

# Hey children! Do you feel listened by your politicians? Evaluating a participative democratic programme

María Soledad Palacios Gálvez\*\*, Patricia García-Leiva \*, Elena Morales Marente\*\*  
Juan Manuel Domínguez Fuentes\*, Iván Rodríguez Pascual\*\*\* y M<sup>a</sup> Isabel Hombrados Mendieta\*

\*Department of Social Psychology, Social Work, Social Anthropology and East Asian Studies of the University of Malaga, Spain

\*\*Department of Social, Evolutionary & Educational Psychology of the University of Huelva (Spain)

\*\*\* Department of Sociology, Social Work and Public Health of the University of Huelva (Spain)

Email: patricia@uma.es

**Introduction** The objective of this study was to evaluate a participative democracy programme called *Ágora infantil*, carried out with students between the ages of 10 and 12. As in participatory budgets, the process is based in the research-action model (Lewin, 1946) and consists of the city council opening up decision-making on a part of the municipal budget or a concrete policy to the children of the municipality. This process of diagnosis, prioritization and decision-making was completed over the course of 5 to 7 sessions during school hours and implemented by the Coglobal association. Once the participants make a decision, the city council carries out the project selected in the municipality (the decision made is binding).

The main goal of *Ágora Infantil* is to generate psychological empowerment and wellbeing amongst its participants, and to measure the effects of this programme on children's psychological empowerment. To this end, we used Zimmerman's model (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). The operationalization of the strengthening was based on: 1) knowledge of local politics (as a component of the interactional dimension of psychological empowerment) and 2) the self-perception of being able to influence the future of the municipality (component of the intrapersonal dimension of psychological empowerment). In addition, wellbeing was evaluated through the perception of being heard (Casas y Bello, 2012) and trust in the city council.

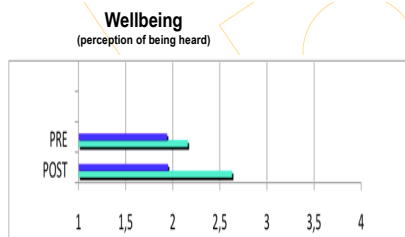
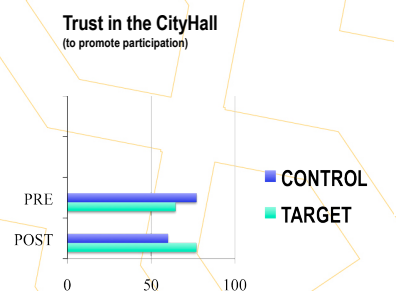
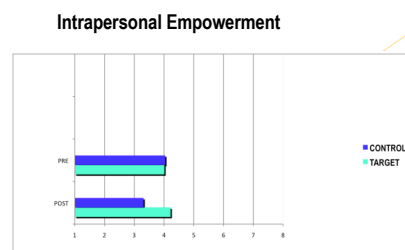
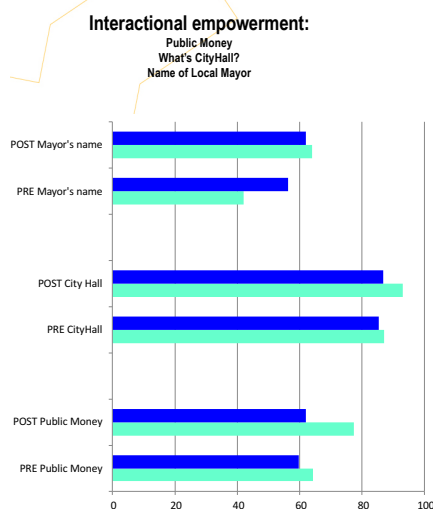
**Hypothesis & Design** The children participating in this experience (target group) were expected to present higher levels of empowerment compared to the control group, thanks to their increased awareness of local policy, while perceiving themselves as capable of influencing decision-making in their locality. The target group was also expected to benefit from an improvement in its wellbeing because they felt heard, and to exhibit increased trust in the local government institution with respect to the control group. A quasi-experimental design was used: intergroup (target and control) and intrasubject (pre and post).

**Instruments** To measure psychological interactional empowerment, several categorical questions were devised (What is public money for? What is the city council and what is the mayor's name?) in which the incidences of correct answers were measured. For case of the intrapersonal dimension of empowerment, 3 items were used, devised just for this study (Your opinion counts in your municipality; Children can influence the decisions that the mayor or councillors make; As children, you can change things you do not like in your municipality), along with an adaptation to Hart's scale (1992), the Likert response format having 8 points. The perception of being heard as an indicator of wellbeing was taken from the instrument developed by Casas and Bello, 2012 (Likert from 1 to 4). Finally, the measurement of trust in the City Hall (to promote participation) (Likert from 1 to 4) was also created just for this study.

**Sample** 838 children participated in the evaluation, of which 479 were from the target group (54.9%) and 393 from the control group (45.1%). The mean age was 10.5 (SD = 1.15), with 52.2 being males (437) and 47.8% females (401). They belonged to 13 different localities in 3 Andalusian provinces and were from 18 different public schools, spanning 5 different educational levels

**Procedure** The data collection was carried out by means of a questionnaire that was administered at 2 times: before commencing the intervention, and at the end of it (during the last session); in both the target group (which participated in *Ágora infantil*) and the control group (students with similar characteristics and at the same educational centres but who did not participate in the programme).

## Results



**Conclusions** According to the hypotheses proposed, the results show that taking part in a participatory democracy programme such as *Ágora infantil* does increase intra-personal and interactional empowerment, and also bolsters children's perception of being heard by the local government's team, thereby improving their wellness. Finally, trust in the institution is also increased. Therefore, we can affirm that the *Ágora infantil* program favours students' empowerment, wellbeing and trust. Future studies will expand the sample, in terms of both the number of participants and the age brackets. Likewise, it will be necessary to perform analyses based on the educational centre involved, in order to gauge the influence of the setting where the programme is carried out.