2024). Dialogue can also reveal diverse perspectives, without enforcing homogeneity (Dunlop et al. 2024).

But if dialogue is partially based on voice it will still not encompass the diversity of ways children share their concerns, as it will exclude children who express concerns through their actions (Imoh and Okyere 2020; Wyness 2013). A focus on voice can also put children under pressure to try to transform embodied emotional experiences into reasoned arguments, losing some of the weight of what they might convey through other means (Krafl 2013). Dialogue conceived of as children asking something of adults, also does not acknowledge the breadth of children's democratic activism, which may involve seeking change through child-led initiatives (Tisdall, Kay, and Cuevas-Parra 2020) and contentious activism in formal structures (Gaudet, Jean, and Forest 2025). So, in our analysis, we sought forms of internal and external dialogues that led to changes in understanding, and to understand how other forms of embodied communication, collective voices and action may be part of children's democratic participation.

2.3 Actions and reciprocity

Consideration of the multiple facets of citizenship and reciprocity can help diversify understanding of children's participation (Duramy and Gal 2020; Imoh and Okyere 2020). Imoh and Okyere (2020) point to difference-centred citizenship (Lister 2007; Moosa-Mitha 2005) and note how Larkins' (2014) conception of four actions and Acts of citizenship can extend understandings of children's participation to include children who encounter marginalisation. These ways of thinking about citizenship actions include (1) children voicing views, in invited spaces, contributing to the negotiation of rules for social living (for example, policies) and developing a sense of themselves as bearer of rights; (2) actions of social citizenship, in any everyday spaces, that contribute to acknowledged social good (including solidarity and caring); or (3) actions of neoliberal citizenship, living the everyday responsibility for fulfilling one's own rights, in the absence of state provision. Author (2014), following Isin (2008), also highlights (4) Acts of citizenship, that are activist behaviours, voice or silence (in any setting), that push for new distributions of resources or standards of justice. A recent review of scholarship in this field (Wood 2022), confirms the value of this focus on citizenship as lived in everyday relational spaces and interactions, as well as Political sites and structures.

Attention to reciprocity reinforces this focus on interactions and acknowledges everyday interdependence as children, their peers, families, communities and wider social collectivities all collaborate to meet (at least) basic economic, social and cultural rights and goals (Imoh and Okyere 2020). Promoting reciprocity in participatory processes can help avoid colonialist modes of extraction

(Hadfield-Hill et al. 2023). Pinpointing absences of reciprocity also highlights where children, families and communities pursue rights, social good or social justice in conditions where there is a dearth of state provision (Larkins, 2014). So, in this article, we use conceptions of citizenship to explore who is taking action, through which connections or collaborations in everyday places and beyond, and expressing what notions of reciprocity or justice.

2.4 Relational influence

Achieving change is a key motivator for children's democratic participation, so attending to relational dynamics (Mannion 2007; Wyness 2013) and relationships to power, process and resources (L  w-Beer and Luh 2024) is important. These dynamics reveal how influence is (and is not) produced, highlighting how attempts to achieve change through dialogues with duty-bearers may result in children's views being due weight in adult decision-making processes (Lundy 2007) or decision-makers being dismissive and patronising (Perry-Hazan 2016). Also, relational dynamics reveal how children achieve change, acting on their own or within their communities (Taft and O'Kane 2024; Tisdall, Kay, and Cuevas-Parra 2020), with and without control over resources, and even within relations of domination (Rye and Vold 2018). Children may, for example, develop skills and confidence even in the face of tokenistic listening or dismissive decision-makers (L  w-Beer and Luh 2024; Lundy 2018).

Time and space are central to these relational dynamics in participatory processes (L  w-Beer and Luh 2024). Children, the people around them, the resources available (material, emotional or conceptual), economic and cultural conditions, and generative mechanisms work together over time to affect continuity or change in their lives and communities (Mannion 2007; Wyness 2013; Author 2019). In formal participatory processes, there can be a mis-match between the timeframes that are necessary in order to achieved change, and the short timescales or moments allowed for young people's involvement, that align with adult needs to evidence consultation rather than young people's availability (Collins, Hunt, and Cox 2023). Influence operates, expands and contracts spatially, as over time, different places and dimensions of space offer different relationships, resources, constraints and possibilities for action (Massey 2009; 2004). For example, young people's influence can deepen locally at times when they secure resources (L  w-Beer and Luh 2024) or become more limited, when issues children care about are discussed in spaces they are excluded from (Powell 2024). So, seeking and achieving influence is an expression of children's capacities and agency, that is constrained by structural determinants (Afroze 2022) and there is need for a relational approach and recognition of these disparate contexts (Cuevas-Parra 2023). So, in this article, we consider how influence is pursued through different relationships, resources and contexts, across time and space.

3. Material and methods

The Reach Initiative was a collaboration between CSOs working with children, young people and families who are Roma or who have experience of alternative care or forced migration, two universities, and a European network for CSOs working with children. It aimed to pilot and understand ways of connecting children's everyday concerns with European decision-making. We had hoped to recruit an international advisory board comprised of children and adults in marginalised contexts and their CSOs, but language and budget barriers proved too great. So, adults (meeting online, internationally in English) helped select terms of reference for the initiative and a broad policy focus. Then, at community levels, working with young Roma and children with experience of alternative care or forced migration, CSOs codevelop plans for participatory processes through which children could influence decisions, or affect change in their lives, communities and institutions, related to the chosen EU policy. Nine pilot processes, in five countries, were funded (receiving 4,000 - 10,000 Euros depending on contexts, goals and costs).

The case studies analysed in this article are two projects with Roma children ('Gitano' in Spanish), young people and families and Roma-led CSOs. Initially, the programme funded four CSOs, in neighbourhoods of large cities with high levels of poverty. Then two pilot projects (in Green Quarter and Blue Quarter²) were extended, to aid understanding of what it might be possible to achieve at the most grassroots level. The extended projects, from September 2021 to March 2023, focussed on the public health aspects of the Child Guarantee. They involved 56 children and young people aged 7–16. Major regional Roma CSOs took a crucial role, facilitating discussions and planning, and cocreating with children accessible information about the European Child Guarantee that was shared with the other CSOs. One worker from one regional organisation also participated with critical insights in the writing of this article (Author 4).

Data were generated through ethnography, and qualitative research cocreated with participating organisations, and with children. The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by a university researcher (Author 3), the community activist (Author 4) and lead researcher (Author 2) who maintained weekly contact with sites and conducted evaluation meetings with NGO leaders at the end of phase 1. Author 1 visited both sites when invited. The researchers built trusting relationship with the children, CSO workers and specialist trainers (Edmond 2005). Observations were written and voice-recorded in a field diary. In Green Quarter, 16 sessions were observed, there was active participant observation by researchers in a final celebration, and interviews were recorded with two female Roma young facilitators and two female Roma professionals. In Blue Quarter, participatory observation took place in 16 sessions and two closing events (with large community participation: families, local municipal decision makers and the press in phase 1, and before, during and after a final community party with the community in phase 2). Interviews were also conducted with the female Roma NGO leader, and four other NGO workers (two Roma women, two Roma men). Children's perspectives were collected directly through short interviews in Blue Quarter and in both sites through creative activities and participatory evaluation activities (including written/drawn account, games, drawing, photography and visual interviews (Pauwels 2019; Úcar Martínez, Heras i Trias, and Masó 2014; Wang and Burris 1997). Reflective discussion activities with children were also organised and recorded by the CSO workers. At the end of each pilot process, CSOs submitted written or verbal reports, quoting what children had said in relation to the Child Guarantee, describing what else they understood about children's concerns (based on observed actions and contexts), and noting what had helped and hindered the participatory process. Reports from each pilot were analysed and collated to prepare a briefing on children's perspectives related to the Child Guarantee that was presented by community members to EU Commission staff in December 2023. Ethical approval was secured from University of Barcelona, an information sharing agreement was established with all academic institutions and CSOs; informed consent was secured from all participants (and from parents of children).

For this article, data, mainly from participatory observations and interviews, were analysed by all four authors in a theory informed deductive approach (Fife and Gossner 2024). We worked iteratively, meeting in person, visiting the communities, and working online to discuss and write descriptions of what struck us about the cases (Froggett et al. 2014), and developing vignettes over months, to allow ourselves the time to come to greater understanding of how children were living the experiences we were studying (Horton and Kraftl 2006). We used the conceptual framework outlined in section 2 to question these vignettes, seeking further information from the raw data to respond to our questions.

4. Analysis of the cases

In this section we present an overview of Green Quarter and Blue Quarter and then in subsections, we develop our analysis using the four elements of the conceptual framework outlined above. That is (1) the diverse places and spaces occupied, and the intersecting identities of people within these; (2) how children's expressed concerns, and the ways these were brought into dialogue with others;

(3) the other actions and acts, resources and reciprocity through which children and communities contributed to sharing and responding to concerns related to the project; and (4) the relationships which appeared to enable or promote influence within and across space and time.

4.1. Case study 1: Green Quarter

A Roma-led grassroots CSO hosted the Reach pilot participatory process in Green Quarter, a segregated housing estate, often represented as a 'ghetto', with a population experiencing high poverty rates, unemployment, poor health and low school performance. The CSO leader Carmen, a Roma activist, has long been working as a social worker with the most vulnerable Roma families of the community. She recruited 23 Roma girls from families who could not afford extra-school leisure activities. The pilot had no initial apparent strategy for dialogue about health, participation and rights as 'The concept of health has negative connotation [in the Roma community], as it becomes an issue only when one gets ill', Carmen argued. However, working with two age-groups (15-19 years; 5-13 years) Carmen and two Roma young leaders (of 19 years) helped motivate girls to participate in Flamenco and health promotion activities and informal conversations about health took place alongside these. The Roma young leaders took part in planning, and the project activities, throughout five initial sessions and then a further twelve.

4.2. Case study 2: Blue Quarter

Blue Quarter is similar to Green Quarter in sociodemographic and economic terms. Roma families were rehoused here due to the demolition of a nearby old social housing estate, where they used to live. Here, the Reach pilot project was carried out by a locally well-connected Roma CSO, led by a charismatic Roma woman, Maria, accompanied by several mainly Roma young people. The CSO had been running an after-school programme for many years, reaching out to ethnically diverse, mainly poor families. As a Roma activist and mediator in primary, secondary and upper secondary schools, Maria is well linked to public administrations and local councils. Working with 44 boys and girls (8-15 years), most of whom were Roma, the project built on already existing after-school groups. A CSO worker stated that many families would enrol their children in project activities as 'they knew it was about health, and it would do their kids good'. Children were provided with a choice of four activities (arts, dance, boxing and nutrition). Each activity started and ended with a dialogue circle and in these informal conversations, the children expressed their views. When needed, they were also referred to relevant health services. After a first 4-month-long phase and its positive evaluation, a second 3-month-long phase was successfully executed.

4.3. Bridging diversity in places, spaces and identities

Both case studies created invited space (Cornwall 2004), but these retained a sense of the everyday and popular by being first and foremost a place of leisure. In Green Quarter this was achieved by presenting the project as a new Flamenco dance course for girls, without mentioning health, participation and rights awareness raising. This focus on leisure rather than democratic participation contrasted with what had been proposed in the funding application but 'This is how we work on the street', explained Carmen. First, the groups are created voluntarily, through whatever motivates girls, then other issues can be introduced step by step. This strategy, and hidden curriculum, were necessary she explained as: 'In a community with experience of vulnerability, immediate decisions over-rule planning'. She suggested that connecting with the girls through something that might be of interest would help them feel safe, at ease, at home whereas discussing participatory methods from the start would mean children feel like they are in school. Even once the groups were formed, conversations with the older girls took place on the street. So, in line with Cuevas-Parra's (2023) concern, the attention was first on creating places that children and young people of multiple intersecting identities (young, female, Roma) could step into.

In contrast, in Blue Quarter, an invitation to voice was clear. The CSO set up an initial openair party with several taster activities – a food pyramid play, a variety of sports and arts sessions and sharing circles. It was possible for children experiencing multiple marginalisations to enter this place because personal relationships to Maria, and the CSO, had already been created through an after-school programme.

Further places were created and occupied through the lifetime of the programme by engaging with the municipality/neighbourhood to secure places for meetings. In Green Quarter, the young women's group was entrusted with an empty garage, situated in the neighbourhood centre. Carmen described this as an important new semi-autonomous 'popular space' with its own power dynamics. Young 'marriable' women were alone with scant parental control, but physically inside the community. It provided a place to feel free and safe to challenge community norms. In Blu quarter, the meeting place secured was an open air community venue, and Maria invited local decision-makers and families into this for closing events after each project phase.

So, in both cases, intersecting aspects of identity and relationships to space and places were significant not just for the children and young people. The women leading implementation of the pilots (Carmen and Maria) had experience in the Roma women's movement, they had a strong understanding of the different socio-ecological power dynamics in these specific communities, and community and political relationships. This may have helped them understand what kind of places it was necessary to create, and to resist organising the types of participatory activities Reach had suggested (which may have failed completely to engage).

The evaluation and reporting process also facilitated access a further place, a meeting with senior staff in the EU Commission hosted by an international CSO in Brussels. This was attended by Maria and female young leaders, staff from other CSOs and family members (although at the last minute, Carmen was unable to attend due to family obligations). Three years (and in some cases ten years) of relationship building between the Roma NGOs and academics, presence of wider family and community members, and generous funding by a charitable foundation all contributed to making this event possible. But, children were still only present through the videos they had contributed to, and the report which compiled their views. So, the perspectives of young Roma, expressed in everyday local spaces, were connected to this physically distant place of contact with policymakers, by older Roma young people and adults who had freedom from other obligations, and who had built trusting relationships with people in the Reach programme and resources.

4.4. Interweaving intergenerational dialogues

In the case studies, issues related to health were slowly raised. In Green Quarter, Carmen explained: 'University's timing differs from the community's timing'. Community work should adapt to the community and not to project plans. During Flamenco practice sessions, adults and Roma young leaders offered information about health to the younger girls group, repeating the health promotion message: 'Flamenco is beneficial'. They ran a nutrition session explaining that Roma people live shorter lives due to some eating habits and doing unsafe physical work. In Blue Quarter, in sports sessions, children were likewise told about the link between physical activity and health. In some ways, observing these sessions, it seemed that the primary focus was educational. But, the children in these examples had few prior opportunities for organised leisure, so doing 'healthy' activities, as well as receiving information, could be seen in Appadurai's (2004) terms as broadening their scales of imagination and horizons of aspiration. That is, enabling them to conceive of how educational and health promoting activities could be provided in their communities.

The second step towards dialogue between children and adults involved facilitating activities that enabled concerns to be expressed. In Green Quarter, the group of young women shared their experiences, views and aspirations sporadically and informally in the street, with each other, with young Roma leaders and with the embedded researcher. Also, in Green Quarter, around the edges of the dance classes, the girls began to talk about stress, low self-esteem, body shame, and concerns about relationship tensions (without identifying them as a 'health-issue'). In Blue Quarter, more structured ways to express concerns and wishes were offered in the form of dialogue circles and activities in which children drew or wrote about their concerns. For example, writing hopes for the project on a piece of paper which they put in the Box of Desire, and decorating a Christmas tree with messages they had written to the local administration.

Here, adult facilitators sometimes ‘helped’ children imagine their desires for future activities through suggestions like: ‘why don’t you put, “I’d like to feel better emotionally”?’ This seemed to be both a process of adults compressing children’s views into words (Kraftl 2013), and supporting children to form and express views (Lundy 2007). This dialogue was also two-way and a process of mutual learning (Birch et al. 2016) in the sense that adult’s understandings also changed (Graham and Fitzgerald 2010). For example, in Blue Quarter, children described voting for the activities they wanted more of, and the CSO staff came to understand that the girls, like the boys, were more interested in kickboxing than dance.

In Blue Quarter, a further step towards dialogue also occurred, with people outside of their weekly hybrid invited/popular space. At the close of phase one of the pilot, children were guided to develop speeches about healthy eating and physical activities for the closing party (attended by large numbers of families, local administration staff and press). The speeches children gave inspired families to encourage more of their children to attend in phase two. After the closing party, the district mayor also came to visit, to assure children that the municipality would take their demands into account. This led one child to say: ‘I felt that I was listened to’.

A final step, dialogue with wider audiences was also enabled indirectly, when community members stepped into the contact space with policymakers with research reports and videos. Researchers and facilitators had recorded what children say in everyday spaces in more and less structured ways. This involved directly recording things that children said through draw-write activities, and videos, for example, recording that a child said:

‘I chose boxing because I have always wanted to do boxing and it was an opportunity. We want something new’
(Child, Blue Quarter).

It also involved researchers and community facilitators speaking and writing things that they remembered children saying, in an ethnographic field diary, recorded conversations between adults, and reports written by the CSO. For example:

‘Young post-adolescent women expressed that their initial source of motivation was to challenge body-complexes, ... shame ... and to learn something about healthy eating (though this latter, was not the main issue). They say that it would be important to find something that gives an inner motivation, rather than an obligation’

(Adult in CSO report, Green Quarter)

‘Generally, the children do not participate in the design and implementation of the activities in school. Generally, the extra school activities are planned by the educational professionals and not taking into account the wishes and necessities of the children. Also, they do not have a variety of leisure activities to participate in’ (Adult in CSO report, Blue Quarter)

Researchers also observed and made notes about resources and contexts (for example the lack of a physical space in which to meet to do sport, and economic conditions).

Researchers then analysed what was heard, reported and observed using the thematic framework of the Children Guarantee, and codeveloped questions, to form the basis of Child Guarantee indicators. For example, Is the Child Guarantee:

‘Removing financial barriers and providing secure funding for community based provision? ...

Providing taster opportunities for children, so that they can express informed views?

Designing and providing age- and culture- appropriate activities based on children’s perspectives of what will work, and monitoring and revising the activities offered in response to feedback?’ (Report to EU)

These draft questions, and the full report, was shared with the participating CSOs and revised in line with their recommendations. As described in 4.1, community members then presented videos and the indicator questions to senior staff from the EU Commission. There were apparent elements of dialogue at this event, as these officials fed back that by watching the videos and hearing about the

indicators they had gained new understanding. After the meeting, one EU Commission senior staff member shared the cocreated indicators with coordinators of the Child Guarantee in every EU member state (the impact of this will be discussed in section 4.4).

So, steps towards dialogue between children in marginalised communities, and local and European decision-makers, were achieved by enabling children to have experiences which they could reflect upon; supporting them to express concerns in the everyday spaces and forms they chose; listening, observing and recording in these spaces; and analysing how the insights shared by children (and adults who understand their contexts) relate to the themes of a European policy.

4.5. Responding with reciprocity and contention

The case studies included a range of citizenship actions and Acts. Children and community members attempted to feed perspectives into plans for the CSO, local municipalities and the EU. For example, influencing activities be provided in the CSOs and municipal support for this. In both case studies, children and young people also contributed to community social good. This social citizenship was evident when in Green Quarter girls expressed care and support towards each other in their groups and when young mediators missed some sessions, despite this being paid employment, due to family caring duties.

In both case studies, the presence of reciprocal relations (Imoh and Okyere 2020) meant that although family concerns sometimes limited children's freedom to take part in planned activities, workers and families also found ways to respond to absences of resources and cultural expectations in order to promote children's involvement. For example, in Green Quarter, playful interventions were offered in an amusing atmosphere to motivate children to continue despite interrupting 'immediateness' of pressing concerns, which Carmen often mentioned can be a driver in the life of Roma girls and young women in marginalised contexts. Also, when the project closing party coincided with the hospitalisation of an elder from one participating family and the death of another, despite cultural rules which would normally prohibit children and parents from attending, many families turned up. They stated that they did not want to disappoint their daughters after working so well in the project. Reciprocity was evident in Blue Quarter, where the project budget did not allow the CSO to buy a Christmas tree for the closing party, so families sourced a cheaper tree in a distant municipality and transported it to the party.

The absence of wider social provision was also clear, revealing ways in which children, young people and communities self-fulfilled rights. The absence of a publicly funded Christmas tree in Blue Quarter is in stark contrast to what is provided in other quarters of this city. The need for children to spend time caring also speaks to the lack of public provision of health or social care, which may also relate to poor working conditions. So here, children were providing for the rights to safety of other younger and older members of their families, in the absence of state support or regulation. In another example, a possible Act of citizenship the older young Roma in Green Quarter rejected the Flamenco class by not attending. They did not want to be taught dance or be observed: 'Even though we voted for it, this is not the way we want it', they stated, and they gained instead the garage space to safely socialise and have private conversations between peers. Acknowledging this as an Act of citizenship, counter to cultural norms and in the absence of state support, recognises these young women's actions as a claim for independence that was pushing boundaries. But, too relied on intergenerational solidarity, in the form of support from Carmen.

So, attention to the diverse actions and Acts of citizenships revealed the reciprocity in multiple inter – and intra-generational relationships (peer, family, community, municipality, state, and inter-state). They highlight collaboration and compromise to achieve the participatory process and promote happiness, but also contention between children and young people's concerns and social norms, and absences of social provision.

4.6. Relational influence with resources over time

In both case studies, sometimes children's or young people's words and actions had an impact on their own lives. In Green Quarter, in line with Lundy's (2018) assertion of that tokenism can be a valuable first step in developing capacities for more meaningful participation, Carmen identified the key outcome being the group learning skills that enabled them to express aspirations. However, children also described local influence when being asked what kind of dance they would like to learn; Carmen offered only Flamenco, and it is not clear how children influenced this but, at the final event children proudly spoke of their chance to choose. Perhaps the achievement here was the chance to choose to attend or not, in a context where choice to attend had not previously been available. Similarly, the young women's Act of citizenship (dissolving the Flamenco training through non-attendance and occupying the garage) may have provided a sense of relational influence, or empowerment.

Experience of relational influence relied on trusting relationships and resources. In Green Quarter, the older girls' actions, relationships with peers, Carmen and perhaps her standing in the community, helped reassure parents that the garage was a safe space for independence. In Blue Quarter, children's words, heard by trusted CSO facilitators, enable their influence over activities offered, a change of daily snack, and the decision to continue boxing and drop Flamenco. CSO workers' established trust with families encouraged acceptance of the norm-breaking value of boxing. Sharing decisions about use of CSO funding was not straightforward; it happened in a context of challenging structural conditions (the lack of public finance) and the CSO had to make changes to budgets and contracting to drop Flamenco in favour of boxing. So, commitment to following children's lead or to sharing decision-making about resources was also central.

Relationships to information, other resources, and committed people and institutions was equally central when seeking to influence European policy. Accessible cocreated information explaining the Child Guarantee helped community-based adults and children understand the European policy contexts and to focus their demands. EU officials' were personally and institutionally committed to using children's insights. Credibility for this study and its approach to hearing from children appeared to be grounded in the long-term working relationships between the EU Commission representatives, Author 1 and our partner international civil society organisation. For some of the participating Roma CSOs in this initiative, this bridging of relationships is not necessary as they have their own links into European policymaking forums. But, for in whatever form, bridging relationships and relevant resources made it possible to feed these children's concerns, articulated in hybrid invited/popular spaces, into European policymakers who did shift their understanding.

There were other small gains. Children, young people and adult CSO members who actively shaped the project, learned skills in building a participative ethos in their activities and their discursive repertoire. The project evaluation provided a reflective process for the CSO staff guiding their focus on new sub-issues of intervention with children such as mental health and new technologies. Media coverage of one of the pilot projects led to one study site receiving further funding from a private donor. Knowledge resources, in the form of awareness of Child Guarantee's priority topics, also reinforced Maria's advocacy in public events where opportunities arise for her to speak about the children's concerns and the Child Guarantee, and this may over time result in further influence. The impact of the projects cocreated indicators, which have been distributed to all members states, is likely to be affected by Antigypsism, the 2024 European election results, and ongoing struggles over distributions of public financial resources. Any influence will likely take years, as the journey toward influence may progress and stall over time and space, and there are enduring inequalities, and state-sanctioned violence, to overcome in the search for justice (Silver 2020).

So, attention to how children's everyday concerns can influence EU policy relates to relationships across time and space. A stronger commitment to long-term participatory processes is needed, to build on experiences, extend relationships and allow time to respond and react to changing opportunities and constraints.

5. Discussion

There are limitations to conclusions that can be drawn from two case studies with Roma children two parts of Europe, but we tried to address this by using a conceptual framework drawn from a critical review of research in other contexts and by suggesting the relevance of these findings in other contexts we are trying to avoid binary distinctions (such as Majority-Minority), which fail to acknowledge what is in common between childhoods (Imoh, Bourdillon, and Meichsner 2019). We found that our analysis of these two cases, helped explain what was happening in the other groups within the Reach Initiative, where connections were also made between children's diverse lifeworlds and policy making. So we suggest these cases highlight four dimensions of complexity which it may be beneficial to explore in other contexts.

We found that children's democratic participation can become less exclusionary when **space is understood in terms of multiplicity and bridges are built between diverse places, spaces and identities**. It is important to consider children's multiple intersecting identities (Cuevas-Parra 2023) and the political processes in invited, popular and everyday spaces, (Cornwall 2004; Duramy and Gal 2020; Horgan et al. 2017; Horton and Kraftl 2006; Johnson 2011). But also, thinking spatially, dynamically and learning from Massey (2009; 2004), highlights that the contrast between place and space is not that the former is grounded and local, and the latter disembodied and global. Rather, both place and space are grounded and relational. Place is specific whereas space is 'the dimension of multiplicity' (2004, 14). Thinking with dimensions of multiplicity in mind helps us understand that places of leisure and privacy, in which children of multiple intersecting identities feel comfortable to be and do things that matter to them (Horton and Kraftl 2006), can also be hybrid invited/occupied spaces in which they develop the confidence, experiences or relationships that enable them to exercise some influence (Horgan et al. 2017; Rye and Vold 2018). These can become spaces of multiple dimensions, which connect into EU policy arenas despite experiences of marginalisation, if over time children, young people, adults and communities are able to build relevant trusting, personal and organisational relationships that act as effective bridges.

Second, bridges will only be effective if **diverse interwoven and intergenerational ways are established to hear, see and share children's concerns (expressed in words and embodied actions), and the demands for justice within these**. Considering participation as related to citizenship and reciprocity helps highlight the multiple actions, by multiple contributors, through which children's concerns and notions of justice are articulated and achieved (Author 2014; Imoh and Okyere 2020). Attending to who is engaged, in what action, according to what standards of justice, revealed the absences of reciprocity from municipalities or states. This can help formulate calls for change in social provision and social norms. Capturing these insights would require cocreation of multiple microphones, or ways of reporting children's concerns, so that children can speak or show the things that matter in everyday or invited places, wherever they are comfortable. It might also mean other young people or adults reporting what has been expressed – in words and actions – by children who do not have access to the microphones.

Generating collective **understanding of the meaning within or behind the words and actions requires dialogue, and understanding of contexts**. In our study, for example, in line with commitments to collective analysis in participatory action research (Cahill 2007), we would have valued more involvement with children directly in the process of developing recommendations and indicators. However, involvement of adult community activist did provide essential insights into what Massey (2004) described as the relational, cultural and political dimensions of the contexts in which they were living. So, deeper understanding of children's concerns, might be strengthened by developing shared collective community-based understanding (Kocsis 2024) whilst retaining space for diversities of perspectives (Dunlop et al. 2024) and transparency in how diversities of perspectives are being combined (Moxon 2021). This may require the creation of environments which favour togetherness and mutual learning (Birch et al. 2016). Critical reflection on what is said, shown

and implied by actions, reports from adults, and links to policy is also vital, and this may mean reading for the meaning that lies in the silences and between the lines of what is reported (Spyrou 2016).

Fourth, although trusting local relationships enabled relatively quick changes in relation to some of the things that mattered to children, **reciprocity, security of resources and action over time increase the potential for influence on policy**. Safety to enter hybrid invited/popular spaces related to the degrees of marginalisation that families were experiencing, and the relationships and resources, through which immediate needs were addressed. Children, young people, families and communities all worked to create the opportunities for children to enter and enjoy hybrid invited/popular spaces, in which engagement in democratic participation became possible, but there was a significant lack of reciprocal contribution from state or intra-state institutions. So, children's democratic participation in Europe might be diversified through redistribution of resources between and within states and communities, to demonstrate responsiveness to children's and communities' immediate concerns about inadequacies of social provision or social norms. This includes long-term support for activities and places, suited to personal and cultural contexts, where children of diverse identities and experience can share concerns and advocate for or enact change (Horgan et al. 2017).

6. Conclusion

Adapting children's participation in decision-making to the diversity of children's lives means embracing the multiplicity and hybridity that the notion of space offers (Massey 2004) and recognising knowledge-making as a collective endeavour. This means doing more than listening to what is voiced (Kocsis 2024; Kraftl 2013). Academics may offer some radical bridging between spaces to support some critical reimagining and progress towards justice (Silver 2020), and there is need for state-institutions to do the same, to avoid extractive processes of harvesting voice.

To deepen children's democratic participation in Europe, EU, state and other institutions could support children, young people and their allies to:

- (1) **Build bridges from everyday places to occupy invited space** – connecting the things that matter in children's multiple everyday places to more distant policymaking, through long-term relationships and secure resources.
- (2) **Use multiple-microphones** – communicating what is said, heard, felt and seen in these everyday places, to people who have committed to listening deeply.
- (3) **Reflect critically on what is said and unsaid through multi-positional intergenerational dialogue** – seeking to understand actions and contexts, absence and presence of reciprocity, distributions of resources and structural constraints.
- (4) **Engage in ongoing action and transformation** – pursuing change in social provision or social norms, through greater reciprocity and redistribution over time.

An immediate pressing action should at least involve young and adult attendees, in pan-European invited places of children's democratic participation, by (1) hearing the concerns reported by children who are not able to attend meetings in places where they have to travel long distances or speak English, and (2) engaging in critical reflection on the contexts, relationships and absence or presence of reciprocity that underly what is reported. Whilst this may seem resource intensive, it could be supported through investment in participation community owned Artificial Intelligence, so that the mass of perspectives, expressed by any visual or verbal means, could be collated and thematically analysed using technology directed by children and community allies.

Whilst children will continue to be political and activists in multiple other ways (Skelton 2013; Taft and O'Kane 2024), this proposed expansion of children's democratic participation processes is significant because it challenges the neoliberal notion that hearing the voices of some children is enough. Unless we move beyond listening, towards contextualised discussions of the redistributions

of relationship and resources that are necessary to achieve change, even well-meaning voice focused participation may hide the conditions, often deliberately obscured from child and adult view, that are perpetuating injustice.

Note

1. Roma is an umbrella term describing diverse ethnic groups, a population of approx. 10–12 million people, that represent Europe's largest ethnic minority (Council of 2020).
2. Pseudonyms

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